Film Music

Composers who write film music use similar techniques to composers of programme music, but have to write music to fit to actions already set by the film makers.

Look Out for the Leitmotif in Most Film Music

> N.B. 'Leitmotif' can also be spelt 'leitmotiv'.

1) The leitmotif is the main tune in the film.

2) It represents a particular object, idea or character in the story, and often returns in the background or in an altered form.

3) For example, the leitmotif in the *Harry Potter* films is called 'Hedwig's Theme' — it's repeated by different instruments throughout the films.

4) Sometimes the leitmotifs give you a hint as to what will happen later in the film — if a character turns out to be a bad guy, their theme might have menacing chords being played in the background.

   - A good example of this occurs in *Star Wars® Episode I — The Phantom Menace™* (1999).
   - In the final few bars of 'Anakin's Theme', you can hear echoes of 'Darth Vader's Theme' from the later films (all by John Williams). This is a subtle hint that Anakin (who was good in this film) will become Darth Vader.

Composers Use Lots of Repetition in Film Music

1) Repeated sections of music can be used to link different parts of the film together — it can remind you of something that happened earlier in the film.

2) A leitmotif can be repeated throughout the film, but might be transformed to reflect what's going on. The instrumentation can be changed, or it can be repeated in a different key. Sometimes just the rhythm of the leitmotif is played in the background — it might be so quiet it's hardly noticeable, but it all adds to the drama.

3) Often at the end of the film there's a triumphant modulation of the main theme (as long as the film has a happy ending). It ends in a happy, uplifting key with a drawn-out cadence (see p.36-37), to show that the story of the film has been resolved.

4) Of course, if the film doesn't have a happy ending (or if there's going to be a sequel), the theme may be left unresolved, giving the film a more open or darker ending.

5) Repetition can be used to create tension and suspense — a repeated sequence that's getting louder and louder can really have you on the edge of your seat.

Some Films Use Pop Songs to Get Publicity

1) Lots of films have pop songs over the opening or closing credits. These songs aren't always in the same style of music as the rest of the film, but they're released in the charts to generate publicity. They're often performed by famous pop stars — like Take That's song 'Rule The World' for the film *Stardust* (2007).

2) A song might be used as the title track but can return in the background later — like a leitmotif. For example, the song 'My Heart Will Go On' by Celine Dion pops up many times in the film *Titanic* (1997).

3) Sometimes the pop song doesn't appear anywhere else in the film though (e.g. 'Rule The World' is only heard over the closing credits).

A good excuse to watch some films...

Film music is written to create a certain atmosphere. Composers use it to set a scene, create a mood or describe a character. It should help the overall effect of the film and add to the drama of the story.

Film Music

Film composers use music to <u>set the scene</u> — it helps you believe it's in a <u>different country</u> or <u>time</u>.

Traditional Instruments Give You a Feel for Time and Place

1) Music can be used to create the mood of a different <u>time</u> or <u>place</u>.

2) <u>Westerns</u> are set in 19th century North America. They generally tell a simple story and they can often be very <u>dramatic</u> and <u>violent</u>.

3) Some westerns use music <u>from the time</u> to <u>set the scene</u>. For example, guitarist <u>Ry Cooder</u> composed music for <u>The Long Riders</u> (1980). He used <u>traditional music</u> and <u>instruments</u> like the Spanish guitar, banjo, honky-tonk piano, tin flute, trombone and percussion.

4) John Barry's score for <u>Out of Africa</u> (1985) combines <u>original compositions</u> with <u>traditional African music</u> to help the audience imagine the film's setting — the track 'Karen's Journey' is based on 'Siyawe', a traditional African song.

5) It's not just films set hundreds of years ago that use music from the time. Films set in the <u>70s</u> or <u>80s</u> might use <u>pop songs</u> from the time to set the scene. People will <u>recognise</u> the songs and it'll <u>remind</u> them of that decade.

The Music in War Films Creates the Atmosphere

1) The music in war films needs to create an <u>atmosphere</u> for the <u>time</u> and <u>place</u> of the war, as well as showing the <u>action</u> and <u>emotion</u> of the plot. For example, the battle scenes of <u>Gladiator</u> (2000) are accompanied by <u>threatening music</u> (by <u>Hans Zimmer</u>) which creates tension.

2) <u>Sound effects</u> (like <u>explosions</u> and <u>gunfire</u>) can be incorporated into the music to create a feeling of <u>war</u>.

3) <u>633 Squadron</u> (1964) is set in the <u>Second World War</u>. The theme music (by <u>Ron Goodwin</u>) is very <u>heroic</u>. It's <u>fast</u> with <u>strong accents</u> — it matches the <u>action</u> of the <u>battle scenes</u>. The <u>soaring brass melodies</u> represent the <u>soaring planes</u>.

