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## Cue the Music: Music in Movies

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The Music We Watch

Kelsey De Pree  
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Music is universal. It is present from the beginning of history appearing in all cultures, nations, economic classes, and styles. Music in America is heard on radios, in cars, on phones, and in stores. Television commercials feature jingles so viewers can remember the products; radio ads sing phone numbers so that listeners can recall them. In schools, students sing songs to learn subjects like math, history, and English, and also to learn about general knowledge like the days of the week, months of the year, and presidents of the United States.

With the amount of music that is available, it is not surprising that music has also made its way into movie theatres and has become one of the primary agents for conveying emotion and plot during a cinematic production. Because of its extreme versatility music is the ideal medium for such an entertainment form. Composers can use music that is very familiar and therefore relatable to the audience or they can choose to write music that is out of reach, ethereal, and full of fantasy.

Movies sit at the center of American entertainment because of the compelling stories they communicate. Music in movies has a significant impact on the viewer's perception of what is happening by providing musical cues about characters, moods, and plot foreshadowing. Movie communication occurs not only through watching the story but, also, by hearing it. It is the movie music that takes the audience out of their seats and emotionally into the narrative that is unfolding before their eyes.

Depending on the movie, the composer may choose to compose, borrow, or arrange for a film score. These choices cannot be made lightly because they drive narrative success. The goal of a movie soundtrack is to be as authentic and unstilted as possible. However, authentic doesn't

always mean original musical ideas or material. Especially in Western cultures, and specifically the United States, movie soundtracks embrace kitsch.

Kitschy, as a term derived to describe the arts when used for entertainment, is the idea that something is of low quality yet still amusing to many people.<sup>1</sup> While this term is often used negatively, in reality, movie music thrives because of its ability to effectively utilize music that some consider kitschy. Kitsch in soundtracks is playing certain instruments and sounds that people associate with certain emotions, cultures, or situations like Native Americans, war, love, and, joy. The point isn't necessarily to be aurally authentic but to be recognizable.

Movie music must be somewhat predictable because its function is to carry the audience between emotional extremes. One scene may be happy and serene but the very next scene takes place in the middle of a horrific war sequence. Emotionally, an audience cannot move between these two extremes as fast as they can visually absorb them. In these situations, music is essential because it bridges this emotional gap much faster than dialogue or visual stimulation. Musical cues help shape and control the audience perception of the story and drive audience interpretation of any given film. When an audience can aurally connect a situation to the action on the screen the switch in emotions is much faster, which is ideal for the pace of most movies.

Music is crucial to movies because, though music is a fundamental part of life, there is no natural soundtrack playing as humans go about their days. In other words, films portray life narratives, they are not actually real life and the music in them is for the benefit of the audience. Movie soundtracks are created for the purpose of supporting and

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Online Dictionary, 11th ed, Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003.

explaining a narrative. The characters in movies are often not even aware that there is music playing. The emotional highs and lows conveyed by movie music are therefore somewhat artificial. "Yet despite the artificiality of the musical score in comparison with everyday life, audiences have come to accept film music as an integral part of what it means to watch a film. Films that fail to use much music or fail to use it well often have a problem involving the audience as completely as films that embrace music as a tool that can expose the inner feelings and thoughts of characters and can shape the way that viewers feel about what's happening on screen."<sup>2</sup>

Even the semi-artificial music becomes new, invigorating and exciting when it is part of a cinematic experience. Music in movies functions with a very clearly defined goal and serves a specific purpose. "Music is making an argument or working to convince or persuade the audience."<sup>3</sup> Movie music works on several levels to affect the overall storyline of the movie. As this author points out, there is a strong tradition of connection between music and movies. In fact, this marriage of music and motion picture became very normal and expected especially after music was incorporated into silent films around. "With the advent of film scoring and ultimately synchronized sound, we begin to have, for the first time on screen, a fixed and permanent association between music and image."<sup>4</sup>

