

Using film music in the classroom



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Introduction

There are many approaches to using film music in the classroom, including:

- a focus on pupil experience;
- a focus on the structure of composition;
- a focus on the relationship between music and image;

This course will explore some of these approaches through various activities.

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand methods of introducing film music to secondary school pupils
- understand how the concept of music accompanying image can be applied to skills of composition
- understand how to develop techniques of appraising and analysing film music through classroom activities.

1 Overview

1.1 Experiencing film music

People hear and experience film music differently, and it is important to respect and explore this subjectivity. No answer is wrong, but merely representative of different cultural perceptions.

‘All that I can say about my method in writing music for films is that it is intensely personal. I work completely emotionally. I cannot intellectualize about the role of music in film. I decide if it should be there purely by my emotions.’

Jerry Goldsmith, composer for *Alien* (1979), *The Sum of All Fears* (2002) and the *Star Trek* films (1979–2002), quoted in Thomas, T. (1991) *Film Score: The Art and Craft of Movie Music*, Burbank, CA, Riverwood Press, p. 293.

‘In my mind's eye I create themes for the principal characters. I then begin to consider the all-important matter of timing the pace of the film – to speed up gradually towards the climax.’

Max Steiner, composer for *King Kong* (1933), *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Now, Voyager* (1942), quoted in Daubney, K. (2000) *Max Steiner's Now Voyager: A Film Score Guide*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, p. 51.

Film musicologists are still developing definitive approaches to interpreting film music, drawing on filmic, musicological and even sociological models to explore the relationship between what we see and what we hear. An important starting point in the classroom is to establish that the pupils are actually hearing the music in the soundtrack. Often there is so much to look at that music remains ‘unheard’.

Throughout this course, reference is made to a number of pieces of film music. It would be advisable to obtain all the clips you intend to use beforehand. The recommended clips are:

- one item each from lists A and B from *Suggested extracts* in Activity 1
- the *James Bond* theme
- Hedwig's theme from *Harry Potter*
- the *Jaws* theme
- *Fantasia*
- the music from the ski sequence from the *Spy Who Loved Me*
- the music from the garage scene from *Tomorrow Never Dies*.

Have a look now at **Activity 1** , which introduces pupils to the challenges of listening.

Activity 1

Click 'View document' to open Suggested extracts

[View document](#)

Click 'View document' to open Experiencing film music

[View document](#)

Click on the second 'View document' link above and choose two contrasting film extracts from the list *Suggested extracts* and play them for your pupils. Extracts from List A should be more easily heard, described and remembered by pupils than those from List B. Click again on the Text icon above and have a look at the question sheet *Experiencing film music*, which will give you a framework for directing discussion. Bear in mind that some pupils may hear the music in ways you do not expect, so be prepared to draw out their experience to stimulate discussion.

1.2. Motifs and memorability

One of the reasons that we find film music memorable is that it uses distinctive melodic motifs to 'catch' the main characters it describes. The James Bond theme is a good example of this, but a modern composer who has had great success with memorable motifs in all his scores is John Williams (*Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*). Click here to read an interview with Williams from 1998.

'[We can] take themes and reshape them and put them in a major key, minor key, fast, slow, up, down, inverted, attenuated and crushed, and all the permutations that you can put a scene and a musical conception through.'

John Williams on *Star Wars*, quoted in Thomas, T. (1991) *Film Score: The Art and Craft of Movie Music*, Burbank, CA, Riverwood Press, pp. 334–335.

Activity 2 has components suitable for younger and older pupils to explore their abilities to identify and interpret memorable film music motifs. For younger pupils it will be enough to link instruments, rhythm, and tempo to how they feel about the characters. For older pupils, the activity explores how motif design reflects character personality.

With the activity for older pupils, you may also like to click on the icons below and use the video extracts from an interview with George Fenton, composer on *Gandhi* (1982), *Memphis Belle* (1990), *Anna and the King* (1999) and *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002).

