

The Live Orchestra Recording: A Producer's Awakening

The recent production of live orchestra soundtracks for games like *Mafia* and *Myst III* provoke a stunning question: If the time spent massaging synthesizers were allocated towards a live orchestra, can the value of that time actually cover the cost of a live orchestra?

Given the right circumstances, it most certainly can.

Time is money, and a significant part of a composer's fee is based upon the time it takes the composer to program synthesizers. By dismissing the synthesizers, a producer is significantly reducing man-hours.

I recently finished work on the score for *Merregnon 2*. I recorded the entire soundtrack with the Prague Symphony Orchestra. A typical cue from this score would have taken even the most experienced synth programmer 35 to 40 hours to create an almost-real sounding MIDI recording. Instead, I spent under an hour recording that very same cue with 54 live musicians. If you do the math, you'll see that essentially the producer has a choice: pay the composer for the time it takes to massage the synths, or pay an orchestra for the time it takes to record live.

Let's consider the cost effectiveness of a live orchestra by examining a sample budget for a 50-minute soundtrack recorded by a 50-piece orchestra. According to Aaron Marks' *The Complete Guide to Game Audio* (CMP Books), "an established composer can charge \$1,500 per finished minute of music." As such, a \$50,000 budget for a 50-minute orchestral score is most certainly conservative.

A competent 50-piece European orchestra will cost \$10 to \$20 per player per hour, including studio costs. Armed with well-conceived orchestrations, flawless parts and a knack for conducting, an equally competent composer can record 50 minutes of music in 10 hours.

50 players @ \$20 per hour × 10 hours = \$10,000



Andy Brick conducts the Prague Symphony Orchestra during the *MERREGNON 2* recording sessions.

During an orchestral recording session we need the assistance of a support staff:

4 support staff @ \$30 per hour × 10 hours = \$1,200

Based on my trip from New York to Prague, when I was accompanied by a senior producer:

Travel and accommodation for 2 people = \$1,600

Finally, let's give ourselves a safety net:

Miscellaneous expenses = \$1,200

Adding up all these costs, we get:

Total cost of production = \$14,000

With a \$50,000 budget, the producer is now left with \$36,000 for the composer's creative fee. Is it possible to convince a composer to give up 28 percent of his or her fee for a live orchestra recording? I suspect a skilled composer would do it in a heartbeat.

On the composer's end, by dismissing the synthesizers, you have just eliminated hours and hours of extremely labor-intensive (and hence costly) work. In my earlier example, I suggested that it would take four or five days to program a four-minute cue in a manner that would yield

an almost-real-sounding MIDI orchestra. That's approximately one minute per day. In our budget example, we have eliminated 50 minutes, or 50 days work. Given an eight-hour day, we have thus eliminated 400 hours of work. Provided you have a composer that can make the transition from MIDI to live orchestra, it is well worth \$14,000 both to eliminate 400 hours of work and to have a live orchestra recording at the end of the day.

In order to record a live orchestra successfully within our budget confines, your composer must be able to make the transition from MIDI to live orchestra. To do so, the composer must have the skills necessary to write the music, appropriately orchestrate it, create proper sheet music, and conduct the music during the recording sessions. Make sure before you sign a contract with a composer that he or she can do all these things and has a proven track record in all these areas. There is a catch-22 that confronts the game music industry: in order for orchestral game soundtracks to rise to the next level, we must move to live orchestral recordings. But as the quality of sample libraries increases, the skills needed to handle a live orchestra decrease.

Armed with both a solid understanding of orchestral writing and an in-depth knowledge of the available software tools, it makes perfect economic sense for both the composer and the producer to accept the budget I just outlined. It's a win-win situation when, by simply re-allocating resources and finding the right composer, a producer can take an all-MIDI music budget and create a live symphony orchestra soundtrack. 🎵



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