



ScreenCraft Works Cross-Border Conversation: Sound Design and Music Composition

Conversation between Katrine Amsler and Randy Kalsi

July 2022

Elizabeth McIntyre:

Welcome to our Cross-Border Conversation: Sound Design and Music Composition, including looking at where does one end and the other begin. My name is Elizabeth McIntyre. I'm the co-director of Screencraft Works along with my colleague Rebecca del Tufo, who is here today as well. I'm a white woman with curly hair and my pronouns are she/her.

A big thank you to our partner Genelec for supporting our talk series, Cross-Border Conversations, and also to our mentor partners, Brunel University London, for the technical management of the talks.

Screencraft Works is a not-for-profit virtual community for cross-border knowledge share across local barriers and international borders for all production and post-production people, those who identify as under-represented or who feel that their voice isn't heard or that their perspective isn't recognized.

Our Cross-Border Conversation is to share expert knowledge and insights between talent from different countries, bringing together experiences at all career stages. Our speakers are drawn from our mentoring community.

So I'm absolutely delighted to hand to our two fantastic, wonderful speakers this evening, Katrine Amsler and Randy Kalsi.

Katrine Amsler:

So my name is Katrine Amsler and I actually have a few titles. I'm a sound designer and I'm a composer, I produce, I build instruments. I'm based in Copenhagen in Denmark. I have a Masters in Improvisation and Composition from the Music Academy in Malmö in Sweden, so I have a solid background in music, but I decided to make a career change around 2015 working towards audio design for games and film and TV. So as a sound designer I've worked with various types of audio visual projects, most recently for game composer Martin Stig Anderson on the two Wolfenstein games and Control and on Back for Blood.

Randy Kalsi:

My name is Randy Kalsi. I also have a few titles – that seems to be sort of the norm nowadays in the industry. I do sound post-production, so everything to do with sound post, and I'm a composer also for film and TV. It all started from me being a singer-songwriter, during the teens, I had an album made in the studio. I think at that point in my life I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to sound like or who I was as an artist, so I decided to get into production, music production, so that I could one day create the songs that I wanted to create as an artist. That very quickly, once I learned my skills, got me into becoming a music producer for others, and that led me onto the path of sync licensing. I learned about sync licensing – how to license your songs to TV and film – because at some point I needed to know how to make money as a full-time musician. And it really fascinated me, it was like a light bulb moment, like, okay, this is exactly how I'm going to make a living as an artist and producer. I got some songs licensed to TV and film and it was a really interesting field. I then decided to help other songwriters become successful in the sync world as well, so I'd produce, mix and master songs for them and I'd help them with the songs first, make sure that they're strong enough to be used as songs themselves, and then produce, mix and master them to the required standard so that they could be placed, and then taught them how to pitch as well for opportunities. I guess that was the entry into film for me.

I then did a feature film with my wife in Thailand and I did the full sound, post production and music score for that. I won five awards for Best Sound and five for Best Score, so I thought I must be doing something right here. It just hooked me. I just absolutely fell in love with it. I built a studio and in February it was ready and I was really grateful to have the opportunity to work on a couple of features – I just completed the second one today actually. I did one, it's like a British gangster comedy, like an *Expendables* but it's a British version, for Shogun Films, and I've just done a murder mystery for a director in L.A. It's all remote work. I did the full sound post-production for that, I just completed the final mix today. Clients happy, so all good.

So what inspires you about what you do?

Katrine:

I think, what I do, I've done that ever since I was a kid, because basically what inspires me is the fact that you can play. I mean making sounds and making instruments is for me a way of being intuitive and it gives me a calm. I'm a pretty impatient person, but when I work with sound, I calm down and I forget about time and then it's also kind of the mystery of sound. I don't know how to explain that actually for me sound can make me more emotional than any other thing. It can get you incredibly scared or sad or happy, and I feel with sound it goes a bit deeper. I don't get the same feeling when I go to an art museum. It doesn't go as deep as with sound. So I guess that is what I like about it. It's what it gives to me actually more than what I get from it, I think.

Randy:

A lot of your work is using actual instruments, like hardware.

