**Chapter 18**

**Film Music**

Music for film is some of the most dynamic, exciting, and high quality art music created today. Many of the world’s best composers write music for film in addition to the other genres in which they write. The music to a film is so individual to that movie that it can become iconic. Think for a moment of a shark cutting through the ocean water. Are you at the same time hearing the theme music to the film “Jaws”? Or if I mention Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker your memory immediately brings up music that you associate with these movie figures. Or if you imagine an international spy, don’t you hear in your head the music to the James Bond movies? The music to a movie sets the overall mood and character of the movie often before an actor even appears on the screen.

Music has been associated with film from its beginnings. Movies were never really silent, they always had music accompanying them to create an atmosphere. Beginning with the first experimental short films of Adolph Lumiere in 1895, movies have been set to music. As early as 1908 movie companies were hiring famous composers like Camille Saint-Saens to write music for their films. This commissioning has become a partnership between director and composer to enhance the acting and the entire picture.

Early silent films were usually accompanied by live musicians hired by the movie theatre showing the film. In the beginning, this was just a single piano player playing music that he or the owner of the theatre thought went along with the movie. But as early as 1912, there was such a demand for music to accompany films that the music publishing company Carl Fischer created a list of music that it suggested fit with certain films. Most of this music was classical art music. Eventually single pianists were replaced by full theatre orchestras or huge theatre organs in larger movie houses and the conductor sometimes chose the music for the film, arranged and rehearsed it prior to the film’s opening. Soon, the movie industry leaders decided to put together a musical list of their own. And after that it was common for films to arrive at theatres with a specific list of music to be played at certain points in the film.

In 1927 *The Jazz Singer* was released and movies changed. It had speech, and more importantly to this textbook, music synchronized with the action. The silent movie era was over. Over the next decade movie producers perfected the art of synchronization such that musical numbers could be filmed and look natural. And music could be attached to the film by the movie studio. No longer did they need to rely on local musicians to play accompanying music. Now the studio itself could arrange, rehearse, and record the music alongside the film. Movie studio orchestras were organized and composers/arrangers were put on contract to specific studios just like actors.

All this happened in about six years after *The Jazz Singer* was released. In 1933 *King Kong* was produced with a full soundtrack. A soundtrack is music not just used when a song was necessary or to open or close the film. A soundtrack runs throughout the film helping change the mood of different scenes, building and releasing tension. The soundtrack to *King Kong* was written by classical art music composer Max Steiner who lived from 1888 to 1971. He wrote some of the most famous of all movie music including the music to *Gone with the Wind* and *Casablanca*. He was under contract early with Warner Brothers studio.

Another early film composer was classical music composer Erich Korngold.

The 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s was a time of censorship in movies concerning what types of things could be displayed on the screen and what words could be uttered. Directors and composers soon realized that they could use music to communicate things to their audience that were not allowed to be actually spoken. Love scenes usually culminated in this time not by an actual love scene on screen but by music that gave the impression of the scene to the viewer. Murder scenes were often dealt with in the same manner. Hitchcock used music to illustrate the stabbing of a young woman in a shower when he couldn’t show the actual stabbing. The musical sounds are extremely effective.

After World War II the movie industry continued to hire the best composers in the world to write soundtracks. Art music composers like Benjamin Britten, Aaron Copland, and Serge Prokofiev all wrote film music. These composers, like Steiner and Korngold were very skilled at their craft and did much to bring the technique of film composition to a high art form.

Throughout much of film’s history directors and producers have known that they could use music to help advertise their films. Many films have a theme song or a special song that is associated with, and was written for, that film. In many cases these songs become hit pop tunes. For example, *Over the Rainbow* became a pop tune hit from “The Wizard of Oz.” *Mrs. Robinson* became an iconic hit from the film “The Graduate.” And, Henry Mancini’s great song *Moon River* is the theme song from the great movie “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.” Composers of the 1960s and 70s such as Elmer Bernstein, Jerry Goldsmith and Henry Mancini were capable of writing full soundtracks as well as hit tunes.

The film scores of John Williams changed the landscape of soundtracks. Beginning especially with the music to films like *Jaws, ET*, and the first three *Star Wars* movies, Williams used an old technique of composition from Wagnerian opera days called leitmotif. The leitmotif was used in opera to bring to the viewer’s mind a person or object without having to have that person or thing on the stage or screen. Williams employs this technique in his film scores and most other composers since have made use of the idea. For example, Williams can make you fear the shark in Jaws without even seeing the shark on screen once you associate the shark’s theme with danger and fear.

Today’s film composers are in partnership with film directors. As a film is produced the composer/director team meets to try out different sounds with different scenes to gauge their effect. Composers today continue to be those from the best of classical art music experience. Danny Elfman, Hans Zimmer, Philip Glass, John Corigliano, and John Williams are all art music composers in their own right who also compose film scores. Today’s films combine electronic music with live performers. Film scores are still recorded in large recording studios with live musicians playing along with the movie as it runs.

Music for film is perhaps the closest music to visual image in existence. The only other type of music that we studied in this text that has the power to evoke such images was program music. Today’s film composers may well be the ones that are remembered as the finest of the 20th and 21st centuries when future generations judge our music. Perhaps if Mozart were alive today he would be writing film music. Perhaps Corigliano or Glass or Zimmer or Williams are the composers who are our generations’ Mozart.