KS5

AQA AoS3: Music for Media – Bernard Herrmann, Hans Zimmer and Thomas Newman

by Simon Rushby

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INTRODUCTION

In this resource, we will look at music by three of the five composers named by AQA in AoS3: Music for Media. For each composer, I provide an in-depth examination of an example of their music, a little context and some ideas for further study of other music that you can undertake with your students.

AQA'S APPRAISING EXAM

In recent resources on AoS4 (*Music Teacher*, April and May 2018) and AoS6 (February 2018), I outlined the requirements and format of AQA's Appraising component, which is worth 40% of the total marks available at both AS and A level. Appraising is assessed in the form of an exam paper with three sections – listening, analysis and essay – and it would be a good idea to look back at these resources if a reminder is needed as to how the exam is set out.

The suggested activities in this resource will focus on preparing students for sections A (listening) and C (essay) at either level, but it's worth remembering that no specific music by any of the five named composers is prescribed by AQA, and the questions in the appraising exam assume a general knowledge of context and a range of music by each.

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.

MUSIC FOR MEDIA

AQA uses the phrase 'music for media' to describe music specifically composed for film, television and gaming, and concentrates the study on music written since 1958. In this resource we will be concentrating on film music.

AQA's five named composers are:

- **Bernard Herrmann** – best known for his music for Alfred Hitchcock films, but he wrote the music for other notable movies as well.
- **Hans Zimmer** – one of the most prolific and best-known film composers working today, perhaps most famous for his work on the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series of films.
- **Michael Giacchino** – particularly well known for his music for Disney/Pixar films and the TV series *Lost*, though he started his career writing for the *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* gaming series.
- **Thomas Newman** – students may know him best for his music on the last two James Bond films, but he has been writing music for major films since the 1990s.
- **Nobuo Uematsu** – the composer behind the music for the *Final Fantasy* gaming series and many others.

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 they are constantly being referenced in lessons and in students' work. The list is not particularly long at first sight, but it implies a very deep study of the use of – for example – **leitmotif**, **complex harmony** and a **vast range of sonorities** both **natural and electronic**. Students will need to know a good deal about how these composers work, their use of the

elements of music, their influences, style and use of **music technology**, as well as being familiar with **musical devices** that are common across the genre.

With this in mind, in this resource we will pick one significant piece of music from each of the three composers and examine it closely, looking at its context and the way in which musical elements are used. A further suggestion of another piece by each composer will allow students to learn and apply this process themselves. Important terminology appears in **bold type.**

This resource will focus on the film music of Bernard Herrmann, Hans Zimmer and Thomas Newman. Since Newman and Zimmer have been contemporaries since the 1980s, often going 'head to head' at the Oscars for the coveted best original score award, and both have cited Herrmann as a major influenced, there are some neat links between the three composers.

BERNARD HERRMANN

(For more on Bernard Herrmann, see also Edexcel A level AoS3: Music for film, part 1, *Music Teacher*, November 2017.)

Born in New York in 1911, Bernard Herrmann was successful composer from a young age, winning accolades from the age of 13 and founding the New Chamber Orchestra of New York at the age of 20. He studied music and composition at New York University and at the Julliard School of Music.

Herrmann started his professional career as a conductor and also wrote music for radio shows, particularly those made by director Orson Welles in the 1930s. When Welles made the film *Citizen Kane* in 1941, Herrmann was asked to write the music, subsequently receiving an Oscar nomination for it, though he actually won the Oscar that year for another film called *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. However, Herrmann's constant falling-out with major figures in Hollywood was possibly the reason why he was never nominated for an Oscar after 1946.

Herrmann refused to be contracted by Hollywood and instead worked on a film-by-film basis. He met Alfred Hitchcock in the early 1950s and scored seven films for him, the most famous being *Psycho* (1960) (covered in depth in the November 2017 resource). Herrmann was famous for being single-minded, and the story that he ignored Hitchcock's original requests for *Psycho* (that the music should be jazzy and that the murder scene in the shower should have no music) is often told. He also said that he believed Hitchcock's films were only partly complete without the music.

