Chapter 3

MUSIC AND MEANING

Distinguished screenwriter Hanif Kuresishi describes popular music as 'a form crying out not to be written about' in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Pop*. (Thompson, 2001: 57). To an extent he has a point; many of the traditional critical theories which apply to music are from a different generation and some no longer apply to contemporary circumstances. That said, there are critical frameworks which, despite their age, context and circumstance, succeed in highlighting and exposing current issues in music composition, commission and usage.

This chapter will attempt to unravel and highlight whether, and to what degree, music contains meaning. I will examine theories from some of music's biggest critical thinkers and analyse how traditional beliefs translate in a modern context. I will attempt to address various issues, traditions, precedents and realities which continue to affect the role of today's composer.

Music analysed includes The Big Country (Jerome Moross), The Magnificent Seven *(Elmer Bernstein),* JFK *(John Williams),* The Day after Tomorrow *(Harald Klosser and Thomas Wander),* Independence Day *(David Arnold),* Back to the Future 3 (Alan Silvestri), The West Wing *(WG Walden),* Jurassic Park & Star Wars *(John Williams),* Dallas *(Jerrold Immel)*

Conceptualisation: Do composers think or do they simply 'do'?

When we examine issues concerning originality, freedom, authenticity and conceptualisation, a rhetorical question appears: are composers free to *think*, or is their purpose simply to *do*? Some have argued that films, particularly the Hollywood variety, and therefore the mainstream, have overused or in some way misused music consistently for almost the entire history of film itself. The argument traditionally centres on the degree to which music has been standardised and immersed in formula. There are, however, conundrums and contradictions at the highest level of debate. Whenever music's 'meaning' and its use commercially are debated, the omnipresent dominating influence of cultural and musical theorist Theodor Adorno appears.

> *"Adorno calls music a 'language without concepts'. He and Eisler dismiss standardisation with the film music industry as if languages of any sort were not sets of conventions. By understanding music as an art rather than as meaning-making practice, Eisler and Adorno contain it within the realm of the universal and the aesthetic and remove perceivers even as part of the evaluative process of film music".*
>
> (Kassabian, 2001: 39)

The quote from Kassabian's book 'Hearing Film' is useful because it highlights Adorno's legendary reluctance to see music in anything other than its purest form. This is laudable but perhaps limiting, especially when analysing film music, the primary function of which is as part of a greater, commercially-driven entity: film. Adorno refuses to conceive of music as in any sense subservient or even equal to a concurrent but separate commercial art.

This belief is, of course, a 20th century manifestation of the post-Enlightenment view that music is, first and foremost, an autonomous art.

> *"Baroque and pre-Baroque notions that, for example, specific scales or phrases might have specific meanings have been denounced since the enlightenment....*
> *....Communication of meaning came to be considered outside the realm of music's tasks"*
>
> (Kassabian, 2001: 15)

The useful quote again displays the restrictions imposed on thinkers who adopt the purist theory that music is devoid of meaning. One of the central themes of my book is that not only does music *convey and create* meaning - there is structure and method to the way in which such meaning communicates emotionally.

There are ways we can rationalise and understand specifically how certain musical devices create emotion and meaning. This is why I feel duty bound to encompass traditional beliefs which disagree with this theory at the outset. One of the central criticisms levelled at film music by Adorno is the level to which it has become immersed into, and subservient to, film and the level to which it has been sucked into commodification and standardisation. But this sits uncomfortably with his *other* theory, namely the idea of rationalising music as an art rather than as a meaning-making practice. If music is unable to convey a sense of meaning within its listeners how does it manage to become standardised? This collision and contradiction of theories displays the perils of trying to impose a specific dictum on the meaning of music.

In his book *Composing for the Films* Adorno argues that it is music's 'ideological function' that has caused it to become institutionalised. (Kalinak, 1992: 34). Certainly in the early days of accompanied silent films, music was improvised and often wildly inappropriate. It lacked the 'institutional conventions' which would later identify it and lead to its standardisation. When film shifted from cottage industry to big business, the improvisatory ethic was lost forever and replaced with structure and inevitably codification. This codification worked, but it was codification nonetheless. So we are left with the conundrum that the standardisation needed to make music function as part of a film is precisely the restriction that has lead to its commodification.

Adorno, obsessed as ever with the hierarchical relationship between film and music, suggested that music can 'radically critique and even undercut a film's dominant ideology'. This is true to an extent but to suggest this as the main premise for music's inclusion in film is questionable.

It is not just the great 20th century intellectuals and the thinkers who promote the notion of music as 'meaningless'.

