

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME II

How does film music work?

In order to understand how film music ‘works’ we must first ask ourselves how it makes us ‘feel’. Then we must ask how and why it makes us feel this way. What elements (sound, texture, production, melody, harmony, instrumentation) are so compelling that they affect our emotion and inform our perception and judgment. Music is extremely important to film; its importance goes beyond mere accompaniment. How we understand and interpret films frequently depends at least partly on how the music ‘frames’ them; how the music delivers the film to us.

In order to understand how film music is written - often under great pressure - we need to draw conclusions and deductions about how certain combinations of musical elements work. For example, specific harmonies can create predictable emotional reactions in listeners. Despite the fact that each person is an individual and listens to music in subtly different ways, music manages to provoke a more general collective reaction amongst its listeners. Put simply, a specific type of chord, guided by our reaction to the sound it creates and because of the consistency and manner of its use in music, causes us to remember it; when we remember it or recall it, we recall the feeling it created within us. This is how we listen to all music but is particularly noticeable in film music because the mixture of music and image, or music and narrative, can make the music more memorable. We remember the distinctive ‘James Bond’ chord not just because of the distinct harmonies but because of a powerful contextual and visual memory we have of the film or the character. Film composers know these things and they exploit and italicise the relationship we have to music.

How is music created?

The creation of music is rarely the random, spontaneous romanticized event people imagine it to be. People are beguiled and seduced into the presumption that music is always the product of personal artistic endeavor. But words like ‘inspiration’ and ‘art’ and ‘genius’ are simply words society gives to try and explain something which seems beyond understanding or categorisation. Whether something is ‘art’ or ‘genius’ is a personal opinion with infinite variables. There is no definitive answer as to whether something is art or genius because we have no benchmark. This wouldn’t be so bad were it not for the fact that the history of music is riddled with words which essentially have no proper meaning. Too many of music history and composition books are based on unbridled reverence. We are taught to revere the great composers as if everything ever composed was a work of lone genius, beyond our comprehension. What we are also taught is that ‘great music’ is something that *other* people create, not us. We are taught the *Disney* version of music history, where we are encouraged and cajoled into idolising and revering ‘great composers’ and interpreting their work as a fantastic aberration, something never to be repeated. This is how Mozart, Beethoven and the rest are sold to us. This might be exciting but it can also be damaging because it conditions us to think that ‘great’ music is simply something done by other people, not us.

When composers write music they’re trying to think of an original and entertaining way of telling a story through music. People are generally able to interpret, rationalise and understand how literal ideas are formulated in books. They understand that writers arrange ideas and words in specific ways to create new context. People are also relatively able to understand visual ‘art’; they have a grasp of what something looks like and what the artist has done and they understand, to a degree, the context. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of music. People listening to music are affected emotionally, biologically and physically by something that (in terms of harmony, orchestration and production at least) they have little understanding of in terms of how it is made. Books communicate using a universal language we all understand. For this reason although we respect and admire authors we do not always cherish them with the same blind unconditional reverence we use for successful or ‘great’ composers. This is because we have an understanding of the process.

Music does not 'transmit' along the usual corridors of emotional communication that informs and enlightens us. With books we understand how and why we've been affected; we can see the words and hear the sounds they produce. There are two frames of reference. With visual art, possibly to a lesser degree, we still understand. With music few people possess the ability to understand how and why they are affected because they lack the ability to visualise and thus rationalise how and why music ends up sounding the way it does.

Sometimes what people don't understand they either fear, resent or revere. Luckily people enjoy music and therefore they have invented a whole system of beliefs to explain how and why a very small number of people can create something the rest find amazing. But any honest composer will tell you straight; whilst writing music is not easy and requires the kind of imagination, creativity and mental agility which few are capable of, it is, nevertheless, not the baffling process people imagine it to be. What 'great' composers do is listen to music, distil its traditions, traits, tensions and characteristics. And then they subtly and slightly rearrange the virtually limitless stylistic, textural, rhythmic and harmonic components and possibilities music offers. They look at the stylistics, traditions, practices and evolution of music and try and figure out where they fit and what they can offer.

