

Composition of film music



An orchestra recording a film score with the orchestra

Film music must be understood immediately, so there is no time to develop long themes. It rarely uses conventional compositional forms such as the sonata. The principles covered here also apply to music for TV.

Film music is composed to accompany the action on screen and often uses:

- quick and abrupt changes of tempo, harmony and melody
- rapid shifts from one musical idea to the next

Film music composers often use **leitmotifs** to help build a sense of continuity. A **leitmotif** is a recurring musical idea (a melody, chord sequence, rhythm or a combination of these) which is associated with a particular idea, character or place.

Leitmotifs are manipulated to match the action and mood of a scene.

They could be altered by:

- changing the rhythm or pitch
- changing the instrumentation or accompaniment
- adding new material
- developing fragments of the idea

Examples

Leitmotifs can be found in the film scores of many film music composers including Bernard Herrmann (*Psycho*), Jerry Goldsmith (*Planet of the Apes*) and Danny Elfman (*Batman*).

Probably the best known leitmotif in film is John Williams' shark leitmotif in *Jaws*. The two notes F and F sharp, played on the low register of the cello signify something threatening and getting closer and closer.

In the opening of *Batman* there is a five-note motif which is heard at the very beginning. It is used throughout the film in various transformations.

Example - Goldfinger

The title song of the Bond film *Goldfinger* (1964) is very well-known. John Barry's music includes two striking leitmotifs. One is melodic and the other is made up of two chords.

Melodic and chordal leitmotifs

In the melodic leitmotif it rises by a fifth and then falls down a major second.

The chordal motif features an F major chord followed by a D flat major chord. The bass line falls a major third and the top line falls a semitone.

In the passage taken from the Raid on Fort Knox scene in *Goldfinger* the two leitmotifs appear.

In the passage taken from later on in *Goldfinger*, the leitmotifs have been transformed.

Music for TV

The principles covered here also apply to music for TV. The only additional considerations are TV theme tunes and advertising jingles. These have to be catchy and fit the mood or message being conveyed in a very short space of time.

Composer Michael Price talks about his approach to writing music for the screen

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Composing ideas

1. Find a picture with strong evocative imagery and compose a short piece to reflect the **mood**. Think carefully about which instruments or sounds you will use. Create a short motif which reinforces the key mood of the picture and develop the **motif** in different ways.
2. Find a **contrasting** picture which evokes a completely different mood. Use the original motif and transform it to suggest the new image.