> *"I consider that music is, by its very nature, powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature. If music appears to express something, this is an illusion and not reality" Stravinsky (1936:91)*
> (Kassabian, 2001: 15)

One remains baffled as to whether composers such as Stravinsky said such things because they perceived them as fact or because they come from a subconscious and unintentional delight in promoting the concept of music as a kind of *magic*, devoid of the ability to convey meaning and therefore any kind of rational explanation. More honest composers might venture to suggest how comparatively easy it is to construct music; how effortlessly it falls into shape and how easily it creates 'meaning' in its listeners. But to acknowledge this not only pits one against the 20th Century's great intellectuals and thinkers, it also robs music of the eternal myth of the 'greatness' that so defines it.

To be clear, as I state elsewhere in this book, I do not suggest that music, unilaterally and by itself has intrinsic contained meaning: people listen to music based on their previous experiences. Our listening ability and aural cognition is largely based on how it compares and contrasts previous listening experiences to current ones. Indeed many of our cognitive abilities are based on our ability to classify and categorise the world around us. We do not listen each time with a fresh perspective, just as when we open our eyes we do not freshly reinterpret everything we see. Specific chord types and even chord sequences appear regularly, and because we interpret these emotionally, they establish a characteristic, a kind of 'meaning', within us. On a basic level this is the ability to associate major from minor and consonance from dissonance, but on an advanced level there are specific harmonic events which can create more specific meanings. When we hear fragmented or fractured harmony, where essential elements of chords are missing or skewed, we can interpret this in ways which cause excitement or anxiety. Because of the regularity with which some harmonic events appear, or the consistency of the context in which they appear, the emotions and 'meanings' they create within us can become common to many people, not just one person. They take on a collective identity, or meaning.

Play the distinctive Em9 [(maj7)] and most people will hear James Bond, or at least hear a chord which creates within us a furtive, clandestine feeling or meaning. Even people who have never watched James Bond will gain a similar meaning from the chord because of how specifically different it is to 'normal' chords. Such 'meaning' can then be tied specifically to how the chord is constructed and the tensions it creates.

We do not listen with a 'blank slate'; we listen with prejudice. We therefore recognise and respond to consistencies and similarities. Because most music is constructed from the same basic harmonic and textural DNA, we develop an understanding of basic types of harmony and when we hear 'different' harmony we sometimes respond in a specific and predictable way. Because music is constructed from such narrow harmonic DNA, such 'meanings' are not exclusive to one person but exist in a more general, more 'social' form.

The 'infantilising' of the audience

In his book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* respected film historian Peter Biskind refers to an apparent 'infantilising' of the audience.

> *"They were infantilising the audience, reconstituting the spectator as child then overwhelming him or her with spectacle, obliterating irony, aesthetic and self conscious and critical reflection"*
> Biskind, 1998: 344

His target is not necessarily music, but since music is such a large part of the era of film to which he referred, it is implicitly included. He referred to the gradual diminution of the 'art of film' itself. The explosion of money fed into the film industry in the 1980s, thanks largely to profits made from American films by theatres in the 1970s, led to growth in the number screens and of films being shown. This brings with it an illusion of choice and diversity, but some have said that actually a simultaneous *opposite* effect in terms of the styles and genres available, has taken place.

The choices available are smaller than ever, but they are greater in number. In fact we are more likely than ever before to see an American film, and less likely than ever before to see art-house films receiving national theatrical distribution. This is not an argument about arts funding; moreover it is an example of the bloated nature of the film industry; a comment on the gradual morphing of the industry into a perfect commercial entity, one in which the wisdom of the crowd reigns supreme and the lowest common denominator is king.

It is a fair assumption that this is one of the many factors which has led music to be formulaic, derivative and commodified. When any cultural force, business model or stylistic approach dominates an arts industry, the results are inevitable. Once again we are in Adorno's hallowed territory; the first section of his book '*Composing for the Films'* contains some of his theories, principally his dismissal of popular culture as a product of an oppressive 'culture industry'. (Kassabian, 2001: 38). If this is true it would explain the downward slide into predictable 'scoring clichés' to which he alludes. He suggests that film music is too closely wedded to the commercial music industry. Not only is this certainly the case over the past twenty to thirty years, but this collision of mentalities which has merged commercial music with film music became extremely evident at exactly the same time in history as the infamous 'infantilising of the audience'. These facts to an extent prove Adorno's points; a sideways glance at the film industry since the 1970s and in particular much of film music since the 1970s act is a testament to Adorno's worst fears.

As we have established, the 'infantilising' of the audience to which Biskind refers did not only affect film, and it did not only affect the audience; its effects on music and on the choices and decisions made by an entire generation of film makers and composers are profound. The merging of different types of culture industries and the desperate fabrication of culture into a brand which can exported in film and music has had major influences on society. The fact that much of society seems to remain blissfully unaware is largely irrelevant. Society seems always to be 'unaware'. This is a testament to the degree to which it is managed by structures and conventions, formerly the 'state' variety, nowadays mostly private commercial entities.

