

A Vocalist-Composer's Approach to Short Film Scoring

Adapting Industry Practices for Female Voice in the Score for *Soulsinger*

By Chelsea Stutchbury

Abstract

How can the practices of professional screen-score vocalists, composers and vocalist-composers, inform my own creative practice as a screen-score vocalist-composer? This paper is derived from PhD artistic research investigating the creative practice of female vocal composition for film, television, and game scores. Semi-structured interviews conducted with 16 professional screen-score vocalists, composers and vocalist-composers across the globe, focused on investigating, identifying and discussing composition, performance, recording and production techniques for female voice. These analysed interview findings work as an informative guide, influencing creative practice scoring for my short film *Soulsinger*. Multiple creative roles including the film's vocalist-composer, writer and director were undertaken for this project. This creative control meant the film could be tailored to best serve its research purpose of exploring the use of female voice in a screen score and allow the music and sound design to become the storyteller, rather than dialogue. On a larger scale, this research highlights female experience and creative voice while working in a traditionally male-dominated screen music industry and acknowledges their significant and diverse contributions to screen music composition, while considering ethical adaptation, vocalist-composer collaboration and vocal identity.

Introduction

The female voice has long been considered a powerful and emotive entity, having been depicted in literature and media ranging from evil to angelic. This use of female voice continues to be reflected in film, television and game scores, and although employed across many narrative genres for various reasons, it is an instrument frequently relied upon to evoke a sense of mysticism or otherworldliness. Though there is considerable research that examines screen scoring practices, research into the creative practices of female vocalists, composers and vocalist-composers, including their impact on

creative practice remains to be explored. My interest in this area developed through fascination with the interaction of music and image in audiovisual media. I became particularly interested in the distinctive and symbolic ways female voices have been used in screen scores, especially by those I refer to as ‘vocalist-composers’ who incorporate their own voice into their compositions.

A question that has driven much of my artistic research is: how can a voice communicate when words are removed? I have been interested in how a story can be expressed beyond the use of dialogue, and how music and the use of voice within it, can innovatively signify meaning, be emotionally engaging and sonically bring to life a visual story or even drive it. I wondered how I might uncover and explore existing ideas and techniques from professionals, while maintaining my originality as a vocalist-composer. These questions ultimately led me to my PhD research question: How can the practices of professional screen-score vocalists, composers and vocalist-composers, inform my own creative practice as a screen-score vocalist-composer? To answer this question, I adopted a sequential research design that moves from interviews with industry professionals to thematic analysis of interview data culminating in the creative application in the score for *Soulsinger*.

Methodology and Research Design

Before conducting my creative project *Soulsinger*, I needed to investigate existing industry practices behind the vocally inclusive music I was interested in. I conducted semi structured interviews with 16 screen-score vocalists, composers and vocalist-composers, whose careers span from the 1960s to the present. Their varied roles and levels of experience generated a broad body of evidence about vocal composition, performance, recording and production.

Interviewees and some of their key works include:

Amanda Achen: Vocalist for *Final Fantasy XIV* (Yoshida, 2010), *Birds of Prey* (Yan, 2020), *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), *Mulan* (Caro, 2020), *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989)

Loire Cotler: Vocalist for *Dune: Part One* (Villeneuve, 2021), *Dune: Part Two* (Villeneuve, 2024), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Hall & López Estrada, 2010) *The Sandman* (Heinberg, 2022), *Dark Phoenix* (Kinberg, 2019)

Lisbeth Scott: Vocalist-Composer for *Salem's Lot* (Dauberman, 2024), *All My Life* (Meyers, 2020), Vocalist for *Avatar: Fire & Ash* (Cameron, 2025), *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Adamson, 2005), *Shrek* (Adamson & Jenson, 2001)

Sally Stevens: Vocalist for *How the West Was Won* (Hathaway, Ford, Marshall & Thorpe, 1962), *Klute* (Pakula, 1971), *Dirty Harry* (Siegel, 1971), *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989)

Julie Elven: Vocalist for *Gran Turismo* (Blomkamp, 2023), *Our Oceans* (Joffe, Lyon, Menzies, Scott & Tuck, 2024), *Mary* (Caruso, 2024), *Horizon Forbidden West* (de Jonge & Auray, 2022), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (de Jonge, 2017)