How we listen

People listen to music in consistent, uniform and predictable ways. We listen in a similar way to how we observe, perceive and rationalise the world we see when we open our eyes. Our power to interpret images is based on our ability to categorise and classify what we see and experience; we do not literally look at everything anew every day because if we did it would take all day and we'd be living in a world of chaos. Because we classify and categorise, we don't have to double-check everything we see, every time we see it. Therefore much of what we see is based on what we *think* we see; what we presume we see, and of course most of the time we are right. This is why we are so affected by something visually new, or perhaps striking, such as a vast panoramic scene we haven't witnessed before. This is also why 'optical illusions' affect us so much; we're shocked and wrong-footed by something which stubbornly refuses to be instantly categorised and classified. When we listen to music we also hear and listen with prejudice; in an instant we rationalise based on how this new aural experience compares with the kinds of things we've already heard and experienced, accessing a vast database of partial aural memories.

We listen in context of the past; what we *expected* or how the new piece compares to what we have experienced before. This is not entirely a product of our kidult or adult experiences; sometimes our predispositions go back even further: cognitive tests proved beyond doubt that three month-old babies react better to consonant harmony than dissonant harmony. Perhaps some of our predispositions, tendencies and prejudices are part of us before we're even consciously aware of it.

I say all this because the same issues are in play when we compose. We write in similar ways because inherently, subconsciously or consciously, we play by the same basic rules of musical structure and architecture. We observe the tradition, style and substance of music and we distil it and use it as a platform on which to build something which sounds sufficiently different or new. Add to this an extra restriction placed on composers: the fact that the vast majority of all music composed is *performed* as it is composed (that is to say few composers conceptualise independent of using an instrument). As soon as we sit down at a piano keyboard we conform; we play by *its* rules. It is impossible to separate the chords we play and the colours we find with the distinct physical characteristics of the instrument.

So, if we still stubbornly stick to the absurd idea that composing music is purely and only about random, spontaneous unbridled bursts of lone genius, created from absolutely nothing and un-influenced by the world outside the composer's own mind, we are missing the point of how we listen to, distil and rationalise music and how some of us then go on to compose music based on these influences. There is 'sameness' to much of the music we experience, despite its apparent depth and variation. This is also the reason why certain chords, harmonies, melodic shapes and textural scenarios cause similar reactions in most people. In order to be immune from this a listener would have to spend their entire lives never experiencing music.

Music is just as much a part of our life as words are, and just as we are influenced in similar ways by a specific combination of words, so we are influenced by a specific combination of harmonies. The harmonic influences might be less obvious but they are there nonetheless. Because of our inability to understand music in the kind of comprehensive and detailed way we understand the written or spoken word, the harmonic influences which affect us and guide us are not *as* specific or literal as words or pictures; they are a little more general in their application but no less effective. In fact one might even say that the inherent beauty of music and its ability to move people is at least partly down to the fact that people are affected by something they don't fully understand, but gain similar experiences from.

Music and the inability of the law to understand it

The law may state that for authors and composers there *is* such a thing as 'an original work' but in reality in most cases the concept is absurd. The law exists to protect what it sees as a wholly original creation but this is nothing more than a crude, knee-jerk method of recompensing creative artists. The trouble with the concept of an original work is that it informs legislation and feeds the myth that one person can be solely responsible for an entire book or an entire symphony or an entire song. Because of the vast riches enjoyed by the relatively few who 'create' for a living and because of people's inability to understand the process of composing, we are left with the presumption of personal greatness and unfathomable genius.