Unnatural Sounds Make Strange Places Seem Even Stranger

<u>Horror</u> or <u>science fiction</u> films are often set in <u>strange places</u> — maybe even another <u>planet</u>. Wherever they're set, composers need to <u>transport</u> the audience to a <u>weird reality</u>, where nothing is quite what you'd expect.

1) <u>Unusual harmonies</u> and <u>time signatures</u> are used when things are a bit <u>weird</u> — they're not what you're expecting, so they sound odd.

2) <u>Synthesizers</u> and <u>samples</u> of bizarre <u>sounds</u> often have no relation to what's happening on-screen, but make the audience wonder what's going on and set their imagination racing.

3) <u>Instruments</u> or <u>voices</u> can be <u>distorted</u> using <u>computers</u>.

4) There's often no clear <u>structure</u> so it's hard to predict what's going to happen.

5) <u>Discords</u> and <u>diminished</u> chords make it difficult to listen to.

6) <u>Rapid scalic patterns</u> (going up and down scales) and <u>interrupted cadences</u> (see p.36-37) can make <u>pulse-raising</u> scenes feel more frantic.

7) In <u>Psycho</u> (1960), for every <u>stab</u> of the <u>knife</u> the <u>violins</u> also <u>stab</u> out a <u>high-pitched tritone</u> (p.184). Each chord goes right through you, and makes what you're seeing on-screen feel much more real.

Music revision can be used to put you in a mood...

There are loads of little tricks that composers of film music can use to create an atmosphere and make the viewer more engrossed in a film. Have a stab at writing a mini essay on this page.

Film Music

Sometimes, film music helps you <u>understand</u> what's happening. It's used to help <u>communicate</u> what's going on, instead of just relying on the action and dialogue <u>on-screen</u>.

The **Style** of Music **Changes** With the **Mood** of the Scene

1) The soundtrack for the film *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) was written by Klaus Badelt.
2) There's a simple <u>love theme</u> to accompany the growing romance between Will and Elizabeth, using <u>string</u> and <u>woodwind</u> instruments playing <u>quietly</u>.
3) In the <u>humorous</u> scenes involving Captain Jack Sparrow, the music is <u>playful</u> to create a <u>light-hearted mood</u> and provides a <u>contrast</u> with the <u>fight scenes</u>.
4) During <u>battle scenes</u>, the mood is <u>tense</u> and <u>dramatic</u> — it's played by <u>low brass</u> instruments.

The Music **Shows** What's **Not On Screen**

It's often the composer's job to create a <u>feeling</u> of something <u>being there</u> that's <u>not seen</u>.

1) <u>Minor</u> and more <u>dissonant chords</u> make you feel <u>uneasy</u>.
2) <u>Low pitches</u> in <u>brass</u> and <u>strings</u> sound <u>dark</u> as if you're <u>underground</u>.
3) <u>Percussive, metallic</u> sounds with <u>reverb effects</u> make you imagine someone <u>lurking</u> about on <u>lonely backstreets</u>.
4) <u>Suspensions</u> that don't <u>resolve</u> (see p.35) build <u>tension</u> and make you think <u>danger</u> is near.
5) <u>Dynamics swell</u> from <u>quiet</u> to <u>loud</u> to <u>quiet</u> as if someone's coming in and out of the <u>shadows</u>.

Music Has to be **Structured** and **Timed** to **Fit** the Film

1) <u>Film directors</u> need music to be <u>synchronised</u> with the <u>action</u> to the <u>split second</u>.
2) The different <u>sections</u> of a <u>film</u> show different <u>moods</u>, e.g. from <u>fighting</u> to <u>romance</u>. The music can easily be <u>chopped up</u> and <u>moved</u> around using <u>samplers</u> and computer programs such as <u>Cubase</u> and <u>Pro-Tools</u>®.
3) Music is used during action scenes to <u>imitate</u> the movements of the actors — like in the fight scenes in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films.

Diegetic Music is Music the Characters Can **Hear**

1) In most films, the music is <u>extra-diegetic</u> — it's <u>not</u> actually <u>part of the story</u>. It's put 'over the top' of the action to increase the <u>effect</u> of the film. It's for the <u>audience</u>'s benefit only.
2) Sometimes film-makers want to <u>include</u> music in the story for the <u>characters</u> (as well as the <u>audience</u>) to <u>hear</u> — this is <u>diegetic</u> music.
3) In *Atonement* (2007), the sound of Briony using a typewriter <u>combines</u> with the piano music so that the two play in time with each other, giving the impression that she can <u>hear</u> the music.
4) Throughout *Brief Encounter* (1945), Rachmaninov's *Second Piano Concerto* is used <u>extra-diegetically</u>. It represents the main character's <u>changing emotions</u> as she has an extra-marital <u>affair</u>.
5) At one point in the film, she turns on the <u>radio</u>, and what should be playing but Rachmaninov's *Second Piano Concerto*. The music has <u>become diegetic</u>.
6) Her husband later asks her to <u>turn the music down</u> — this could be seen as him <u>suppressing</u> his wife's emotional needs.