Katrine:

My journey has been quite like this because I started out as a piano player, playing classical music, and I also went to the Conservatory playing not classical but improvised and jazz music, so my main instrument is the piano. But I always kind of struggled with it. What annoyed me was that you can't bend the strings of the piano. You hit the note and that was it, so that annoyed me. Eventually I then started building my own instruments where the strings were able to bend more. I've been around analogue synth and building digital sound tools as well. But at the moment I just enjoy the acoustic world a lot and that's where I am right now.

Randy:

We're in a similar field now where we do sound for film, TV, games. We're in that kind of area but we have completely different journeys to getting there. I'm completely self-taught. I haven't studied music or got a Master's in it in the way that you have. I'm self-taught and I sort of work my way through. I've already mentioned how I got to where I am, but I largely work with software as well, software instruments as opposed to hardware, so it's really interesting. I'm looking forward to what you're going to show us with that, how you use real world instruments. Somebody like me would then purchase a software program where artists like yourself have created a plugin, where they've created all these sounds, where I would then go in and use that software. It does have a certain amount of manipulation where I can have control over how it will sound, but it's really interesting to speak with somebody who's on the other end, is actually creating these amazing sounds, it's really incredible.

Katrine:

I have two clips of three different sound tools. The first one is the Yak. I called it that because I think it looks like a yak. You can't see it so much in the video but it has these horns, with piano strings. It's made of piano strings and springs and meccano (like Lego but not the plastic Lego, the metal Lego that was a bit earlier). I use that a lot and some IKEA hacks. Let's look at it.

[Clip played.]

So the last one is basically just what can you do with lamps, like a ceiling lamp and then there's an oil lamp and then I tried to show in the video when the supernatural spirit leaves the oil lamp, it's kind of in the middle there.

Randy:

Do you work remotely, do you work hybrid? How is it for you as a freelancer?

Katrine:

I work remote most of the time because I have my home studio in our apartment. I basically stole the family living room – that's my studio! You gotta do what you gotta do! I have my things here in the living room and then, when I do work for Martin and the film composer called Fleming Norco who is based in Paris, then I do all my

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work from here and we send them files back and forth. Sometimes we also meet and record in a real studio. Your studio is away from home?

Randy:

This is my own studio, this studio is one of the rooms in my house. I do work sometimes in other studios, so I am hybrid. I built four new walls all with insulation and ceiling insulation so that it's acoustically sound, so I can do final mixes in here in stereo and surround. It's nice having the freedom to be able to work remotely but it is nice also to go into these nice big studios in London and work with them as well.

Katrine:

I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the differences in your experience between working as an artist where you're your own product as opposed to working with a film. The difference with the collaboration with the rest of the team behind the movie and what it's like to work with your own music, if you still do that.

Randy:

I'm focusing more on sound post-production now. It's my biggest passion. I just love how when you get the raw film and how it just sounds a complete mess. The location sound when it comes from the editor, and the editor has put all the sound in the right places, but it's different takes of different scenes, it's all choppy, it's noisy, it's a complete mess. There's just so much satisfaction out of being able to take that and, first thing would be to get consistent clean dialogue, so working on that and getting that clean, and then adding all the other elements, foley sound design, sound effects. Then all the way to final mix where you're just balancing everything, levels, and the end result and just the satisfaction from that. It's something I really enjoy doing so I'm focusing on that more. I do love composing too, but usually when I work with clients it's as a package. With independent film that happens more often than with the bigger budget stuff. So mostly I work with the editor of the film and so we have a lot of communication back and forth and the producer who hires me, and then towards the end, that's when the director gets involved because it's more important for them, the final result and how it sounds and what the level should be, where the music comes in, how they want that. So this is a very very collaborative process.

Katrine:

But don't you also find, when I started working with games, what I really enjoyed was that focus that just kind of shifted from yourself and away and over to something that is a part of a bigger picture. You're this small co-worker doing your thing over here and we have to make this the greatest thing and the focus is kind of away. I really enjoy that shift. I was at a state in my life where I was just not enjoying the focus, when you play live gigs. So I just realized that I really liked that way of working.

Randy:

Yeah, I definitely agree. When I decided to go into music full-time, the first way I was able to make a living was from singing and performing live. It can feel quite solitary and it's definitely more enjoyable working as a part of a team towards a bigger goal. You just feel like you're part of something valuable.