Click "play" below to watch George Fenton discuss musical ideas for film scores.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 1](#)

Click "play" below to discover how George Fenton creates a theme.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 2](#)

Click "play" below to learn about the type of theme created and hear the tune with harmonies.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 3](#)

Click "play" below to learn how George Fenton inserts tension into the theme he has written.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 4](#)

Click "play" below to hear the first variation of the original theme.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 5](#)

Click "play" below to hear the second variation.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 6](#)

Activity 2

Part 1 (all pupils)

Play the main character motifs from a number of films (such as the *James Bond* theme, Hedwig's theme from *Harry Potter*, or the *Jaws* theme) to pupils. Ask them to write down the type of character or film which they think the motif might be associated with. Afterwards you can name the films and characters for each motif.

Part 2 (younger pupils)

Ask pupils to identify some of the qualities of the motifs that make them effective in those films, e.g. what is sinister about the *Jaws* theme? What is energetic and driving about the *James Bond* theme? What is mysterious about the music from *Harry Potter*?

Part 2 (older pupils)

Develop with pupils a list of four qualities for each key character.

Part 3 (older pupils)

Discuss with pupils the motif designs, concentrating on interval size, rhythmic patterns, diatonic/chromatic language, major/minor modes, range of pitches, and repetition of motifs in the theme.

Part 4 (older pupils)

Finally, ask pupils to match qualities of the character with design features of their motif (you may like to use the sample answers given here as a basis for developing your own answers).

Click 'View document' below to open Film music motifs – indicative answer sheet

[View document](#)

1 3. From experience to interpretation

In almost all films, the visual story is completed first, dialogue and sound effects are then added and music is composed last of all. However, when Disney made the animated film *Fantasia* in 1940, they reversed the process, producing animations based on pieces of classical music. You may like to look at the Disney archives website, or read some information about the making of *Fantasia* from the Disney family museum website.

At the time, this was thought of as a way to popularise classical music, and to make audiences more comfortable with hearing music in films. The earliest audiences were often confused about where the music was coming from, especially if they couldn't see an orchestra.

Activity 3 imitates Disney's *Fantasia* process to help pupils analyse different expressive musical elements. A segment of music from *Fantasia* is a good basis for the activity. You might like to finish the activity by comparing pupil responses with the original film scene.

Activity 3

Click 'View document' to open Storyboard worksheet

[View document](#)

Choose a piece of film music from a soundtrack album (preferably without voice over) of about two minutes in length. An effective choice would include a change of melody, mood or tempo in the middle. Play this piece of music to the pupils several times and ask them either to:

- draw up a storyboard (click on the link above for a storyboard worksheet) or
- write a short scene or
- write a short piece of prose to describe the action for this music.

Then share the outcomes, asking pupils to read their prose or scene aloud, or lead through the pictures on their storyboard. Ask pupils to compare with each other how they responded to mood, tempo, and significant moments in the piece.

1 4. Making the music fit the film

It is a huge step from identifying how music can be expressive, to composing music which captures the essence of the visual images, mood and action of a story. Composers such as David Arnold constantly stress how personal their response to the finished film is, but they still manage to guide our expectations and we feel uncomfortable if the music is 'wrong' somehow: too loud or quiet, expressing action too explicitly, or not saying enough.

Click on the first link below to watch a video extract from an interview with Marvin Hamlisch, who gives his account of writing the music for the famous skiing sequence in *The Spy Who Loved Me*, click the second link below to watch this scene.

An extract from an interview with Marvin Hamlisch.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 7](#)

The famous skiing sequence from *The Spy Who Loved Me*.

Video content is not available in this format.

If you have access to copies of the Bond films, watch the skiing sequence in *The Spy Who Loved Me* and compare it with the sequence in the more recent Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* in which the car escapes from the garage. This later sequence sounds more modern, because the composer David Arnold has been influenced by contemporary popular music, just as Marvin Hamlisch was 20 years previously. So not only do composers produce a personal response to the film, but they must also decide how their music is going to reflect both their personal era and that of the film. This affects the audience too, and again influences how much we hear of the music.

For other examples of composers who have brought contemporary popular influences into their scoring, click on 'View document' below.

Click 'View document' to open Suggested extracts using contemporary popular music

[View document](#)

This activity establishes a link between listening to film music and composing it. In

Activity 4, pupils can build on what they did in [Activity 2](#), changing a motif to symbolise different moods or to reflect different musical styles.