Film Music

Music for horror and fantasy often makes you feel like you're in another world or a kind of nightmare reality. The music can also help to build tension and to make you jump.

You Are Lulled Into a False Sense of Security

1) When music's in a calm major key, you don't feel like anything bad's going to happen. For example, in *Gladiator*, the music that plays when Maximus thinks of his home is a simple, gentle melody composed by Hans Zimmer and Lisa Gerrard. In *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-3), Howard Shore composed a happy piece of music to reflect the comfort and safety of the Shire.

2) Beware — sometimes the same theme comes back in an altered form — like in a minor key — to show that things have started to go wrong.

Composers Can Keep You on the Edge of Your Seat

1) Ostinati keep the audience on edge for a long time. For example, in *Halloween* (1978), there's an ostinato played in a minor key — it's then played on a different note to keep the audience wondering where the scary person is going next.

2) In some sci-fi films there's background music with just drums and bass, generated on computers, that's played under the dialogue throughout the film. This lets the audience know that the danger is always there.

3) Sustained notes create suspense (e.g. tremolo strings).

4) Composers know how to build the tension and make you feel like something bad is going to happen:

- Dynamics get louder.
- Tempo gets faster.
- Pitch gets higher.
- A tune played earlier in a scary bit sometimes comes back to remind you.
- Sometimes they use silence before a loud bit just to make you jump.

Thrillers Have Lots of Tension and Action

1) Thrillers and spy movies are often serious and tense — the music has to create the right atmosphere. It has to set the scene for conspiracies and people dealing with shadowy figures and underground organisations.

2) There are often lots of layers to the story. A composer uses lots of techniques to show that there's more than one thing going on. E.g. in *The Usual Suspects* (1995), the composer John Ottman creates tension and drama by using:

- Long notes in the foreground with ostinato patterns in the background.
- A repeated pattern on the woodblock sounds like someone's on the move while percussive bursts and brass motifs played on top suggest someone's trying to catch them.

Silence — something bad's about to happen...

Turn the volume down when you're watching a scary film and it's nowhere near as nail-biting. Perhaps more than in any other film genre, the music in horror is crucial to setting the atmosphere.

Recording a soundtrack
English composer Sir Malcolm Arnold (1921–2006) conducts the orchestra during the recording of the soundtrack composed by Sir William Walton (1902–83) for the 1969 film *The Battle of Britain*.

ORCHESTRAL ACCOMPANIMENT
As early as 1908, **Camille Saint-Saëns** produced an 18-minute orchestral piece to accompany the film *The Assassination of the Duke of Guise*, while American composer **Victor Herbert** (1859–1924) provided an entire symphonic score to be played along with *The Fall of a Nation* (1916), a sequel to D.W. Griffiths's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

Otherwise, cinema orchestras played from compilation scores aided by cue sheets compiled from the cinema's stock of music cues. These orchestras disbanded when "talkies" arrived.

CINEMA ORGAN (1927)

Music for the Screen

Film music was once regarded by critics as commercial writing by composers subsidizing their earnings from more serious endeavours. Increasingly, however, the quality of soundtrack music casts its practitioners as fine composers and musical craftsmen.

The film industry recognized early on that musical accompaniment enhanced the cinema-goer's experience. When silent films were supplanted by "talkies" in the late 1920s, music soundtracks continued the mood-heightening work that live music accompaniments had begun – but under the much closer control of the movie-maker.

Still, it took a few years for film-makers to become comfortable with the notion of "non-diegetic" music in film – music that doesn't occur naturally within a dramatic situation: for example, from a visible band or orchestra. However, by the mid-1930s, the symphonic film score had become an integral part of a movie and working practices were established.

Procedures and techniques

Scores were commonly created from a list of cues negotiated at an initial "spotting" session when the composer and director viewed a rough-cut of the film. Quantity, location, length, and type of cue were agreed upon. The composer then had to work to produce the score quickly, as the music was usually composed towards the end of the film-making process. Recording was done while the film was being shown, so the conductor (often the composer) could time the music appropriately. Aids to this process included audible "click-tracks" that were punched into the film, or visual scratches and flashes on the frames.