The formulas of Franz Waxman, Max Steiner and Alfred Newman

Film music perhaps underwent its primary and most enduring era of codification during the reigns of composers such as Franz Waxman, Max Steiner and Alfred Newman. Steiner defined what became the classic film music model, and the notion of correspondence and relationship between music and the implied content of the narrative is perhaps the most enduring and endearing characteristic. The remainder of the model was a little obvious and restrictive (a high degree of correspondence between music and action and the use of leitmotifs). Nonetheless we are left with this dominant legacy. It is hard to think of any other art-form which has been dominated so wholly by a practice which was first used seventy years ago in the 1930s and 1940s and was itself borrowed from a musical stylisation which predated that by two hundred years. Indeed one reason why genuinely talented young composers who have fused elements of the rock genre and classical romanticism find it hard to achieve 'escape velocity' from the stranglehold of classical romanticism is firstly because of its historical dominance, and secondly because it was, and continues to be, so effective in transmitting emotion in music and film. Much though film music has undoubtedly evolved and progressed, stylistically and harmonically, the symphonic orchestra is still the dominant texture through which it is articulated.

Just as 'special effects' have dominated moving pictures to the extent where visually almost anything can be achieved through illusion and CGI, and where therefore, in some ways nothing is new, some have suggested that there has been a comparative and simultaneous drop in the quality of film narratives; the ability to *do* has to some extent replaced the ability to *think*. Shallow and dumbed-down narrative goes largely unchallenged because it is shrouded in overwhelming visual effects. 'Seeing is believing', so essentially the need for narratives that questions, cajole and stimulate is in many cases less important than it was.

Given that *Star Wars* has that rare distinction of being both commercially successful and critically acclaimed, and given that films such as this effectively paid for the continued existence, expansion and survival of the film industry for thirty years after they were made, it is perhaps a little disingenuous to criticise John Williams' iconic music. But serious critical analysis often has to address difficult questions. Annette Davison, in her book *Hollywood Theory, Non-Hollywood Practice,* argues that since the mid-1970's the model of the classical Hollywood film score has functioned as a form of 'dominant ideology'. Kalinak makes a similar point in her book.

> *"One would think that faced with the limitless of space and multiplicity of life forms Williams would explode with ideas. But in composing the sound to go with the future, Williams doesn't look to any of the avant-garde composers… Instead Williams looks to the major key flourishes of Wagner and Tchaikovsky and the swashbuckling Captain Blood and Adventures of Robin Hood soundtracks of Erich Wolfgang Korngold"*
>
> Greg Oatis, 'Cinemafantastique',
> quoted by Kathryn Kalinak
> (Kalinak, 1992: 34).

The quote above addresses some fundamental issues; how is 'the future' to be represented musically in a fictional sense? Do we score by invoking the image of 'now', from what we perceive as the future, or, as Williams has done, by using the past as the template? 1960s composers who tried to emulate a vision of the future through music via instruments such as the Theremin were often ridiculed because the instrument sounded not just unsettling and mysterious, but more than a little odd.

When the music from *2001: A Space Odyssey* is evaluated, at least it can be said that sections try to address the fundamental question about the future, and more specifically, how 'the future' is to be represented musically in a fictional sense. Kubrick utilises some dark and difficult music in trying to address these fundamental issues; he helps shape the audience's perceptions ultimately by questioning their reliance on formulaic music and 'the past'. Over and above the eternal issue of his crude dismissal of Alex North's soundtrack in favour of his favoured temp track, the great irony is that in trying to depict the future Kubrick used music written by composers from the past.

Star Wars is a wholly different film, arguably for a different audience, but still it is telling that Williams regurgitated the past by using a sure-fire, well-known combination of late classical romanticism and swashbuckling fantasy in order to tell a story set in the future. Williams' appropriation of existing formulas, formulas usually reserved for fairytales and traditional Westerns, effectively set the standard for science-fiction 'space movie' music scoring.

This is why *Star Wars* is such a pivotal moment not just in screen history, as Biskind has informed us, but also in the history of film music.

The function of music

Kalinak again, this time quoting Claudia Gorbman:

> *"The restricted number of possible film/music relationships as discussed by most scholars seems curiously primitive, limited largely to the concepts of parallelism and counterpoint; either the music resembles or it contradicts."*

This is an important point because it divorces the link between music and what the *function* of the music is. No matter how diverse the music is in itself, as music, if its function is merely parallel or counter then its scope for communication will sometimes be limited. Sitting comfortably alongside a propensity to score using traditions and approaches which are seventy years old at least, is the increasing use of music as special effects. 'Shock and awe' scoring has seen a revival not just because it sits so well with traditional orchestral template, but because musically it is the only approach that penetrates sound effects and it is one of the few approaches that, in the eyes of many directors, can match the visual spectacle that film has become. But is music supposed to match special effects? Is that its purpose? Is it a competition?