The correlation between the music and the emotional experience of watching the movie is undeniable. Music in movies plays a significant role and has a powerful impact on the viewer's

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<sup>2</sup> Jessica Green, "Understanding the Score: Film Music Communicating to and Influencing the Audience." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44, no. 4 (2010): 81  
doi:10.5406/jaesteduc.44.4.0081.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>4</sup> Melanie Lowe, "Claiming Amadeus: Classical Feedback in American Media," *American Music* 20, no. 1 (2002): 102-19. doi:10.2307/3052244.

perception of what is happening by providing musical cues about characters, expected emotional moods, and also by foreshadowing certain elements of the plot. Music suspends or advances plot lines by hinting toward situational outcomes, defines and introduces characters through the use of themes, and leitmotifs, and serves as transitional background between scenes.<sup>5</sup>

Each aspect of the roles of film music has a distinct purpose for movie viewers. First, it provides cues for the plot and foreshadows events that come later in the film. Sometimes this foreshadowing is directly before events and sometimes it foreshadows something that takes place much later. There are many examples of this type of music usage.

The opening scene to the 2006 movie *Déjà vu* shows the triumphant return of several hundred navy sailors. The sailors are accompanied by their families and are returning to their homes. Everyone is jubilant and merry as they board a ferryboat to head across a river. Visually, there are cues indicating there may be more going on than initially appears. The action all takes place in slow motion and the joyful expressions on the faces of everyone are brought into hyper focus. Though there are strong visual cues, which hint that this is no ordinary celebration, the strongest cue that something is amiss is in the musical scoring of this particular scene.

There are a lot of extra-musical sounds like camera lenses adjusting, along with long-held harmonic pitches that accompany the opening credits. When the scene begins and the sailors start to appear, a repetitive motive of So-Lay-May-Ray-May-Do (D, E-flat, B-flat, A, B-flat, G) in G

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<sup>5</sup> Melanie Lowe, "Claiming Amadeus: Classical Feedback in American Media," *American Music* 20, no. 1 (2002): 86. doi:10.2307/3052244.

minor can be heard being played by the low strings. <sup>6</sup> This motive plays over the percussion, which is in constant pounding motion. The consistent repetition in the percussion coupled with the repetitive minor motive in the low strings signals to an unknown but impending doom, which belies all the happy faces on the screen. When, only a few moments later, disaster strikes the ferry on which everyone is celebrating, this ominous music is visually explained and the soundtrack makes sense.

This is the common trend for movies. Instead of implicitly stating to the viewer that something is going to go wrong, the music acts as a powerful plot-suggesting and story-telling device. Often, the foreshadowing creates a disconnect for viewers, between what is seen and what is heard, that drives them to pay attention to the story to ascertain how it will end. The music itself begins to point toward conclusion.

Soundtrack music is also used to foreshadow plots by giving aural cues during an otherwise neutral scene. A neutral movie scene is one that can be interpreted several different ways in the absence of any leading verbal or aural cues. The music allows the viewers to form an opinion about what will occur next. A person walking through the streets is one example of a neutral scene. Depending on the music the audience can be led to think a multitude of different things about such a movie sequence. This technique has been used in many movies. One of the most famous directors to utilize this technique was Alfred Hitchcock. “The films of Alfred Hitchcock provide many such examples of this technique in which ominous music may be

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<sup>6</sup> Harry Gregson-Williams, “Algiers Ferry.” *Déjà vu*, Hollywood Records, Touchstone Pictures, Jerry Bruckheimer films, and Scott Free Productions, (2006)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeYwtUVkgUY>

played at the onset of a seemingly innocent scene of birds flying about a town square.”<sup>7</sup> In these movies, and many others like it, the expectations for disaster are given entirely through the soundtrack.

The music used in these types of scenes is chosen for its emotional drive. Because music is so tied to the emotions, especially in movies, directors will choose music that will take the audience from one emotional feeling to the other quicker than dialogue can. Love scenes are often accompanied by music that conveys love. Stringed instruments with lush full harmony and soothing melodies are ideal for these situations. When there is a lot of death in a movie, the music tends to convey despair and often, the notes are played for longer periods of time. Eighth notes become whole notes and tempos slow down during sad musical segments.