Katrine:

I have a clip where I made a sound library called V7 and in the first part of the clip it's just the V7 demonstrated. Then after that I made a redesign of a small clip with a large whale. It was a sound design contest that I made something for. So there's the sounds from the V7 like the sound tool and then the sound design for the clip is made only from the V7 sounds, except one sound that is that candy that is crackling in your mouth.

Randy:

Pop candy.

Katrine:

Exactly that. So I made it from my sound tool and that special kind of candy.

[Clip played.]

Randy:

That's super cool. So this is exactly the type of VSTs I would use, virtual instruments I would use. In fact that comes perfectly onto a question [from the audience]: Randy, where do you start looking for or manipulating new sounds in a virtual plug-in world? *The Daytime Nightmare*, it was a psychological thriller but it has horror elements in it. I used a particular VST, I think it was made by Output, and the way it works is they start you off with a bunch of different sounds, like what you've created, like what you've shown us, and then it gives you an x and y axis, so it allows you to click the mouse or the keyboard, click the sound, and then you move it around with the mouse on the x and y pads and you can create all these amazing sounds with it. I usually always have a sound in mind that I want to use and then it's being able to find the right VSTs that you can work with that can help you find those sounds, so finding something very similar, loading that up into the software and then just playing around with it until you find something you like. Then when you do find something, you're hoping that you can recreate it.

Does the idea of sound come first or the desire to make an instrument to experiment with what sound you can find or make?

Katrine:

That's a good question. It's almost always the instrument, the material, that comes first, and then I kind of investigate what is this material. Most of the time it starts with me going to the flea market. It's pretty embarrassing to go with me because I take everything down from the shelves and I clank on it and I listen to kitchen tools and stuff and people think I'm crazy. Then I buy different stuff that I hope and think will have sound in it and then I try to put it together and see what happens. Strings and springs are often a part of the tool.

Randy:

Because they resonate, right?

Katrine:

Yeah, exactly.

Randy:

And then something hollow as well for it to be able to ...

Katrine:

Yeah, something like a box, different types of box that resonates with the strings.

Randy:

Somebody else has asked: Randy, do you still do the singer-songwriter gig? What do you think resonates more with you - doing film or being an artist?

I really really loved performing live but eventually at some point, and you know this is the reality, it's the truth that eventually at some point you need to decide what you want to do for a living that's something that's going to help make you a decent living, something that's sustainable, something that can last throughout your career. Going into film – massively, it's so much better in every way than performing live. I'm 41 now and the choice I made for going into film and having my studio and using my skills and talents in other ways has helped so much, not just financially but also emotionally. I'm much happier, I'm much more content and comfortable. If you have a talent, if you're performing live, I would definitely consider pursuing other ways, like getting into film, getting into TV, getting into games, where you can utilize your talent. There's so much work available now from streaming platforms, it's all opened up again now, and there are a lot of opportunities there, so for those who do have those talents, I would definitely consider exploring those.

Katrine:

Yeah and for me the reason why I became a musician and composer and played live, it's basically only because nobody told me I could do otherwise. When you go to school, I just remember that the greatest thing you could do was go on a Europe tour and play gigs. Nobody told me that that there was another ... or I didn't search for it myself either. It kind of just popped up. I went on that Europe tour and I was like, I'm not enjoying this, what's wrong with me? And then I started searching – I was too afraid to tell anybody that I was not enjoying it, but it opened up for me to start searching for something else. What should I do, where does my music fit or where do I feel comfortable?

Randy:

That actually comes perfectly on to another question here, to both of us: to attract your first commission did you create a showreel of your different work, eg horror movie, romantic movie, short pieces, that showcased your skills?

Katrine:

I think for me it was totally a coincidence because making these instruments was not meant for people to see or for me to work with. I made my first experiment with making instruments when I was pregnant with my daughter, just because she was sleeping and I was bored so I had to do something. It's the yellow one behind me actually. Almost all the horror gigs and the work that I've done for horror games and scary stuff is from people that discovered me doing those instruments and were finding that interesting. So for me that was the opening actually.

Randy:

I mean for me, the reason why my wife and I decided to make our own feature film was for that exact reason, for us to be able to showcase our abilities and talents. It needs to be done. You need to create something, you need to have something there that you can show others. From that and networking and building relationships with people in the industry.

Katrine:

I often see it like – I go fishing, I have all these in the water and I put one down and then, I don't know, maybe two years later there will be a catch there. It's all these kind of different – doing something that you can showcase, talking to this person, talking to that person. It's a lot of ends that come together.