Two of the hundreds of films analysed in this book are *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight,* and one of the refreshing aspects of these scores is that, although they compete in terms of visual spectacle versus aural spectacle, the music contains much subtlety and reflective sensitivity which actually contextualises the films and the vastness of their narrative and history.

'Shock and awe' scoring technique at its most basic can be a combination of brash romanticism, heavy-brush orchestration and piercing high and extreme low frequencies. It has penetrated the area of musical decision-making but it may be in danger of artistically compromising not just the finished product, but the idea of conceptualisation in music. The comparative lack of conceptualisation is not something we can assume is initially the composer's fault, but it is something they are forced into. One of the first concepts to grasp as a film composer is the need to avoid excessive scoring around sounds which occupy the same sonic range as the music. A great number of films today have increasingly realistic, constant and loud special effects; effects which often span the spectrum of sound. This limits the ability of a composer to score freely and can limit their ability to conceptualise.

Referencing his film *Alien*, director Ridley Scott refers to the challenge of 'how far we can cock the pistol before firing the gun'. Given Alfred Hitchcock's famous observation that a film viewer's apprehension is not 'the bang', but 'the fear of the bang', the point Scott is making is an important one; the difference between what a film shows, what it implies and what is understood is essentially down to audience interpretation. This is where music can be so effective and this is why Hitchcock and Scott are such great users of music. One of music's primary idealistic and indeed moral functions therefore is not always to think along such narrow lines as duplication or counterpoint; it is to draw out the emotion, often emotion which is not present visually. It is to create a relationship between the image and the audience.

Composers need to be free to conceptualise and hypothesise, with the director, about what the *function* of the music can be. What is its purpose? Whose point of view does it play? Does it play the story or the fiction? Does it play the pictures or the narrative? Is it surface level or does it play what the film is often *really* about? Composers must have access to a multitude of styles and conventions, traditional and modern, but also employ the use of conceptualisation. One only has to remember that Bernard Herrmann was famous not just because he was an effective film score composer, but because he received much critical acclaim for employing radically different styles and approaches. He utilised modernistic orchestration techniques, sometimes against the wishes of directors. Even visionary directors as Hitchcock showed startling lack of imagination when it came to music. We all know the story of Hitchcock instructing Herrman to 'leave the shower scene alone' in *Psycho*, but a less well-known story took place while Hitchcock was filming a scene at sea, during which, clearly questioning the need for music in a scene set in a lifeboat, he was heard to say to Herrmann, "where exactly would the orchestra be?". Herrmann's uncompromising and watertight response was "the same place as the camera".

In his work with Hitchcock, Herrmann created new sound textures, making modern harmonies accepted in film. In many ways he predated minimalism by twenty years. His musical style was bold and direct and not typical of the day. Rather than actual themes or leitmotifs, his knack was to select and develop simple 'mottos' such as high-pitched violins in *Psycho* or augmented chord arpeggios in *Vertigo*.

Just as reading a book allows for and is dependent on the personal interpretation of the reader, so films which leave more to the imagination of the viewer are sometimes more effective and intelligent films; but they are frequently more dependent on music. Therefore, if there is a notable diminution of integrity in terms of the artistic freedom accorded to artistic interpretation and conceptualisation in music, it is to the detriment of the art forms of film, music and a combination of both. As an example, it is hard to imagine that the off-screen monologues in *Gattaca* would have been as effective had they not been accompanied by Michael Nyman's deep and reflective score.

Also, somewhat curiously and ironically, diminution of integrity and reduction in musical conceptualisation in composing for film can have a damaging effect on the bloated film industry itself, as surely there is a limit to the number of films which can be made using predictable, duplicative and formulaic music. If film is so beholden to the concept of shock and awe and delivers this by using predictable narratives and music, one has to ask two rhetorical questions: how much is enough, and when will that point be reached? This is an important point because stylistically and artistically there is no clear path forward from this approach. Bernard Herrmann was a modernist and so was Jerry Goldsmith. Goldsmith famously said that one day the orchestra would consist not of four sections, but five. The fifth would be the 'electronics section' and would be full of people playing keyboards and triggering samples. He believed this; many of his works fused the orchestra with rock instruments – not in a tired clichéd way but in a way which did indeed feature electronics as a section of the orchestra[1].

