

AQA AoS3: Music for Media part 2 – Michael Giacchino and Nobuo Uematsu

Simon Rushby is a freelance teacher, writer and musician, and was a director of music and senior leader in secondary schools for many years. He is the author of a number of books and resources for music education, including two books of listening tests for the current GCSE music specifications. He is an ABRSM examiner and a songwriter, composer and performer, and has also been a principal examiner for A level music.

by Simon Rushby

INTRODUCTION

In the first part of this resource (*Music Teacher*, August 2018) we looked at music by three of the five composers named by AQA in Area of Study 3: Music for Media – Bernard Herrmann, Hans Zimmer and Thomas Newman. In this second part, we'll be looking at the other two names on AQA's list. For both **Michael Giacchino** and **Nobuo Uematsu**, we'll look at their careers and focus on some key music composed by them, mostly in the realms of video game music, though Giacchino is now very prolific in the film genre.

AQA'S APPRAISING EXAM

AQA's Appraising component is worth 40% of the total marks available at both AS and A level, and is assessed in the form of an exam paper with three sections: listening, analysis and essay. It would be a good idea to look back at past *Music Teacher* AQA resources if a reminder is needed as to how the exam is set out.

There are six Areas of Study (AoS) at AS Level, and seven at A level. AoS1 (Western classical tradition 1650-1910) is compulsory for all students, and they must answer questions on **one** of the other six for AS, and **two** for A level. We are looking at AoS3 (Music for Media).

In the exam, students will be expected to answer listening questions on unfamiliar music by **any** of the five named composers. Additionally, they will need to be able to 'appraise music and make critical judgements' for **three** of the five composers, by demonstrating knowledge of how these composers' styles have varied over time, and describing how musical elements are used in **at least two works**, using appropriate musical vocabulary and terminology. The choice of works to study is entirely that of the teacher and the student, so the music covered in this resource is a collection of suggested examples.

AREA OF STUDY 3: MUSIC FOR MEDIA

Our study of Michael Giacchino will allow us to look at the work of an extremely versatile composer, who has written for live-action films such as *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, Disney-Pixar classics such as *The Incredibles* films, *Ratatouille* and *Up*, TV series such as *Lost*, and video games including the *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* series.

In Nobuo Uematsu we will encounter a composer known as the 'Beethoven of video games music', best known for his music for the *Final Fantasy* series.

In its specification, AQA lists a range of musical elements and terms that students are expected to know and understand, and it is important to refer frequently to this list to ensure that the elements and terms are constantly being referenced in lessons and in students' work. Students will need to demonstrate knowledge of these composers' use of the **elements of music**, their influences, style and use of **music technology**.

With this in mind, in this resource we will pick some significant pieces of music and look at their context and the way in which musical elements are used. Important terminology will appear in **bold type**. At the end of this resource, there will be some practice questions for students to try, based on AoS3. But first of all, let's get a little historical context on the world of video game music.

Music for video games

Few musical genres have developed in sophistication as quickly as video game music. In early arcade video games of the 1970s, it was easiest and cheapest to have **monophonic** music generated by a dedicated computer chip, pre-programmed in code, such as in classics like *Pac-Man*. Tomohiro Nishikado's music for *Space Invaders* (released in 1978) was the first 'soundtrack' to be continuous throughout the game, though it consisted pretty much entirely of four low-frequency notes in a **loop** that increased in tempo as the action intensified. This kind of music became known as **chiptune**.

In the 1980s, home consoles began to appear and advances in technology allowed more **channels** for music, allowing for some **polyphony**. The restrictions presented to composers forced them to write very simple and therefore extremely catchy melodies. Dedicated sound chips in Sega and Nintendo machines resulted in more sophisticated music, such as that found in 1981's *Frogger*, Manami Matsumae's music for *Mega Man* and Yoko Shimomura's for *Street Fighter II*. Matsumae and Shimomura both stated that they studied the **counterpoint** of JS Bach in order to be able to write effective music for two or three channels, or **voices**.