In the absence of such leading music, neutral scenes can become very confusing to an audience. There have been multiple studies done to research this exact phenomenon. Many experimentalists wanted to test the influence of music on movie viewers. In one such experiment, three movie clips, from three different movies, were selected. Each clip was a scene leading up to an event but the clips were shown without their conclusions. The question in this experiment was “How does the presence of music influence the interpretation of the unfolding story and those aspects of the film that are selectively attended to and subsequently remembered?”<sup>8</sup>

Each of the three movies was chosen because they were not familiar to college-aged students. The music that normally accompanies these three clips was replaced by music wholly unconnected to the original films. Once the music had been manipulated, the group was split into

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<sup>7</sup> Marilyn G. Boltz, "Musical Soundtracks as a Schematic Influence on the Cognitive Processing of Filmed Events." *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 18, no. 4 (2001): 428. doi:10.1525/mp.2001.18.4.427.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 428.



three groups. One group saw each movie clip with positive and happy music, one group watched each movie clip with negative and intense music and one group watched each clip in the absence of music. The group that watched the clips with the positive music had an overwhelmingly positive impression of the outcome of each of the clips. Likewise, the group who watched the clips with the negative music had a negative impression of the outcomes of each clip. The group with no music was split almost evenly. Two of the clips with no music were deemed negative and one positive but the conviction of the watchers was not nearly as strong as it was when the clips were accompanied by music. The researchers concluded then that music does indeed play a role in movie watching and in particular as an agent in telling and foreshadowing the story to the viewer.<sup>9</sup>

There are also many classic movie motifs that are used as foreshadowing devices. One of the most iconic is the riff So-Lay-So-Lay-So-Lay-So-Lay-So-Lay-Fa-So-So-Lay-Fa-So (E, F, E, F, E, F, E, F, E, F, D, E, E, F, D, E) repeated over and over in A minor.<sup>10</sup> Every time there is a Fa in the music there is a percussion hit. This is the riff from the movie 1975 movie *Jaws*. This particular musical motif has become so well known that the within the opening couple repetitions of the notes, most people can identify what is playing. In the movie itself, this riff always precedes someone dying so people who watched this film quickly associated this musical motif with disaster. Even though the shark, the one doing the killing, is not seen until much later in the film, the expectation for its attack was set in stone. By the time the monster does make an

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<sup>9</sup> Marilyn G. Boltz, "Musical Soundtracks as a Schematic Influence on the Cognitive Processing of Filmed Events," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 18, no. 4 (2001): 428. doi:10.1525/mp.2001.18.4.427.

<sup>10</sup> John Williams, "Jaws Main Theme" *Jaws*, John Williams, *MCA Records album*, (1975) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvCI-gNK\\_y4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvCI-gNK_y4)

appearance, the audience has made the musical association enough times that the shark doesn't seem at all out of place with the flow of drama.

In addition to providing foreshadowing of the plot, movie soundtracks alert the audience to certain characters as well as their intentions. Linking characters to music is not a new concept in film and is almost expected by audiences. So how does music in movies provide musical cues signaling characters, emotions, and their intentions?

One of the main ways to signal to the audience that a certain character is coming is by using a musical motif or. A motif is a short melodic idea, often one that comes back repeatedly. A musical motif as a way of alerting the movie audience to characters is a commonly used cinematic device. The ideal of motifs is not a new one. It actually began back at the end of the nineteenth century. Richard Wagner was a composer who was well known for his use of leitmotifs. In fact, it was he who made them popular in theatre settings. Like a motif, Leitmotifs are musical ideas but they are specifically connected to a character, and Leitmotifs could symbolize just about anything; moods, objects, places, ideas, or mindsets. In movies, motifs and themes are treated like leitmotifs a good deal.

