

SECOND EDITION

Film Music

IN FOCUS

David Ventura

Film Music in Focus provides a general introduction to music for film, covering its history, context and influences, and giving an explanation of some of the main technical practices and procedures of the industry. It is written with the music student in mind, but also takes into account the needs of film studies students and the requirements of the Creative and Media Diploma.

This chapter explores music's use in Horror, Sci-Fi and the Supernatural genres within cinema, where the soundtrack plays a particularly key role in producing the overall desired effect.



9. HORROR, SCI-FI AND THE SUPERNATURAL

These films are designed to take us out of the real world and play on our worst nightmares. They utilise the power of fear to create entertainment, catalysing our imaginations with special effects and fantastic visions. Not surprisingly, the soundtrack, combining music and sound effects, makes a critical contribution to the film's ability to produce the required audience reaction.

Jerry Goldsmith (1929–2004)

Goldsmith's music covers a wide range of styles, a substantial period of time (his career spans 1957–2004) and a variety of innovative approaches. This prolific composer received lessons from the Italian émigré Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco – who had a reputation for a delicate and refined style – and from the more traditional film composer Miklós Rózsa (see page 38). He began his musical career in television, where his improvisation and continuity skills were tested nightly, playing the music for the live TV suspense series *Climax* (1954) using a piano, organ and novachord (an early Hammond synthesiser). Consequently he learnt how to make music both economical and effective, a skill he soon applied successfully in the film industry.

For fantasy, sci-fi and horror films Goldsmith created effects that sounded electronic. However, he drew upon orchestral resources – acoustic instruments, or instruments that have been processed electronically but can still be played in 'real time'. Examples of films that feature this technique include *Alien* (1979), *Hollow Man* (2000) and *Poltergeist* (1982), and favourite devices include extreme instrumental ranges, string glissandi and harmonics, brass mutes and percussion effects. The wide spectrum of compositional techniques used by Goldsmith draws parallels with classical composers such as Stravinsky, Bartók, Berg and Debussy, but he drew greatest inspiration from contemporary film composers such as Alex North (1910–1991) and John Williams (b. 1932) (see page 81).

In *Chinatown* (1974) he deploys the unusual combination of strings, four pianos, four harps, a solo trumpet and percussion.

Planet of the Apes (1968)

This sci-fi film is set on a planet where apes are the dominant life form. The soundtrack reflects this alien environment, utilising atmospheric scoring with an abundance of percussion. Goldsmith employs ethnic instruments such as a ram's horn and various African drums, to imply the tribalism of the ape society, as well as for the purely sonic qualities they offer. He also uses effects processing to transform his sounds: for example, reverberation is added to xylophone notes and the bass flute is put through a kind of electronic harmoniser.

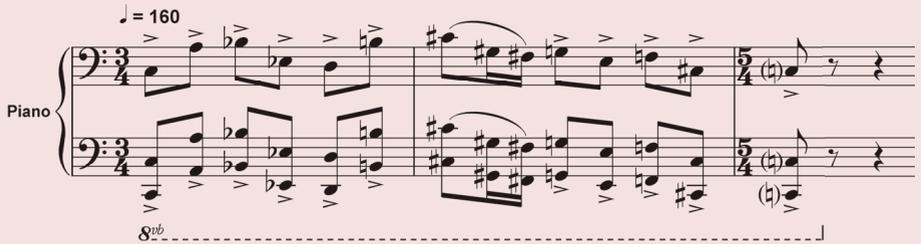
A highly chromatic motif is used, to emphasise the alien nature of the film's subject:

Goldsmith, chromatic motif from *Planet of the Apes*



The opening three notes of this (a descending minor 3rd and a rising semitone) are found throughout the film as a motto theme. The score contains little that could be described as melodic. It is mainly atonal in character, reflecting the central character, Taylor (Charlton Heston)′s feelings of frustration and entrapment. Twelve-tone motifs are embedded within the score, such as in the excerpt from ‘The Hunt’ below:

Goldsmith, ‘The Hunt’ from *Planet of the Apes*



Low-pitched piano stabbing chords and disjunctive violent phrases abound and the action moments often evoke Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* (1913) or the same composer’s neo-classical orchestral pieces that include piano (for instance, his *Symphony in Three Movements*, 1942–5). Bartók’s *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (1938) is also an influence, but Goldsmith’s music is even more violent than this, using the extremes of instrumental registers and severe dynamic contrasts.



The hunt scene

The Omen (1976)

Goldsmith held strong convictions about the role music should play within film:

'I think sometimes you can have too much music. I'm probably more conservative about it than anybody; I don't want to write more than is absolutely necessary. *Patton* had 33 minutes of music, and the movie was two and a half hours long'

(*Knowing the Score*, D Morgan, Harper Entertainment 2000).

