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by James Manwaring

## INTRODUCTION

In the previous resource on Edexcel's film music Area of Study (*Music Teacher*, November 2017), we looked in detail at music from the film *Psycho*. In this second resource, we're going to consider the next film score in the Edexcel Anthology – *The Duchess* by Rachel Portman.

Before embarking on a similar analysis of the music, we'll first consider some routes into using film music with composition: it's a useful way for students to learn how to understand both atmosphere and storytelling in music.

## STARTING POINTS

For me, it's an absolute must that as teachers, we take the time to listen to music. In the case of film music, that means rising to the challenge of listening to more of it. That can be tricky, however – but here are some thoughts on the subject:

- Make sure you have time scheduled for your own personal listening. You can justify it to yourself because it is crucial planning. Work out a time in the week when you can shut yourself away from the world, either at home or at work, and just listen to music.
- Make sure you have access to one of the many online streaming services. It can be complicated, but maybe your school can pay for the service, or you might have to take the plunge and subscribe yourself. It's well worth the effort, however, in order to have access to a whole world of music and very useful playlists.
- Work out what you're going to listen to, and make a playlist that you can then work through. It can be daunting to have access to almost every film score ever written, so it's good to work out in advance what you're planning to listen to. If you're teaching film music, the playlist could be made up of a couple of other scores by the Anthology's three composers, plus possibly something current.
- Keep a diary of what you hear, and what stands out to you. When you're teaching, you want to be able to draw upon your own knowledge. If you can remember a film score that starts with an inverted pedal, or one that relies on developing short motifs, then you can also bring those details up in class. Not only do the students value and need this detailed knowledge, but they will also respect you for it.
- Share what you listen to on social media, and encourage students to follow your ideas, or check out some of the Twitter feeds sharing wider listening (for example, Wider Listening Wednesday).

In this resource, I'll refer to a number of different scores by Rachel Portman, who has produced some wonderful music and has a clear compositional style. Listening to a large amount of her music will be really helpful throughout this scheme of work, and will give students a huge number of wider listening examples that can be incorporated into their essays.

## FILM MUSIC AND COMPOSITION

In this resource, we'll consider how we can study film music through composition, and then how to approach film music as a viable avenue for an A level composition.

I firmly believe that part of understanding film music comes through experiencing it. Listening is crucial for A level students, but they also need to experience the process of creating their own cinematic music. This is something that should start at a younger age, and students may have already engaged with it at GCSE. If not,

they could have a go at creating their own music at A level to unlock their understanding. Here are a few ways into creating film music:

- Ask students create a clear and recognisable sense of atmosphere, but without the presence of any melody. They can either select their own theme/genre/scene, or you can give them one.
- Ask students to experiment with writing in an unusual time signature such as 5/4 or 7/4. These time signatures can often be of use to a film composer, allowing them to create interesting rhythmic ideas or break away from the more conventional time signatures to create a certain mood or feeling in their music.
- Create a melody for a film that is entirely modal (see later in our discussion of *The Duchess*). This process is useful for A level students for a number of reasons, but it will also get them thinking about cinematic music. They should aim to try out two or three different modes to familiarise themselves with their particular sounds and characters. At the same time, they can also start to listen out for them in music.
- Ask students to experiment with three instruments that they have never used before. They should research how they are used, what type of thing they play, and any examples of where they've already been used in film music. You might even want to consider non-Western instruments, which are often used in cinematic film scores.
- Create some melodies and ideas using just a harp. This is an instrument that's often used in cinematic music and has a number of functions. It's important to get to grips with how it can be used.
- Experiment with pedal notes and inverted pedal notes. Try writing melodies that work over or under a pedal, and also consider chord patterns over or under a pedal note.
- Create a chord progression where chords merge and morph into one another – a common feature in film music. Consider how you can make chords more exotic with extensions and alterations, and try and fit these into your progression.

Creating a film score is an excellent option for students looking for an avenue into composition. Creating atmosphere, telling stories with music and creating strong motifs are all excellent pathways into cinematic composition.

The student who embarks on this pathway will need to be prepared to do lots of listening, however, and have a clear picture of exactly what they are writing music for. Research, preparation, listening and planning are all essential.

The key thing is that they are passionate about what they're going to compose, and that they work out what story they're telling. Picking the right instruments or the correct ensemble is a crucial starting point, and then they need to develop their melodic theme. This is in some ways outside of the scope of this article, but it is worth discussing with your students if they want to pursue this in their composition.

## USING MODES

If students have not already covered them, now would be a good time to study modes and modal harmony. Students have often heard of this terminology, but don't always understand it fully. There are a number of misconceptions related to modes, and students should really grasp the patterns and the uses of modes. I have always aimed to teach this at GCSE level, but I find I have to recap at A level, and also encourage students to incorporate modes into their own compositions (something I rarely do at GCSE).