Wagner's leitmotifs would be linked to a particular opera character and would change as that character developed. Throughout the narrative, these leitmotifs would reappear and alert the audience that a certain character was making another entrance or perhaps changing moods.

Upon their return leitmotifs could be altered by many things such as rhythm, by intervals, by which part of the orchestra played them, and by accompanying harmony. Wagnerian leitmotifs could be added to each other if multiple characters were present or they could be played alone.

Between the leitmotifs of Wagner's day and the modern movie motifs there are a few distinct differences. The motifs of movies today are, for the most part, unaltered each time they are heard. Once a character theme is played, it will remain the same throughout the film. This provides a strong connection between character and music. Film motifs are also less complicated than the leitmotifs of Wagner's era. While Wagner used his music to symbolize metaphysical implications of plot and motive, modern film scores use motifs as character signposting and cueing.

Despite these differences, modern film composers have indeed utilized the idea of leitmotifs as an ideal film score component. One of the composers well known for this musical technique is John Williams in his *Star Wars* movies. Williams heavily uses motifs with almost every main character featuring a different motif. In addition to the motifs Williams also uses overscoring. Overscoring is the reuse of music that has already been heard before in the movie. Instead of sounding gimmicky, this tactic worked very well for these movies. The motifs Williams used were immediately linked to good or bad characters so that when audiences heard certain motifs, they began to expect certain characters to make an appearance.

Some of these well-known *Star Wars* motifs include Princess Leia's theme, The Imperial March, which is known as Darth Vader's Theme, and the Love motifs for Han Solo and Leia. Each motif is not only linked to a character but also to a side of the fight. This allows Williams to shape the overall score of the movie using these motifs to aurally show which side is winning. In *A New Hope*, the Obi-Wan theme is the dominant motif heard indicating that the Rebels are winning. The exact reverse is true for *The Empire Strikes Back* where Darth Vader's Theme is played prominently throughout the entire film. *The Return of the Jedi* has all the themes equally

represented conveying that there is no way to tell which side will win out in the end until good triumphs near the conclusion of the film.<sup>11</sup>

*Star Wars* is not the only movie franchise in which musical motifs are used. Many movies have adopted this method because it is an easy way for the audience to anticipate a character. Motifs can also tell you a little bit about the character they are connected to. Harry Gregson-Williams uses motifs in the Narnia movie *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The violins play Do-Mi-Do-Fa...Re-Re-Fa-Mi...Mi-Re-Mi-Fa...La-So-Fa-Mi (C, E, D, F... D, D, F, E... E, D, E, F... A, G, F, E)<sup>12</sup> The sound of this particular theme is Celtic in nature and the tempo is slow. Though this particular theme continues for a while, fans recognize Lucy meets Mr. Tumnus or Tumnus' Theme within the first couple groups of notes. This is not a fast motif and, though it is set in the key of C major, it is not particularly joyful. Tumnus' character, especially when Lucy first meets him, is a conflicted character and rather sad. He is in the service of the evil figurehead, the White Witch, when Lucy meets him and, though a nice character, he has evil intentions. This is conveyed by his complicated theme.

Usually a motif will indicate a single character. Film music, however, doesn't always fit these constraints. Sometimes, a theme can represent a group of people, not simply a single individual. One example of such a theme is the Fellowship Theme from the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Originally used to be a representation the fellowship, "The Fellowship theme" is the well-known Do-Tay-Tay-Tay-Do...Fa-So-Lay-So-Fa-May-Fa-So-Fa...May-Ray-Do-Tay-Tay-

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<sup>11</sup> Irena Paulus, "Williams versus Wagner or an Attempt at Linking Musical Epics." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 31, no. 2 (2000): 159. doi:10.2307/3108403.