There are many examples of the telling use of silence throughout Goldsmith's films. When, in *The Omen* (1976), Robert Thorn (Gregory Peck) and the photographer arrive in the Italian monastery, short phrases of music are punctuated by gaps, enabling the chanting of the monks to rise to the surface and enhance the overall atmosphere of the scene. In a cue later in the film, as Robert moves towards Damien (Harvey Stephens) to cut his hair (to ascertain whether he bears the incriminating '666' birthmark), the musical atmosphere is tense. Low strings creep in, accompanied by piano tone clusters.

Tone clusters are formed when a number of adjacent notes are sounded simultaneously.

A motto theme – a falling 6th (G–B \flat) – is developed throughout the film, acting almost as a leitmotif for the Thorn family and its steady disintegration. There are gradual transformations of the theme, both melodically and instrumentally. Contrast, for example, the version of the theme played during the bedroom scene, towards the beginning of the film – when Robert and Katherine (Lee Remick) share their anxieties about Damien with one another – with the version played later, when Katherine lies in her hospital bed. Here, the theme sinks chromatically, ending on a flute flutter-tongue, underscoring the words 'kill me'. Similarly, when Katherine announces her pregnancy and her desire for an abortion, a much darker version of the theme is used.

The other important motif in the film is, of course, the demonic 'Sanctus, Daemius', which uses repeated Bs. This repeated, quasi-religious chant is enhanced by church bells and, later in the film, by drums to build tension, becoming more forceful and insistent to match the increasing tension of the plot.

Goldsmith's use of tonal contrast is also worth noting. The shift from the hesitant, chromatic harp music towards the beginning of the film, when Robert is in the convent, to the sunnier, major tonality when he presents the newborn baby to his wife is typical of the composer's skill in subtle musical transformation. Again, after Damien appears to be lost by the river and is subsequently found, the scene shifts to a birthday party where a music box is playing 'Happy Birthday' in an uncomfortably unrelated key. The use of a Haydn string quartet (Op 3 no 5, second movement) as source music is also an inspired contrast to Goldsmith's frightening cue for Damien's panic attack in the church.

John Carpenter (b.1948)

Generally speaking, there have been few instances in the history of cinema when a film's director and its music composer have collaborated closely with one another. Rare examples include the Russian director Eisenstein, who worked with Prokofiev on *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and Orson Welles, who adapted his shots to correspond with the music of Bernard Herrmann in *Citizen Kane* (1941). In the case of John Carpenter, however, the relationship between film direction and music composition could hardly be closer as, for many of his productions, this imaginative director composed his own musical scores.

John Carpenter has not scored the music for all of his films, however; Ennio Morricone wrote the score for *The Thing* (1982), one of Carpenter's best-known films.

Carpenter's preference has been for horror and suspense movies, and his scores usually involve a solo piano set against synthesisers and electronic effects. Well-known films for which he directed and composed music include *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), *Halloween* (1978), *The Fog* (1980) and *Vampires* (1998).

Halloween (1978)

The opening music for this so-called 'slasher' movie contains all the basic ingredients of the simple but effective score:

Carpenter, opening music from *Halloween*

The image shows a musical score for the opening of the film *Halloween* (1978). The score is written for Piano and is in 5/4 time. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 142$. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The score consists of two systems of music. The first system has two measures, and the second system has three measures. The melody is primarily in the right hand, featuring a sequence of eighth notes and quarter notes. The bass line is primarily in the left hand, featuring a sequence of quarter notes and half notes. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Horror, sci-fi and the supernatural

There are various themes that occur whenever suspense is required. Most feature the interval of a semitone:

- Ostinato quavers as in the above theme played on piano (above)
- Rising minor 3rd and falling semitone in the bass



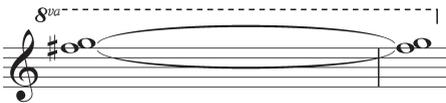
- Consecutive harmonic minor 2nds, falling by step, again on piano



- Slower quavers moving by repeated falling semitones



- Held minor 2nds on high synthesised strings.



These themes are developed sequentially downwards, extended, or played in various combinations. Even just a single note, using the same timbre, is enough to create a fright – when Annie Brackett is murdered in her car, for example.

No new musical material is introduced until the closing chase scene between Myers (Tony Moran) and the heroine Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), when a repeated, insistent bass piano note suddenly appears, impelling the action forwards.