In Ridely Scott's *Alien*, Goldsmith spent large portions of the film deliberately avoiding the predictable bombastic scoring which had so commodified 'space films' of the previous two years, notably *Star Wars*. The darkness of Ridley Scott's film is due at least in part to the haunting nature of the music. The opening segment to the film's music seems to extort various emotions from the listener, not just the expected ones of trepidation and anxiety. The orchestration is standard Hollywood, but the use is slightly skewed and distorted. Ridley Scott uses several excerpts of classical source music during the film, but none to better effect than the final sequence which uses Howard Hanson's Romantic Symphony No.3 in Eb. Once again a director uses romantically inclined music, but at least it is *authentic* 20th Century romantic music.

Another reason the issue of artistic freedom of expression in film music is important is this: Given that statistically most people do not visit theatres or concert halls to listen to music, for most the only time they will hear an orchestra is as the accompaniment to film, in a movie theatre on in their homes on DVD. To take this argument to its natural conclusion, the only time most people would ever hear serial music is by watching a film. Films such as *2001, The Exorcist* and *Planet of the Apes* are important milestones in the use of serial music. The problem is that they are old films. Progress in music has no template to follow. There are no rules or observations, only history, tradition and the spirit of adventure and evolution to guide us and shape the future. But surely progress is not supposed to be a wholesale rampage through the past anymore than it is meant to be a complete *negation* of it. If music is a product of its genes and its experiences, and if the future is created by people and circumstance, it is important that we maintain a healthy, stimulated and varied approach to scoring for film, not just to whet the appetite of the few that might enjoy listening to 'strange music', but to maintain balance, equilibrium and choice, or as Adorno might put it, 'to give the people what they don't want'.

An example of two composers standing back from predictability, convention and formula to deliver music which goes against the grain of a genre is Michael Nyman and Philip Glass. In particular Nyman's score for the film *Gattaca* stands as testament to what can be achieved when composers are free to conceptualise and are not forced by directors or ignorance to 'buy into' existing formulas. Although critics of Nyman normally assess the music as romantic but unduly tedious, dull and mournful, they perhaps miss the point that his music, particularly in *Gattaca,* elevated the film into more of an art film than it actually was.

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[1] Several of his films, notably Star Trek The Motion Picture, treated heavily distorted guitars as orchestral instruments, not as tokenistic gimmicks

In other words critics analyse the music first and then film, in a sequential preferential order which denies the music a coherent and contextual analysis. *Gattaca's* abstract narrative, devoid as it was of time and location, was so much a creation of the score. Nyman's score, which is analysed at length in this book, didn't so much 'accompany' the movie, as immerse itself in it. The two are inseparable.

The film *Notes on a Scandal* was scored with similar and predictable detachment from formula by Philip Glass. Here the music sometimes creates an alternate narrative to the one we watch. The music tells the same story as the film, but in a different way. This qualifies as deep conceptual thinking, where the composer is not merely an extension of, and an interpreter of, the director's psyche, but a conceptual thinker who envisages drama in different and non-formulaic ways.

Back to the question; do composers 'think' anymore, or do they merely 'do': Do composers 'create and craft' music which functions as an artistic dimension to the pictures they accompany, or does the modern composer function as a 'provider' – a humble functionary whose primary role is to entertain? We have technology in the arts in abundance; technology to aid creative film-making, to open the minds of film makers and to revolutionise what is on offer to composers. Much though the argument amongst some tends towards a suggestion that technology can sometimes stifle art by immersing it in a multitude of infinite possibilities and baffling its users with choices they don't know how to respond to, the more probable theory is not that art is stifled, more that we simply don't know what to do with technology, so we simply do what was done before, but quicker, faster and, arguably, with less respect. Music spent a long time craving the opportunities that technology finally brought, to the point where its usage sometimes simply serves to caricature and exaggerate music, not make it more interesting.

Can Music Communicate?

So, we return to the issue of whether music has meaning, a debate which has focussed the attention of great minds, some of which we've analysed already. 'Art music' since the 18th century has tended towards the instrumental. Instrumental music, because of its lack of words and therefore traditional context, flutters on the edge of something which would be considered comprehendible. Such issues have haunted most of the critical writings and theories about what music is. Music and language are dependent on the articulation of sound into discernable units – a kind of grammar. In the case of music this grammar is generally thought to be largely metaphorical. Philosopher Ludvig Wittgenstein claimed that 'to understand a verbal sentence was to be able to replace the sentence with another that means the same thing'. If we can do the same thing with music then music is indeed a language capable of creating meaning within the minds of listeners. The mechanism of how (and if) music creates meaning within listeners has been written about by musicologists, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and psychoanalysts. But we are no further forward for all of the lofty debate. At the centre of the debate is the assumption that music doesn't generate meaning because we are at a loss to suggest how, why or when such meaning manifests itself.

Music is said to be 'closed off'. Few people understand it because its primary means of communication, as I have discussed at length elsewhere in this book, is by aural means. People often don't understand what they can't see. The meanings music imparts are therefore different than those contained in literature or visual art. But nevertheless music conveys emotion to people who simply don't understand how it's happening. Music's most endearing characteristic is most probably the fact that it communicates such emotion despite not being understood. It is precisely this nebulous impreciseness that makes music able to communicate often quite precise emotion in such a warm, gentle way.