Later in the decade came Koji Kondo's famous music for *Super Mario Bros*. This groundbreaking game was one of many to incorporate the cartoon technique of **mickey-mousing**, where the music and sound effects **underscored** the player's actions (such as jumping or growing in size). By the end of the 1980s **dynamic soundtracks**, where music was used to hold the narrative and action of the game together, became the norm.

1990s consoles like Sega's MegaDrive had still more advanced sound chips, allowing composers like Yuzo Koshiro to write **electro-** and **techno-**influenced music for games such as the *Streets of Rage* series. By the 2000s, large-scale **synthesised** scores that sounded like symphony orchestras could be accommodated, and this is where Uematsu's *Final Fantasy* work began. Soon after, it became possible to include **samples** – and ultimately recordings – of real instruments, which brought video games into the realms and scale of film music such as in the music of classic games of the 2000s like *Halo* (Martin O'Donnell) and *Assassin's Creed* (Jesper Kyd).

A key difference from film music, however, is that much modern video game music adapts and changes according to the player's actions and decisions. In some more recent cases, the music of a game will 'generate itself' so that no two players experience the same musical 'journey'. A great example of this is Jessica Curry's music for *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* of 2016 – you can find an audio clip of Curry talking about the process of writing music for video games [here](#).

Today, the genre of video game music has broken out of the console and computer, and become an international obsession. Major orchestras frequently hold concerts of the best-loved game music that sell out the world's biggest concert halls, and there are now Grammy and BAFTA awards for video game music. In the UK, classical radio stations like BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM regularly broadcast video game music.

If you and your students would like to explore the genre in more depth, in addition to the study of Giacchino and Uematsu's music, this guide from Classic FM provides a great starting point.

Michael Giacchino

Michael Giacchino (the 'cch' is pronounced as a 'k') was born in New Jersey in 1967 and demonstrated interest in animation and music as a child. He studied film production at the School of Visual Arts in New York and then attended the Juilliard School of Music, while at the same time completing an internship at Universal Pictures which resulted in a paid job as soon as he graduated. He soon moved to Disney and worked by day in their publicity department while studying orchestration by night at UCLA.

Through impressive self-promotion and persistence, Giacchino managed to get himself jobs writing music for Disney's video games department, and in the late 1990s he scored the PlayStation adaptation of *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* – one of the first console games to have a live orchestral score. He went on to write scores for the celebrated *Medal of Honor* series of games and also for *Call of Duty*.

In 2001, Giacchino was approached by the television producer JJ Abrams, who was impressed by his video game music, to write the soundtrack for a new series called *Alias* starring Jennifer Garner. This led on to more writing for Abrams's TV series, most significantly 2004's *Lost* which became very successful worldwide. Having heard the *Alias* music, Pixar director Brad Bird approached Giacchino to write the soundtrack for his new animated film *The Incredibles*, which proved to be the composer's breakthrough film score, earning him two Grammy nominations. Pixar's previous films had mainly been scored by Thomas Newman, and Giacchino's 'retro' jazz-influenced score was a new direction for the company.

After *The Incredibles*, Giacchino became very busy, writing music for – among others – *Mission: Impossible III* (directed by Abrams) and *Ratatouille*, for which he got his first Oscar nomination. During this period he also composed music for various installations and rides at Disney's theme parks in California, Paris and Hong Kong. Giacchino won his first Oscar for his music for the film *Up* in 2009.

Since *Up* Giacchino has written music for a wide variety of media, but it is his film music that continues to be the best known. In 2016 he composed the music for *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* and in 2017 *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. His most recent work can be heard on the recently released *Incredibles 2*.

ANALYSIS – MEDAL OF HONOR, MAIN THEME

The *Medal of Honor* series of games began in 1999 with a title developed by DreamWorks Interactive and published by Electronic Arts for Sony's PlayStation. Acclaimed film director Steven Spielberg was inspired while working on his film *Saving Private Ryan* to create a game that could give players a realistic experience as a front-line soldier in World War II, and simultaneously entertain and educate.

The success of this first game resulted in a follow-up in 2000 – *Medal of Honor: Underground* – and a total of 16 games were released under the *Medal of Honor* title between 1999 and 2012. Spielberg created the storylines of the first three games, and Giacchino wrote the music for the first four.

