KS5

Edexcel A level AoS3: Music for film, part 3

by James Manwaring

James Manwaring is Director of Music for Windsor Learning Partnership, and has been teaching music for 13 years. He is a member of the MMA and ISM, and he writes a music education blog.

INTRODUCTION

This is the last of three resources on film music (following part one in *Music Teacher*, November 2017, and part two in January 2018) based around Edexcel's Area of Study 3. Here we'll focus on *Batman Returns*, and also some further ways into film music composition for A level students.

STARTING POINT: COMPOSITION

Film music is a popular genre among students. They enjoy both the set works and the wider listening. Composing in a cinematic genre also remains a popular avenue for many students, who enjoy crafting and creating music that tells a clear story. In this resource, I want to start by looking at some specific ways into film composition, so that students can create music that fits in with the set works.

If students are going to truly understand a genre of music, they need to engage fully with it. Composing cinematic music is a great way for students to understand cinematic music – and that goes for all genres of music, in fact. Performance is also important, however: students should have the chance to play music from different genres – and there are some great arrangements out there for all abilities. If you can play something cinematic in your orchestra, wind band or brass band, it will really bring the music to life.

Where to start with composition

My first piece of advice is: start somewhere. There's no right or wrong way to start a composition, so I often suggest that my students just start with something. Of course, they might need to think about an overall theme for their film, but I like them to just get going. For some, this can be the starting point for a great piece of music, while others can find the creative freedom a little frustrating.

But students need to think, be creative and explore. Ask them to think about a film they love, and to sit down at a computer or piano and start to play around with ideas. They might find this hard at first, but they will soon start to think like composers.

Here are some of the questions and thought processes they may go through:

- What instrument should I choose?
- How am I going to create the atmosphere I want?
- How am I going to approach the texture?
- Do I want to start with melody or an introduction?
- What do I need to listen to for inspiration and ideas?

These are all useful issues for an emerging composer to consider. And they're just the kind of thought process we want to instil in our students, particularly at A level. We don't want them to think that composition is a formula, a process in which they simply follow steps. To produce a high-quality piece of work, they need to start somewhere and have the right thought processes along the way.

The leitmotif

But if students struggle to start a piece of film music, how can you help them? Some students may indeed sit in front of a computer screen and simply have no ideas. However, there's still value in them going through that thought process. They need to work out for themselves what it is they are struggling with.

The next stage in composition, which isn't unique to film composition, is for them to write a melody.

> A **leitmotif** is a theme that runs through a composition, representing a particular character, idea, place or situation.

Students will no doubt have come across leitmotifs before, but now they need to think about how they can compose one themselves.

Batman Returns is a great example of a film score that uses themes to represent characters, which we'll return to later. As a starting point, give your students the Batman theme as an example of composing a leitmotif.

The Batman theme is a very short motif used throughout *Batman Returns*, and it's a good idea to refer to the score for the original 1989 *Batman* film by Danny Elfman (which would make a good choice for wider listening). There are countless other leitmotifs that you can also refer to and John Williams in particular is a master of thematic music. His scores for the Indiana Jones, Harry Potter and *Star Wars* movies, as well as *Superman* and *Jurassic Park*, all provide great examples of leitmotifs in action. Get your students to listen to some of these themes as inspiration for crafting their own leitmotif.

However, they will also need to consider a few issues before they begin:

- Does your theme represent a character, place, time or situation?
- In light of this, what kind of instrument will best suit your leitmotif?
- What tonality are you going to use, and what will be your starting note?
- What other elements of music might you consider now that you have a sound in mind?

Again, this list of questions isn't exhaustive, but it will help students to start thinking again. Once they start composing their leitmotif, they will hopefully have a clear idea of what their film is conceptually about and what sound they are aiming for. They can then do some wider listening at home to gain more insight into the sound they're looking for.

Atmosphere

Hopefully your students are now starting to compose, and hopefully this process will be fairly organic. They should have a theme, place, character and situation in mind, and they will hopefully have some kind of leitmotif forming on screen or on paper.

Encourage students to turn to the piano where possible, and sit at the piano to give them ideas yourself. You could also consider taking the ideas they're starting to work with and playing them on the piano yourself. This not only helps students hear the piece, but also gives them an idea of what they could do with the melody, or with the atmosphere they're creating. If possible, sit at the piano and help them to see how themes can be crafted.

Atmosphere is crucial to cinematic music, and to a number of other genres. Just think about pieces such as Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* or Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and their power in creating atmosphere in music. For me, in film music atmosphere is everything that isn't melody and accompaniment. It is the music that sets the scene, that happens before, underneath and around the main leitmotif.