<sup>12</sup> Harry Gregson-Williams, "Lucy Meets Mr. Tumnus" *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Harry Gregson-Williams, Andrew Adamson, Mike Elizondo, Walt Disney Records (2005) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HSrMpFQkpM>

Tay-Do (Which is D, C, C, D...G, A, B-flat, A, G, F, G, A, G...F, E, D, C, C, C, D) in D minor. This particular theme reoccurs every time the Fellowship is present and represents each of the nine members. Aurally, this is not a sad motif, sounding heroic and triumphant rather than sad, despite being set in a minor key. This heroic theme clearly indicates to the viewers that these nine people are the good characters with honorable intentions.

The subject of music signaling character intentions and emotions was the basis for a study of research. "The main aim of the present study is to examine whether presentation of music expressing particular emotions (happiness, sadness, fear, or anger) either before or after the appearance of a film character can influence viewers' interpretations of the character's emotions."<sup>13</sup> This specific study focused on portraying four main emotions: fear, anger, sadness, and joy. The scenes chosen for analysis were neutral scenes. There was one instrumental composition chosen for each emotion, three songs total, and each of these songs were used for each of the selected clips giving thirty-two total variants to watch. Often in movies, the focus of the viewer is not on the music itself but the movie. The music is heard first and is somewhat unconsciously processed by the brain before the scene begins. To create a similar affect, all the participants in this study were given other things to do like draw or work on puzzles. While they were involved in these activities, the music would begin. The goal was to have the musical effect take place without a conscious effort to hear it being made by the viewers.

The results were pretty much as expected in all categories. The participants that heard the happy music before and after the movie clips recorded that the character in the movie clips were

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<sup>13</sup> Siu-Lan Tan, Matthew P. Spackman, and Matthew A. Bezdek, "Viewers' Interpretations of Film Characters' Emotions: Effects of Presenting Film Music Before or After a Character Is Shown." *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 25, no. 2 (2007): 138. doi:10.1525/mp.2007.25.2.135.

happy even though they were not paying attention during the opening of the music but merely processing it. This was true overwhelmingly in all the categories except fear. Fear was the hardest emotion to accurately discern. Nevertheless, the researchers determined that music does play a significant role in how viewers see characters and their emotions.

Music is a powerful story telling agent in movies. Its versatility is seen over and over again in film soundtracks. But in addition to serving as a certain theme or character motif, music is also used to aid in the setting of a film. What typical musical devices, (intervals, instruments, musical progression, and chords) are used to signal different movie moods, settings, and events?

One of the first things music does in film is help set the mood and location where the story will be taking place. "Music suggests the possibility of another reality: a world or universe more beautiful, more harmonic, more brilliant than ours."<sup>14</sup> Fantasy in general is a genre of movie where the setting is crucial to the story. The characters, places, and sometimes the language, take the viewer outside of this world and into another. The music is the piece that makes this transition complete. When the aural and visual work together to create a world unlike that which the audience can hear or see on earth, the otherworldly experience can be enjoyed.

Fantasy music is often majestic and broad in nature consisting of full orchestras playing at high volumes. Fantasy music is composed to paint a vast picture to the viewer. The idea is to create a world that is nothing like what humans can experience. This music is also only for the viewers or non-diegetic. This means that the characters themselves do not hear the music and are not supposed to be playing it.

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<sup>14</sup> Isabella Van Elferen, "Fantasy Music: Epic Soundtracks, Magical Instruments, Musical Metaphysics." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 24, no. 1 (2013): 4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24352902>.

“Majestic environments painted for the eyes of fantasy readers become visible and audible in film, television and games. Viewers marvel at the beauty of forests and hill slopes, or at the brooding vastness of outer space while being thrilled by the soundscapes that these new lands generate. Epic music sweeps and thunders its intricate melodies and rich harmonies over impressive visuals, irresistibly drawing the audience into the mythical world depicted onscreen.”<sup>15</sup>

It is non-diegetic music that pushes the audience to the different emotions and feelings as well as providing character cues. Soundtracks known as epic soundtracks often accompany fantasy movies. Epic soundtracks use full orchestras that play different timbres and colors. Like the lands this music describes, these soundtracks are full of musical contrasts between full orchestra and one section. It is not uncommon to hear heavy percussion and loud brass in one section and then a few violins or a flute solo in the next.

