

# SOUNDTRACKS

## Exploring Film Music



### A. The Purpose of Music in Film

Film Music is a type of **DESCRIPTIVE MUSIC** that represents a **MOOD, STORY, SCENE** or **CHARACTER** through music, it is designed to **SUPPORT THE ACTION AND EMOTIONS OF THE FILM ON SCREEN**. Film Music can be used to:

- Create or enhance a mood (though the **ELEMENTS OF MUSIC**) ->
- Function as a **LEITMOTIF** (see D)
- To emphasise a gesture (**MICKEY-MOUSING** – when the music fits precisely with a specific part of the action in a film e.g. cartoons)
- Provide unexpected juxtaposition/irony (using music the listener wouldn't expect to hear giving a sense of uneasiness or humour!)
- Link one scene to another providing continuity
- Influence the pacing of a scene making it appear faster/slower
- Give added commercial impetus (released as a **SOUNDTRACK**) – sometimes a song, usually a pop song is used as a **THEME SONG** for a film.
- Illustrate the geographic location (using instruments associated with a particular country) or historical period (using music 'of the time').

### D. Leitmotifs

**LEITMOTIF** – A frequently recurring short melodic or harmonic idea which is associated with a character, event, concept, idea, object or situation which can be used directly or indirectly to remind us of one not actually present on screen. Leitmotifs can be changed through **SEQUENCING, REPETITION** or **MODULATION** giving a hint as to what may happen later in the film or may be heard in the background giving a “subtle hint” to the listener e.g. the “Jaws” Leitmotif



### B. How the Elements of Music are used in Film Music

**PITCH AND MELODY** – **RISING MELODIES** are often used for increasing tension, **FALLING MELODIES** for defeat. Westerns often feature a **BIG THEME**. **Q&A PHRASES** can represent good versus evil. The **INTERVAL OF A FIFTH** is often used to represent outer space with its sparse sound. **DYNAMICS** – **FORTE (LOUD)** dynamics to represent power; **PIANO (SOFT)** dynamics to represent weakness/calm/resolve. **CRESCENDOS** used for increasing threat, triumph or proximity and **DECRESCENDOS** or **DIMINUENDOS** used for things going away into the distance. Horror Film soundtracks often use **EXTREME DYNAMICS** or **SUDDEN DYNAMIC CHANGES** to ‘shock the listener’.

**HARMONY** – **MAJOR** – happy; **MINOR** – sad. **CONSONANT HARMONY OR CHORDS** for “good” and **DISONANT HARMONY OR CHORDS** for “evil”. **SEVENTH CHORDS** often used in Westerns soundtracks.

**DURATION** – **LONG** notes often used in Westerns to describe vast open spaces and in Sci-Fi soundtracks to depict outer space; **SHORT** notes often used to depict busy, chaotic or hectic scenes. **PEDAL NOTES** – long held notes in the **BASS LINE** used to create tension and suspense.

**TEXTURE** – **THIN/SPARE** textures used for bleak or lonely scenes; **THICK/FULL** textures used for active scenes or battles.

**ARTICULATION** – **LEGATO** for flowing or happy scenes, **STACCATO** for ‘frozen’ or ‘icy’ wintery scenes. **ACCENTS (>)** for violence or shock.

**RHYTHM & METRE** – 2/4 or 4/4 for Marches (battles), 3/4 for Waltzes, 4/4 for “Big Themes” in Westerns. **IRREGULAR TIME SIGNATURES** used for tension. **OSTINATO** rhythms for repeated sounds e.g. horses.

### C. Film Music Key Words

**SOUNDTRACK** – The music and sound recorded on a motion-picture film. The word can also mean a commercial recording of a collection of music and songs from a film sold individually as a CD or collection for digital download.

**MUSIC SPOTTING** – A meeting/session where the composer meets with the director and decides when and where music and sound effects are to feature in the finished film.

**STORYBOARD** – A graphic organiser in the form of illustrations and images displayed in sequence to help the composer plan their soundtrack.

**CUESHEET** – A detailed listing of **MUSICAL CUES** matching the visual action of a film so that composers can time their music accurately.

**CLICK TRACKS** – An electronic **METRONOME** which helps film composers accurately time their music to on-screen action through a series of ‘clicks’ (often heard through headphones) – used extensively in cartoons and animated films.

**DIEGETIC FILM MUSIC** – Music within the film for both the characters and audience to hear e.g. a car radio, a band in a nightclub or sound effects.

**NON-DIEGETIC FILM MUSIC** – Music which is put “over the top” of the action of a film for the audience’s benefit and which the characters within a film can’t hear – also known as **UNDERScore** or **INCIDENTAL MUSIC**.

### E. History of Film Music

Early films had no soundtrack (“**SILENT CINEMA**”) and music was provided live, usually **IMPROVISED** by a pianist or organist. The first **SOUNDTRACKS** appeared in the 1920’s and used existing music (**BORROWED MUSIC** – music composed for other (non-film) purposes) from composers such as Wagner and Verdi’s operas and ballets. In the 1930’s and 1940’s Hollywood hired composers to write huge Romantic-style soundtracks. **JAZZ** and **EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC** was sometimes used in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Today, film music often blends **POPULAR, ELECTRONIC** and **CLASSICAL** music together in a flexible way that suits the needs of a particular film.

### F. Film Music Composers and their Soundtracks



**Jerry Goldsmith**  
Planet of the Apes  
Star Trek: The Motion Picture  
The Omen  
Alien



**John Williams**  
Star Wars  
Jaws  
Harry Potter  
Indiana Jones  
Superman, E.T.



**James Horner**  
Titanic  
Apollo 13  
Braveheart  
Star Trek II  
Aliens



**Ennio Morricone**  
The Good, The Bad and The Ugly  
For a Few Dollars More  
The Mission



**Danny Elfman**  
Mission Impossible  
Batman Returns  
Men in Black  
Spider Man



**Hans Zimmer**  
The Lion King  
Gladiator  
Dunkirk  
Blade Runner 2049  
No Time to Die



**Bernard Herrmann**  
Psycho  
Vertigo  
Taxi Driver