Students need to be able to create mood and atmosphere in their music: this is their next challenge. Once they have an idea of what their film is about, they need to create music that sets the tone and atmosphere. This might start with a lonely inverted pedal, or a series of rhythmically punctuated chords. They might use percussion to create a sense of anticipation, or a solitary snare drum that leads into their leitmotif. Wider listening is crucial here, and students will quickly see that film composers are often masters at setting a scene.

If students struggle with atmosphere, turn to the other set works and look at what their composers do to create atmosphere in their music. Here are a few ideas:

- **Bach:** how does Bach represent the mighty fortress of God in 'Eine feste Burg' (see *Music Teacher*, August 2017)?
- **Vaughan Williams:** what features of *On Wenlock Edge* (see *Music Teacher*, February 2018) help to represent the outdoor environment?
- **Stravinsky:** how does Stravinsky use rhythm to create atmosphere in 'Les augures printaniers' in *The Rite of Spring* (see *Music Teacher*, December 2016)?
- **Herrmann:** 'The City' from his *Psycho* soundtrack (see *Music Teacher*, November 2017) is a great example of atmospheric music, but what are its features that help emphasise this scene?
- **Cage:** when you take away all concepts of melody and harmony, what's left, and how can we use those features to create atmosphere?
- **Portman:** what helps set her score for *The Duchess* (see *Music Teacher*, January 2018) in the past, or to create an 18th-century feel?

The goal here is for your students to create music that sets a tone for their film, music that wraps up and surrounds their main leitmotif. Once students start to experiment with atmosphere, they start to develop their composition seriously.

If all else fails, try this

Some students just need a final nudge that will get them going, or an idea that will help launch them into composition. Film music isn't for everyone, of course, and if a student doesn't want to compose for film, they don't need to. But with any compositional genre, students need to be able to come up with ideas. Here are a few suggestions to get them started:

- Start with a tonic pedal and then add a simple scalic idea underneath.
- Start with a rhythmic idea on a snare drum.
- Use the Batman theme, but rewrite the rhythm or change the tonality.
- Write a short sentence that describes your film, and then use the syllables to come up with a rhythm.
- Find a picture that you think represents the mood of your film, and then start to write a list of how music could represent the picture.
- Write an ostinato that helps create the atmosphere you're aiming for with your film.

Final thought on composition

It's unlikely that a student is going to compose music for an entire film, especially considering all of the other things they need to do at A level. It's important, therefore, that they consider a film composition as more of a suite of music bringing together various scenes in a film.

Students can bring together their ideas into a single piece, but they need to have different scenes, moods and characters in mind. For the A level exam, students need to compose a piece that is at least four minutes in duration, so if they tackle three scenes from a film then they should have enough material. A number of film scores contain a suite of music that shows how different moments from the full score can be combined. Others contain main titles music that's almost like an overture for the overall film.

BATMAN RETURNS BY DANNY ELFMAN

Born in 1953, Danny Elfman has had a varied and interesting career in music. Not only is he now a well-known and successful film composer, but he was also lead singer in the band Oingo Boingo from 1974 to 1995. He grew up loving film music, in particular the scores of Nino Rota and Bernard Herrmann.

He was approached by Tim Burton and Paul Reubens in 1985 to compose music for the film *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, which launched his career as a cinematic composer. Despite four Academy Award nominations, Elfman has never won an Oscar. He has, however, won an Emmy and a Grammy award for his music, the Emmy for his title theme for *Desperate Housewives*, and the Grammy for the Batman theme.

A number of composers have influenced Elfman's music – Bartók, Philip Glass, Ravel, Satie and Stravinsky among them. He has a unique and exciting sound, and has worked on a number of films with Tim Burton since that first Pee-wee Herman movie in 1985. One of the best examples of music from a Burton/Elfman collaboration is the iconic music from *Edward Scissorhands*.

The recent documentary on film music *Score*, which speaks to leading film composers, is well worth watching with your students. The section on Danny Elfman is fascinating, discussing the impact of the synthesiser and punk on film music – both things Elfman was familiar with from his time in Oingo Boingo. He talks about how he started to write 'weird but elaborate compositions' that gave him the inspiration to write film music. His big strength is the way he comes up with short ideas that he then develops. He explains that he wanted to do something different from John Williams, and in *Batman* he looked back to Bernard Herrmann for inspiration: he needed to create a dark score for *Batman*, but one that still had energy. Possibly the best quote from Elfman in the documentary is: 'There is only one rule: there are no rules.'