“It was developed in film soundtrack composing by musicians such as, most prominently, John Williams, who composed the epic soundtrack for the *Star Wars* saga; Williams’ approach was followed by composers like Harry Gregson-Williams (e.g., *Chronicles of Narnia*), Howard Shore (e.g., *Lord of the Rings*), and Hans Zimmer (e.g., *Inception*). It has also been used in animation film soundtracks like John Powell’s successful scores for *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) and in television soundtracks like Rob Lane and Rohan Stevenson’s score for the BBC series *Merlin* (2008-2013).”<sup>16</sup> These soundtracks have each their own iconic and recognizable sounds and have become classics in the film industry world of fantasy.

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<sup>15</sup> Isabella Van Elferen, "Fantasy Music: Epic Soundtracks, Magical Instruments, Musical Metaphysics." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 24, no. 1 (2013): 5. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24352902>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

Howard Shore in his orchestration of the *Lord of the Rings* series capitalizes on the familiar to make his other world more authentic. The music is a classic example of a fantasy film soundtrack. “Shore’s musical scores help to highlight the mythic character of Tolkien’s narrative...It adds emotional and intellectual feeling to the visual images, pointing particular attention to specific scenes and representing the tensions built or released as the narrative and visual images unfold. <sup>17</sup> Within this mythic aspect are relatable musical forms like folk style pieces.

All the music of *Lord of the Rings* is connected and consistent. This is another powerful tool for composition of a world. If the music remains the same especially within a series, then audiences can make an automatic connection between the storylines. “Like Williams' scores for *Star Wars*, the scores to all three films are composed as one overarching composition, with consistent leitmotifs identifying characters and situations throughout and thus reinforcing the epic feeling that all the events in Middle-earth are interconnected.” <sup>18</sup>

One of the opening scenes of the *Fellowship of the Ring* features bright sunshine and happy hobbits. The soundtrack for this section is bright and somewhat Celtic in nature giving the impression of a folk tune but also a merry place where peace and frivolity are a normal part of everyday life. The music has a lot of staccatos and pauses that sound playful and full of joy. The melody uses a rhythm that switches between sixteenth notes and eighth notes. This also lends to the happy-go-lucky feel of the mood. <sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Isabella Van Elferen, "Fantasy Music: Epic Soundtracks, Magical Instruments, Musical Metaphysics." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 24, no. 1 (2013): 44-45.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24352902>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>19</sup> Shore, Howard. “Concerning Hobbits.” *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. Shore, Howard. Reprise Records (2002) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGaz\\_qN0cw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGaz_qN0cw)



In fact, the fantasy world in the *Lord of the Rings* is so well established that each location has its own theme and therefore, its own emotion for the audience to associate with the people there. These distinct sounds are the result of specific instrument choices for each location. Shire sound is decidedly Celtic achieved by the tin whistle which has a long association with Celtic culture in movies. The Shire is also very folk-like which is accomplished with the sounds of the fiddle and the accordion.

Mordor is the exact opposite. Pounding low drums and sharp chromatic repetitions on strings as well as screams and forte dynamics create the sounds of chaos, pain, and evil. Rohan is the lonely kingdom of the conflicted king Théoden. Its territory stretches out of vast green hills and plains. This open iconic sound is played by the Hardanger fiddle. This Norwegian instrument is similar to violin except it has eight or nine strings; four stacked on top of the other ones. The bottom sympathetic strings vibrate when the top strings are played creating a distinct, open, resonant sound. Lastly, the two elf realms of Rivendell and Lothlorien are musically distinct from one another. Rivendell uses clarinets and strings to form lush consonant melodies that sound like romantic composers and Lothlorien features tremolo on the violins, low instruments like tubas as well as the high ethereal, voices of the choir reminiscent of the Gregorian chants of the Renaissance.<sup>20</sup>