Ari Mason: Vocalist for *BBC Planet Earth III* (Easton, Greenhalgh and Ridgeon, 2023), *Castlevania Nocturne* (Deats & Deats, 2023), *Assassins Creed Valhalla: The Siege of Paris* (Baptizat, Boudon & Richer, 2021) and *The Dawn of Ragnarok* (Baptizat, Boudon & Richer, 2022)

Josie Mann: Vocalist-Composer for *Bump* (Bennett, Khan, Beattie & O'Brien, 2023), *The Artful Dodger* (Otto, Walker, Chen, Lucas & Young, 2023), *Kangaroo* (Woods, 2025)

Helen Choyer: Composer for *Rispondimi Un dernier au revoir* (Novarese, 2025), *Trek to Yomi* (Menchiari, 2022), *Star Wars: Outlaws* (Cook, Draghici & Gerighty, 2024)

Anna Waronker & Craig Wedron: Vocalist-Composers for *Yellowjackets* (Lyle & Nickerson, 2021)

Lisa Gerrard: Vocalist-Composer for *Gladiator* (2000), *Dune: Part One* (Villeneuve, 2021), *Dune: Part Two* (Villeneuve, 2024), *Whalerider* (Caro, 2022), *2:22* (Currie, 2017)

Holly Sedillos: Vocalist for *Don't Worry Darling* (Wilde, 2022), *Wicked* (Chu, 2024), *Wicked: For Good* (Chu, 2025), *Minions* (Balda & Coffin, 2015)

Lorne Balfe: Composer for *Black Widow* (Shortland, 2021), *The Wheel of Time* (Judkins, 2021), *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* (McQuarrie, 2018), *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One* (McQuarrie, 2023)

Angela Little: Vocalist-Composer for *Dive Club* (Jaggi, 2021), *The Blackdagger Brotherhood* (Musk, 2025), *Honor of Kings* (Min, 2015), *Everybody's Oma* (Banks & van Genderen, 2022)

Jessica Jones: Vocalist-Composer for *One Day* (Taylor, 2024), *The Tinder Swindler* (Morris, 2022), *Red Rose* (Blake, Salazar & Siwe, 2022), *Fifteen-Love* (Riley & Macdonald, 2023)

Suzanne Waters: Vocalist for *Dune: Part One* (Villeneuve, 2021), *Dune: Part Two* (Villeneuve, 2024), *Agatha All Along* (Schaeffer, Goldberg & Monteiro, 2024), *Despicable Me 3* (Balda, Coffin & Guillon), *Transformers: The Last Knight* (Bay, 2017)

The semi-structured interviews followed a set of 21 questions important for my research, such as how they entered the screen music industry, what their role entailed, and how and why their voice was integrated into their creative practice for screen scoring, with a large focus on 4 key interwoven areas: composition, performance, recording and production practices for female voice.

Interview Findings

Following interviews, I analysed the data thematically, generating key findings that could be useful to apply in the creative project component of my research. A summary of key findings below, is organised into three interconnected areas, with recording techniques included in production. Performance practices refer to vocalist techniques used to generate expressive material; compositional practices refer how that material is shaped to create themes and textures; and recording and production practices refer to how the voice is spatially and sonically edited and positioned within the screen world.

Vocal Performance Practices:

- Significant improvisation, especially for vocalist-composers
- Global vocal influences (throat singing, overtone singing, microtonality, Konnakol, and Balkan styles)
- Embracing a unique vocal identity rather than traditional vocal ideals
- Wordless vocalisation/glossolalia and ornamentation, melisma, glissandi
- Using voice to serve narrative, emotion, and character
- Use of envisioning and embodying narrative elements through composer descriptions. For example, in *Dune* (Villeneuve, 2021) vocalist Loire Cotler (personal communication, November 21, 2024) described how Hans Zimmer would sometimes give her descriptive imagery to direct her vocal delivery such as asking her to sing like she was “swallowing sand”
- Using breath, tone, and register manipulation for expressive effect
- Genre-specific vocal prep
- Ethical adaptation of influences into original vocal expression
- Stylistic versatility across genres and contexts
- Use of extended techniques such as embodying narrative themes into the physical delivery of vocals. For example, to symbolise the narrative themes of women’s oppression in the film *Don’t Worry Darling* (Wilde, 2022), the vocal performance techniques used included the vocalist Holly Sedillos singing while repeatedly placing a hand over mouth to create a muffling/silencing effect, as well as using vocal percussion by repeatedly striking the chest for rhythmic vocal effect (Powell, 2022)
- Exploring vocal imperfections. For example, Anna Waronker (personal communication, May 25, 2025) discussed embracing vocal imperfections and when recording voice for the television