Listening approaches

Students need to listen to the full score for *Batman Returns* and also watch the movie to understand the music properly, and it's also a good idea to watch the original *Batman* movie. Don't spend lesson time watching the whole film, but maybe restrict your lesson listening and watching to key scenes to give them an idea of the work – perhaps the scenes that feature the music from the Anthology.

There are three approaches to listening that I like my students to follow:

- Listen without the score.
- Listen with the score.
- Listen in the background.

Students need to get used to spotting things in music without a score as well as with a score. They need to be able to follow music, but also get used to having the music in the background.

The notes on *Batman Returns* from the exam board include an excellent list of the detailed performance directions given by Elfman. Use this list in lessons to help students listen out for key features, or even ask them what other set works feature these playing techniques.

Birth of a Penguin part 1

One of the key features of the *Batman Returns* score is its wide-ranging instrumentation. Elfman brings together a huge range of instruments, some common to the orchestra and others less so. As a starting point, get students listening out for the various forces in action in this piece. Alongside the standard orchestra, what else can they hear?

This particular section provides a great example of a leitmotif, and also superb use of atmosphere. Elfman has chosen instruments that work well for both the leitmotif and the creation of a dark, mysterious mood.

Another key aspect to approaching film music is to consider how its structures, and how they are different from, say, a classical piece in sonata form. Film composers are not concerned with filling a certain number of bars, or creating balanced phrases. Their primary focus in on the screen – they need their music to fit what's happening in the movie. We therefore see a very different approach to structure. That's not to say the music isn't structured, or even random. Instead, the composer is simply fulfilling a different function. Phrases and melodies are still balanced, but the music can take unexpected twists and turns as the on-screen action and mood changes.

Texture is another interesting aspect: in film music, we can no longer simply name it, but instead we need to describe it. Students who embark on a film composition need to understand that texture should vary and take various twists and turns. They need to understand the power of texture, and this piece shows one possible approach in starting with a clear leitmotif, to represent not only a character, but also the overall mood of the film.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe the Batman leitmotif in as much detail as you can.
2. What makes the Penguin motif different from the Batman motif?
3. How does Elfman use vocals in this piece of music, and to what effect?
4. Why is the pipe organ a good choice of instrument for this piece?
5. Describe the music played by the celesta, suggesting why it is appropriate for this piece.
6. How would you describe the harmony for this piece?
7. How does Elfman approach texture? Describe it – don't just try and name it.
8. What is the primary tonality used by Elfman?

Birth of a Penguin part 2

This cue is very similar to the last, so it would be good for students to look at the similarities and differences between them. A good comparison will help them pick out the cues' key features.

What stand out are the way that Elfman uses the main Batman theme in various ways throughout the cue, and also the way that he changes mood. At 1:28, the mood suddenly changes from a driving momentum to a more subdued atmosphere, which then builds up again gradually. Students can think about this in connection with their own compositions, especially if they are composing something cinematic.

The use of strings is particularly cinematic in this cue, and scurrying semiquaver string figures provide a charged and driven accompaniment to the main motifs. The strings not only create an exciting textural layer, but also help to spell out the harmony. Elfman then goes on to use the strings to provide rhythmically driven accompaniment – another cinematic feature of the string writing.

Cinematic music is not unique, and it brings together ideas from many musical genres. Used in the right context and for the right scene, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* could be mistaken for cinematic music. That is simply because music has and always will tell stories, evoke emotions and help us to imagine. Students should understand this power and learn how to harness it in their own work.

The programme music of Berlioz and the tone poems of Richard Strauss, as well as *The Rite of Spring* and *On Wenlock Edge*, are great examples of music telling stories and bringing situations to life. Students will start to see that the Anthology, although full of different genres, contains music that tells stories, depicts situations and brings to life moods and emotions.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Would you describe this music as polyphonic?
2. What different key signatures are used in this cue?
3. What is diminution, and where is it used in this cue?
4. Where does Elfman use ostinato?
5. Where do you find an example of cross-rhythms being used?
6. How does Elfman use the Batman motif in this cue?
7. Describe in detail the final 20 seconds of this cue.
8. What does Elfman use in bar 55? Describe it and explain how it is used.

Batman vs the Circus

This is my favourite of the four cues featured in the Anthology: it explores some new and interesting sounds and ideas; it combines comedy and chaos; and it packs a lot in. A circus is a interesting concept one for students to consider, and might be a good way into composition for someone is struggling for ideas. It might even be good for students to consider how Elfman creates comedy and chaos in this cue – that will allow them to focus on specific elements, and will help them with the approach I discuss at the end of this resource.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe the music played by the trombones in this cue?
2. Describe the way in which percussion is used in this cue – both tuned and untuned.
3. What qualities of the bassoon make it appropriate for this cue?
4. What is a diminished 7th chord, and how is it used in this piece?
5. What makes bars 67-77 so 'chaotic'?
6. What features of the music give it momentum and forward drive?
7. What feature in the strings links back to *Psycho*?
8. What instrument do you feel sets the scene the most, and why?