Randy:

I definitely recommend having a decent website, a portfolio website showcasing your skills and talents. It takes time but if you never give up then you'll always get there.

Katrine:

I think that's been my keyword. I'm really bad at quitting.

Randy:

[Question from the audience.] Randy, what do you mean recreate? Do you find a sound you like on a library and then recreate it from scratch like Katrine?

No. There are artists out there like Katrine that create these sounds and then make software instruments out of them, and then those software instruments have certain parameters that you can use to manipulate the sound that was created. So Katrine, for example, would create the sound and then somebody would put that into a plug-in form and then you would have a certain amount of flexibility on how you could manipulate that sound. So, for example, there's an xy axis, there'd be one sound on the left side, one sound on the right side, and you would be allowed to switch in between the two, manipulate the sound, but you can do it in real time so that it's moving, then you can add reverb effects, whatever you want to then recreate your own sound from that original sound.

Katrine:

Yeah, it's completely true. Also, when working in games and when I create stuff not for a library but custom-made – a game as opposed to a film where you have a linear timeline – then with the game you can come back to places and the stinger for something that is scary can't be the same sample every time because then you will go crazy. So when I work for games I make almost the same sound but in many variations so the composer or the sound designer working with it has 10 or 20 different variations of almost the same sound, so it doesn't sound repetitive.

Randy:

It's also massively about budgets. Using somebody live and having bespoke custom sounds done is for bigger budget projects, whereas in the indie film world, for example, they have a set amount of budget for everything and, when that's the case,

you're having to use virtual instruments and stuff like that because you can't hire the people to do it for you because there isn't that budget. So that also plays a big part.

Katrine:

But with a game it's almost, instead of composing the score, you compose all the elements of the score. It's a bit like if you build stuff with Lego, then you ... I hope you know what Lego is, it's this Danish plastic things you can build towers.

Randy:

Oh, Lego, yeah.

Katrine:

I think I can explain it best by saying that when you make a score for a film, you build everything, but when you make a score for a game, you make all the Lego beats and then, when playing the game, the score will build itself.

Randy:

I think we have time for like one last clip. Do you want to show us something else?

Katrine:

The one called NFMD. It's a piece I made for the for the Nordic Film Music Days and I can talk about it afterwards.

[Clip played.]

I should say that this is originally a piece that is 12 minutes long but it's cut into three minutes, so there will be transitions that sound pretty weird.

This is a dentist's drill!

I just wanted to show this clip because it almost sounds like normal music, but underneath all of this music there's so many different things that are not from ordinary instruments. It is an ordinary guitar and stuff, but later in the song there's the sound – the main voice coming later is from a walrus and there's a dental drill. I don't know if you heard me talking. Then there's the sound of the V7 also, like a giant spring, and there's also a sea lion singing, and the things in the beginning of the song is from – I kind of do this a lot where I want to take stuff – it's a very calm intro, it's me playing, I think I had the same mind when I was a kid. I wonder what would happen if I do this, and then I kind of just go with that. I also oftentimes, instead of using reverb, I just put the sound of an actual room underneath my music. So if I want something to feel scary, maybe I put something from a riot. I've used a lot of ASMR also because I think it's really scary, so I just add ASMR under my music and maybe nobody will hear it but it's just a feeling, it creates something scary.

Randy:

So cool. Well I think we're running out of time now so I think what we should do is maybe offer a takeaway each for those who are watching. For me the most important thing is to have something that you can show, where you can show your skills and talent – that's really super important – and the second is to learn how to market and promote yourself. Those are two really important things, in my opinion, and I'm still

trying to figure it all out myself and it takes time, but if you can focus on those two things as well as your art, then I think you can be successful in this this industry.

Katrine:

I totally agree. I also think, make sure that it's still fun, that you don't lose that, so if it's not fun anymore and you don't love what you do, then reconsider. Make sure that it stays intuitive and interesting for you yourself.

Elizabeth@

Randy and Katrine. I want to say a huge thank you for this fascinating conversation. I could listen to you both all day even though it involves some horror instruments. A huge thank you also once again to Genelec for supporting the talk series and to Brunel University London for supporting the mentoring scheme. A huge thank you to Randy and to Katrine for a fascinating Cross-Border Conversation.

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