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## THE MUSICAL PSYCHOLOGIES OF SHARON FARBER

Interview by Randall D. Larson

*Originally from Israel,*

composer Sharon (pronounced Sha-ròn) Farber has received critical acclaim in the US and Europe for her work in both the concert field and in music for films and television. Her most recent score, for director Pinchas Perry's eloquent adaptation of Irvin D. Yalom's celebrated novel, *When Nietzsche Wept*, is an elegantly classical composition, rich in dramatic texture and musical sensitivity. Farber's musical portrait of Nietzsche expresses the tortured soul of the famous philosopher via an eloquently unfolding psychological tone poem, and she paints the environment of 1882 Vienna in heartfelt, broad strokes.

Sharon came out of a very musical family. Immersed in music from a very young age, Sharon began training as a classical pianist at the age of seven. Her studies were interrupted for two years for mandatory service in the Israeli Defense Force, after which she resumed her training, moving to Boston in 1994 with a scholarship to the Berklee College of Music, where she undertook a dual major in classical composition and in film scoring. Graduating Summa Cum Laude in 1997, Sharon relocated to Los Angeles and began her professional career in music, while continuing with studies through an internship in film scoring from the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, the ASCAP Film Scoring Workshop and the mentorship

program of the Society of Composers and Lyricists, which she currently serves on as a board member.

Noted as much for her concert and choral work as for her work in film and television music, Sharon received the Telly Award in 1998 for best score for the docudrama series, *California 2000*. She has brought her talents to a diversified variety of films and television, ranging from scoring cues for TV's *Superman & Batman* with Shirley Walker, Showtime's award-winning dramas *In A Class Of His Own* and *Call Me Sirr*, AFM's science fiction shorts *Alien Episode* and *Meaner Than Sin* for director Jorg Ihle, Adam Consolo's short sci-fi thriller, *The Brothers Grim*, Pablo Toledo's gritty drama of Latina street gangs, *Runnin' At Midnight*, Glenn Kinkler's portrait of a schizophrenic wannabe superhero, *Yup-Yup Man* (aka *Dark Justice*), NBC's Emmy-nominated series, *Starting Over*, and much more, all of which come from very different realms of music and musical approaches.

Sharon "brings to her music influences from her Middle Eastern heritage as well as her extensive knowledge of classical and Western music," said manager Beth Wernick.

Interviewed in her home studio, Sharon spoke enthusiastically about her experiences in film music and the challenges of being a relative newcomer — and a woman — in the contemporary Hollywood film scoring business.





**What were your first experiences in film music when you arrived in Hollywood after graduating from Berklee?**

I found out about the internship with the Academy of TV Arts & Sciences, here in Los Angeles, and I decided to give that a try. I got in! The internship was with Alf Clausen, who scores *The Simpsons*, and Jonathan Wolff, who used to do *Seinfeld* and a lot of classic sitcoms. So I did that for two months, and I learned so much from these two awesome composers. At the end of the internship, Jonathan asked if there was anyone I would like to meet. When I was in Boston I used to come home every day around 3:00 o'clock, and I'd watch *Superman & Batman* on TV because the music was so amazing, so I told Jonathan I would love to meet Shirley Walker, who wrote that music. Shirley met with me and was just so terrific and accommodating, and she recommended me to do music proofreading at Eric Stonerook's for Warner Bros. That's how I started. Then one day Shirley called me and asked if I would like to orchestrate for her, which I excitedly accepted. That was such a remarkable learning experience. You go to school and you study, but it's only when you do it in the real world that you get your real education. School can just prepare you in so many ways. I started writing for the show, but unfortunately, shortly after I started, Warner Bros decided not to use orchestra any more, so that was basically the end of my time with Shirley, bless her memory.

And then things just happened. When I was still a student, my cousin was editing a docudrama series called *California 2000*, and he called me and said the director's (James Kelty) looking for a composer. I was just a student but I scored an episode, *Mr. Bourn's Gold*, and I got the Telly Award [for best score], which was great. So I was lucky enough to begin working professionally while I was still a student. After I finished my internship, I became good friends with Shirley Walker's former music editor, Virginia Ellsworth, and she was working on a Showtime film with Lou Diamond Phillips, called *In A Class Of His Own*, and the director, Robert Munich, was looking for a composer. I had just finished an independent film called *Yup Yup Man* and I let him hear that music. He liked it and I scored his film. Then he directed another film, *They Call Me Sirr*, starring Michael Clarke Duncan and the whole thing started rolling.