Perhaps inevitably, Hitchcock and Herrmann eventually parted company after a disagreement over a film called *Torn Curtain*, and Herrmann went on to score a number of television series and films in the 1970s, most significantly Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* which was the last film he scored before his sudden death from a heart attack on Christmas Eve, 1975. Scorsese dedicated *Taxi Driver*, which was released in 1976, to Herrmann's memory.

Analysis: 'Prelude' from *Vertigo*

Written in early 1958, Herrmann's score for the Hitchcock film *Vertigo* (which stars James Stewart and Kim Novak) is seen as an example of his greatest work and adds much to the mysterious and tense atmosphere of the film.

Watch the opening title sequence here with your students and get them to note down how the music sets the atmosphere before anything significant happens on screen.

A version of this Prelude, conducted by Herrmann himself, can be found here, arranged as part of a suite and helpfully transcribed into piano score. Here's an overview of the key musical characteristics.

Bars 1-30:

- The key is **E flat minor** but is made **ambiguous** by the presence of D naturals and C naturals, creating **dissonance** in the form of **augmented intervals**.
- An **arpeggiated ostinato** falls and rises in the strings, while long notes from the brass (again D naturals and C naturals, along with the tonic note E flat) form the main melodic idea.
- There is **textural** and **dynamic contrast**, created by alternating relatively full scoring with the quieter moments of harp, celeste and triangle. Loud, fully scored **augmented chords** outline the **tonic and subdominant**.

Bars 30-35:

- A short link section maintains the ostinato but introduces a rising figure in the violins, consisting of **trilled** notes covering the **triad** of E flat minor with **added 4th** (A flat) and **major 7th** (D natural).

Bars 36-52:

- This second section is similar to the first in its continued **6/8 quaver rhythm** and use of string arpeggios with fully scored chords, underpinned with a steady rise and fall in dynamic. The **tempo** is a little slower.
- The E flat minor tonality is gone, and this section consists of a variety of three-bar **tonal centres** without ever quite settling on a key. Each tonal centre (listed below) is coloured by **appoggiaturas**, sometimes **chromatic,** sometimes **diatonic**:
  - Bars 36-38: A flat major (**augmented 4th** appoggiatura)
  - Bars 39-41: A minor (**major 9th** appoggiatura)
  - Bars 42-44: C minor (in **inversion** with major 9th)
  - Bars 45-47: C major/A minor (ambiguous)
  - Bars 48-50: A flat minor (no dissonances)
  - Bars 51-52: B flat major with **augmented 5th**

Bars 53-70:

- A return to section 1 at the original tempo, but the rhythm doubles to semiquavers and the tonality returns to the ambiguous E flat minor of the opening, with similar long melodic notes from the lower brass. The harp figures prominently and again there are contrasts in the dynamics, but the harmony is different towards the end and there is no link.

Bars 71-82:

- Section 2 again, with the same tonal centres, but slightly differently scored and with each phrase now two bars long instead of three.

Bars 83-88:

- A **coda**, based on the ideas of the first section, but scored with more variety including **pizzicato** strings. Tellingly it ends on **octave** D naturals despite the suggested E flat minor tonality. This '**unresolved**' ending is common in the fluid world of film cues.

How does Herrmann create tension and suspense with this music? Through a small number of relatively simple but extremely effective devices:

- A lack of 'melody' – instead we have **ostinatos** and **motifs** with very slow-moving lower notes.
- **Ambiguous tonality** with frequent use of **dissonant augmented intervals** and **chromatic appogiaturas**, some of which are not resolved.
- A sense of **bitonality** in the ostinato.
- **Repetitive rhythms**, sometimes quavers, sometimes semiquavers, with changing tempos.

- Use of **full orchestra**, particularly brass and timpani, contrasting with the **sparser textures** of high strings and harp.
- Large **dynamic contrasts** that work together with the **textural changes**.
- A simple **two-part structure** focusing on **repetition and contrast**.