Activity 4

Part 1

Using a simple melody, such as *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, improvise variations at the keyboard to show the effect of different musical elements on our experience of the theme, e.g. use major and minor, loud and quiet, dotted rhythms and even ones, range of pitch, or chromatic embellishment to demonstrate mood, emotion, or action.

Now do either Part 2 **or** Part 3.

Part 2

Ask pupils to use instruments to develop different interpretations of a motif to reflect different personality traits. For the motif you could use something as simple as a scale, or a more complicated phrase you choose yourself, depending on the class. For personality traits, you can use the qualities from Activity 2, or you can provide a list of your own.

Part 3

If you have done work on different styles of popular music, for example Latin American, rock'n'roll or blues, you could link it into this activity. Ask pupils to develop a chosen motif in different popular styles to reflect particular influences.

1 5 Composing for film

1.5.1 Different ways of working

Composing for an entire film is an intense and intensive experience, which must usually be completed in a very short time. Composers are always the last people to work on a

film, and cannot begin writing the score until the final edit of the film is ready, often only a few weeks before the film is to be released.

Composers work in many different ways: David Arnold (the current James Bond composer) uses an electronic keyboard and computers to record and manipulate his ideas, which are orchestrated later. This is very different from the traditional method of writing directly onto paper by hand, either in a 'short score' of four staves which is orchestrated later, or straight into a full orchestral score. Many composers improvise at the piano or keyboard to begin with, then notate as their ideas become more refined, using music technology to produce a clear final score. Composers must also deal with the exact timing and synchronisation of their music with details in the film's visual images. Click on the link below to have a look at a section of a score by composer Miguel Mera from the short film *The Goodbye Plane*. This is a fully orchestrated segment, with references to visual cues.

Click 'View document' to look at the score

[View document](#)

Activity 5 explores the relationship between visual stimulation and compositional process. It is quite a large project, but is best completed during one session, particularly if pupils are not confident in notating their work in any form, conventional, symbolic or otherwise.

Activity 5

Using a short two minute extract you have chosen from a documentary or other film without soundtrack, ask pupils working in small groups to develop a piece of music to accompany the extract. They should explore matching mood, emotion, physical action and characterisation, and when music begins and ends. They should also explore musical language: mode, melody, rhythm, genre and instrumentation.

Pupils should then perform their compositions to the other groups and they should discuss their responses to their compositions together.

Finally, have a look at *Resources* in Section 5.2.

1.5.2 Resources

Resources on film music can be difficult to come by. There has been a gradual increase in the range and number of books available, and the bibliography you can get by clicking on the link below should help guide you towards useful texts.

Click 'View document' to open Indicative film music bibliography

[View document](#)

Soundtrack albums are now released for many films, and DVDs occasionally include composer interviews. There are a number of useful reference and electronic journal sites on the internet, listed via this link, and there are several 'composer appreciation' fan-sites also. Obtaining original scores is extremely difficult, even for film music scholars, as they are kept by studios and by university archives, mostly in the United States. However, some British and American film music has been written into orchestral suites which are available through music publishers.

Conclusion

This course has explored the ways in which moving and still images may motivate and inspire pupils in their understanding of music. You may find it helpful to share your experiences of using images with your peers, perhaps through a short presentation to your department.

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References

Thomas, T. (1991) *Film Score: The Art and Craft of Movie Music* (Burbank, CA, Riverwood Press) p. 293.

Daubney, K. *Max Steiner's Now, Voyager: A Film Score Guide* (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press) p. 51

Marvin Hamlisch quote: extract from DE353/14, OU film no. 517, p. 6

Acknowledgements

This course was originally prepared for TeachandLearn.net by Dr Kate Daubney, Visiting Research Fellow in Film Music Studies at the University of Leeds. She has taught film music to students from musical and non-musical backgrounds, and her research interests include comparative analysis of film music as written and aural texts.

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Score of 'The Goodbye Plane': Courtesy of Miguel Mera and Newhaven Pictures, Director David Bartlett

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