**What were your first impressions of the mechanics of scoring for motion pictures?**

I was pretty much clueless at the beginning! Even at Berklee I was aware that I needed to work with computers, but I really



wanted to be a good composer, and I put all of my effort into studying really hard at composing, orchestrating and arranging. It wasn't until I came out to L.A. and saw Jonathan Wolff doing everything he did with computers that I really began working with computers seriously myself. But you first have to be a great composer. All this [indicates computers behind her] is technical stuff, anybody can learn it if they want to do it. It's not that hard. Even though today you are really expected to do everything, compose, orchestrate, be the music editor and the mixing engineer — everything! But there's a limit. I'd rather be a good composer — a great composer, if I can be — than a great engineer. I mix my own music for TV shows, but when it comes to film, I call Michael Stern, who's a great engineer, and he takes care of that. It's less of an interest to me how the computer works. I'm more interested in what it can do for me to make my life easier and more efficient as a composer.

**When you write, do you compose at the keyboard or do you use pen-and-paper?**

When I compose concert music I write the whole thing with pen and paper, and then I transfer it in to a notation program on the computer. I use Sibelius [[www.sibelius.com](http://www.sibelius.com)], which I endorse —as well as GigaStudio [[www.tascamgiga.com](http://www.tascamgiga.com)]. When I compose film music I usually write the main themes on paper, but when I start working and orchestrating I will work at a keyboard, because then I'm working with shorter scenes, usually two or three minutes in length — four minutes is a really long scene for film. That's the way I work, but in concert music I have to see it on the page.



**Is that because concert music is purely coming out of your head, you're not scoring to a particular visualization?**

Yes, exactly. Everything is very much time-oriented with film. You have to be very, very careful with sync points, and with certain things visually that you have to catch musically. When I write concert music, nobody is limiting me, I have no visual thing to look at, it's just my imagination and what I hear. So for some reason it just flows better with pen and paper.

In 2002 I wrote a piece in memory of Daniel Pearl [the American journalist [who was kidnapped and murdered in Pakistan] — his father is a friend of mine, and when the whole terrible ordeal had ended I thought, what can I do? Write music! So I took this beautiful Hebrew poem by Nathan Alterman, "Haem Hashlshit" ("Mothers' Lament"), and I set it to music, and gave it to him as my gift. Later I sent it to Conductor and Music Director Grant Gershon at the Los Angeles Master Chorale, who premiered it at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion along with works by Verdi, Schubert and Britten. That was a beautiful experience, as I

felt that I wrote a piece with a deeper meaning and significance. I look forward to working with Maestro Gershon again.

**How would you contrast the personal satisfaction you find in writing for film with writing something that may be freer or less direction-specific?**

It's all music, but it's two different worlds. In film music you are a service to the film. Of course, you try to write the best you can, but it's not about your music. It's about what the music can do for the film. It's about being of service to the vision of someone else. It's about collaborating with someone else and really listening to the director's vision. It's hard to have something rejected — you wrote this music, you may think it's the best thing you've ever written, and the director listens and then says "I don't like it. It doesn't work for me." You just have to be very sensitive and ask why. Is it because it's too sentimental, maybe not sentimental enough; is it too cozy, or too dark? You try to communicate in terms you can both understand. Most directors are not musi-

## CRACKING HOLLYWOOD'S GENDER BARRIER

### ■ Composer Sharon Farber and Manager Beth Wernick

**Did you find any challenges, as a woman, coming in to the Hollywood community?**

**Sharon Farber:** It is a little bit of a boy's club. It's harder for women. You speak to film music fans and you ask them about composers, they almost never know any women who score films — and we have composers such as Rachel Portman, Anne Dudley and Laura Kaufman, and of course Shirley Walker, bless her memory, who surely was one of the women who really led the way, and who showed that she can do it as well as any man.

I did a film called *Final Draft* [2003], and remember sitting in my studio with four men — two directors, the producer, and the editor, and me and thinking that this says everything about the state of women in the industry. You have to think, "how do we work together and what do we do to make this a success" and not be intimidated by the fact that you're the only woman there. The fact remains that there are tons of men composers and very few women composers. Women need to have determination and need to work hard and need perseverance.