Composers soon learned numerous techniques suitable for film scoring. One was an adaptation of Wagner's *leitmotif* technique, the name for a recurring, short melodic theme associated with character, idea, or significant event. This served two useful purposes. First, there was appropriate, often subliminal reinforcement of a storyline or theme and, second, the repetition of previously written musical material
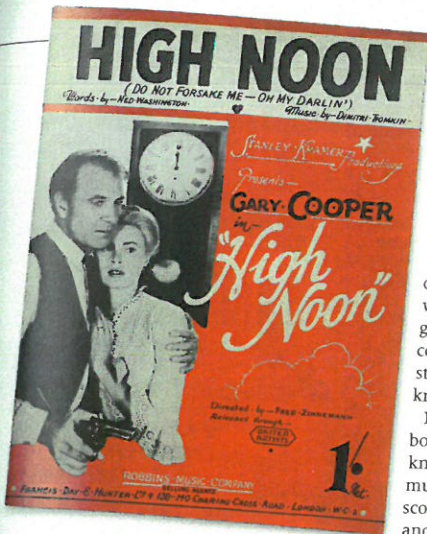
High Noon sheet music
"Do Not Forsake Me – Oh My Darlin'", the song written by Dmitri Tiomkin and sung by Tex Ritter over the titles of the 1952 Western *High Noon*, encouraged the rise of the film theme song.

saved precious moments for the time-strapped film composer. Composers became adept at supporting the narrative; for example, using rhythmic and vibrant cues for images of galloping horses, or moody and dissonant sounds for scenes of tension. If the music reflected the screen images too literally – for instance,

default musical style, though with various periods and genres to write for, many composers became adept at stylistic pastiche, and became known for particular styles.

First to arrive was Viennese-born Max Steiner. He was best known for dramatic, melodious music and creating landmark scores for *King Kong* (1933) and *Gone With The Wind* (1939). There followed several European composers, including Austrian Erich Korngold, who wrote rich, passionate music, notably for *The Adventures Of Robin Hood* (1938). Hungarian Miklós Rózsa was as effective at moody scoring for the film-noir classic *Double Indemnity* (1944) as for epics calling for grandeur and bombast,

"He only finishes **60 per cent** of the **picture;** I have to finish it for him."

BERNARD HERRMANN, COMPOSER, ON FILM DIRECTOR ALFRED HITCHCOCK

a timpani hit as someone falls over – this was referred to as "mickey mousing" after the highly synchronized cartoon scores.

Europeans in Hollywood

Though the vast majority of films in the 1930s and '40s were made in Hollywood, a striking number of film composers originated from overseas. This helped establish late 19th-century European romanticism as Hollywood's

such as *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *Ben-Hur* (1959).

Though highly trained musicians who produced accomplished concert works as well as film scores, these professional Hollywood composers received little respect from the musical establishment. British composers William Walton and Ralph Vaughan Williams and the American Aaron Copland, who only dabbled in film music, received the critical plaudits.

Enter the moderns

In the 1950s, a new wave of soundtrack music appeared. In using America's home-grown music, Alex North's jazz-influenced, dissonant score for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) helped create the first Hollywood movie that sounded like modern America. There were further explorations of jazz idioms in Leonard Bernstein's tough *On The Waterfront* (1954) score and Elmer Bernstein's startlingly brash *Man With The Golden Arm* (1955), while Quincy Jones, Henry Mancini, and Lalo Schifrin continued to produce jazz-derived scores into the 1960s and '70s. Leonard Rosenmann's scores for *East Of Eden* and *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955) explored atonality (music written outside a particular key).

Italian composer Ennio Morricone found fame with Sergio Leone's Western *Fistful of Dollars* (1964). He has since worked with many directors, including Bernardo Bertolucci and Quentin Tarantino.

Film-score genres diversified in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Electronic scores grew in popularity for reasons of fashion, aesthetics, and finance. German disco producer Giorgio Moroder scored *Midnight Express* (1978), and Greek rock musician Vangelis composed the music for *Chariots Of Fire* (1981). Both won Oscars for their electronic scores.

Contemporary scores, including those of leading composers Hans Zimmer and Danny Elfman, blend orchestral and electronic textures.

The commercial pressure to fit hit songs into movies and exploit the youth market gradually led to a trend – begun in the 1960s and continuing today – for non-musical films scored largely from existing pop and rock tracks. Examples include *Easy Rider* (1969), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), and *Love Actually* (2003).

The return of the orchestra

Though Elmer Bernstein, Jerry Goldsmith, and others continued to provide traditional film scores through the 1960s and '70s, it was the vivid music for *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) by John Williams that revived the orchestral score. His blockbuster style with strong melodic themes and lush orchestrations remains hugely influential to this day.

Violin part

The orchestral score of *Psycho*
This page is from the score used to conduct the orchestra in the recording of Bernard Herrmann's soundtrack for the Hitchcock film *Psycho*. The harrowing, piercing writing for the violins to accompany the infamous shower scene is visible here.