

# The Purpose of Music in Film

Film Music is a type of Descriptive Music that represents a mood, story, scene or character through music; it is designed to support the action and emotions of the film on screen.

## To create or enhance a mood

Frequent effects used by Film Music composers to create or enhance a mood include:

- A repeated **OSTINATO** pattern
- Sustained notes of **LONG DURATION**
- **TREMOLO** strings
- A **CRESCENDO** with the **DYNAMICS** gradually getting louder
- Increasing **TEMPO** (*Accelerando*)
- **PITCH** getting higher
- The use of **SILENCE** before something dramatic (to make you jump!)
- Unusual harmonies such as the use of minor and **DISSONANT** or **CHROMATIC CHORDS**, **DISCHORDS** and **DIMINISHED CHORDS**
- **IRREGULAR TIME SIGNATURES** (3/4, 7/8)
- Rapid Scale Patterns help create a frantic mood and a feeling of unrest and urgency
- **INTERRUPTED CADENCES** create a sense of tension and suspense
- The use of the **TRITONE** (*Augmented 4<sup>th</sup>*)
- The use of low pitch brass and strings to provide a "dark sound"
- The use of percussive metallic sounds
- The use of **SUSPENSIONS** that don't resolve to build tension and make you think danger is near
- Frequent changes in **DYNAMICS** to hint an imminent danger
- The use of electronic sounds and synthesizers
- The use of **SAMPLED SOUNDS**
- The use of effects such as **REVERB** or **DISTORTION** applied to electronic, synthesised or sampled sounds to change and manipulate the sound
- The use of unusual (often electronic) instruments e.g. *Rózsa's use of the Theremin* in his soundtrack to Alfred Hitchcock's thriller 'Spellbound' (1945)

## To function as a Leitmotif

A frequently recurring short melodic or harmonic idea which is associated with a character, event, concept, idea, object or situation which be used directly or indirectly to remind us of one not actually present on screen. Leitmotifs can be changed (*sequencing, repetition, modulation*) giving a hint as to what will happen later in the film or may be heard in the background giving a "subtle hint" to the viewer/listener.



## To link one scene to another and smooth over visual cuts, providing continuity

Repeated sections of music can be used to link different parts of the film together – it can remind you of something that happened earlier in the film. The style of music can also change within a film with different sections of the film having different moods – love, humour, battle/war. Film scores may be **MONOTHEMATIC** where the entire film score is based upon a single melody e.g. *David Raksin's "Laura" (1944)* which is heard so often and in many different circumstances, that it comes to "haunt the listener".

## To emphasise a gesture

This is known as **MICKEY-MOUSING** and is used especially in animated films, cartoons and comedy films and is where the music mimics every small movement reinforcing or illustrating the action e.g. *sliding trombones as characters journey up and down in a lift, a descending chromatic scale as a character goes down a set of stairs*. Timing is crucial when using Mickey-Mousing and Film Music composers often use **CLICK TRACKS** to help them time their music exactly.



## To give added commercial impetus

The independent commercial 'afterlife' of the film score has become an increasingly important aspect of Film Music. "Hit" songs will help sell the film and are often used in the opening or closing credits. Songs may be used as title tracks but can return 'in the background' of the film soundtrack later. All of the James Bond films feature 'big songs' often released as popular music singles independently to help advertise the film and add commercial impetus.



## To provide unexpected juxtaposition/irony

Using music which the listener/viewer wouldn't normally expect to hear creating a sense of uneasiness, comparison or even humour e.g. *Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" is heard in the 'Dracula' (1931) film*.



To influence the pacing of a scene making it appear faster/slower/more comprehensive Film Music composers often use fast, dramatic music in action sequences to "drive the action and pace forward". In love or romantic scenes, a slow, sweeping theme on the Strings can be used to "slow the pace down".

## To illustrate geographic location or historical period

Westerns often use music "from the time" to set the scene using 'traditional' instruments. Films set in a different country often combine traditional instruments "associated with a particular country" in their soundtracks to help the audience imagine the film's setting and give a sense of "place" e.g. *the Sitar can help "place a film" in India* or *the Bagpipes help "place a film" in Scotland*. Films set in a particular historical period e.g. the 1970's or 1980's, may use pop songs from the time to set the scene with the audience recognising the songs and reminding them of that particular decade.