

INTRODUCTION

How does music communicate meaning?

When everything is said and done, what matters to any composer or scholar of music for the moving image, is how does music convey the emotion of the images, the narrative, the story? Central to any study of these fundamental issues is the need to understand how music itself functions; how does music create feelings and emotions and convey meaning? What kind of meaning does music convey? If we understand why music creates emotion or evokes feeling we can find out how certain music ‘works’ in certain filmic circumstances and environments; we can learn to appreciate and understand how the vastness of musical structure and the seemingly limitless characteristics it possesses, actually communicate when applied to the moving image.

This book will analyse and study hundreds of transcriptions of film and TV music; it will investigate how music interacts with the narrative structure of film and will debate and discuss many musical, technical, aesthetic, contextual, historical and abstract issues and areas of interest and importance. But above all, the central theme of ‘how music communicates’ in film represents the core of what this book is about. Understanding how we listen to music and why we respond in certain ways is vitally important in learning how to compose. Understanding how and why people respond to music’s structures and traditions and its complex labyrinth of possibilities enables us to successfully engage with music as listeners, critics, scholars and composers.

Music for the moving image is not ‘normal’ music

Music for the moving image is unique because unlike ‘normal’ music, which is usually (but not exclusively) propelled by musical, artistic, egotistical and, mostly commercial considerations, music for the moving image does not always encompass the same pressures. It is essentially driven by visual elements, literary considerations and narrative structure. It does not necessarily have to function as ‘commercial music’ or even ‘music’ in the usual sense of the terms. It is not necessarily meant to be an extension of the composer’s ego in that the composer does not dictate the emotional needs of the music; he or she responds to the *film’s* needs. What a composer would *like* to write from a purely musical perspective is a secondary consideration to the central need for music which provides an identifiable and noticeable *function* and thereby works for the greater good of the film experience. Brian Eno said, “Film music has a very interesting identity which makes it compositionally different from other pieces of music, which is that the main part of it is missing... film music is there to support an action.” This is an important point - that film music’s job is not supposed to be to provide an identity of its own but to support *another* identity. A composer for the moving image is not primarily driven by the need for the music to ‘entertain’ but instead for the music to serve a greater endeavour whose job is to entertain and enlighten. Indeed if music is composed primarily to entertain and stand out, it may not always work as film music because it will undermine or diminish the film itself or the meaning of the film.

Film music is not just listened to; it is watched

People do not just ‘listen’ to film music, they listen while they watch; music for the moving image is usually not primarily enjoyed purely as music and therefore doesn’t theoretically have the normal burden of commercial expectation. Listeners of music for the moving image rationalise and interpret in a visual environment and context where belief in reality is suspended temporarily. The picture therefore is *part* of the music. There is, inevitably, a debate amongst film score scholars as to whether film music ought to be able to function as stand-alone music. Certainly many directors would welcome the further stylistic commodification of film music and the undoubted commercial opportunities this would bring. But in some respects we have to be careful what we wish for; if we end up with every movie spawning a stand-alone soundtrack of music which is commercially attractive in its own right then we may risk the creation of music to film being less about sculpturing music which weaves itself effortlessly into the film’s narrative, and more about simply providing two hours’ worth of music whose only redeeming feature is that it penetrates the labyrinth of dialogue and sound design enough to be noticed.

If film music happens to work as stand-alone music, fine, but if that is its primary function then it ceases to be film music and instead simply becomes music put to film, which is an entirely different thing.

I can remember when I first became interested in music for the moving image, listening to film music independent of its film and thinking it sounded different to how it had sounded when I saw the film. I can remember wondering if the soundtrack album was recorded by a different orchestra and wondering if maybe the mix was different. It just didn't sound the same. I eventually realised years later when I began composing for the moving image, that the picture and sound design is such a big part of our perception of the music that essentially in a very real sense it is *part* of the music. Our aural perception and memory of the music is a product of the film experience first and foremost.

The 'function' of film music is film music

Ultimately the way film music is rationalised is linked to how obviously the *function* of the music works; in other words how well the composer reads the situation and applies music which functions and works in a specific way to affect the viewer's perception of a scene. What the music 'is' as music and what it 'sounds like' is obviously important, but what the music is *doing*, e.g. its function, is often what distinguishes it. If composers decide what they want the music to achieve, this will be its 'function' and in the final analysis, how the music functions will be how it is remembered. What the music contains 'musically' is a subtly different thing. If you think back to your favourite film music moments, what was great about the moment is how well the music worked with the scene or how well it interpreted the narrative. John Williams' famous and iconic cue from *Jaws* works principally because it capitalises on your fear of what is likely to happen. Thus the function was good; the idea of that particular approach, that decision, to play the film in that way, is what makes us think of it as 'great music'. The music *was* effective but the underlying idea, the concept, was outstanding.