**Beth Wernick:** There seems to be a change nowadays. There's more dialog about wanting to see more women composers, and very little dialog now about "well, you know, it's harder to get you work, honey, because you're a girl." That little pat on the back that you get at a meeting that makes you just want to scream.

**How about dealing with harassment issues in this business?**

**Sharon Farber:** I think the most important thing is to remember that you've been chosen because of your abilities as a composer, and are there to do the job. If someone treats you in an unprofessional way, you just have to say — not to embarrass anybody, because you want to keep on working, "you know, I'm glad that you like me so much, but this is not appropriate, because we're in this professional situation, and in order to work together and to get the great results that we can get together, we need to respect each other. I respect you, I respect your vision, I respect what you want to get out of this. You need to respect me the same way."



cians, and they're not expected to be. They need to tell you what they feel, what they hear in their mind, to draw the picture of the scene that they want. In concert music, there are no such limitations. The only limitations may be of time or the subject matter — someone who commissions you may say "I want a ten minute piece and I want it about angels" or something like that. But within it, you're totally free. It's so rewarding to sit in a concert hall, knowing that people bought tickets and came to hear what you have expressed through your music, and when you're part of a film, they came to see the film, and you're just part of it.

But on the other hand, I remember when I did *In A Class Of His Own*, and I went to the premiere at the WGA theatre. I was just starting out, and when my music came on with the big picture on the screen, I was blown away — "Wow! This is really cool!" So it's just a matter of being in the moment when you do a film, and then being in the moment when you do the concert music. Treat everything you do with the utmost respect. That's really important. I can't do half a job. I can't say, "Oh, this is a small film, I'll just do a small job." I can't. I put all my heart to it, because I believe that, first it's me, it's my name on it, I want to be proud of what I do, and also out of respect for the people who have worked on it for so long.

**What can you tell me about your latest score, *When Nietzsche Wept*. How did you get involved with this project?**

*When Nietzsche Wept* is based on Irvin Yalom's best seller book. The funny thing for me with this film — when something is meant to be, it's meant to be. I read his book when I was seventeen and I fell in love with it. I re-read it throughout the years, and when I started scoring films, I thought, "maybe someone will take it and make a film out of it. Wouldn't it be great if I could compose the music for it?" I met the director four years ago, and he told me about this project. I said "Oh my God, this is the book that I really like!" He said, "Well there's this scene in the movie, maybe you can see if you can do something with that." It's the scene where Nietzsche (played by Armand Assante) actually plays on the piano a piece of music he wrote — Nietzsche was a composer himself. I took it and did a reduction for piano and soprano, and recorded it with a friend of mine, a wonderful opera singer named Hilla Plitman, but we ended up re-recording the piece for the movie with Soprano Ayana Haviv. I gave it to the director, Pinchas Perry, and he loved it. Nothing happened for a couple of years, and then he called and said "Sharon, we're doing the film!"

**You recorded the score in Bulgaria with a full symphony orchestra. What prompted this decision?**

I'm very happy to say that director Pinchas Perry, from the get

go, wanted to record with an orchestra. The film is a combination of quite a few classical pieces and my score. Pinchas was so keen on going to Bulgaria and doing it with real orchestra, which was a pleasure for me, because there's nothing like scoring a film with a real orchestra. Even with all the computers that we have today, it's never the same. The production company, Millennium Films, decided to put the money into the orchestra recording, and it's just elevated the film so much.

Bulgaria was chosen based on a few factors. The film was shot in Bulgaria and the director wanted to record there. I had contacted the union regarding recording here in Los Angeles, (which is, of course, my ultimate goal and intention on every movie I score) but the production company insisted on Bulgaria, because of political connection they have with the Bulgarians and of course, the cost. Before we decided on the location, I asked my Scoring Mixer, Michael Stern, (who also did an amazing job mixing the film in surround sound under pressure) to check out the technical aspects of Bulgaria, including mics, ProTools set-up, etc, and he determined that the studio had what we needed to record there. On top of that, my own communication with the orchestra manager was great — they were very accommodating and we felt that they were really trying to help us out and do the best they can on every level. Musically, as well, I liked their professional and warm sound, which fit the sound of the movie.