Music is there to be written and one of the most wonderful and consistent things about the film music industry is the humility of its composers. Think not of personal greatness; think instead of using the almost limitless possibilities that music offers us in order to craft something which benefits the movie. Think about what unique element or thought or idea you will add to music to give it a specific personality - one people will remember long after the film has finished. The successful film score writers have one fundamental thing in common: they have all brought something new to the genre. People remember John Williams for his rousing thematic material but what really distinguishes him from the pack is the stuff that goes relatively unnoticed; his almost unparalleled ability to create subtle types of harmonic tension, colour and beauty through harmony. He has distilled existing stylistic influences and created music which has furthered the art-form, not just perpetuated it. Hans Zimmer's use of music and production, together with the insatiable sense of colour and romance within his luscious harmonies and deep, dense orchestration has distinguished him such that he has an identifiable and much-copied style. His use of real instrumentation, sampled sounds and brilliant production technique, together with his great sense of architecture, have defined a fresh approach to scoring films. Similarly the sheer breadth and magnitude of colour created by James Horner's music and his eclectic use of harmony and instrumentation has created something people recognise. His rousing themes for *Star Trek II*, his distinctly jazz-influenced score to *Sneakers* and the subtle harmonic abstractions in *A Beautiful Mind* make Horner one of the most eclectic and Chameleon-like composers in the history of film music.

In order for listeners to enjoy music, inevitably there must be an element of tradition, of something we 'recognise', within it. Any music which is utterly original and does not possess *any* of the satisfying structural, textural or harmonic signposts present in 'normal' music can be open to hostile interpretation. But, ironically, in order to galvanise us, interest us and make us remember, there normally has to be splashes of originality, of newness in music, which titillates the listener and engages them. But 'newness' is often not so much something wholly bold and original, rather than simply a different way of contextualising the harmonies and structures music offers us. To say something differently, to offer a fresh perspective is one of the most poignant things a composer can do. Being 'different' need not always mean 'jumping off the deep end'. If, as a composer, you can manage to embrace tradition sufficiently enough to create warmth and familiarity and avoid being exiled into the world of total abstraction but *also* create a style or approach which makes you recognisable, distinct and slightly original, you have mastered the art of composing. Most successful and well-known film composers have managed this to varying degrees.

Do not ignore the context

One thing that makes film music work is the context in which it is heard. The music and the film are part of each other. They are contextually inseparable. The success of film music is ultimately a product of its 'function'. If film goes 'like' a certain piece of film music it is not usually the raw music they respond to, but the 'job' it does, the function it fulfils in the film. We respond to the feeling the music creates within us, but this feeling is because of the consummation between music and film; between something we hear and something we see. In many ways with film music we 'watch' it just as much as listen to it, just as we listen to the film as well as watching it.

All music is 'functional' to varying degrees. Very little music is written for no reason whatsoever. Music is hardly ever written in a vacuum. There is normally a reason, a motive, a purpose, an intention. Film music's purpose is not just to be heard as music, but to be listened to as part of a bigger construct – the film. Unlike 'normal' music, film music is not driven by ego or a desire to 'musically entertain'. Film music is driven by literary and dramatic considerations. This is not music for music's sake; what's important is the 'function' of the music. When writing to picture, always ask yourself 'why am I writing it like this, what does it do, what does it bring to the film that wasn't there already, what is its function?'. If you're simply duplicating existing emotion, which is what most film music did in the early days, ask yourself, are you overcooking the scene. Dramatic action sequences may need overcooking with duplicative music but more subtle dramatic moments might be in need of lighter brushstrokes; something which subtly counters the drama, says the same thing but in a different way or simply makes us more emotionally receptive to the story. Try and see the difference between how music sounds and the function it provides; the job it does.

Can you do it by Friday?

The pressure to turn it around in an implausibly short length of time creates the kind of panic and stress which can often create great music. The pitifully short amount of time given to most film composers and the stress this creates is a permanent factor of the industry. It is the stuff of legend. The need to write quickly can lead to the kind of commodification and formula which many criticise but which has given film music an identity which has made it more popular than ever. The sheer pressure, tension and anxiety created when a composer is working to a tight deadline can often be the catalyst that induces the mind to create great music.