What music brings to the narrative, to the pictures, to the movie, is subtly different to what it actually *is* as music. We hear it as music but we *listen* to it in context of what job it is doing; what 'function' it's providing. This is why sometimes when we listen to film music without the film it loses some of its meaning; what it has lost when listened to independent of the film is its function; why it exists. There is no convincing definition of 'great' film music just as there will never be a definition of great music. There are no right ways or wrong ways to write music or film music. There is only history. All we have to go on is what has been proven to work; this in turn can act as a springboard for our own imagination and as a template through which we can begin to find our own voice. Music is never composed in a vacuum. There is never truly a blank slate. As composers we cannot help but be influenced. We cannot literally 'un-know' what we already know. Even the most original-sounding music owes some of identity to the past. Its partial adherence to tradition or recognised structure is what creates the platform for its elements of originality.

Does good film music have to be something people can hum?

A film score you come out of the cinema humming need not necessarily be effective film music simply because you remember the melody. Many modern films latch on to a specific theme or idea and reuse it time and time again to try and establish an aural calling card; a musical thematic identity. But it can sometimes be 'overcooked' and thus cliché. People did not come out of the cinema humming Bernard Herrmann's music to *Psycho* but people remembered it and still do fifty years later. Effective film music is not necessarily something we remember *as music*. We remember the experience more than anything. Music is arguably more useful and successful when what is remembered is an overwhelming emotion, rather than simply 'music'. When we remember Hans Zimmer's wonderful themes from *Gladiator*, we do not usually remember *just* the music; we remember the experience the music gave us. We do not hum Herrmann's shower scene from *Psycho*, all we remember is that it terrified us.

Music for the moving image is not always written to the image

People often underestimate how much of 'music for the moving image' is written to the dialogue, the narration, the words and the sound design rather than simply the picture itself. In many ways it is as 'much music to words and/or sound' as 'music to picture'.

Composers of documentaries with a narrated voice-over weave their music around the voice as much as the pictures. George Fenton's music for the *Planet Earth*, *Blue Planet* and *Frozen Planet* documentaries is as much a triumph of his ability to carve out a path around Attenborough's distinctive voice and the labyrinth of other sounds as it is a triumph of music to picture.

The film is part of your music and your music is part of the film

Most composers are open to the concept of their music bringing new colour, artistry and emotion to film; they are generally less able to engage with the notion that moving pictures and the existence of a story or narrative will bring emotion to their music. This is probably because music is a much more intensely personal and solitary pursuit compared to some creative arts. It's often difficult for us to see our music playing a side role in a larger creative and commercial construct and it's even harder to conceive of a situation where something non-musical could be interacting with our music and changing the way it's perceived. But if the great 20th Century film composers share one common characteristic, it is that they all write *for* the film, not *to* the film or *at* the film. They write for the greater good of an artistic and commercial endeavour that represents a consummation of various artistic and technical achievements, of which they are merely a part. To a movie composer the images which accompany their music ought to be as much a part of the fabric of the music as harmony, melody, instrumentation or production because they determine the ultimate context in which it is rationalised, enjoyed and consumed.

Is music for the moving image the most natural kind of music?

When most composers conceptualise and write music, whether they be songwriters, symphonists or exponents of experimental jazz fusion, they usually use images or powerful memories to fire their emotion and imagination; composers 'picture' things. So in many ways music has always been about the image. In many ways 'music for the moving image' is the most natural kind of music. When we compose 'normal' music – music purely for music's sake – we are fired and inspired often by visual stimulus. Converting our mental images or visual stimulus into actual music is a major part of the conceptualisation and composition process. Music for the moving image simply means that our imagination is fired at least partly by *someone else's* images, so in some ways at least part of the initial conception process is done for us. Our job is no longer to conjure up music from a self-generated mental image or picture, but to interpret an *actual* image from a story. We tend to think of music and the moving image as a relatively new phenomenon but the success of music and visuals is nothing new; music has supported movement for hundreds of years, from dance through to plays, theatre, opera and more recently, film.

Film music conundrums

Most directors acknowledge that music is the one component that succeeds in making a film more real; more authentic. In most situations music makes the film more genuine, more 'actual' and more vivid. It heightens tensions and can create abstractions and subtleties which make the film more dramatic and poignant and which the film alone cannot do. Music can be what makes film appear truthful. It can be what makes a story authentic. Why and how we are prepared to suspend belief so easily and readily is as much to do with the music as it is the image. And yet real life - the ultimate 'truth', surely - does not come accompanied by a soundtrack, and indeed it would be absurd if it did. Driving along an unfamiliar dark country lane at night in a storm would be unnerving enough without Bernard Herrmann's music coming at you. So why do we need music in a film when we don't have it or need it in reality? Why is its inclusion in real life so obviously absurd but its inclusion in a film *depicting* real life so natural and important?

