

## **WHAT MAKES MUSIC "LICENSABLE"?**

Written by Symphonic Distribution

As you begin diving into the realm of sync licensing, you might hear that some songs are more “licensable,” or licensing-friendly, than others. Some songs fit seamlessly into films, commercials and the like, and though they may not be by a well-known mainstream artist, they definitely have a certain je ne sais quoi and commercial appeal that helps them appeal to mainstream audiences. Even more importantly, these songs serve the purpose of the visual media with which they are synched - they have the power to both stand alone and be subservient to the action going on on-screen... and to add more depth to the scene on-screen. So, what makes some songs licensable?

### **A SOLID Sound**

Licensable songs utilize top-quality production; they are well-mixed and well-mastered. It should SOUND expensive. If your music SOUNDS like it was made in your bedroom, no one will care.

For example, think about Rebecca Black’s “Friday.” Sure, this song and Black herself are an absolute joke. However, NBC’s The Today Show definitely used this song coming in and out of commercials. Why...oh, why? Well, who knows, but let’s be honest on one thing. Those guys at Ark Music Factory do know how to make well-produced music. The production quality was solid, and it sounded like something you might hear on radio. It did, indeed, sound just as expensive as it probably was for Black’s parents to make that happen for their dear daughter.

### **Vague Lyrics & Theme**

The most licensable songs have lyrics that are vague enough to apply to the masses, and have lyrics with themes that are vague enough to apply to the masses. Music supervisors are picky about lyrics, especially in the commercial/promo realm. (By the way, commercial/promo placements pay well.) Telling a story in 30 or 60 seconds is hard. The less detail you go into, the more powerful the lyrics are, and the more people and situations they can apply to. The vaguer, the better! And the quicker you can get to the point with key words, even better. (Remember: Since often the lyrics just won’t work for a particular spot, ALL your songs with vocals should have an instrumental version! Be prepared, do that extra work now, and set yourself up for big money.)

What kinds of vague themes?

- o Partying - alcohol, drugs, sex, dancing.
- o Love & Romance.
- o The all-time classic break-up song.
- o Overcoming challenges, hope for the future.
- o It’s a happy joyous fun beautiful day!
- o Had a bad day, it’s raining, woe unto me.
- o Conquering, being a badass.

Alternatively, a lot of the most licensable songs have rarely any lyrics at all, perhaps only one basic phrase such as: “I can’t wait,” or “Ready, steady, go!”

Check out Paul Oakenfold's "Ready Steady Go" in Saab's epic Viggen car commercial below. Simple and highly effective lyrics. They can apply to multiple different opportunities needing music with pump-up, energetic, action-packed vibes!

### **Immediately Identifiable Mood**

Most licensable songs have an identifiable mood or vibe that pulls you in by the very first notes of the song; the song conjures up a particular emotion or vibe immediately. Take, for example:

Phrenik & Stiletto's "Can't Wait" - Check out that kickass electric guitar hook that slaps you in the face. This hook grabs your attention immediately. Not only that, but this song has the short and simple lyrics, "I can't wait, wanna touch me, wanna love me." This song is golden for a commercial because in a short span of time, we feel the pump-up energy and those lyrics can apply to almost anything.

D.V.S\*, "Fortunes Won and Lost" - That bittersweet, nostalgic guitar is heart-wrenching. This is a perfect example of an intro that isn't hard-hitting... but the immediate intimacy of that guitar texture strikes a chord with any listener and pulls you in.

### **Emotive Chord Progression**

So, we've addressed that licensable songs are always emotive of a particular vibe. What plays a huge part in this is the chord progression. In the most general sense, the chord progression creates the essential vibe and mood of the song. For example:

Hoob ft. MC Flax, "Girl" - Hoob may have called his song a "SUMMER SMASHER!!!", but this song has an undeniably dark vibe. Why? That chord progression. It's driving drum & bass, but that chord progression gives it a whole new meaning. It's as if you're driving forward leaving behind stories of a darker past (or whatever story you want to create). On that note, this is a perfect example of a song needing an instrumental version. A music supervisor might like this song for those driving yet darker vibes, but the lyrics MC Flax and Hoob use don't quite match that storyline.