series *Yellowjackets* (Lyle & Nickerson, 2021) she was unwell, yet this made her voice more unique and ultimately resulted in a sound that matched the shows' darker themes

Compositional Practices:

- Prioritisation of emotion and atmosphere
- Use of improvisation and using the voice as a device to compose initial ideas for all instrument parts
- The layering of vocals to create textures and evolving soundscapes
- Using simplicity, silence, and subtle timing
- Developing and reusing thematic ideas
- Blending organic elements with synthetic ones
- Capturing ideas as early as possible & create original work from other media to inspire if no footage is available yet
- Using vocals intentionally
- Experimenting and embracing unconventional approaches

Recording & Production Practices:

- Manipulating vocals with production effects and plugins such as reverb, equalization (EQ), delay, distortion, pitch shifting, and filtering to shape vocal character
- Recording vocals dry for greater mixing flexibility
- Optimising the recording environment for the best performance and recording possible with many interviewees preferring a home setup and trialing different acoustic treatments, microphones and microphone positions
- Capturing spontaneous performances, including warm-up and first takes as often these are the best and are hard to recreate
- Creating intimacy or space through microphone technique and stereo imaging
- Using audio effects to transform the voice into atmospheric or non-human textures, an effective way of using voice subtly way allowing for less chance of the voice clashing with characters dialogue/too similar in frequency

This research of performance, compositional, recording and production practices surrounding female voice in screen scoring provided a flexible framework rather than a fixed model for my approach to creative music practice for *Soulsinger*.

Ethical Adaptation

Although not the primary focus of this research, ethical adaptation emerged as an important issue in discussions of vocal practice. Several interview insights raised questions about how screen scores have used the female voice to exoticise settings, characters or emotional states, including through tropes such as the wailing woman or requests to perform an unspecified “ethnic” sound. For a vocalist-composer, this raises a practical and ethical challenge: how can existing vocal traditions be acknowledged as influences without reducing them to imitation or stylistic shorthand? In this paper ethical adaptation is treated as a creative responsibility that requires research, training, collaboration and awareness of the cultural meanings attached to vocal sound.

Integrated Creative Roles and Production Context

My creative role in *Soulsinger* extended beyond the score composition and vocal performance to include writing, directing and overseeing the broader production. This placed the score in direct conversation with choreography, camera movement, lighting, set design, costuming and editing. Although this level of creative control is unusual for a vocalist and composer, it provided a useful research opportunity to shape musical decisions alongside the film’s visual and choreographic language rather than added after the image was locked. These interdependent production conditions shaped both the sound palette and the order in which its soundtrack (score + sound design) was developed.

This artistic research project also sits within a broader concern with women’s creative work in screen music and filmmaking. By centering a female protagonist and collaborating with women across several production roles, *Soulsinger* became a practical extension of the research’s interest in women’s voices both as sonic material and as creative agency.

Overview of Creative Project – *Soulsinger*

To implement the interview findings in a practical way, I created the short film *Soulsinger*. The project challenged me as both vocalist and composer, to express the emotional journey of a female protagonist without relying on dialogue. As writer, director, composer and vocalist, I was able to develop the score alongside the film’s broader artistic vision. This integrated role allowed musical, visual and choreographic decisions to inform one another throughout production.