The answer is simple and it is a testament not just to the important role music plays in film but to the power music has over us emotionally: in real life you don't need a soundtrack because you're living it; you're *actually there*. The inclusion of music as a permanent soundtrack to our lives would italicise, overstate and even cheapen the living of it: the emotion is provided by the insatiable reality of life itself; of *being there*. But when you watch a film you're *not there*, you're watching a recording of whatever 'there' was when it was filmed, and you're watching it in a darkened film theatre with a load of strangers. The film wants you to think you're *there*, so the music helps you 'live' the film. Music therefore is in many ways the ultimate emotional connector.

The inclusion of music is often the thing that succeeds in truly connecting you to the film. Music can be the emotional bond between you and the film; it can make you understand and enjoy the film on a much more heightened level than pictures or dialogue alone can achieve. It can replicate and mimic the kind of vivid personal ‘actuality’ you feel when you experience something real. This is music’s great power and ultimately it is its greatness. Put simply, music helps you think the film is real.

The function of any film’s music is perhaps best expressed by composer Bernard Herrmann when he suggests that music may be considered ‘the communicating link between the screen and the audience’. Author Kathryn Kalinak goes further, claiming that music gives the two-dimensional characters on screen their flesh-and-blood humanity: ‘...through a kind of transference or slippage between sound and image, the depth created by the sound is transferred to the flat surface of the image.’

This book will provide hundreds of transcriptions of various film and television themes and incidental music. Detailed expert advice, context and guidance on composing, orchestrating and producing music for the moving image are embedded in every chapter, discussed through the numerous examples featured. The book contains detailed guidance on music theory and in particular how to understand and interpret harmony. But above all, the central theme of ‘how music communicates’ represents the core of what this book is about. What the book hopes to prove is that music undoubtedly communicates in a whole multitude of different ways. Whilst our ability to rationalise and enjoy music is based on virtually innumerable and complex factors such as our level of emotional intelligence, engagement, aural cognition and intellect, many ways in which music communicates are general, consistent and predictable. This means they can be evaluated, understood, appreciated and learned from. People listen in predictable ways because music is structured in consistent predictable ways to accommodate our expectations.

Although, as Adorno is fond of reminding us, the very birth of film music was immersed in formula and its evolution buried in codification, ironically, despite the continued increasingly populist and commercial stranglehold of the industry it serves, film music is one of the few avenues of commercial music creation in which composers are still relatively free to explore areas, styles and approaches which would be open to hostile interpretation if they were judged purely as commercial music.

Critics of film music

Critics of film music can be found everywhere. There are dissenters right across the musical spectrum ranging from ancient and crusty cultural theorists like Theodore Adorno who saw it as an adjunct to mass entertainment and therefore a debasement of what music should be, through to songwriters and symphonists. They sometimes suggest that the concept of ‘writing to order’ or writing to picture is restrictive, as if writing music for the sake of music somehow makes it ‘free’. Some (but by no means all) composers of classical music and classical music academics and scholars (those for whom the classical canon represents the ultimate arbiter of greatness in music) see film music not as the extension and evolution of classical music that it so obviously is, but as a troublesome distraction. The vast libraries of concert music that exist within the repertoire of many film composers such as John Williams and James Horner, for which they often have multi-million dollar record contracts, will rarely see the light of day in concert programs in the UK, whose classical music repertoire is rarely progressive and tends toward a permanent and ongoing celebration of long-dead classical composers and a tiny minority of largely unknown 20th century classical composers who write music and definitely *not* film music.

At the other end of the spectrum many supposedly progressive electroacoustic composers resent their music being ‘cheapened’ by its immersion in film and therefore, ultimately, commercialism. Electroacoustic music represents an important and valid extension of what music and sound can be, but it is an acquired taste and understandably doesn’t have a large enough popular appeal for it to be commercial; its existence is, at least partly, a product of the closeted world of academia. This protection of electroacoustic music by academia is worthwhile and laudable because it encourages and supports music which might otherwise be open to hostile interpretation; but it does tend to forge an attitude of elitism and superiority in some electroacoustic composers, hence the ridiculous reticence in some parts to see their music as an accompaniment to film.

The elephant in the room in all these cases is that film music is often seen as being unworthy because it does not exist for its own sake but ‘merely’ as part of a greater construct. Another important thing to remember when challenging the belief that film composers are somehow less free than other composers is that ironically music for film, despite the restrictions created by the pictures and the narrative, can actually be a good deal harmonically freer than ‘normal’ music; the restrictions placed on commercial music by the record industry that controls it have become increasingly absurd and an inhibitor to the discovery of new talent, which is why in some respects genuinely new and innovative artists have a problem breaking through.