### **Memorable Melody**

Another characteristic that makes songs licensable is having a memorable melody (whether embedded in lyrics or not) that can be:

#### Sweeping & Expansive

For example, Kezwick's "Let Go ft. Mimi Page" has a grandiose melody is sweeping and gorgeous with an element of wonder.

#### Short & Catchy

Watch this famous Kia Motors commercial using Ivan Gough & Feenixpawl's "In My Mind ft. Georgi Kay." The main melodic hook literally has 4 notes. It's short, catchy, and totally memorable. Not only that, but that main lyric is so vague and perfect for a commercial selling any product: "This is what we're waiting for."

## “Cinematic” Instrumentation & Orchestration Tools

Yes, any non-classical piece of music can utilize these same techniques, just in the different context of genre.

What kinds of instruments?

- o Strings are always cinematic.
- o Piano can bring a vibe of intimacy. With reverb, it generates that gorgeous big-room sound.
- o Guitars of all kinds.

This applies to genres like electronic music, too. For example:

Cryptex’s “Slay It” - Check out those badass arpeggiated strings in the intro. Let’s go save the world.

Phrenik & Kezwik ft. PLS DNT STP’s “Ready for Impact” features a hard-hitting string melody in the intro, giving this song a rushed, hardcore and exciting appeal. Let’s do this.

In Kezwik’s “Tame,” listen to that catchy piano riff, followed by a call in the trumpets. It breaks down into a head-nodding, bouncy jam with soaring synth melodies. The intro (before the heavy dubstep drop) is uplifting, fun & great for a commercial.

D.V.S\*’s “Blame Me” - Guitarist & producer Derek Van Scoten starts off with that lonely, nostalgic, intimate electric guitar theme, but then grows it into a bigger, more cinematic and inspiring sound.

### **What kind of orchestration (how you arrange the instruments & sounds)?**

One of the most effective compositional structures and orchestration techniques of all time is this general “textural crescendo”: Layering sounds, one on top of the other, building up, and coinciding the instrumental build up with the chorus or climactic section. This applies to literally any genre of music. Example:

Overwerk’s “The Nth” - Listen from 1:15 onwards. Huge orchestral build-up with strings and heavy drum percussion. And what does it finally climax to? An absolutely killer pumping electro jam.

Please note that not all licensed songs have every single one of the above qualities. However, the above qualities are some important characteristics of songs that have been licensed before.

For example, above we actually described two different ways a song can be structured. The two are completely different, but both work for different types of visual media project needs.

1. A song can begin by starting with a sound or particular vibe, and stay that way throughout the entirety of the song. It can emit aggressive vibes like D.V.S\*’s “Oxygen” with that badass electric guitar riff. Or, it can be chill, smooth, and romantic like Dorsh’s “Je t’aime.”

2. A song can start off one way and thereby grow, build up, and expand into a climactic section. Take, for example, Overwerk’s “Daybreak.” This epic electronic symphony starts with pizzicato

strings only and builds into something entirely different. This song has been licensed multiple times, most famously in a GoPro commercial:

Absolutely epic, right?

Now that you hopefully have some new ideas brewing, take a listen to your catalog and address these characteristics. For your next tracks, perhaps try out some of these tools. Of course as artists we never want to sacrifice freedom and creativity, but at the same time it's always fun and beneficial from a creative standpoint to use new tools and thought processes like those above when writing music. And who knows? Maybe you're sitting on next summer's blockbuster film trailer track. Take a look at Symphonic Distribution's licensing page for info on how to get your music into the sync realm.