The Rise and Fall from Grace

This is the shortest of the four cues in the Anthology, and it's very different to the others. Why? What does Elfman do with the music in 'The Rise and Fall from Grace' that helps to set a different tone and atmosphere? This kind of analysis links back to the key purpose of the music – to represent what's happening on screen – as well as giving students further insight into their own compositions.

A film composer needs to help the viewer to see specific things on screen, and this cue helps to draw attention to very specific things. The documentary *Score* I mentioned earlier contains a very good section on a how a film composer will draw the viewer to look at something very specific on screen, in referring to the way in which we're drawn to the balloons in the Disney Pixar movie *Up*.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Elfman use woodwind in this piece?
2. How is the harp used in this cue?
3. How does the texture change thoughtout this cue?
4. What different string techniques are used in this piece?
5. Describe the use of the Penguin motif.
6. Where and why does Elfman use triple time?
7. Where do we see the use of monophony?
8. Describe how this cue ends.

EXAMPLE ESSAYS AND LINES OF ARGUMENT

I've taken a fairly consistent approach to the study of set works since the new specification was launched in 2016. My approach is that students need to think about the 'line of argument' for every set work before they start to study it.

What is a line of argument? For film music, it's how the composer creates music that enhances the on-screen drama. In the essay, I ask my students to pin all of their discussion of the elements of music back to their line of argument. This not only fulfils the criteria in the mark scheme, but also helps students craft a well-structured essay.

For each set work, I ask students to create an introduction, an example of which I provide below. If they do this for every set work, they will go into the exam with a clear idea of what they are going to discuss in their essay, slotting in the key elements that the examiner has chosen for the question.

Discuss the use of melody, harmony and instrumentation in the music you have studied from Danny Elfman's *Batman Returns*. Relate your discussion to other relevant works. These may include set works, wider listening or other music.

Danny Elfman composed the score for *Batman Returns* in 1992 and it is a great example of his unique style of film composition. Elfman uses leitmotifs that he then develops throughout his score, and he was influenced by composers such as Bernard Herrmann. This score is a great example of cinematic music, music that enhances the on-screen drama and brings to life the characters in the film. Elfman helps tell the story of the dark, mysterious and heroic Batman, as well as bringing to life the Penguin and Catwoman. In this essay I am going to discuss how Elfman uses melody, harmony and instrumentation to create a film score that helps tell the story of Batman and the battle of good against evil.

This is an example of an introduction, and I ask my students to write something similar for every set work. When they go into the exam I want them to know the context for their piece and have a clear line for argument. I find that this approach helps them to meet the marking criteria set by the exam board – and of course they also include lots of wider listening.

WIDER LISTENING

In the first part of this resource (November 2017), we looked at ways of approaching wider listening. It's a crucial element of the course, and students need to make sure they go into the exam with some great examples of cinematic music.

Students should find this fairly easy, however, since they're likely to know a lot of cinematic music. It's important, though, that once they have heard some music in a film, they go away and listen to the whole score to get a feel for what the composer does with the music.

But let's not just link wider listening to the essay question and the set works. Wider listening should be seen as an activity that a student undertakes to be a better writer, musician, performer and composer. Students should understand that when they are composing film music, they need to listen to great examples from the genre they are pursuing.

As teachers, we can encourage this by always giving students ideas from our own memory of pieces we have listened to. If a student is composing in a genre you're not familiar with, make sure that you listen to as much of it as you can. Next time you discuss wider listening, make it a positive thing and encourage students to do it all the time. When they're preparing for their next performance, they should listening to performers who are playing the same piece or instrument as they are. The more they listen, the more they will be prepared to tackle the exam, the composition and their recital.

CONCLUSION

Film music is such an exciting genre, and one that is very much part of society today. There's such a wealth of film music out there, and our students are listening to it on an almost daily basis.

But it doesn't matter whether what you're studying is film music, opera, Romantic piano concertos or Baroque vocal works. Our students need us to bring music to life and have our own bank of wider listening examples. Film music is brought to life on screen, but other music needs to be brought to life by us in our classrooms. That is the ultimate job of the music teacher, and the more we can do that, the more students will learn about and love music.