Music and meaning

This book’s centre of gravity is the issue of how and why music suggests and implies meanings, emotions and feelings and how these can be applied to film. Hopefully it will show that music *does* create common and predictable emotions within the listener and that emotions can be generated by the use of specific chord sequences and other harmonic and instrumental devices. I say this because centuries ago composers and musicologists were largely of the opinion that music was incapable of imparting a kind of general meaning which could be understood. They were adamant that if music seemed to impart meaning, it just *seemed* that way. This is discussed at length in the chapter entitled *Music and Meaning*. According to many classical composers, musicologists and academics centuries ago, any meaning that music imparted had to be specific and peculiar to the individual and was not something which could be seen to be in any way universal or standardized.

Composers were at pains to suggest that *how* they wrote music was a process beyond rationalisation. They were often incapable of articulating how they thought it all up. This fuelled the other prevailing idea; the absurd myth of the ‘lone genius’. If composers, musicologists and academics couldn’t figure out how people wrote music, then how they did it was beyond our understanding. If something is beyond our understanding we generally tend to either ridicule it or revere it. Luckily for composers we decided not to lock them up or burn them at the stake but instead to revere and worship; to admire and venerate. Composers would talk of ‘inspiration’ and of music being ‘from the heart’. They would talk about musical ideas ‘coming from nowhere’; about conceptualization being an ethereal almost spiritual event, beyond understanding. Whether composers actually believed this or whether it was simply good PR is unclear, but these sentiments continue to this day to foster a fundamentally flawed perspective of how music is conceived and created; it affected for an eternity how listeners and music lovers rationalise music. Hundreds of years of music history tended to faithfully and happily restate the same views *as fact* and so the great lie continued. This is not to denigrate or malign the work of the so-called great composers; merely to re-contextualise it with modern perspective and more honest context.

History gives us a long list of composers from centuries ago right up to now, whose work is brilliantly imaginative. The creativity involved and the sheer level of skill, dedication and incredible ability is staggering. But it is not beyond belief because *it happened*. The great problem with history, or rather the *telling* of it, is that it is mired in sentimentality. Is every notable or historically famous act of musical composition to be seen as ‘awesome’? And if some are and some aren’t, who decides what is good and what is bad? Who decides who the geniuses are? Good and bad do not exist; they are merely opinions, not fact. Genius does not exist and as a means of evaluating the worth of a composer, it is a meaningless accolade which simply means that the person *giving* the accolade is unable to articulate their thoughts and opinions coherently and rationally and instead opts for the safe haven of a term nobody understands but everyone agrees must surely be fantastic.

Looking at how and why society places such high accolades on music from the so-called ‘great composers’, we need only look to how society reacts nowadays to any artist or composer who achieves commercial success. Almost all are universally paraded as being ‘brilliant’ or ‘superb’ or ‘awesome’ or ‘genius’, as if anyone who succeeds commercially is also by definition excellent. There is a societal tendency to overcook the importance, relevance or ability of artists. Partly this is the result of ignorance and partly it comes out of our need for winners and heroes. This is just as present now as it was two or three hundred years ago, and ultimately it is just as pervasive because it frames the debate and debases the work of creative artists.

It distills their work through the distorted prism of a media obsessed with celebrity, not ability, and in so doing determines how society interacts with its musicians and composers.

In concluding this introduction we need to return to the theme of ‘meaning’ in music; music suggests and infers emotional meaning and such meaning is the subject of intense discussion in most of the chapters in this book. To be clear, such meaning is not actually physically contained in the music itself, it is contained in our reaction and response *to* the music, just as words possess meaning not because of what they look like or sound like but because of the collective consciousness and common beliefs of those who interpret them. The meaning music imparts is rarely apparent to just one individual. It is frequently general and obvious to most listeners, albeit to varying levels of accuracy depending on someone’s aural cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence and intellect. True, the meaning harmony imparts does not translate to most people with the immediacy and succinctness inherent in the written or spoken word or the image, but that is simply because the meanings in words and images have evolved in more of an absolute, complete and unequivocal way; we can all convert words into meaning relatively quickly and concisely. But there *are* meanings, moods, emotions and feelings created within us by music which are ultimately governed by our unified and collective reactions and responses to specific harmonies, chords, intervals and other devices and situations. This means we can deduce how, why and in what circumstances certain harmonies, intervals, instrumental combinations or melodies continue to affect us in fairly consistent, predictable and reasonably uniform ways.