Fantasy movies aren't the only genres of movie that use music to set the mood. Every movie uses music to bring the audience into a time period. And the music doesn't always have to be composed for the particular film. Period movies often employ classical music to set the tone for their characters. Jane Austen adaptations like *Pride and Prejudice*, movies about specific

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<sup>20</sup> Isabella Van Elferen, "Fantasy Music: Epic Soundtracks, Magical Instruments, Musical Metaphysics." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 24, no. 1 (2013): 7-8.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24352902>.

composers, and movies where the characters are supposed to be high society will use classical music to set a mood of sophistication. Modern movies are not exempt from this trend; classic songs like Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 14 ("Moonlight Sonata") and other slower classical songs are used to set the mood for funerals. Carl Orff's, "O Fortuna" from *Carmina Burana* is used to add intensity and drama to many movie scenes including the 1992 film *The Last of the Mohicans*, the 1994 film trailer for *Léon the Professional*, and 2003 movie *Cheaper by the Dozen*. Classical music is everywhere and most Americans know pieces like *The Ride of the Valkyries*, *The Blue Danube*, *Atmospheres*, And *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* because of movies. 21

Movie music enhances moods and characters so well that certain sounds have a permanent association with them regardless of whether or not they are accurate. "We all know what 'Indian music,' battle music and romance music sound like in the movies; we know that a standard forties film will choose to introduce its seductress on the screen by means of a sultry saxophone playing a Gershwin-esque melody...music, cultural codes of music are interdependent with cinematic codes. "Indian music," battle music, romance music, and seductress music have all been codified by the viewing experience." 22

One thing that has a very iconic sound in movies is war. War is intense and the music often portrays this. Low drums start with a pounding rhythm usually sixteenth notes. There is a driving melody played on the strings and on top, a slower melody is often overlapped also played by strings. These forces create a sound that is iconic for movie wars. In *Hacksaw Ridge* this underlying driving melody is thirty-second notes playing Ray-Fa-Mi-So (E, G, F-sharp, A) in D major repeated over and over again as the quarter-note melody of La-Fa-So-Do-Ti-So-La (B, G,

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21 Melanie Lowe, "Claiming Amadeus: Classical Feedback in American Media." *American Music* 20, no. 1 (2002): 102-19. doi:10.2307/3052244.

22 Ibid., 106 -107.

A, D, C-sharp, A, B) plays over the top also in D major.<sup>23</sup> Almost this exact same melodic pattern can be seen in a very different war sequence. “The Battle” from the *Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* has a very similar driving melody to the one in *Hacksaw Ridge*. This time the driving melody is Do-May-Do-May-Do-May-Ray-Fa (C, E-flat, C, E-flat, C, E-flat, D, F) sixteenth notes rhythm played by low the strings. The overarching melody is more complicated Do-Ray-May-Do-Ray-May-So-Fa-So-Tay- Fa (C, D, E-flat, C, D, E-flat, G, F, G, B-flat, F).<sup>24</sup> This time, the song is in they key of C minor. This melody then repeats again in F minor. Even though these are very different movies, in different key, the driving melody is nearly identical aurally. There is one difference that is quite stark. *Narnia* uses another common device for war; a choir. Choirs are used in movies to aid in the intensity of scenes, to be part of church services, and to be holiday, and funeral music.

Key signatures often set the mood as well. While there are exceptions, minor keys are usually used to portray sadness, melancholy, and loneliness and major keys represent happiness, joy, and thriving. These associations are not necessarily accurate to real life but because of films, they are expected.

