Developing wider listening – film music: part 1

KS4/5

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Introduction

For more than 100 years, from the earliest experiments in silent movies to the modern, digitally enhanced, computer-aided action blockbusters, music has played an essential role in films, relied upon to enhance the mood, set the atmosphere, signal changes and magnify the impact of the action on screen. Music can do what words and pictures cannot: it gives us hints of characters' thoughts and emotions, warns us of impending danger before anyone on screen has spotted it (just think of *Jaws*), and makes us cry, smile or jump out of our skin when we're least expecting it.

The fact that music for film is an extremely important – and potentially very profitable – area to work in is reflected in the fact that many major 'classical' composers since the start of the 20th century have written film music. Moreover, there are a great number of dedicated, highly successful composers who operate exclusively in the world of film and television music, and your students will probably have heard of many of them.

Film music has evolved over the years, from being the only thing that was heard in silent movies, to becoming an integral part of the movie experience, spawning soundtrack albums and associated hit singles. A lot of music not originally intended for film finds its way into it, and while a high percentage of music composed for film is barely noticed, as it underscores scenes, blockbuster film themes (think of *Star Wars* or *Pirates of the Caribbean*) are as familiar to us now as chart singles.

Understanding the background and context to music they listen to, hear on TV or play is an incredibly useful skill for all musicians, especially those studying music for GCSE or A level, as 'wider listening' has become such a key part of the exam boards' specifications. Not only is a wide listening experience key to preparing for music exams, but it also increases everyone's enjoyment of the music they encounter, as they make links between music they do and do not know, and find parallels across genres, cultures, traditions and time periods.

We covered the four main time periods of 'classical' music – the Baroque, Classical, Romantic and 20th century (in two resources: here and here) – in five *Music Teacher* resources published between November 2020 and October 2021. In this resource, part one of our look at film music, we will trace it from its beginnings to its heyday in the 1950s, when some of the most iconic film scores were written.

Charlie Chaplin with Jackie Coogan in The Kid (*1921*)

Creating tension: listening and comparison activities

Let's get straight into one of the key concepts of film music and do a couple of class activities that explore **tension**. In the world of film, tension doesn't necessarily mean stress, nor is it a negative thing. Most importantly, film directors manage tension to keep the viewer interested and engaged in the action. By creating moments of uncertainty, they can ensure that we want to find out what happens next. By relieving tension, they control the pace of the film and the viewer's emotional response.

John Williams

A good illustration of the use of music to enhance the tension of a scene can be found in this clip (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fnq1s-babs**). This is a live concert, presented by actor Richard Dreyfuss, who played one of the lead parts in the classic Steven Spielberg movie *Jaws* (1975), and John Williams, who composed the music. *Jaws* was one of Williams's earliest film scores and he went on to collaborate with Spielberg many more times as well as writing some of our best-known film music.

In this clip, we see a scene from *Jaws* without Williams's music, and then with it, courtesy of a live orchestra conducted by Williams himself. Watch the clip with your class – perhaps more than once – and start a discussion with any of the following or similar questions:

- Is the clip tense without the music? If so, when?
- Which parts of the clip become noticeably more tense when the music is added?
- Dreyfuss refers to 'four or five key points' – where do you think these points are in the clip?
- Where is the tension greatest? What is the music doing at this point?
- How does the music change at the end of the clip, and what effect does this have on the tension? What does it tell us about the bearded man's mood at this point?

Hans Zimmer

At this point, it would be good to encourage students to start to note down some of the key ways in which music can create tension. In this clip (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3IcGnMhvsA**), from *Interstellar*, celebrated film composer Hans Zimmer develops a simple theme from very small beginnings, following a shocking and unexpected moment early in the scene (it will probably make everybody jump!). Part of the genius here is Zimmer's and director Christopher Nolan's decisive use of silence and the subsequent underscoring of the docking attempt with a repetitive, four-note short **motivic** idea.