As a 'first-person-shooter' game, *Medal of Honor* was groundbreaking, taking full advantage of the capabilities of the PlayStation and setting the tone for many similar games to follow, not least the *Call of Duty* series. Giacchino's music was also innovative, particularly since it was a fully scored orchestral soundtrack that brought video games onto a level with films. This opening theme, which was re-used throughout the game and in subsequent *Medal of Honor* titles, has become iconic, though it needs to be noted that further titles in the series had their own different themes.

The version of the theme described below can be found here.

MELODY

There are two themes, which are important in determining the **two-part structure** of the music. We can call them themes A and B, and they are shown below.

Theme A is first heard on a solo trumpet. It focuses on the **root, 3rd and 5th** of the B flat major **triad**, which helps to convey a military, **fanfare**-like character. However, the use of the notes either side of the third (C and E flat) introduce **conjunct** movement which conveys a sense of melancholy, as if we already know the inevitable desperate and futile outcome of war.

Theme A - solo trumpet



It is divided into four **equal phrases**, each ending with a long note implying either the **tonic chord** (phrases 1 and 3) or the **subdominant** (phrases 2 and 4). Phrases 3 and 4 are answered – phrase 3 by a horn which provides an exact echo creating **antiphony**, and phrase 4 by a quick-moving piccolo and flute phrase, further cementing the 'military band' style.

After a more fully scored repeat of the whole of theme A, this time with the strings taking the melody, we hear **theme B** for the first time at 1:29, led by the cellos and then the full string section. It has an **anacrusis** start and is shorter than theme A, having only two phrases. It is also a little more conjunct and has more movement.

Theme B - cellos **Strings**

After this, we hear theme A again at a quicker tempo with an exciting and incessant rhythmic backdrop, before a repeat of theme B back at the original tempo, led by solo clarinet. Then theme A returns for a fourth time, triumphantly at 3:15, though in an interesting twist, the music ends with a **hybrid** of both themes – the pitches of theme B played with the rhythms and phrasing of theme A, at 3:31:

'Hybrid' of themes A and B

HARMONY AND TONALITY

The key of the music is very firmly settled in B flat major and does not **modulate**, perhaps unsurprisingly for a 'theme' cue. However, Giacchino supplies interesting harmonies as well as drawing on a rich heritage of film music devices to set an appropriate tone for the game.

The tonic of B flat major is established at the start with a **tonic pedal** (across the pitch range), and the first phrase ends on the **major 3rd** (D). The whole of theme A is first presented with little harmony other than this pedal until a move to the **subdominant chord** of E flat major at the end of the fourth phrase.

When theme A is repeated by the strings, Giacchino uses **open 4ths and 5ths** to perpetuate the 'fanfare' style but adds some interesting **dissonances** to the lower brass chords, creating added chords such as **B flat major 9** (0:54) and **E flat major 6** (1:15).

The rest of the music is harmonised relatively simply with tonic, subdominant and dominant chords, and when theme A returns at a quicker tempo there is a very strong tonic and subdominant pull, with pedal notes almost always present.

RHYTHM, TEXTURE, INSTRUMENTATION AND STRUCTURE

The overall thematic structure of A-A-B-A-B-A, with the 'hybrid' theme appearing in the **coda**, is simple and potentially uninteresting, but Giacchino ensures that there is plenty of **contrast** in his use of rhythm, texture and instrumentation. The overview below shows how this is achieved.