For me, the starting point when studying modes is the idea of a pattern and the sound it creates, rather than thinking about playing a scale from D up to D on a piano, for example, which can lead students to think that Dorian mode is all about D and not about the pattern.

Get students playing these patterns and creating them on different starting notes. Listen to lots of modal music and show the extent of its use across time and genres. This may be something you do throughout the study of this film score, but you may like to go into this scheme of work with the students understanding modes already.

### Modes:

- **Ionian mode:** this is what we now call major.
- **Dorian mode:** this is fairly similar to the minor scale, or natural minor scale, but the sixth note is a major 6th rather than a minor 6th. 'Scarborough Fair' provides a good example of this mode in action.
- **Phrygian mode:** this is a mode often found in flamenco music, and although it's similar to the natural minor scale, the second note is a minor 2nd, not a major. Vaughan Williams famously used this mode in his *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.
- **Lydian mode:** get students playing the theme from *The Simpsons*, and they'll soon recognise this mode in action. It's very similar to the Ionian mode but has a slightly more unsettling feel – ask your students to work out why.
- **Mixolydian mode:** it's only the 7th note that separates this mode from the major scale – a flattened (minor) 7th rather than a major one.

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## THE DUCHESS BY RACHEL PORTMAN

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Born in England in 1960, Rachel Portman has contributed much to the cinematic genre. She's most famous for being the first woman to win an Oscar for best film score, for her work on the 1996 film *Emma* (worth exploring as part of wider listening). Unlike other film music composers in Edexcel's specification, she is still alive and still writing scores. At the time of writing, her most recent scores include *Their Finest* and *A Dog's Purpose*, both of which can be used for wider listening.

*The Duchess* is a 2008 movie about the life of English aristocrat Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire. It is a period movie set in the 18th century, which in itself immediately sparks thoughts about music from that period. The year 2008 was an interesting one for cinematic music, and the Oscar that year went to AR Rahman for the *Slumdog Millionaire* score. It's worth listening to this score with students, too, as there are so many talking points about how music can represent a place and time. It will also highlight the rich and diverse nature of film music. The previous year Dario Marianelli picked up the Oscar for his score for *Atonement*, another score that it's well worth exploring. With such a diverse range of scores released every year, it's also worth asking students to consider the ways in which the genre has developed since the *Psycho* score they've just studied.

Another link with *Psycho* is the performing forces Portman uses in this score. Portman uses only a fairly small orchestra, and it's good for students to consider why. She was clearly linking back to the forces that a Classical composer would have found themselves working with. Linking back to a period in time is crucial in film music, and here, Portman clearly chooses to create a sound that would have belonged in the Classical period. There are the additions of trumpet and piano, which were not as common at the time – but discussing the orchestration is a great way in to the score.

The complete score to *The Duchess* includes 18 cues in total, and Portman also uses two pieces of existing music: Beethoven's German Dance No. 10 in D, and Haydn's String Quartet in D, Op. 1 No. 3. As with much of her music, Portman favours instrumental sounds over electronic sounds or loops. Her music in this score is light and, with the addition of the works by Beethoven and Haydn, takes us back to a time in the past.

Before you begin teaching this set work, listen with students to the full set of extracts in the anthology. At this stage, don't use the score: just listening will help them to focus on the music in a different way. They may also like to watch the film, which is something they can do at home. Listening to the entire film score is also advisable as it will help set the scene for the chosen extracts.

### **The Duchess**

The scene is set with this opening music. Portman's use of homophonic textures as well as the clearly modal feel to the music all help to take our minds back into history. Although modality isn't strictly a Classical feature, we nevertheless get a feeling of the past from this music. Similar techniques are used in John Lunn's music for *Downton Abbey* and also another Portman score, *Belle*. Listen to the main title music from *Belle* with your students, and see if they can spot the similarities with *The Duchess*.

You could also ask them to work out the main themes at the piano. This opens up the modality to them in a practical way, and it's also a great way to analyse the melodic material. Portman's melodic approach is very much to create melodies using small units or motifs. This opening music has three melodic ideas that are used throughout the score.

#### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- What instruments are used in this opening music?
- How are the instruments used? What do they contribute and provide to the opening music?
- How would you describe the tonality of this music, and what gives it this sound?
- How would you describe the main melody?
- Does the texture of the music change at all during this cue?
- How is the harp used in this extract?
- Why is this a suitable piece of music for the opening of this particular movie?