Alongside my interviews, I was in the films pre-production period, where I developed the narrative, drafted the score, trialing ideas suggested by my interviewees and assembled a team of Griffith University Film School students. I collaborated with *Soulsinger* choreographer and performer Jayden Grogan and lead performer Sophia Gougoulas while rehearsals, production planning and musical development progressed together. Working with my film supervisor and crew also expanded my understanding of filmmaking and influenced how I approach creative music practice for screen. *Soulsinger* is currently in post-production, and as I continue to work with my film editor, score and sound design, I am reflecting on my creative practice and discussing how I have been informed by interview findings, what practices I incorporated and adapted and why, which will result in the final main chapter of my thesis where I breakdown my scoring process in detail.

The film follows a woman who sacrifices her life to save the soul of her dying lover and becomes bound to a dreamlike realm as a Soulsinger, an immortal gatekeeper whose song guides souls across the veil into the afterlife. When the reincarnated soul of her lost love appears in her realm on the brink of death, the encounter unsettles her duty and initiates the film's main emotional and musical arc. This narrative structure allowed me to investigate how a vocally explorative score could communicate character, memory, grief, and transformation. Through this project I wanted to challenge myself as a musical storyteller through my composition and voice, allowing the soundtrack (score and sound design) and dance to tell the story of the film without the need for words.

In *Soulsinger*, my voice fulfils several interconnected functions: it expresses the protagonist's emotional and physical states, suggests her siren-like song used to lure the souls across, characterises the setting, marks the connection between the two main characters, and represents the presence of past *Soulsingers*. Moving between diegetic and non-diegetic conceptions of sound, female voice operates as an expressive, textural and symbolic storytelling element. Its thematic placement helps drive the narrative in the absence of dialogue, while leaving room for audience interpretation.

***Soulsinger* Score Breakdown (Summary)**

The score combines voice, piano, organ, synthesizers, pads, live cello, drums, choir and more, with possible vocal contributions from interview participants and Sophia Gougoulas. Because score composition began before filming, the early score draft became a generative structure for choreography and production, evolving alongside the story over several months rather than

responding to locked footage. The following score breakdown follows the film's dramatic sequence to show how a recurring vocal motif changes in function and meaning and summarizes how that process translated into specific vocal, instrumental and production choices for the score. It begins with distance and memory in the prologue, moves through narrative aspects of monotonous duty, past recognition, rekindled love and hope, then loss, grief and rage, and concludes with freedom and reclamation of her human state. 'The vocals' primary function is to reflect the character arc for the lead protagonist, the Soulsinger.

The Prologue

The Prologue uses a lament-like solo vocal to establish loss, distance and memory. Composed in a minor key and informed by Lisa Gerrard's (personal communication, June 5, 2025) discussion of improvising over a drone and by broader associations between women's vocal lament traditions and mourning, I improvised a wordless mournful vocalization over a drone sound, keeping the production simple with some heavy and long reverb. Placing the voice further back in the mix created spatial distance, establishing this section of the film as a narration of the Soulsingers past emotional journey, setting the scene for the next chapter where the dance begins in present day.

Chapter One: The Soulsinger

This is our introduction to the setting and the Soulsinger, therefore the first vocal heard is a layered leitmotif which represents her siren song. The reverb present establishes her as an ethereal and mystical being, and what it might sound like in this liminal dreamlike space as she sings to the souls of the dead. The vocal melody is comprised of open vowels inspired by various siren song representations in media that have influenced my musical journey. There are various harmonies layered in this vocal leitmotif, with some creating a slight dissonance to evoke a sense of mystery and playing into the 'evil' representation of the traditional siren who lured sailors to their deaths in Greek Mythology. Due to the long period of time that had passed since she transitioned into the Soulsinger, I wanted the audience to be unsure about her present-day character, is she still a being with feelings or has she turned off her humanity to deal with the constant death she must face? Or is this seductive persona all an act to embody her duty as the Soulsinger. Although her character is not visibly singing, her movements and the use of voice in the score suggest that the vocal melody may be emanating from her, allowing the vocal to hover between diegetic song and non-diegetic score. The minor key and eerie harmonies work together to establish her otherworldly and siren like presence, while also carrying a sadness and allure.