One of film music's roles is to distort and heighten reality musically and in this respect it is perhaps one of the few remaining areas of music where one is expected to dance on the edge of what is acceptable, stylistically, texturally and harmonically. Even early film score composers, some of whom were so much victims of the hangover from Vaudeville, created most of the nervous reaction of early filmgoers by intricately and subtly displacing the point of rhythmical, melodic and harmonic emphasis.

Film composers have made a virtue out of bending musical structure almost to breaking point, protected always by the simple fact that what they're writing is not 'real' music, but music driven by literary means. This book is firmly built on the theory that not only can music create meaning within listeners, its methods of emotional communication can be identified, rationalised and understood.

Film music conventions, styles and misinformation

I want to touch briefly on perhaps one of the best examples of musical communication – the use of and manipulation by musical 'conventions'. Film music styles and approaches (known as 'conventions') are not created by accident. People craft such things in order to illicit specific emotions from a film viewer, often by the power of suggestion or association. Conventions are ingrained in a cultural sense and create a universal, shared, collective perception. Conventions activate and stimulate our responses and our prejudices. Many harmonic and rhythmic devices summon up thoughts of specific geographic locations; not because in all cases these are accurate, but they are what a composer deemed to be appropriate and fitting and what listeners therefore thought *was* accurate. Thus we have grown up with an occasionally distorted view on what kinds of music come from which locations.

Music taps into a collective power of association to attempt to create the time and place represented in the image. Nowadays this is wholly more accurate but half a century ago it wasn't; open fourths and fifths, played by massed armies of brass instruments were often used to represent ancient Rome. Such assumptions are and were wildly speculative. This does not mean composers were deliberately falsifying our interpretation of culture and ethnicity through a distorted prism. Composers try to establish a musical identity with a certain place, geographically or in time. At best their efforts were often horrendously caricatured and exaggerated versions of reality.

Composers were under the twin pressures of ridiculous time schedules and the need to offer music which used sufficiently 'western' harmonies. Composers often created their own version of what a country's ethnic music might be. Thus a kind of 'quasi authenticity' developed. Directors and composers often worked on the flawed assumption that even if they were to sensitively locate, decipher and rationalise an authentic ethnic sound, such is the ignorance of most filmgoers, the audience wouldn't recognise it anyway. Film music aside, this is a big issue in today's global homogenised culture where it is becoming increasingly difficult to hear authentic indigenous music in many places. Here modern film music comes to the rescue, albeit minimally. Just as for decades the only time most people would hear an orchestra would be through film music, nowadays film is one of the few prisms through which people can experience reasonably accurate ethnic music.

The Cowboy chord sequence

Elmer Bernstein, who scored *The Magnificent Seven,* was at the forefront of early film score stylisation, but more importantly he is the co-creator/discoverer of one of the most enduring film music conventions. Bernstein said: "I'd wanted to do an American type of theme for a long time because of my interest in folk music and Copeland, who invented American music". If Copeland invented American music, then arguably Bernstein must have been one of the two great users of 'cowboy music', along with Jerome Moross, who composed *The Big Country.*

To give a little historical, cultural and political context, with a few notable exceptions, 'westerns' tended to be idealistic. Cowboy films displayed little genuine real dirt or squalor; heroes were universally heroic, Native Americans were universally brutal and Cowboy sharp-shooters could hit their target from a mile away with a hand-gun. Also, curiously, there were few black characters. The subversion of history for the benefit of a largely white western audience is nothing new in film and indeed it is not exclusive to America. Most English period TV dramas portray a fundamentally distorted view of the period they seek to dramatise. Most Victorian dramas do not aptly portray the squalor, depravation and class inequities which plagued the era. Instead we receive what could arguably be termed the 'Disney' version. The interesting thing is that the enduring iconic image of the 'cowboy', with all its inherent absurdities and historical airbrushing, did not begin or end with traditional 'cowboy films'. Captain Kirk essentially functioned as John Wayne in space. Indiana Jones (*Raiders of the Lost Ark* series), John McClane (*Die Hard* series), Ethan Hawke (*Mission Impossible* series), are all reinvented cowboys. Historically the most successful reinvention of the cowboy was when it crossed over from film into the real world and became Ronald Reagan and eventually George Bush. Politics aside, and crucially to the issue of whether and how music conveys meaning, the cowboy aesthetic is kept alive by the longevity of Jerome Moross and Elmer Bernstein's treatment of it via chord sequences which show up time after time in different films. Bernstein and Moross cannot claim ownership on two or three chords – especially a group so relatively ordinary, used thousands of times in classical music. What they created is the context; the way the music was used in a filmic context.