Ask the students how they think Zimmer increases the tension, bit by bit, in this scene. What musical **elements** does he change? How does he change them? What unusual (in film music context) instrument becomes prominent as the tension builds? Get them to make a list of ways to change – either by increasing or decreasing – the tension in a piece of music. How is the tension released at the end of the clip?

There's a live performance of the music from this clip here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MPR8ikyU9s**

In it, Zimmer directs (from the keyboard) an increasingly complex build in **texture** and **timbre**, and it is easy to see the importance of melodic and rhythmic **ostinatos**, with much use of other **minimalist** techniques and of **pedal notes** (such as **the inverted dominant pedal** E that can be heard at the top of the texture, played by such diverse instruments as electric guitar and recorder).

Incidentally, did your students spot the 'unusual' instrument? In this clip (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcaOVCnsYJM**) we get an interesting insight into Zimmer's thought processes, which are often inspired by working with people outside of the film industry.

Zimmer worked with Christopher Nolan on a number of films, including *Batman Begins, The Dark Knight, Inception* and the 2017 film *Dunkirk*. For extension work, you could adapt the section on *Dunkirk* that can be found in the *Music Teacher* resource for AQA's A level AoS3, published in August 2018. It explores Zimmer's use of the **Shepard tone**, an audio illusion where the music appears to continually rise in pitch without leaving the confines of a one or two-octave range, a bit like the visual effect of a corkscrew (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzNzgsAE4Fo**). Zimmer does this in a scene from *Dunkirk* called 'The Oil' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyPWT8f-TZo)** by superimposing rising **scales**, which is analysed in detail in the August 2018 resource.

Early film music

The earliest movies had no sound and relied entirely on musical accompaniment to enhance the action on screen. A piano or organ player would play pre-composed or – most likely – **improvised** music, live in the movie theatre as they watched the action unfold on the screen above them. They were skilled in knowing exactly when to increase or decrease tension and – crucially – when to change the mood with their playing.

The next activity is based on an entertaining and very revealing five-minute video, which shows in stark relief how powerful music is at creating a mood. By showing identical scenes with different music, often deliberately quite crudely superimposed, film composer Jack Pierce provides the viewer with far more information than the film itself can reveal – mainly by suggesting through the use of musical elements what it is that we cannot see on screen. This might be physical things (such as what the character is seeing or running away from) or his emotional state.

Composing activity: manipulating the mood

Watch Jack Pierce's video (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSkJFs7myno**) from the beginning up to 1:30 seconds only – covering his introduction, where he shows how a change of music can make him seem like a completely different character, and a deliberately over-the-top example of how music can change the meaning of a scene.

Next, show the portion from 1:30 – 1:53 *with the sound muted*. It shows a character simply gazing out across a lake. Ask your students what they think the character is looking at, and how he is feeling. Who is he? Why is he there? What is he doing? Without music, it's very hard to be sure of the answers to any of these questions.

Now show the same portion, with sound, and let the video play on to 2:58. Discuss with the students how the three different underscores change the effect of the scene and get them to think about how these three moods – heroic, evil, sad – are created through the use of musical elements.

You can show other parts of the video at this point, or later. A good, brief composing activity, which the students could work on individually or together, would be to write their own, simple underscore to the scene where the character opens the suitcase (4:09 to 4:36). Show it without sound and ask them to compose a 20-second musical idea that tells us what is in the suitcase.

Listening activity: *Modern Times*

As technology advanced, the music to silent films was recorded by orchestras and ran concurrently with the film, on a separate audio reel. Charlie Chaplin, one of the best-known comedy actors of the silent movie age, wrote the music for some of his own films, including this one, *Modern Times*, which was made in 1936. Though he had musical knowledge and played the violin, he worked with **orchestrators** and **arrangers**, playing and singing tunes for various scenes, such as this famous skating scene (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPcEFHA3Xoc**).