Chapter Two: The Strange Soul

When the reincarnated soul of her love appears, the recurring siren song leitmotif is heard again to signal her usual sirening movements and song because she does not recognize him. However, the melody is transformed as they touch, through added vocal distortion and pitch shifting. These effects alter the vocal material from familiar leitmotif to something different and reflect her shock and confusion, sonically marking her recognition that this soul is different to the rest. The musical shift demonstrates how composition decisions and the use of production techniques such as distortion and pitch shifting can serve a narrative function, changing not only the sound of the voice but also its meaning. This section ends with a transition into an ethereal new melody, taking her song on a different path in reflection of her character journey.

Chapter Three: The Remembering

This scene is where the characters' memories fully return and their souls recognise each other. This is the only time I use an identifiable word 'stay' in the score other than the end credits track. She wants him to stay more than anything so they can be together forever, but she knows he can't, so the tone is still melancholy yet hopeful. There are many soft and yearning vocal layers used and the live cello is also introduced as a representation of their remembered love. I played with panning various vocal layers to create a moving soundscape that reflected the movement and momentum as they danced. This chapter ends with a silent pause making it feel like time for them has stopped, they embrace finally feeling at peace. This is where the only sounds that can be heard are the sound design elements of the soundtrack that includes the whispery vocals that represent the character of the realm which were created using my layered breaths and whispers, some of which were recorded inspired by interview finding techniques such as moving around the microphone as I vocalised, as well as a very close mic technique to capture the soft breath noise. This provided a moment of stillness and contentment, allowing the incoming vocal part to be highly contrasting and even more dramatic in volume and intensity. The multiple operatic style vocal cries abruptly pierce through the silence as he is ripped away from her again, falling back into the realm of the living. This represents her intense cry as she reaches for him, refusing to let him go again.

Chapter Four: The Fracturing

Chapter four and five were designed to be contrasting in mood and style, both visually and musically, reflecting her emotions at this point in the story; grief and then rage. In *The Fracturing*, I wanted the

score to evolve from silence into sorrowful minimalistic deep pulsing using a synthesizer pad sound that represented her clouded and grief filled state of mind. I used very little voice to symbolise her loss of hope and the lack of power she feels over her life and love. Some of the gentle vocals were recorded closer to the microphone, full of breath and shakiness, and other were recorded more distant with the addition of heavy reverb, mixed so that they sat further back in the score to symbolise her depressive and distanced mental state. Her dance movements are slow and lethargic which is reflected in the pacing of the score for which no click track was used. The layered live cello with heavy reverb becomes the main element, taking on a repetitive mournful melody that reflects the ending of the melody heard when they were reunited in *The Strange Soul* chapter. This is done to create a sense of her calling out to him but unable to use her vocal power, the wavering bowing, improvised timing and varying note choices of the cello combine to reflect her instability and fragility, taking over for the voice as her mental state deteriorates as her voice becomes silenced.

Chapter Five: The Breaking

In *The Breaking* she begins to shift from grief as she pulls down the memory leaves of the willow tree of life at the heart of the realm. Her sobs turn to rage as she lifts her hands up to the gods begging them to let her time as the Soulsinger end. This is accompanied by a slow deep piano beat that leads into an intense chant of vocal layers as she falls to her knees and screams. As she tries to tear apart the realm, harmonised vocal lines are gradually introduced, including alternating vowels, contrasts between straight tone and vibrato, expanded vocal range and a cathartic style chant push the voice toward the edge of its expressive capacity. In this moment, vocal strain becomes part of the character's dramatic state: the score does not merely accompany her plea for release but embodies its physical and emotional force. This led into the idea of using vocal imperfection or vocal breaking as strength, as discussed with Waronker (2025) in our interview. In her book *Vocal Break: On Women, Music and Power*, Laura Elkin (2026) also talks about this idea, and how working with the vocal break can “help us confront our faults, and even emphasise them: vocal kintsugi, as in the Japanese technique of repairing broken pottery by lining the cracks with gold. The place where something breaks can also be the place where it heals. Embracing the flaws can strengthen the work; through vulnerability can come power” (Elkin, 2026, p. 8). This is something I was inspired by in *Soulsinger* and helped me to understand the meaning of why I titled this chapter ‘The Breaking’, and how I was using voice in the score at this point. As this is the narrative's climax where the protagonist is feeling broken, the score's vocal elements reflect her built up anger and sadness, symbolically the voice use here is her trying

break her free of her bargain she made with the gods. I wanted parts of the vocals to feel like they were being pushed to their limits and ‘breaking’. This paired with effects such as distortion can really exaggerate the effect and intensity of a dramatic vocal performance. With the addition of her diegetic screams and the vocal layers of the past Soulsingers, voiced by some of my interviewee’s improvising vocal lines, is what breaks her free.