Further study

You can embark on further examination of Herrmann's music by using the considerable resources available for *Psycho*, which is a set work for Edexcel's A level music. Additionally, you may like to try one or two of the examples in this lengthy selection which has a handy tracklist in the description (click on 'Show more').

HANS ZIMMER

Born in Germany in 1960, Hans Zimmer is one of the most successful living film composers, with over 150 movie scores to his credit. Zimmer's sound world is a combination of electronic and natural sonorities, and his experimentation in the 1980s and 1990s in combining computerised instruments with traditional orchestral arrangements was unique, and helped to cultivate a particular 'Zimmer sound' that's now unmistakable.

Zimmer attended school in the UK and started out as a keyboard player in bands. Eagle-eyed students might be able to spot Zimmer in the video for the Buggles' 'Video Killed the Radio Star'. In the 1980s, he began to get work writing advertising and TV music, and worked as an assistant to the established film composer Stanley Myers, which fostered the beginnings of his interest in combining electronic and orchestral sounds. The best-known film from the Myers-Zimmer partnership is *My Beautiful Launderette* of 1985.

Zimmer's big break came when he was asked to write the score for the 1988 film *Rain Man* (starring Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise), for which he gained an Oscar nomination. The following year he scored *Driving Miss Daisy*, and in 1991 he wrote the music for Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*. These and other successful projects brought Zimmer onto Disney's radar, and he was engaged to compose the music for their 1994 blockbuster *The Lion King*, for which he won his only Oscar to date, and many other awards. Zimmer's music, along with songs by Elton John and Tim Rice, formed the bulk of the Broadway and West End show version of *The Lion King* which has been running since 1997.

Other projects of the 1990s included *Crimson Tide* and *The Prince of Egypt*, and by the turn of the millennium Zimmer had a formidable reputation, particularly for adaptability and his knack of creating a unique sound world for each film, whether it be African-influenced for *The Lion King* or Japanese for *The Last Samurai* (2000).

Ridley Scott came back to Zimmer for three films in 2000 and 2001, all of which were hugely successful – *Gladiator, Black Hawk Down* and *Hannibal.* Other well-known films of the 2000s scored by Zimmer include *Madagascar, The Da Vinci Code, Angels and Demons* and *Sherlock Holmes*, as well as *The Simpsons Movie* and collaborations with other composers on the video games *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* and *Crysis 2*. In these scores, Zimmer was continuing to use electronic sounds, but his trademark orchestral sound is perhaps the most memorable and striking.

The producer Jerry Bruckheimer approached Zimmer to re-write the music for the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film in 2003 following an unsatisfactory job by another composer, but Zimmer was busy on another project and passed the bulk of the work to his colleague Klaus Badelt. However, some of the main themes were Zimmer's, and he went to write perhaps some of his most famous music for the following three films in the series. Zimmer's other extremely successful and famous work of this period was for the Christopher Nolan films *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, though in truth these were collaborations with other composers and performers.

Zimmer's work since 2010 has included Nolan's *Inception* and *Interstellar,* a number of collaborations with musicians including Pharrell Williams and Junkie XL on a variety of superhero blockbusters, and themes for TV series such as *The Crown, Planet Earth II* and the 2018 FIFA World Cup. He's also been recruited by Disney to score the live-action remake of *The Lion King.* Perhaps his most interesting recent work is his score for Nolan's 2017 film *Dunkirk*, which makes heavy use of a ticking watch recording made by Nolan, and an adaptation of 'Nimrod' from Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. It is a cue from this more recent score that we will look at in more detail now.

Analysis: 'The Oil' from *Dunkirk*

Nolan and Zimmer had worked together many times when they came to make the 2017 film *Dunkirk,* which tells of the famous World War Two allied evacuation from the French beaches. The format of the film was to tell the story from three angles, each with its own timeline and leading characters, with a large ensemble cast and very little dialogue. Nolan and Zimmer knew that they had an opportunity to create a score that would carry the bulk of the film, and they wanted to get as close as they could to a perfect fusion of sound and image. Nolan is known for his hands-on approach to the musical scores of his films, and Zimmer acknowledges the director as having significant input into the composition process.