### **Mistake of Your Life**

Portman continues with the mix of modality and diatonic minor in this cue, and again we start with some lovely atmospheric writing with long, drawn-out chords. It's worth continuing the discussion of the use of modality here, and it's good to look at where else modality can be found in the Anthology, so that student gain insights into its wide-ranging use in music, and not necessarily just from the Renaissance or Baroque periods.

This cue brings in the plaintive piano writing that I previously mentioned. Portman often uses piano and likes to juxtapose it with a small string ensemble. In her score for *Their Finest* she provides some lovely piano writing in the second track, 'I'd Miss You'. Students might like to try and create their own ideas at the piano, which could then be used for composition. It's also worth listening to Portman's music for the film *Never Let Me Go*, where the main titles again incorporate the piano.

Again, this cue uses simple melodic ideas: in this case, two main ideas are used. It's interesting to listen out for the timpani pedal note in the opening moments of the music, and consider its impact. Pedal notes are common in cinematic music – in fact they're crucial to the genre – and students will be able to spot them right across the film music genre. Portman brings together ostinato features and melodic ideas and creates a wonderful canvas of sounds.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What makes this cue very different to the opening music?
- How would you describe the music for piano?
- If you were going to replicate this piece, what three features would you need to include?
- Using a piano, can you work out the chord progression that Portman uses in the opening moments of this cue?
- Do you notice any patterns in the progressions that she uses?
- What different melodic ideas can you hear in this extract?
- How does Portman use cadences in this cue?

### *Six Years Later*

This extract brings together much material that we have now become familiar with, as well as pizzicato strings, and there's a real sense of rise and fall. Again, Portman is working with a modal version of D major, and the music is built around ostinato features and small melodic cells that make up the whole.

We again see the use of the chord progression I-V (dominant minor), which was used in the opening music. There are numerous examples of orchestral, symphonic and programmatic music that use modal ideas to create a certain mood or represent a time or place. Linking together the study of music with listening and composing skills is crucial in creating the all-round music student who combines rather than separates skills.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why does Portman use pizzicato string techniques in this cue?
- What mood is created here? Name three features that contribute to this mood.
- Does this music still link back to the Classical period, and if so, why do you think that is?
- How would you describe the melodic material used in this cue?
- Sum up Portman's approach to rhythm and metre in this cue.
- What type of chord is used by Portman in bar 25, and what effect does this have on the music?

### *Never See Your Children Again*

This is a classic cinematic opening to a piece of music, or cue. Strings emerge, meander and dominate the landscape. Students can create this kind of atmosphere themselves to see exactly what's going on in the music.

We again see the use of modes, and although the cue is in D minor it also uses the Aeolian mode. Modality crosses so many borders and genres in music, and it's well worth students exploring it in their own work. It's also a great way of linking to other pieces and developing the students' wider listening knowledge.

The use of the tonic pedal at the end, as well as the dissonant D flat, all lead to a wonderful close to a rather emotive section of music. In her score for *Belle*, Portman also incorporates broad, emotion-filled strings as well as pedal notes and a sense of the unresolved. The harp is also used to wonderful effect in this section.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why do you think Portman chose to use the harp in this cue?
- How would you describe the melodic writing in this cue?
- How would you describe the quaver movement in this piece?
- What kind of harmonic palette does Portman use in this cue?
- What role is given to the timpani in this piece?
- Why is this a great example of cinematic underscoring?
- How does this piece fit in with Portman's style of film composition?

### End Titles

This material is very similar to the content and structure of the first cue, *The Duchess* – so why include it in the Anthology? It's surely so that students can spot the subtle changes that Portman makes to the cue. We still have the use of modal D major, and the melodic material is the same as the first part of this score. But there are some changes in structure and also come variations in the material used in the opening. Students should find any differences and discuss their impact.

### Wider listening

I'd recommend that students listen to some of the following Rachel Portman scores:

- *Their Finest* (2016)
- *Belle* (2013)
- *Race* (2016)
- *Chocolat* (2000)

Other possible wider listening ideas include:

- *The King's Speech* (2010): for use of piano, and another film set in a different time period.
- *Downton Abbey*: for piano writing, period drama and modal influences. It's also a great example of how a theme can develop throughout a score.

Rachel Portman discusses her approach to writing film music on this video, provides both students and teachers with valuable insights into a film composer's processes and methods.

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## CONCLUSION

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Rachel Portman's music spans a huge period of time and moves through different genres, from period dramas to films about dogs or dolphins. Yet she has a clear style to her writing, one that students will be able to recognise and engage with.

This resource has touched on some compositional avenues that you could follow with your class to unlock some of Portman's ideas. Composing a cinematic piece is not only accessible to the A level student, but also rewarding. If nothing else, listening to the score to *The Duchess* and studying the music should open students' horizons and get them thinking about their own work.