Play the scene a couple of times and ask your students to discuss with each other and note down their thoughts, prompted by the following questions:

1. Which two orchestral sections are most prominent in the first part of this scene?
2. Melodies are generally shared around the orchestra. Name some of the instruments that have melodic **fragments** in this opening part, as the characters enter the store and put their skates on.
3. What musical characteristics help to create the happy, excited mood of the opening part of the scene?
4. As Chaplin announces that he is going to skate blindfolded, what changes are heard in the music? What effect do these changes have on the mood?
5. As he skates with the blindfold on, how does the music match this graceful scene? Which section of the orchestra is mainly playing?
6. Which instruments do we hear as the camera cuts to the girl, who notices that Chaplin is in danger?

Students might be interested to know that while Chaplin did all of his own skating, he was never in the danger that the scene suggests. The clever optical illusion was created by a 'matte painting' technique which has been used in films such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Star Wars*. *Modern Times* was the last film in which Chaplin's character 'The Tramp' was seen, and though it's mainly a silent movie, his voice is heard in a scene where he sings a comedy song and forgets the words.

Talkies

Films with synchronised soundtracks were already common by 1936, when *Modern Times* was made. Problems with audio recording quality and synchronisation made talking pictures, or 'talkies', commercially unviable until 1927, when the first feature film with synchronised sound, *The Jazz Singer* staring Al Jolson, was a major hit. Its popularity spurred Hollywood on and by the early 1930s significant advances had been made, particularly in placing sound actually on the film reels, which was more practical than synchronising separate soundtracks on discs.

Much of *The Jazz Singer* is actually silent, with music and sound effects, but when Al Jolson's character sings we hear the actual sound recorded on set, including songs and some ad-libbed speech. This clip (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iX2lg4eYwQ**) gives a good impression of how the film worked, showing the transition from separately recorded sound to 'live' sound, and it also highlights some of the problems with synchronising the soundtrack to the film.

Jolson's improvised line 'Wait a minute, wait a minute, you ain't heard nothing yet!' was the first spoken dialogue heard in a feature film, and in the context of movie soundtracks it was remarkably prophetic. This eight-minute video (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlAt2lcg5ZM**) is well worth showing as an overview of the beginnings of film sound from the first ever recording (of a violinist playing into a huge recording 'cone') to the success of *The Jazz Singer*.

Throughout the 1930s, Hollywood movie studios paid increasingly greater attention to the power of music in their films, and major composers were hired to compose **opening title themes** and **interludes** between scenes. Not all movies had original music, however, and well-known works by famous composers, living and dead, became associated with films. The 1945 British movie *Brief Encounter* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGQ6xBMLfeQ**), directed by David Lean with a script by Noel Coward, made Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninov's late-Romantic and much-loved Second Piano Concerto even more famous. Perhaps leading the way was the Walt Disney company, whose animated classic *Fantasia* (1940) used some of classical music's best-known works as the basis for the action on screen.

This is Walt Disney's inspired animation of ballet dancing animals, set to music from Ponchielli's ballet *Dance of the Hours* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJ7IGnQPZPQ**). The ballet from which this music is taken was first performed in 1876.

Apart from songs, a lot of music written at this time for movies was intended to match the action closely, with the result that it did not always work as coherent music away from the context of the movie. Some established composers from the classical world were initially snobbish about film music as a result, but it wasn't long before talented individuals 'crossed over' from the concert hall to the movie theatre, recognising perhaps the financial and reputational boost that film scores could provide.

In the 1930s, two leading Austrian composers took Hollywood by storm with their film music. Erich Korngold's best-known movie score was for *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpqR6Ca-LL8**) which starred Errol Flynn. His compatriot Max Steiner scored some of the greatest films of that era, including *King Kong* (1933), *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Casablanca* (1942). Steiner was one of the first to compose title themes which became instantly associated with the movie and famous in their own right. One of his themes for *Gone with the Wind* is examined in detail below.