**When you first sat down to work on this film, what were your initial impressions as to the kind of music you felt was appropriate, and then how did you translate that into your final result that's heard in the film?**

Pinchas had temp tracked the whole film with classical music. So here I am trying to compete with Brahms and Beethoven and Mozart! But I thought a lot about what the film was about. It was about love and obsession and realization and sadness and being happy with what you have. From the minute I saw the movie, I knew I had the main theme. There was something about it that just came to mind, and the director loved it. The rest of the score was essentially derived from the main theme. I orchestrated everything, so the director could hear the full version before we recorded orchestra.

**How much music did you write for the film and how much time did you have to do that?**

I wrote about 40 minutes, altogether. I actually had more time than usual. Because the director put so much time into the film, I didn't want to rush. I had about 2 months. But then, just before we left for Bulgaria, all of a sudden the director wanted ten minutes more music. So then it became crazy.

### **How did you deal with that at the 11th hour?**

I called a friend of mine who's just a wonderful orchestrator, Penka Kouneva. She's also a great composer. She worked on it along with her copyist, and two of my interns and somehow we got it done. I was actually proofreading the new score pages on the plane to Bulgaria, the day before the session. Then, after the first two sessions, throughout the night I was proofing the next morning's session! I made some changes at the last minute and had them print the new score right before we recorded it!

### **What elements of this film spoke to you initially? How did you decide what needed to be the heart of the score, the element that needed to be conveyed through your music?**

With this film in particular, because I had read the book so many times, I had my own interpretation of what it was about. I had many, many conversations with the director, and he was very precise with his vision, so that really helped me understand his interpretation. Armand Assante is so brilliant in the film and he transfers the emotions of Nietzsche in such a way that you need to be really completely an unemotional person not to be moved by it.

So I wanted to have a theme that would encompass his sorrow, his passion, his love, his obsession. I wanted something very classical, with a little bit of Rachmaninof's piano style. I wanted something that would convey all of that, and the minute I had it, I felt it was right. Once I had the first three themes, everything was taken from that.

### **Did the fact that it had to do with a real person, and a person of Nietzsche's character and intellect in history, speak to you as far as "this has to be a serious score that evokes an environment and the character's psychology?"**

Completely! I had studied psychology and I know what people go through. Especially in the film's period, when psychology really didn't exist, it was called "talking cure" and it was just an experiment. Nietzsche, without even knowing it, was both the first psychology patient and psychologist. So this was a story that really spoke to me. There's something about someone who is so brilliant but so alone and who just wants to be loved, it just breaks my heart!

### **What was your biggest challenge on that score?**

The biggest challenge was to convey to the director that even though I understand and respect his vision of "scoring" the picture with classical music only, an original score would make the film unique and exciting. He has a great taste in music and knows classical music, so I came from a very respectful approach. My main challenge was, first, to understand that it's not that he doesn't like my music, it's that he has a vision of doing it in a



specific way. Eventually, the director and I felt that, conceptually, a synergy of classical pieces and an original score would enhance this beautiful film and elevate its emotional language and that's what our collaboration created.

### **You are also very much involved on concert and choral music.**

When I'm not working on a film or TV project, I write concert music. There are so many opportunities out there for concert music, it's just unbelievable. There are many orchestras and choirs who are always looking for material and want to commission works. There are many competitions composers can get involved with. There's so much stuff to do, and your name starts to get around. Right now I'm on three commissions, and that's such a pleasure.

### **A lot of composers who are looking for film as a marketplace may not be aware of many of these things. How do they find out about these commissions?**

There are two organizations for concert composers that I belong to, one of them is The American Music Center [[www.amc.net](http://www.amc.net)], and the other is the American Composer's Forum [[www.composersforum.org](http://www.composersforum.org)]. Both are great, and they send you opportunities every month or two, and you just check what interests you. It lists things like "a piece for soprano and five musicians," and the deadline. And you write it and you send it out. Sometimes you get it, sometimes you don't, but either way you have another piece under your belt. In 2004, as a result of one of these opportunities, I was commissioned by The Foundation for Universal Sacred Music to compose a piece that would portray tolerance and understanding between people and religions. Coming from Israel, I knew how the lack of these issues can cause pain and suffering, and decided to write a piece that will try to bring some peace through music. The result was a 22-minute work for Choir, Chamber Orchestra and Ethnic Instruments, with guest artists Omar Faruk Tekbilek on Nay flute, Oud and Dumbek, Freddie Schifan on Flamenco guitar and David Kontesz, my husband,



on dumbek. The premier in 2004 led to a repeated performance in 2005 and the next two performances take place in Boston this coming April.

