

Music License Matrix

Every music right, what it covers, who to license from, and a plain-English clause. Companion to the Music Licensing resource. By Lex Nova × Thoolie.

Remember: every song is TWO rights. The composition (sync license) and the recording (master use license). “We cleared the song” is not enough. Clear both, or record your own cover.

Right Type	What It Covers	Who to License From	When You Need It	Sample Clause (Plain English)
Sync License	The composition (lyrics + melody) when used with video.	The music publisher that controls the composition (negotiated directly, NOT through ASCAP/BMI/SESAC, which handle performance royalties only).	Anytime a song is paired with video, even as background music.	“Producer must secure a synchronization license from the publisher before using any music in the film.”
Master Use License	The specific existing recording of a song (e.g., a particular artist's version).	The record label or owner of that recording.	Only if you use an EXISTING recording (not if you record your own cover).	“Producer will obtain a master use license for each existing recording used.”
Mechanical License	The right to reproduce/distribute a composition, e.g. releasing a cover on a soundtrack.	The publisher, often via The MLC or Harry Fox Agency.	If you record a cover and release it as music (separate from syncing it to picture).	“If Producer releases a cover recording, a mechanical license will be secured before distribution.”
Festival / Temp Use License	Short-term rights for festival screenings, pitch reels, or limited use ONLY.	Composer, label, publisher, or music library.	For festival runs before securing full distribution rights. Does NOT cover distribution.	“Licensor grants temporary non-exclusive rights for festivals and private screenings only; distribution requires separate clearance.”

PUBLIC DOMAIN vs. ROYALTY-FREE, DON'T GET BURNED

Public Domain: A free composition does NOT mean a free recording. Beethoven's symphonies are public domain, but a modern recording of one is its own protected master. Verify the composition (IMSLP, PDInfo), and clear or replace the recording.

Royalty-Free: Pay once, use often, but scope varies. Many royalty-free licenses do NOT cover commercial film, ads, or monetization. Read the license and confirm it permits your use. Reputable libraries (Artlist, Soundstripe, Epidemic, Musicbed) bundle both rights into one film-cleared license.

BONUS CONTRACT CLAUSE

“Producer shall obtain all necessary synchronization, master use, and, where applicable, mechanical licenses for each piece of music used in the Picture, in a scope sufficient for the intended distribution. Producer warrants that no music will be used without a valid license covering both the composition and the recording as used.”

Educational reference only, not legal advice. Music rights are fact-specific; consult a licensed entertainment attorney for your film.