Sound design in general plays a crucial role in *Halloween*. The sound of Myers's heavy breathing and the unsettling sounds of the night add an extra layer of tension to a film that manages to maintain an almost constant level of suspense throughout.

Vangelis (b. 1943)

This Greek composer worked in London for 12 years in a studio full of electronic equipment and percussion instruments. His film soundtracks explore the sonic landscapes which can be created with analogue synthesisers, sound-processing equipment and overdubbing techniques. In his early career he worked in progressive rock bands and went on to produce a number of solo electronic music albums. He achieved international

recognition as a composer of film music, winning numerous awards for his electronic score for *Chariots of Fire* (1981) set in the Paris Olympics of 1924. Following on from this he produced the haunting score for the cult movie *Blade Runner* (1982), working with director Ridley Scott, with whom he also produced music for the New World historical adventure *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (1992).

Blade Runner (1982)

Vangelis created a highly atmospheric soundtrack for this sci-fi movie, set in a dark, industrial future. Much of it uses layered textures, created by the large collection of synthesisers in his studio, together with some processed percussion sounds. The music is improvised to produce melodic fragments over sustained chord progressions. The harmonies used are largely triadic and the melodies often move by step. Chromaticism is reserved for the relationships between one chord and another, for instance a D major chord moving to an A \flat major one. In other words, the harmonic language is often restless, avoiding perfect cadences and traditional modulations, slowly morphing from one chord to another using link notes or pivots. Most of the time it is non-functional.

Non-functional means that, rather than chords moving from one to another following hierarchical, tonal relationships (tonic, dominant and so on), they are chosen simply for the emotional or sonic effect they produce when juxtaposed.



The futuristic environment in *Blade Runner*

Common harmonic progressions in Vangelis's music include:

- Minor to relative major (e.g. D minor to F major)
- Minor to tonic major (e.g. A minor to A major)
- Mediant relationships (chords whose roots are a major or minor 3rd apart e.g. C major to E major)
- Parallelism (chords moving in blocks up or down e.g. G major, F major, E \flat major)

Horror, sci-fi and the supernatural

- Chords changing over or around pedal notes (e.g. C major moving to D major while the bass note stays on C)
- Tritonal relationships (chords whose roots are an augmented 4th apart (e.g. F major to B major).

At other times the harmony is static. One minor chord will be sustained using a synthesised string-like sound, and sound effects or single notes are layered over this chord, like points of light in a dark sky.

Technically, this string-like sound is known as a 'pad'.

Similarly, melodic lines gradually evolve as scenes progress, becoming longer and more meandering. The rate of harmonic change within these extended themes is slow. On other occasions Vangelis repeats a fragment of melody, perhaps just a falling tone, harmonised in 3rds (for example in the 'Wounded Animals' cue) while other musical events change. Sometimes, single notes feature a downward glissando, producing a sighing effect. These motifs act as a binding agent to give the music unity and also an element of wistfulness or nostalgia, which corresponds to characters' recurring uncertainty about whether their past life is real or manufactured.

One important and recurring motif is the huge reverberated bass drum sound which represents the futuristic cityscape.

However, there are certain cues in the film when Vangelis resorts to a more traditional musical language. One of these is the cue when Deckard explains to Rachel that her memories are implanted. A distant solo piano gradually makes its presence felt, featuring a gentle, falling 4th motivic introduction, which then evolves into a flowing theme in D major, based on traditional progressions.

Dane Davis (b.1957)

Davis had a traditional musical education, after which he worked with small jazz ensembles, performing and arranging. He came to film composition after working extensively in television in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He was employed in Hollywood as an orchestrator on films such as *Bound* (1996), which led directly to his recruitment as the composer for the sci-fi blockbuster *The Matrix* (1999) by the film-making brothers Larry and Andy Wachowski. This was a huge box-office success and spawned two major sequels.

Davis's compositional style is distinctly modern, employing jazz, dance and avant-garde influences and avoiding overtly sentimental lyricism.

The Matrix (1999)

Set in an existentialist future in which humans are controlled by machines, *The Matrix* is reminiscent of *Blade Runner* in its dystopian vision. There are also similarities between the soundscapes produced for both films; like Vangelis, Davis avoids traditional orchestration and thematic development. However, while the music for *Blade Runner* belongs

to the analogue age, *The Matrix*'s score is thoroughly digital, corresponding to the futuristic technology depicted in the plot. There are no identifiable musical themes, the main material consisting of a combination of music samples and sound effects. However, the score gains an internal unity through the consistency with which these are deployed.