0:00-0:47 – theme A	The theme is presented by a solo trumpet over a held tonic pedal note. Distant crashes from bass drum and cymbals convey the military character of the music. A horn echoes the third phrase of the theme, creating antiphony. The fourth phrase is answered by flutes and piccolo over an E flat major 6th chord.
0:48-1:28 – theme A	The theme is repeated, this time by the upper strings in homorhythm . All the phrases are answered by flutes/piccolo, and lower brass and percussion provide harmony in between the phrases. This harmony becomes steadily more dissonant .
1:29-1:53 – theme B	Theme B is first heard, played by cellos accompanied by fully scored strings in melody-dominated homophony . The second phrase of this theme is played by the full string section and comes to rest on the dominant note.
1:53-2:35 – theme A (quicker tempo)	Side drum, timpani and other percussion herald a quicker, more rhythmically exciting section, and a pounding ostinato on the tonic note is heard in the lower instruments, particularly the strings. Harp and upper strings decorate the theme, now heard in the brass, with semiquaver ostinatos and glissandos , and lower brass chords. The woodwind answers are now doubled on the violins.
2:36-3:02 – theme B (tempo primo)	Out of the sustained note emerges a solo clarinet, re-introducing theme B accompanied by delicate harp notes. Lower strings accompany with warm textures and the strings and trumpet take over the theme, building up the texture and dynamics to a climactic point.
3:03-3:30 – theme A (first two phrases)	Lower brass notes, horn calls and a string ostinato set the scene for the triumphant final playing of theme A, with trumpets answering the horns in antiphony.
3:31-4:13 – coda (hybrid theme)	Trumpets play the 'hybrid theme' answered by horns playing theme A. Woodwind and trumpets play this hybrid phrase four more times, with the texture and dynamic fast reducing until we are left as we started, with a tonic pedal and distant bells.

This theme has been arranged for concert band, and the score can be downloaded free of charge [here](#).

Michael Giacchino: further listening

Study of one of Giacchino's film scores is a must, and my suggestion would be his music for either *The Incredibles* or *Up*.

This clip from *Up* shows how Giacchino's skilled development of a simple waltz theme can underscore a really poignant, long segment that tells the story of the whole of the two characters' married life. This video shows how Giacchino developed the music for this film and is an absolute must-watch.

There's a similar documentary about the music of *The Incredibles* [here](#), and a sample Section A question on *The Incredibles Theme* at the end of this resource.

NOBUO UEMATSU

Few video game composers are better known than Uematsu, a Japanese musician who enjoys as much fame in his field as John Williams does in the film music world. Born in 1959, Uematsu received no formal musical tuition but, inspired by Elton John, taught himself piano from about the age of 12. He went on to study at Kanagawa University, and on graduating spent some time as a keyboard player in bands and honing his skills as a composer.

His break came in 1985 when a friend who worked at the video game company Squaresoft (also known as Square, and now called Square Enix) invited Uematsu to compose the music for a game called *Cruise Chaser Blassty*. On the strength of this work he was engaged by game developer Hironobu Sakaguchi to write for some of his games, the most successful of which was *Final Fantasy* in 1987.

The success of this game resulted in a sequel in 1988, *Final Fantasy II*, and an offshoot game in 1989 called *Final Fantasy Legend* (which had its own sequel the following year). Uematsu went on to write music for every game in the *Final Fantasy* series up to 2002's *Final Fantasy XI*, sometimes alone and sometimes in collaboration with other composers such as Kenji Ito, Naoshi Mizuta and Junya Nakano. Uematsu also wrote for other Square Enix games such as *Chrono Trigger*.

He left Square Enix in 2004 to become a freelance composer, and continued to contribute music to further *Final Fantasy* releases and a number of other games such as 2008's *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*. He also branched out into visual media, writing the soundtracks for a number of anime series. Uematsu's *Final Fantasy* music has been a regular feature on Classic FM's Hall of Fame, and – at number nine – is the highest film or video game entry on 2018's chart, sandwiched between Mozart's Clarinet Concerto and Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony.

We're going to look at two pieces from *Final Fantasy VII*, composed by Uematsu in 1997 and among the best-loved of his huge array of music for the series. The game was PlayStation's second best-selling of all time, and the most successful of the *Final Fantasy* series.

The music of *Final Fantasy VII*

AERITH'S THEME

This beautiful theme, one of the best known from the *Final Fantasy* series, is a regular feature in concerts of Uematsu's music. The original theme can be found [here](#).

Aerith (sometimes spelt Aeris) Gainsborough is a young flower seller who joins the mercenary hero Cloud Strife and his anti-government group in the pursuit of the evil Sephiroth. Her theme is played several times throughout the game, serving as a **leitmotif** during flashback scenes and also at her sad demise at the hands of Sephiroth.

