



We are excited to interview Milton Nelson from the music industry's premier artist organization, the American Society of Music Arrangers and Composers (ASMAC). For over 82 years, ASMAC's mission has been to educate commercial artists and the public about the contributive and necessary disciplines of music composition, arranging, and orchestration within the entertainment industry.

Milton Nelson is a vice president on ASMAC's Executive Board. He is a distinguished orchestrator and arranger whose credits include Splinter Cell: Conviction, The Ellen DeGeneres Show, Fast and Furious Presents: Hobbs and Shaw, and many more. He was generous enough to take the time to answer a few questions about ASMAC and Music Orchestration.

### **1** *Milton, what is your background, and how did you come to work with ASMAC?*

I am an arranger, orchestrator, composer, and keyboard player originally from Albuquerque New Mexico, now living in Los Angeles. As a pianist-keyboard player, I performed at countless live events, TV shows, and recordings. As an arranger, orchestrator, and composer, my work has been included in TV, film and media projects recorded or performed by orchestras throughout the world as well as with virtual instruments at my home studio.

#### **More here**

I was introduced to ASMAC in the early 2000s and found that the members were welcoming and available to share information about the craft. At the time I was the arranger for the Wayne Brady Variety Show, the only variety show on network TV, and was invited to the board of directors. I have been increasingly engaged with event planning and other aspects of ASMAC's endeavors.

### **2** *The ASMAC has an 82-year history; please tell us why it was started.*

In 1938, a group of arrangers and composers formed The American Society of Music Arrangers (ASMA) to promote their general interests and advocate for better compensation. This was also a social organization and a platform to share information. In 1987, the word "Composers" was added to the original name in recognition

of the fact that most arrangers were also practicing composers. Our organization is now called the American Society of Music Arrangers and Composers, or [ASMAC](#).

### **3** *How has joining ASMAC helped your career?*

Besides making some connections that evolved into work opportunities, the information that I have absorbed from ASMAC events and other members has been invaluable. This includes technical information about the craft, how to approach business, and overall professionalism.

### **4** *What benefits can songwriters gain from joining ASMAC*

There have been several events focused on how to write songs. Recently "Songwriting - The 11 point plan" by Richard Niles and some events with song critiques. A big part of what makes a song a hit is the arrangement. There is a lot of focus on song arrangement, and members of ASMAC are the arrangers behind hit songs throughout the decades.

### **5** *Is there a membership fee?*

There are various levels of membership, including a full membership and associate membership and student memberships with fees currently from \$25 to \$100 per year. Some events and features on the website are offered for free as part of ASMAC's mission to promote the art. ASMAC is considering new monthly tiers of membership. [More Info](#)

## **6** *What is the difference between an orchestrator and an arranger?*

An **arranger** takes the basic elements of a composition and expands it to form the entire end product. An example is [Beethoven's 5th Symphony](#) is an arrangement of 3 notes. An arrangement of a song would include adding an intro, interludes and other elements that are not the melody. The chords can be part of the arranger's job but also elements like creating drum and bass grooves as well as the other elements. An arranger can also be known as a producer. For example, a song's creative producer, string producer or brass producer, etc...

An **orchestrator** takes the arrangement and commits it to score notation for the musicians who will perform the music. This includes assigning the notes to the exact instrumentation of the ensemble and adding expressive markings such as dynamics, phrasing, and articulations. An orchestrator may also enhance an arrangement with additional instrument assignments and add elements of color or weight. This may include fixing any wrong notes that are frequently found in virtual arrangements.

The lines are blurry as a composer may create some or all of an arrangement. The arranger may compose some original material and also orchestrate. An orchestrator may create some of the arrangement and add original material, which is part of the composition. A virtual orchestra production is created by an arranger who is producing a virtual performance and is also making some orchestration choices. A virtual orchestra

performance could be the realization of a finished notated orchestration also known as a mock-up.

Then there is **the copyist** who is taking the score notation and creating individual parts for the players. Sometimes the copyist is creating the parts from midi and may be technically orchestrating when making decisions about articulations, dynamics, and phrasing, etc...

This brings us back to why ASMAC was formed and part of the mission, which is to advocate for fair compensation for the various music creation jobs.

## **7** *What are some pet peeves orchestrators have, and what can composers do to make their jobs easier?*

The top of the list of pet peeves is tight or unreasonable deadlines. Frequently this is not the composer's fault, but sometimes composer procrastination is adding extra deadline pressure.

It may be a losing battle, but composers could try to fight for more time between music approval and recording to allow more time for orchestration and music preparation. One thing composers can do to make an orchestrators job easier is to keep in mind that live players will have to perform the composition. What is possible with samples in a D.A.W. is not always possible for real players to play. Composers before the advent of synthesizers had to know what was possible and practical for players in order to achieve a great performance. Orchestrators frequently have to reverse engineer orchestral mock-ups in order to make it possible for real instrumentalists to perform, which is sometimes impossible.

Avoid free time compositions that need to be in sync with other elements or random tempo changes that a human cannot follow. Also, create a tempo map that matches the performance of midi mock-ups. If the music slows down or speeds up, make sure that it is reflected in the tempo map. It also helps if the composer can keep in mind the instrumentation available.

## **8** *There may be some readers who are interested in learning orchestration; what advice would you offer to those seeking this career?*

The best way to learn orchestration is to get as many different sounds of the orchestra in your head and learn how to achieve that sound with notation. YouTube has a lot of classical music synced to scores. Start by following along and focus on how the notation relates to what is being performed. Some good orchestration books are needed to give an understanding of instrument ranges and other critical information. If someone wants a career in orchestration, the best way is to find composers who need orchestrators. Other orchestrators may need help as well. Joining a group like ASMAC is a good way to meet composers and orchestrators.

## **9** *What is the best way to contact ASMAC?*

The best way to contact ASMAC is to send an email to [info@asmac.com](mailto:info@asmac.com) To stay informed about ASMAC events, sign up for the email list at [www.asmac.com](http://www.asmac.com)