

# Popular music of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries

Film music



# Film music

- # Music is often used to accompany a scene in a film.
- # In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when films had no sound (silent movies) it was common to find a pianist **improvising** music which fitted what was happening on the screen.
- # This is the power of music – to be able to create a mood or feeling, an emotional response in the listener.
- # This is very useful in films, where it can be used to enhance the mood or drama of a particular scene, or help to create the right mood for a scene that is about to happen.
- # Like opera, which often starts with an **overture** (an ‘opening’ piece of instrumental music composed as an introduction), films often begin with an opening piece of music set against the titles, to help capture the audience’s attention and set the right mood.



# Conventions and leitmotifs

- # Like most music composed for a specific occasion or event, film music often makes use of **conventions**.
- # These are musical devices and features that listeners associate with something *extra-musical* (outside of the music) and can be used by composers to create a particular **context** in the music.
- # For example, music for Western films often includes a harmonica, train-whistle sounds, or 'galloping' rhythms, because these instruments or musical devices are associated with the 'Wild West', and using them helps the composer to create the right mood and context.



# Activity

- # Working on your own, in pairs or as a group, choose a scene from a film and compose music to match the mood action.
- # Plan and discuss your piece, and then listen to each group's compositions.
- # Choose one you particularly like and say why it was successful.



# Leitmotif

# Listen to 'Good Life' by Kanye West. Notice how the beat is built up using different sound loops, including a synthesiser and electronic drum and rhythm effects. Over this there is rapping with the voices electronically changed in places.

a) What term best describes the synthesiser melody heard at the start of the piece?

b) What term best describes the tonality of this song?

major

minor

modal

pentatonic



# Leitmotif

- # A **leitmotif** (originally German, meaning leading-motive) is a memorable and distinctive theme or musical idea that is used throughout a piece to represent a person, object, idea or emotion.
- # In short, it is a musical 'tag'.
- # Leitmotifs are very useful in film music: they help the audience to establish a link with a character or object not actually on-screen, suggesting some connection between what is happening and the character.
- # A leitmotif can be changed in some way to create a different mood or situation affecting the character or object.
- # This device is also used in opera, in much the same way.



# Listening Quiz

- # Listen to the opening music from the film *Jaws* by John Williams.
- # It is an example of a leitmotif, since the repeated two-note **motif** (small fragment of a theme) is used to represent the huge killer great white shark which is the main subject of the film.
- # The leitmotif is instantly recognisable to an audience, and was very useful for the film's director, Steven Spielberg.
- # In order to maintain suspense in the story, we do not actually see the shark itself until well into the film, by which time it has disposed of several people.
- # However, the audience knows when the shark is going to attack, or is around, because when the shark's huge size is revealed to the audience until much later.



# Listening Quiz

# The leitmotif itself also conveys much of the shark's 'character'.

# The two notes are simple and direct (an unsophisticated hunting, eating machine), they are a **semitone** apart (threatening), and often played at a low pitch (indicating size and depth). The two-note motif gets faster and louder (suggesting an attack).

1. Which term best describes the harmony of this excerpt?

2. Which term best describes the melodic shape played by the French horn and then repeated by the woodwind near the start of the excerpt?

conjunct

disjunct

scalic

3. Name the plucked string instrument heard towards the end of the excerpt.

4. Which two of the following can you hear in the excerpt?

trill

ostinato

canon

syncopation

drum fill

5. Name one percussion instrument you can hear in the excerpt.





# Key terms

# **Context** – context in music includes taking into account the occasion, purpose and place the music was composed for, the time (age) in which was written, and the time and place in which it was performed.