Hollywood film music standardisation and codification, to which Adorno and others refer, is used in this context to retain the feeling of the heroism contained in the old Westerns and successfully graft it onto newer films wanting to exploit hero connotations and emotions in the mind of the viewer/listener. In order to explain and contextualise this issue, below the original Cowboy theme which contained the distinctive chord sequence is notated, followed by several films which used the same convention. The chord shift is explained musically in order to contextualise how codification actually works

The Big Country *Jerome Moross*

Audio – Main Titles

Fig. 1

Given that this iconic chord change has been grafted onto other film music sequences and arguably converts to an almost literal meaning within listeners, it is worth trying to figure out how and why this worked to well in the early Westerns and still instils sentiments of heroism and grandeur within us.

The chord sequence, which returns the phrase back to the key centre - in the case of *The Big Country,* the key of C - would read Bb, G then back to C. Thus it retains the convention, stability, tradition and commerciality of the famous and all-powerful V-I (G to C) chord shift, but adds a slightly unexpected prefix chord, the Bb, which contextually sits a tone below the tonic and outside the key centre of Bb. Thus in the key of C, a sequence of Bb to G to C *is* the 'Cowboy chord sequence'. Below is a 'chord grid' (the chord maps are explained in detail in the chapter entitled *Music Theory in Action*) displaying chords in their harmonically literate order, using C as the key centre. Underneath the chord map is the original 'cowboy chord sequence' in transcribed form. As stated earlier, the Bb chord is crucial here; it is the only one outside the immediate key centre of C and it is therefore this, especially coming before the G and then C, which gives the sequence its distinctive colour.

Fig. 2
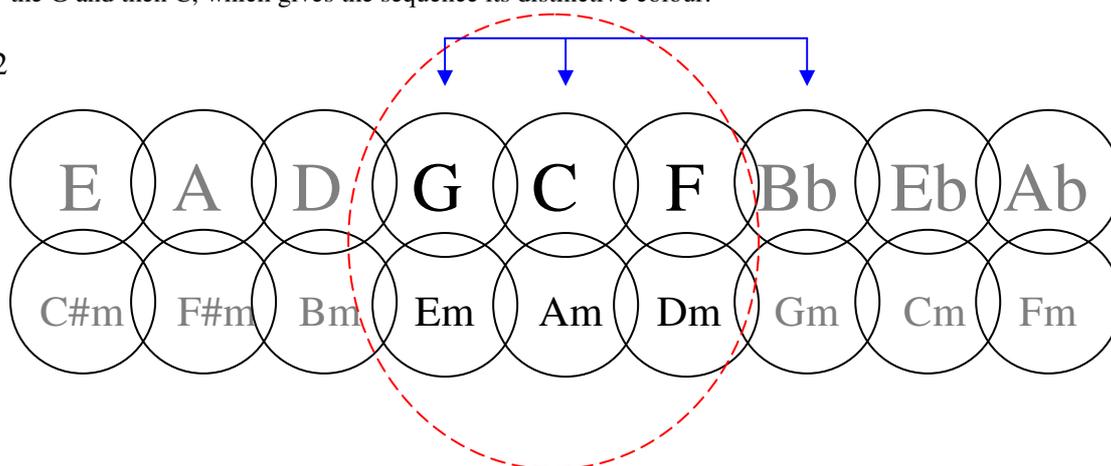
Overleaf, (fig.3) we have Elmer Bernstein's take on the same chord shift, used in his famous and enduring theme from *The Magnificent Seven,* with the relevant highlighted chord sequence.

The Magnificent Seven *Elmer Bernstein*

Audio – Main Titles 00.27

Fig. 3

How to retain the musical cultural longevity of the Cowboy and graft it onto new films wanting to exploit similar emotions in the audience via the power of association

In figure 4 (below) the opening bars of the movie JFK, by John Williams, is transcribed. This time the cowboy sequence appears twice; once in the middle of the phrase, as an edited reference and once at the end in its full three-chord mode. Power, greatness and heroism are referenced well in this theme, using a romantic template, melodically and in terms of orchestration. So the sudden appearance of the 'cowboy chord sequence' is therefore quite deliberate and strategic. The piece would function quite well without it but Williams inserts it to reference what the audience remembers as 'heroic times'. The crucial point here is that the music doesn't have to bother with the moral fallout: whether the audience 'buys' the cowboy myth is irrelevant; they 'buy' the musical equivalent without realising, and that's the power of music and the meaning it creates within us.