In 2005, I was commissioned a piece by Jacob Barzilai, an Israeli poet who is a holocaust survivor. It was called “To Always Remember” and was a song cycle based on three of his poems. It was premiered in Berlin with soprano Sharon Rostorf and pianist Hagai Yodan at an event commemorating 60 years since the end of the war. Now the Center for Jewish Culture and Creativity (which I am an affiliated artist with) has commissioned me to re-orchestrate the piece for the Center’s ensemble “Synergy,” which will premiere in May. Hagai Yodan, the pianist who performed the piece in Berlin, loved the work and commissioned me to compose a piano ballad for him, which premiered in Israel in March.

**How does your technique vary when you’re faced with a project that you’re not able to use an orchestra in, such as your earlier scores for television and short films?**

I always try to have a few live musicians. I don’t think I’ve ever done a synth-only score. I scored a film called *Runnin’ At Midnight* [2002], which was a beautiful film about Latino gangs by director Pablo Toledo, and it won tons of awards. He wanted to go against the picture and go with an emotional score, which I was so happy about. I had about 15 musicians, but he needed a bigger sound, so some of those musicians are doubled by synth. I always try to bring in horns and brass, especially if I need to play emotional music. Either way, there’s something about musicians playing together that enhances the real depth of the story. So my technique is to first score everything on the computer and then decide whether I need to double what am I not going to use from synth, how many musicians I need, and how many musicians

the company can afford. When I start doing it, and I realize that I have all these great musicians, I start writing more, so I start adding music! Sometimes even on the scoring stage I will add music or orchestration, because I think, “It’s so beautiful, let’s have a little bit more, another melody here for the oboe!”

Of course, when you have only orchestra and you know you don’t have the support of the computer, you have to really be careful. When you score in synth and you mix it in the computer, you have more room to play with. When you score with an orchestra, the orchestra has its own inner balance, so while it is easier to mix, the composer and orchestra need to be very careful. You can’t write for, say, fifteen trumpets and one harp, if you want to hear the harp- you need to know your orchestration skills. Of course you can always record the harp separately and mix it in, but if you want to have the real sound of the orchestra, you need to be very conscious of things like that.

**What advice would you give to would-be film composers in today’s Hollywood?**

Visualization. Visualize yourself and believe in that vision, and don’t let other people say you can’t do it. When I left Israel, someone told me, “Why do you think you’re going to make it? There are so many out there, you’re just one of them.” And I said, “Well, why not?” You can look at it either way. Even the biggest film composers started from somewhere; it took them time to become the biggest. You go to screenings and you hear the big composers’ stories and everybody has a different story. You cannot build your career on someone else’s story. This is you, this is your voice, this is your story. Be yourself as a composer. Many times people say, “oh, I can write in the style of so-and-so,” but then you may get to write in all these styles but there’s no real independent individual voice that’s yours. You sound like

*"You cannot build your career on someone else's story. This is you, this is your voice, this is your story."* —Sharon Farber

everybody else, so why don't they hire that someone else?. Just be yourself. It's sometimes hard to do; it's very hard to feel secure in your own voice. But I think the best music, either concert music or film, that I wrote, was music that was totally myself; that was me, that was my voice.