Listening activity: *Gone with the Wind*

Start by showing this video (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxOrh19hAP8**) linked below of a montage of clips from this classic 1939 film, which starred Vivien Leigh, Clark Gable and Leslie Howard in a romantic love story set against the backdrop of the American Civil War. Max Steiner, under contract with Warner Brothers, was 'loaned' to the production and spent 12 weeks writing the huge score for the film, which included a number of themes that have become very famous in the world of film music.

Perhaps most famous among the themes is the one heard in the clip above, called 'Tara's Theme' and associated with the plantation house where the character Scarlett O'Hara's family lived.

Play this version of the theme (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yLQCEO9QhY**), from the beginning to 1:58, and ask your students to consider answers to the following questions.

1. Give two examples from the introduction (the opening 25 seconds or so) of how Steiner uses musical elements to set the dramatic mood.
2. In the main theme, which begins at 0:29, describe the role of the violins and also that of the horns. Can you work out which of these two parts is played by the violas?
3. Describe the **tonality** and the **rhythm** in the A part of the main theme, from 0:29 to 1:08.
4. The section from 1:09 to 1:31 forms the contrasting B part of the theme. Describe any similarities and differences between this and the A part.
5. When the A part returns at 1:32, how is it different from before?

Suggested answers:

1. Use of the full orchestra, percussion and harp glissandos, crescendo.
2. Violins play the main melody in octaves, horns and violas play an answering countermelody in between phrases of the main melody.
3. Major key, 4/4 metre with repeating melodic rhythm, second beat starts to each phrase with a dotted pattern.
4. Instrumentation very similar (violins vs horns/viola); new harmony beginning on the subdominant, falling bassline, quieter dynamic with a build at the end.
5. Trumpet carries main melody, strings have the countermelody, theme played once (it was repeated before).

In the 1940s, more mainstream composers ventured into film – most notably Englishmen Ralph Vaughan Williams (*Scott of the Antarctic*, 1948) and William Walton (*Henry V*, 1944, starring and directed by Laurence Olivier). The famous Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich wrote more than 30 film scores, and – riding on the post-war wave of British military films – Malcolm Arnold and Eric Coates scored *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *The Dam Busters* (1955) respectively.

Animation

At this point, having already referred to Disney's *Fantasia*, we should look more closely at the increasing popularity of animated movies. Walt Disney undoubtedly led the way with this, turning cartoons into musicals by engaging talented composers to write catchy songs and themes in the same way that stage musicals relied on blockbuster songs. Frank Churchill's music for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and Leigh Harline's for *Pinocchio* (1940) became so popular that the first soundtrack albums were released on disc, for people to listen to in their homes.

Another Disney composer, Carl Stalling, became Disney's and Warner Brothers' preferred composer for their cartoons, also made for the movie theatre, that featured trademark characters Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. Stalling's heavily jazz- and classical-inspired music was written to fit closely to the action on screen in a technique which became known as **mickey-mousing** and dominated cartoon music for decades to come, perhaps best-known to students in the form of Scott Bradley's scores for more than 100 *Tom and Jerry* cartoons of the 1940s and 50s. Bradley himself said that he used ideas such as the **12-note** technique devised by Arnold Schoenberg in composing for these cartoons.

Mickey-mousing: associated activities

To finish this first part of our look at film music, here are some useful resources on mickey-mousing, which you can use to examine the technique further and inspire your students, perhaps with a view to setting some composition tasks:

- There are some good examples of older and more modern uses of the technique here: **https://filmmusiccentral.com/2016/01/12/film-music-101-mickey-mousing/**
- This brief video provides a good explanation of the technique: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqbMmWozjks**
- Here's a clip revealing one composer's take on a *Tom and Jerry* clip: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLJAHx4Ix4s**
- And here's a classic example of Scott Bradley's use of the technique: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSap1b2qfNc**
- This fantastic performance by the John Wilson Orchestra of some highlights from Scott Bradley's music is well worth a watch – it was performed at the BBC Proms in 2013: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYrUWfLlY1o**