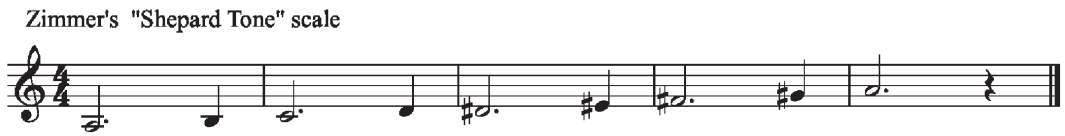
The pair's work on *Inception* (where a slowed-down version of the Edith Piaf song 'Non, je ne regrette rien' becomes a major theme) had showed them that they were capable of making unique sound worlds through intense **experimentation** and seemingly impossible challenges. The starting point for the music of *Dunkirk* was the ticking of Nolan's watch, recorded by Nolan, which was **sampled** and electronically developed by Zimmer to become the foundation stone of much of the music.

Nolan's other idea was one he had used before, the audio illusion of the **Shepard tone**. The effect of this illusion is that a sound is continually rising in **pitch** but never seems to reach a high point outside of its range, rather like the visual illusion of a corkscrew. Compositionally, this is created by placing several **ascending scales** on top of each other, each separated by an **octave**, and gradually fading out the higher notes and increasing the volume of the lower ones as the scales ascend. The net effect is a continuous rising scale, and the brain stops hearing the octave shifts in pitch.

This idea matches perfectly the three-strand format of the film. Three separate stories, with separate timescales and characters, build gradually throughout the film to a final simultaneous climactic scene: the soldiers on the 'mole' (a jetty extending from the beach) covers the timescale of a week; the British civilians on rescue boats bound for Dunkirk covers one day, and the RAF pilots involved in dogfights overhead covers one hour. The film constantly jumps from one story to another, the jumps becoming more frequent as the tension builds.

The effect of the Shepard tone is perhaps best heard in the cue 'The Oil', which accompanies the climactic scene where the soldiers, boats and pilots meet amid an oil slick out at sea following the sinking of one of the military boats. You can see the scene here though the commentary below will be focusing on the music cue, which is here.

- **0:00-0:35** A **tonic pedal** of A begins, coloured by repeating it in various **octaves** (including some extremely low ones!) and superimposing a higher note A that wavers in and out of tune. Zimmer used electronic sounds and 'real' string instruments to create this effect. A gentle but foreboding **pulse** based on the ticking watch idea can be heard.
- **0:35-1:42** The first sense of 'rising' up from the A pitch is heard, very low down. Zimmer used double basses very low in their range and cellos very high to create this eerie effect, underpinned by electronic samples. As the lowest part begins to rise, extremely slowly, a slightly higher trombone-like sound also begins the rising pattern, moving a little quicker. The rising scale Zimmer uses is an **A melodic minor** scale, but with the 4th and 5th degrees **sharpened** to create a more **dissonant, chromatic** effect:



Zimmer reflects the different timelines of the story (and their contrasting speeds) by arranging the scale in different parts with different **rhythmic values**, so that some parts move faster than others. He also creates the Shepard tone illusion by continually restarting the scale and fading it out when it reaches the top.

- **1:43-3:39** The volume, pitch and dissonance continue to build in intensity, always slow-moving, and always with a pedal A and the unnerving **semitone** wavering. The ticking sample is still subtly present and the almost random coinciding of notes in the various renditions of the scale creates a steadily shifting harmony.
- **3:40-5:00** Thanks to the Shepard tone illusion, it still feels like the scale is rising, yet the music is only just beginning to reach the higher pitch range. The texture is filling out constantly and in turn this creates a perpetual rise in **dynamics**.