Let's take a look at this version arranged for solo piano. You can find the sheet music [here](#).

Uematsu packs a large number of melodies into his music, and this particular piece has three themes, shown below. The table that follows shows how these three themes are arranged in a simple ABCABC structure, and adds some information about harmony, tonality, rhythm and texture.

Theme A

The musical notation for Theme A is presented in two staves. The first staff contains measures 1 through 4. Above the notes, the chords D, Am, D9, and Am are indicated. The second staff contains measures 5 through 8. Above the notes, the chords D9, Am9, Bb9, Gm9, and D are indicated. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Theme B

Theme C

Bar nos	Theme	Key(s)	Notes
1-9	A	D major	Theme A is presented with sparse accompaniment and is mostly balanced apart from the extra cadential bar at the end. It has modal qualities thanks to the use of the dominant minor chord (A minor) in bars 2, 4 and 6, the flattened submediant (B flat major) in bar 7, and the minor supertonic (G minor) in bar 8. Many of these chords have an added 9th which increases the sense of sadness.
10-21	B	B minor, D major	There is more movement in the accompaniment now, and the theme is divided into two halves (shown as x and y above), one more conjunct than the other. Chords are more diatonic than modal, with F sharp minor and G major used frequently in the y part of the theme. The use of colourful added notes and passing notes becomes more common.
22-35	C	D major	Theme C is mostly conjunct, descending and chordal in texture. The harmony becomes simpler, using the subdominant and dominant as well as the mediant and submediant chords.
36-44	A	D major	A repeat of theme A, with a return to the sparse texture at first, but with more rhythmic interest in the accompaniment (including triplets against quavers) as it progresses.
45-56	B	B minor, D major	A repeat of theme B with mostly triplet accompaniment and some semiquaver decoration and ornamentation . There is a strong sense of build-up.
57-71	C	D major	The climactic return of theme C, with full texture and complex rhythmic accompaniment, before the music subsides.

An orchestral arrangement of the theme can be found here. It would be interesting to get students to compare this orchestration with the piano version and/or Uematsu's original version used in the game.

Nobuo Uematsu: further listening

The original version of 'One Winged Angel', found here, is startling in its sonic qualities and 'orchestration', given the range of sounds available to Uematsu at the time. It is played during the final battle against Sephiroth, the 'one-winged angel' of the title, and it was the first to include choral singing – a setting of the ancient Latin *Carmina Burana* words famously found in the 1936 choral favourite by Carl Orff.

Uematsu has remarked that he was influenced by Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and the music of Bernard Herrmann's *Psycho*, and he took a different structural approach to the composition, writing short, two- or four-

bar passages and then arranging them in different ways to create quite a **sectionalised** structure. A video about the composition of 'One Winged Angel' featuring Uematsu can be seen here.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Section A of the A level paper will have three groups of questions on different excerpts from the Area of Study, one of which will demand a longer answer.

Here are some Section A-style questions on Giacchino's theme from *The Incredibles*. The appropriate clip can be found here and the questions cover the section from the beginning to 1:00.

1. Describe in as much detail as you can the tonality at the beginning of the excerpt (from 0:00 to 0:13). [2]
2. What is the name for the musical device heard in the piano and bass part (and later other instruments) from 0:10 to 0:17? [1]
3. Describe the instrumentation used in the section from 0:18 to 0:24. [4]
4. Explain how the use of musical elements creates a sense of excitement in this music. [10]

A guide to the answers:

1. The tonality is minor. There is an abrupt change to another minor key midway through (at 0:06).
2. Ostinato (or riff).
3. Piccolo melody, answered by pizzicato violins and xylophone. Rhythms played on the ride cymbal of a drumkit. Interjections from tom-toms and a roll on bongos at the end of the excerpt.
4. Answers could include some of the following points, among others:
 - Minor key
 - Jazz style
 - Extensive use of brass, especially high trumpets
 - Fast-running ostinatos
 - Syncopations and much rhythmic intricacy
 - Added and dissonant chords
 - Saxophone solo in jazz/rock style
 - Main melody based around perfect 5th – keeps returning as 'punctuation'
 - Much use of percussion, especially drumkit
 - Fast tempo
 - Wide dynamic and pitch ranges
 - Frequent textural changes
 - A number of modulations

Section C will have one essay question on each of AoS 2-6, and students should pick just one of these to answer. They will not have to refer to all five of the named composers in their answer, but will be expected to refer in detail to the music of two. The question will be phrased so that it can be answered with reference to any of the named composers.