JFK *John Williams*

Audio, Main Title, JFK - 00.19

Fig. 4

Composers Harald Kloser and Thomas Wander wrote a beautiful, simplistic but haunting section to the introduction credit-roll on the film *Day after Tomorrow*. The 'middle 8' prior to a return to the main theme features the 'cowboy chord sequence'. Placement of the cowboy chord sequence is harder this time because the piece as a whole is in a minor key. Therefore the euphoric, uplifting climactic sense the sequence provide is slightly lost since it resolves to a minor chord, not a major.

The Day after Tomorrow *Harald Klosser & Thomas Wander*

Audio - Main Theme: The Day After Tomorrow 02.04

Fig. 5

The final theme of the film 'Independence Day' featured the iconic Cowboy chord sequence too.

Independence Day *David Arnold*

Audio - Main Title: Independence Day

Fig. 6

Below (fig.7) the main theme from *Back to the Future III* is transcribed. The film, the third and final in the successful trilogy, goes back to the Wild West. Alan Silvestri's iconic theme features the 'Cowboy chord sequence'.

Back to the Future III *Alan Silvestri*

Audio – End Credits - Back to the Future 3

Fig. 7

The example of the Cowboy chord sequence in fig.8 below is from the successful American TV drama *The West Wing*

The West Wing *WG Walden*

Intro titles – The West Wing

Fig. 8

The 'cowboy chord sequence' is used to reinforce notions of tradition, history and heritage.

The next example is from the pen of John Williams. A more subtle, innocuous and hardly detectable example of the same chord sequence this time appears during a cue from *Jurassic Park.*

Fig. 9

Firstly let's look at the chord sequence itself in isolation (fig.9). This time the first chord is an inversion, which subtly alters the harmonic centre of gravity, distorting the sequence and making it more subtle.

The section as it appears in the cue occurs during a transition from the key of G to Bb, as we can see from this slightly more contextualised example below (below, fig.10).

Fig. 10

The section in its entirety is below (fi.11), and is buried deep within what is an extremely effective and emotional section, featuring the string section alone.

Jurassic Park *John Williams*

Audio 03.19 – 'Welcome to Jurassic Park'

Fig. 11

George Lucas said of *Star Wars*, "I saw that kids didn't have any fantasy life the way we had – they didn't have Westerns, they didn't have pirate movies". It therefore no surprise that Williams invoked the cowboy chord sequence in *Star Wars;* proof if proof were needed that some of the lure of *Star Wars* was in fact that, like *Star Trek* and others, it was a Western in space.

Star Wars *John Williams*

Fig. 12

Audio - Main Theme from Star Wars

Perhaps the last example of the 'Cowboy chord sequence' ought to come from an actual contemporary example of a Western; the phenomenally successful TV series *Dallas.* This time the sequence itself is abbreviated; it appears just before a key change so the E chord in bar ten (fig.13) drops to the D in bar eleven but does not go to the B chord which would have brought it back to the E chord.

Dallas *Jerrold Immel*

Fig. 13   *Dallas Main Title theme*

As we can see from the few examples given, the audience can listen to the music and subconsciously benefit from the obvious referencing by the composer without really being aware of it. All we know is that it *reminds us*. Indeed some composers aren't aware of the various references and conventions they use either, but the fact that similar chord sequences are chosen time and time again proves that structure is not always 'created' but is frequently appropriated by composers who often do so unknowingly. For most, music has no tangible reality over and above its aural qualities; the audience are in the uniquely emotional but simultaneously baffling position of being at the same time both 'in their element' and 'out of their depth' as listeners. Few art forms deliver this kind of endearing experience. As I have said before, the fact that music is not understood by listeners is most probably part of its great charm. For many it is a kind of magic, where its composers and 'creators' are magicians. But simply knowing and understanding how to do something that few others can comprehend does not make you a magician; it simply makes you rare.

Academics have traditionally exalted the theory that music has *no* meaning. Their conclusions are reinforced by a supporting cast of great composers and cultural thinkers. Nevertheless they are wrong. Music creates meaning within us through our emotional reactions *to it*, which are alike and in some cases identical to that of everyone else, such is the specific power and identity of chord shapes and sequences.

If, as composers, we want to progress and evolve the commercial art-form of film music and stop it dipping head-first into bland homogenised commodification we must first understand how it communicates specific identity and thus creates specific meaning.

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Despite film music's apparent dense, impenetrable shell, which maroons it, for the most part, to a lifetime of surface-level, mundane and reverential analysis, when we break it down and unpick the harmonies and dense orchestration, the secrets behind the success is that there *are* no secrets – it is simply the application of great skill, judgement, deliberate adherence to, or avoidance of, structure. It's also about observation, economy and method. It is about understanding how music contains identity to which we respond, creating meaning within us.

The aim of this book, therefore, is to show how film music communicates; to analyse film music and place the reader and composer in a position to understand how it is created, why decisions are taken and how music takes shape, so that they might become film score writers or educators, and in so doing might progress the art form.