- **5:01-6:08** A noticeable **hit point** in the music coincides with the attack of the Allied spitfire on the German plane. The ticking rhythm is now very noticeable and intense, underpinned by drums, and the rising scale continues, though it still doesn't seem to have risen to a particularly high pitch level. Zimmer uses an age-old film music trick at the end of the cue, refusing to provide a **cadence** and leaving the tension hanging, just as the stricken German plane crashes into the oil slick and sets it ablaze.

Further study

Study of one of Zimmer's more orchestral scores such as *Gladiator* would be a good idea, but my suggestion here for further study remains with the music of *Dunkirk*. Based on the success of the experiment in *Inception* of slowing down an existing piece of music to mirror the slowing down of time, Zimmer asked his colleague Benjamin Wallfisch to arrange a new variation of the famous *Nimrod* theme written over a century earlier by Elgar.

Get students to compare the original Elgar theme with Wallfisch's slowed-down variation used in some of the most climactic scenes of *Dunkirk*. How does Wallfisch change it, and what effect does this have?

THOMAS NEWMAN

Thomas Newman was born in Los Angeles in 1955, the son of Alfred Newman, one of the greatest film music composers of the early 20th century, who won nine Oscars (more than any other film composer to date) and wrote the music for blockbusters including *Wuthering Heights*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *How The West Was Won* and *Airport*.

It's perhaps inevitable that given his father's stature in the industry, Thomas Newman was destined to become a film composer. He was encouraged in music by both parents, learning the violin and piano as a child and gaining degrees from the University of Southern California and Yale, where he specialised in composition. It was not only Newman's parents who were musical – his uncles Lionel and Emil Newman were also successful composers, and his cousin, Randy Newman, is a well-known singer-songwriter.

Newman started out as a composer for the theatre and worked closely with Stephen Sondheim in New York, as well as writing some music for television. He broke into film in the 1980s when John Williams – who was a family friend – recruited him into his team for the third *Star Wars* film, *Return of the Jedi*. Newman learned valuable lessons from this experience, particularly in how to **orchestrate** for film, and spent the rest of the 1980s refining his technique through a number of early forays into the film scoring world.

In 1994 Newman received two Oscar nominations for his film scores for *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Little Women*, but he missed out on the award that year, which went to Hans Zimmer for *The Lion King*. Nevertheless, Newman was now established as a highly regarded film composer and went on to score a number of movies, particularly for director Sam Mendes, who hired him for *American Beauty* in 1999 – a score that won Newman a Grammy and a BAFTA.

In the 2000s Newman scored a range of very well-known films, including *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *Road to Perdition* (2002), *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *WALL-E* in 2008, for which he also co-wrote the song 'Down to Earth' with Peter Gabriel, securing Oscar nominations for both song and score. In fact, Newman has received 14 Oscar nominations to date but is still yet to win – in 2008 he lost out to AR Rahman and his *Slumdog Millionaire* score.

The extremely prolific Newman went on to score many more major films, such as *Revolutionary Road* (another Sam Mendes film) in 2008 and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* in 2011. When Mendes was asked to direct the James Bond movie *Skyfall*, Newman was asked to compose the music, taking over from David Arnold who had penned the scores for the previous five Bond films. Once again, Newman received an Oscar nomination for his score, but it was the film's theme song, written by Adele and Paul Epworth, that was successful in this regard, the 2012 best original score Oscar going to Mychael Danna for *Life of Pi*.

Since *Skyfall*, Newman has scored the Bond film *Spectre* (also directed by Mendes) and other films such as *Saving Mr Banks*, *Finding Dory* and *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*.

Analysis: 'Define Dancing' from *WALL-E*

WALL-E is an animated film made for Disney by the highly successful Pixar studios, and it was co-written and directed by Andrew Stanton who had previously worked with Newman on *Finding Nemo*. Set 800 years in the future, the film tells the story a trash-covered planet Earth, left by the human race which has been evacuated to space by a giant corporation, who left robots behind to clean up the planet. WALL-E is the last functioning robot on Earth, but he meets and falls in love with a probe called EVE who has been sent to Earth to report on its state.