Here is a sample essay question for AoS 3:

What are the most effective ways to use the elements of music to enhance the drama of a film or video game scene? Refer in detail to specific music by two of the named composers (Herrmann, Zimmer, Giacchino, Newman, Uematsu).

With reference to the two pieces of music covered in this resource, answers might include some of the following musical points, among others. In order to satisfy AO4, it's important that students link these musical points to their effect in enhancing the drama.

GIACCHINO: *MEDAL OF HONOR* MAIN THEME

The main concern of this music is to convey the sense of war and desolation.

- Melody
 - Triadic, fanfare-like.
 - Phrases end on the root, 3rd or 5th of the tonic triad.
 - Conjunct movement – particularly appoggiaturas and auxiliary notes to convey melancholy.
 - Slow-moving melodies.
 - Equal phrasing.
 - Memorable or 'catchy'.
- Harmony and tonality
 - B flat major key with no modulations.
 - Extensive use of tonic pedals.
 - Reliance on primary chords – tonic, subdominant, dominant.
 - Open 4ths and 5ths convey military style.
 - Added chords and dissonances.
 - Use of the 'darker' sounding plagal subdominant chord and plagal cadence.
- Rhythm
 - Often slow tempo and slow-moving rhythms to convey desolation.
 - Distant bursts of drums (gunfire?).
 - Central section is rhythmically exciting, with a variety of percussion instruments and rhythmic lower string ostinatos.
 - Strong sense of common time with heavy first beats – military-like.
- Texture
 - Melody-dominated homophony.
 - Homorhythm at times (eg string melody).
 - Use of antiphony is common – eg answers from woodwind, echoes from horns.
 - Vivid textural contrasts from fully scored to very sparse, including use of solo instruments.
- Instrumentation
 - Use of brass, particularly solo trumpet and horn.
 - Use of upper woodwind – flutes, piccolos and a solo clarinet.
 - Strings have melodies but are often used for textural 'warmth', and to provide ostinatos and pedals.
 - Large variety of percussion.
 - Use of full orchestra for climactic sections.
- Structure
 - Simple, repetitive structure with two themes, designed to be motivic and memorable.

UEMATSU: *FINAL FANTASY VII* – AERITH'S THEME

The main concern of this music is to convey the sense of **sadness** and **innocence**.

- Melody
 - Mostly balanced but with a number of pauses at phrase endings and held notes.
 - Slow-moving.
 - Modal.
 - Combination of disjunct and conjunct movement, and ascending/descending creates a very symmetrical and balanced contour.
 - Memorable and motivic.
 - Much use of passing notes and appoggiaturas.
- Harmony and tonality
 - D major with some short sections in B minor.
 - Use of modal chords such as the dominant minor and flattened submediant.
 - Much use of major 6th and major 9th chords.
 - Frequent use of minor chords such as the mediant and submediant.
- Rhythm
 - Varies between static (eg at the beginning), flowing (often with quaver broken chords) and complex (eg with triplets against quavers, and the use of semiquaver decoration).
 - Rhythms become more complex as the tension increases.
- Texture and instrumentation
 - Comments on the use of texture and instrumentation depend on which version of Aerith's theme is being discussed.
- Structure
 - A simple three-part structure with each part having its own melody.
 - Melodies can be divided into different motivic ideas.
 - Repetition allows melodies to become 'catchy' – important when associated with a character.

Students may wish to refer to 'One Winged Angel' instead of Aerith's theme in their answer (or both!). There is much to say in 'One Winged Angel' about the use of dissonant harmony, pounding rhythms and sectionalised structure.