By Kaitlyn Raterman  
Publishing & Licensing Manager  
SyncPhonic Creative Director  
kaitlyn@symphonicdistribution.com

*Symphonic Distribution was launched in the winter of 2006 by a Music Producer from Tampa, Florida. The company was launched with the intention of providing new and established record labels cost effective digital distribution to retailers such as iTunes, Beatport, Rhapsody, Amazon, and more with a strong emphasis on customer satisfaction. By the end of 2007, the company struck agreements with over 250 record labels, and improved its offerings to include additional services such as Mastering, Marketing, Label/Artist Development, and more.*

**Article source:** [https://musicclout.com/contents/article-299-what-make-music-licensable.aspx?goback=%2Egde\\_3259553\\_member\\_266955011#%21](https://musicclout.com/contents/article-299-what-make-music-licensable.aspx?goback=%2Egde_3259553_member_266955011#%21)

### **SOME EXTRA TIPS FROM AN IMRO WORKSHOP (2013)**

A music licensing company seeks for any given client

- ^ the best song/music they can get
- ^ which is fully available (with full & immediate clearance)
- ^ and which is within the client's budget.

Why is clearance so important? Deadlines are extremely tight in the licensing business (perhaps only 48 hours) so all the songwriters/composers have to say "yes" at once. Is it clear who all the writers are? For instance, does the manager have a share of the song? Knowing without an iota of ambiguity who owns the song/music is critical.

As regards production values, this issue is extremely important to music licensing companies. There is no time to re-record because of tight client deadlines. Of course, the company will also stockpile incoming "approved" music, ready to call a "library item" into play should a particular client commission seem appropriate. But you will be rarely contacted asking you to re-record a piece to a higher standard.

In submitting unsolicited material, submit no more than two tracks. Less is more! Do not hassle the company with follow up calls: they will get back to you if the music is good enough.

Do your research on the company you are approaching and supply them with music genres of interest to them.

The music should be provided **mixed but not mastered**.

It is vital to **tag your music properly** (what are called “meta data”). The data required includes song name, all the writers, the publisher, full contact details, and digital links such as soundcloud.

When providing a song, also provide non-vocal segments suitable for advertisements of different lengths (10 sec, 20 sec, 30 sec, 60 sec). These are called cutdowns.

---

---

Additional tips - from "**Prepare yourself and your music for music licensing**" (by Greg Savage, July 2014)

### **1. Make sure your music sounds good**

I'm not speaking in terms of genre or taste, we're talking sonic quality. It must sound good. You want to make sure your music is mixed properly, with no clipping, a good dynamic range, good levels, etc. If mixing isn't your strong point, hire someone to mix your music or start learning how to do it yourself. The SoundLab at Disc Makers is an affordable and professional mastering option. A good thing to do is compare your music to commercial music; if your music doesn't sound as good sonically, then it's not ready.

### **2. Who owns the rights to your music?**

Make sure you know who owns the rights to your music. If you are part of a band or work with multiple writers, then everyone involved with the creation owns a piece of the music.

Licensing professionals need to know: Who owns a master recording; and Who owns the composition. Because before your music can be used in visual media (video games, movies, reality TV shows, etc.), the client needs to obtain two specific licenses: A master license (master sound recording); and a synchronization license (the right to use the composition). Without all parties (i.e. writers, owners) on board, the transaction gets stuck in limbo.

### **3. Make sure you can be sent publishing income**

Make sure you're signed up with a Performing Rights Organization (PRO) like ASCAP, BMI, or SESAC. Why? Because they collect royalty payments on your behalf. If your music is used in a TV commercial, and this TV commercial airs several times a day, that's money in the bank. If you are not signed up with a PRO, you are missing out on this income.

### **4. Create alternate versions of your music**

Having alternate versions of your music – with and without vocals, for instance – increases the chances of your music being used. A lot of times when you listen to TV ads, you'll notice that the instrumental plays underneath the dialogue for a few bars; then towards the end, you hear the full song. If a music supervisor needs the instrumental version of your song but you can't be reached or you can't deliver this to him quickly, you could miss out on the placement altogether.

### **5. Educate yourself**

Make sure you understand the basic terminology of music licensing as used in contracts. If you can afford legal representation, go that route. Even if you can afford legal representation, it's still beneficial to understand the jargon and terms being used. In some instances this will save you money, and will make you a little more marketable and professional. Big clients like working with people who are professional. Smaller clients will appreciate the Average Joe approach, especially if you can explain things on their level.

**Article source:** <http://blog.discmakers.com/2014/07/prepare-yourself-and-your-music-for-music-licensing/#ixzz3FYUuRI5u>