The 'define dancing' scene takes place in space midway through the film, when WALL-E and Eve celebrate managing to save a plant that might reactivate the planet's ecosystem. You can watch the scene with your students here and, as an initial exercise, get them to note down the key ways in which the music underscores a scene largely devoid of dialogue. Here are some of the points that could be made:

- The first 40 seconds of the scene have no music. Cleverly organised **sound effects** provide irregular punctuation to WALL-E's attempts to master his newly found fire extinguisher 'jet pack', and the surrounding **silence** successfully enhances the sense of emptiness in space.
- Music enters at 0:42 when WALL-E produces the plant, the supposed destruction of which EVE had originally assumed he was responsible for. A succession of **dissonant string tremolo notes** as she analyses the plant resolve into a **major-key**, more fully scored chord as she hugs him, and this music in turn pauses as the two robots realise the situation they are in.
- EVE's 'kiss' at 0:58 sparks the main musical cue of the scene – a harp-led **ostinato** that matches WALL-E's spin as he reacts to this change in EVE's demeanour. The cue evolves into a succession of harp-like **arpeggios** in a sunny major key, with use of **tonic pedal** and two **adjacent major chords**.
- As the 'dance' develops, the orchestration becomes warmer and more 'conventional', with **lyrical strings** – this neatly syncs with the first sight of humans in the scene, aboard their starliner casually watching the robotic romance. The music continues to be gentle and arpeggiated but has a rhythmic pulse to it.
- The final part of the scene focuses more on the humans, who have become obese and feeble due to their sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy diet. The music here is more background and combines some of the ideas from the earlier dance with more dissonant and reflective sounds.

Here is an element-focused analysis of the main musical cue from this scene, as it appears on the soundtrack album. It can be found here.

MELODY

Mostly **arpeggiated** and **motivic**, interspersed with more lyrical, slow-moving and **conjunct** phrases from the strings. Much of the melodic content is based on **ostinatos**, though the more reflective section in the middle has **balanced phrases**.

HARMONY AND TONALITY

In the key of **D flat major**, with the chords of D flat and E flat major superimposed over a **tonic pedal.** Contrasting phrases use the chords of B flat minor and G flat major. Starting at 1:24 there is a middle section with the following chord progression:

B flat minor – F major (x2)
G flat major – D flat major – E major – B major
G flat major – D flat major – E major – F sharp major

The F sharp major chord **enharmonically** becomes G flat major, which moves neatly to A flat major, the dominant, and leads the music back into the tonic key.

There is a nice contrast between the relatively simple, repetitive two-chord outer sections and the more harmonically sophisticated middle part.

RHYTHM

The D flat major sections have a constant **momentum** of **semiquavers** with a **triple-time metre**, rather like a **waltz**, which is fitting for the 'dance' character of the scene. Much of the contrasting B flat minor phrases have **quaver rhythms**, making them feel slower, but gradually even in these sections there is always a distant semiquaver rhythm present. The superimposition of slow-moving chords and fast ostinato rhythms is what gives the scene its magical atmosphere.

TEXTURE AND SONORITY

The texture is always **homophonic** and relatively full, though within it there is much variety both in terms of **register** and **sonority**. The warm string chords contrast with the harp- and bell-like sounds of the faster ostinatos – Newman is known for liking **tuned percussion** in his scores. There is a neat combination of the kind of fully scored orchestral sound that Newman's father would have identified with, alongside a wide palette of electronic and studio effects and space-like sounds, all given an ambient atmosphere through much use of **reverb**.

STRUCTURE

This is defined mainly by the chord sequences shown above. Broadly speaking it is a **ternary structure** with the more reflective central section flanked by the ostinato idea, which itself alternates between two musical ideas.

[Further listening

Any of the following examples of Thomas Newman's music can help build a bigger picture of his unique style:

- 'Rock Island, 1931' from *Road to Perdition*
- 'So Was Red' from *The Shawshank Redemption*
- 'Nemo Egg (main title)' from *Finding Nemo*

And here's a must-watch video featuring Newman talking about his work for the Bond film *Skyfall*.