The inclusion of asking my vocalist interviewees to submit a vocal improvisation which I could work into this chapter of the score to symbolise the Soulsinger drawing upon all the past Soulsingers vocal strength to break free of the realm, feel like it ties into my thesis research methodology in that I am drawing power, knowledge and support from those women whose voices have inspired and supported me through craft and being part of my research.

Chapter Six: The Waking

For the final chapter in the film, I wanted the music to reflect the Soulsingers’ physical state as she lies unconscious under the tree of life, after her final song. Therefore, the score in this chapter opens in silence before a soft and slow rising pad and angelic choir crescendos in a sustained cluster of notes. This builds, following her gradual movement as she rises and wakes with the touch of a ghostly hand on her cheek. As her eyes open in the final seconds, the score transitions into the end credits track opening. The vocal sounds used are not mine and are supposed to evoke the idea of an angelic sound. These long-held note here creates suspense yet is hopeful, and the golden lighting in this chapter ties into this heavenly aesthetic of the score.

Title Card & Credits

The credits track completes the scores journey from wordless vocalisations to a lyrical voice. Using a song with lyrics that followed a more pop song style structure, gave me an opportunity to create an original song inspired by her journey, the aesthetic of the narrative and end with full vocal impact. This allowed me to showcase another side to my vocalist-composer role as a songwriter, performer and producer while continuing to use the some of the techniques and effects I applied in the score such as vocal reverb, distortion, improvisation, layering and harmonies as well as carrying over some of the sound design elements. Many of my interview participants score work has included writing and performing original songs used for films credits, which is a passion and aspiration of mine that I wanted to explore in *Soulsinger*.

Conclusion

Although the score and sound design remain in development, this scene-based breakdown demonstrates how some of the interview-derived practices have already shaped the project's vocal language, thematic design and production methods. By exploring some of the many creative ideas and techniques discussed with my interviewees, this practical component of my research feels like building on their creative voices as composers and vocalists, while challenging myself to find my own.

The *Soulsinger* creative project suggests that a vocalist-composer's embodied knowledge can shape short film scoring at several levels: thematic development, vocal performance, recording practice, production design and narrative interpretation. The interview findings provide practical techniques, and philosophies, but their value did not lie in direct imitation. Instead, they created a framework for some reflective adaptation, allowing industry practices to be translated into a personal creative process. This positions the vocalist-composer (myself) as both performer and maker of screen meaning, particularly in films where music carries a significant share of the storytelling. These findings clarify the project's contribution at two levels: they show how industry professional knowledge can be ethically reworked through embodied creative practice, and they expand accounts of women's agency in screen-music production.

This research could result in multiple positive outcomes. These include new insights, developed from the interviews regarding methods used by different kinds of music composers, vocalists, and vocalist-composers which may provide aspiring musicians who are interested in this area, an understanding into the current industry practices for screen score composition, as well as inspire new methods in approaches to scoring for different kinds of film projects, especially when using voice. It will add to the current scarcity of literature found on composers who explore the use of female voice in screen their scores and expand the amount of research on women in these roles, where it has been a historically male dominated industry. It will also demonstrate the complexities and existing ideas around female voice, and how it can be a semiotically dense sound source, especially when examined in context with a visual narrative. The research project will also have a personal benefit as a developing screen music vocalist-composer, providing a unique opportunity to develop and refine my craft while building my contacts and experience in the current screen music scene.

References

Elkin, L. (2026) p. 8). *Vocal Break: On Women, Music and Power*. Chatto & Windus.

Powell, J. [@johnj_powell]. (2022, September 26) Behind the scenes of how the vocals from Don't Worry Darling were recorded by @hollysedillos [Video]. Instagram.
https://www.instagram.com/p/Ci_LC5-PW9p/?img_index=3.