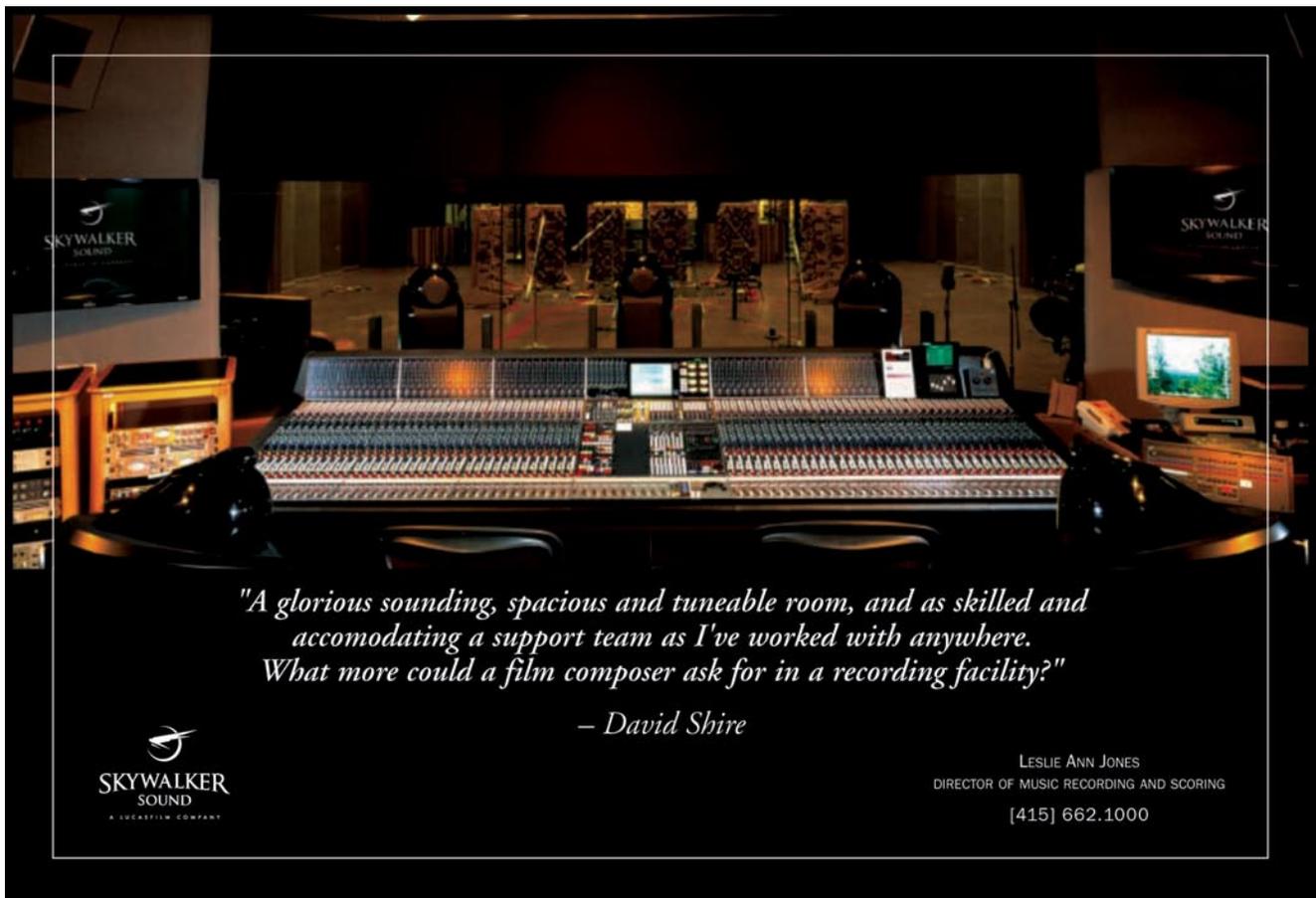
**What's your outlook on the state of the art of film music right now? What does it take to be successful today as a film composer?**

I think we face enormous challenges, especially as I'm on the Board of the SCL [Society of Composers & Lyricists, [www.thescscl.com](http://www.thescscl.com)], I know from the inside some of the really hard challenges that we're facing. I think it's coming to a point where it's less and less money for more and more work. You only had to be a composer in the past. Now you have to wear so many hats — composer, orchestrator, copyist, music editor, mixing engineer, recording engineer. It's just crazy. Of course there's always the big, big composers that we all strive to be, who don't have to deal with these issues. However, the expectations are huge. The time that you have to score is getting shorter and shorter. And of course, as independent contractors, we're not unionized, so it's a little harder at this point. I also feel that many of the film students are

not being taught how to communicate with a composer. What do you need, what is the budget, what does it mean to have an original score? They don't know that we have to have a copyist, for example. What does it mean to score for an orchestra, if they have the budget for that? The composer can't do everything — there are people we bring in to help us out, but they need to get paid! So we composers have to stand in this position again and again and try to educate filmmakers about the nature of our work.

I don't believe in the starving artist syndrome. I believe that we have worked very hard to get to where we are, and I believe we should be compensated accordingly. Many young people will just start out, and I understand it, but they're willing to work for free, for nothing, and all their rights are taken away from them. They think that this is going to take them to the next level, but it's not, because when the director has the opportunity to do something bigger, he won't come back to them, because he may then feel if they work for free their work can't be that good. I think that we composers need to be very supportive of each other and try to work together to better the situation. ||

*For more information on Sharon Farber, please see her web site at [www.sharonfarber.com](http://www.sharonfarber.com)*



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