It is undeniable that music has an impact on its viewers. Sometimes the complete absence of music, the established and expected norm, can also be a very effective film technique. Nor is it necessarily true that movies need music in order to be enjoyable. There are the occasional films, which enjoy wide success despite having little to no soundtrack. One of the most famous movies

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<sup>23</sup> Rupert Gregson-Williams, “Rescue Continues.” *Hacksaw Ridge*: Rupert Gregson-Williams, Abbey Road Studios (2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nF1VSpXNvfM>

<sup>24</sup> Harry Gregson-Williams, “The Battle.” *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Harry Gregson-Williams, Andrew Adamson, Mike Elizondo, Walt Disney Records, (2005) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f\\_sMuo8Lujg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_sMuo8Lujg)

to do this was the Alfred Hitchcock film *The Birds*. This film uses sound effects, not music, to convey the story. *The Birds* does have two songs that characters play or sing but other than this diegetic music there is no soundtrack. Nevertheless, the movie is compelling and the story clear. Many people have a fear of birds because of this movie and that fear is not rooted in music. The 2004 American drama *Keane* is entirely without a score. The drama of the plot is portrayed in other ways than through music.

Having movies without a score is not uncommon for other countries. In America however, this is very abnormal and often intimidating for an audience. It is interesting to note that a lot of the American films without music are horror movies or psychological thrillers. “But for the western audience, accustomed to the music of the organ or the orchestra, the absence of music would, I am certain, prove ominous and even terrifying. Moreover, profound silence demands too much of the human species, western style.”<sup>25</sup>

Even when there is a soundtrack, movies do sometimes choose to employ silence to enhance drama instead of music. Music and voices give way to silence in the aftermath of bombs in movies like the *Hunger Games*. At the height of drama when two characters are being separated, audio is often muted and the camera focuses on the faces of the actors. When a character is seriously injured, when there is a serious accident or a death, or when a character is under the influence of some force of evil there is often a lack of music. This last use for silence is present in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. When Frodo is under the influence of the ring, there is often silence or only the sound of his heartbeat instead of the music that is otherwise so prominent in this series. Grief, shock, and extreme sadness are also the emotions of silence.

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<sup>25</sup> Harry Alan Potamkin. "Music and the Movies." *The Musical Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1929): 281. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/738355>.

The last thing silence is used for is right before the occurrence of something dramatic. Sometimes, characters witness a disaster, like a car crash, death of another character, as it is coming and things warp into slow motion as all sounds cut out of the movie. Dramatic events can also be happy. Baseball films often mute music when a character hits the much-needed winning homerun and everyone is waiting to see if the ball will leave the ball park or not. Other times, when characters are in high stress situations and cannot concentrate, all movie sounds are silenced for a few seconds till the character can focus again or something happens to the character that triggers a response. In a war scene, for example, the “trigger” to respond would occur when someone fires a weapon. Each time there is movie silence the “trigger” will not only cue the character to action but also the soundtrack to begin again.

Silence is the held breath of cinema. This is a powerful tool. It conveys volumes without the need for dialogue or the proper soundtrack. But, like anything, it must be used sparingly; otherwise its potency is lost. That is one of the main differences between music and silence. Music can convey a lot of different things and effect many different moods from viewers. It is difficult, though not impossible, to overuse music as a media device. However, if too much silence is used in a movie, that also has a soundtrack, it becomes pointless and artificial.

If all this is true, is music something that movies cannot do without in order to be effective? No, there are plenty of examples of successful movies and effective films without music. Still, music has a profound impact on moviegoers. If music were imperative, there would be no way for those who can't hear to enjoy movies but if it were totally absent from film, many people would become antsy and uncomfortable.

Movie music helps to drive human emotions to certain levels at the right time for the best possible reactions to important film moments. In America, we are a culture so immersed in

music that when music is incorporated into films it doesn't seem strange to us. Music is, in fact, the perfect background sound for movies because it is extremely versatile and can be custom composed for a myriad of situations.

It is undeniable that music has a significant impact on movie viewers. Music has the ability to portray volumes with simple elements like chords, keys, and rhythms. It sets moods, explains emotions, and brings other worlds to life. An effective soundtrack can mean the difference between the success and detriment of any cinema graphic narrative. Music has a power that is unexplainable. "Where words fail, music speaks." Hans Christian Andersen once said. Indeed, music is the breath of the American movie. Without it, movies are lifeless.

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