The many action sequences feature crashing, reverberant orchestral stabs, fast-moving bass lines and screechingly discordant high notes. Sometimes, brass sounds are employed for a sense of grandeur, as well as techno music, notably in the nightclub scene near the beginning of the film and in Neo's (Keanu Reeves') and Trinity's (Carrie-Anne Moss') attack on the security building, in their attempt to rescue Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne). The diegetic track, 'I'm Beginning to See the Light', played when Neo goes to meet the Oracle, seems particularly appropriate.

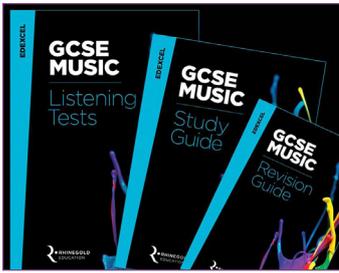
See www.filmsound.org/danedavis/

The score has been much imitated, to varying degrees of success. Sound designers and mixers are always important in films, but in *The Matrix* this is particularly true. Specific mention should be made of the extensive sound design of Dane Davis and his ProTools/MetaSynth studio, as well as the music mixer, Dave Campbell, who worked initially with six orchestra and six synthesiser tracks provided by the composer. These two personnel were key to the soundtrack's success.

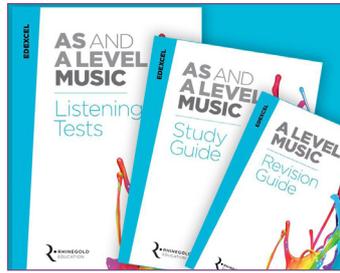
ProTools and MetaSynth are professional-level software programs, often used in recording studios.

Other relevant titles from Rhinegold Education and BlitzBooks

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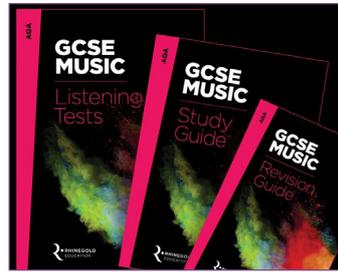


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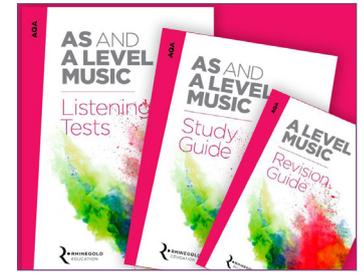


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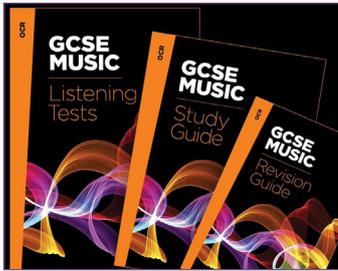


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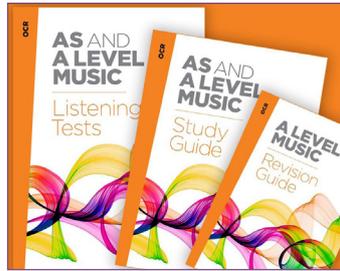


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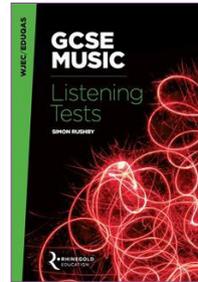


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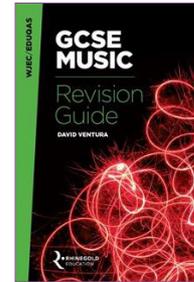


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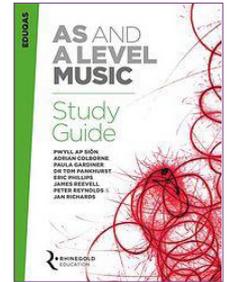
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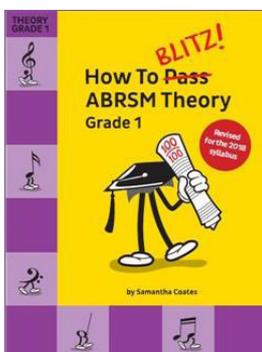


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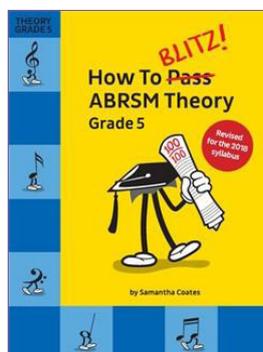


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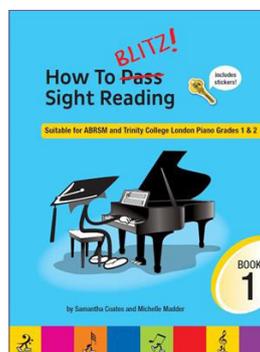
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