



WHAT IS FILM MUSIC FOR?

5 MINUTES READING #1

“Film music should have the same relationship to the film drama that somebody’s piano playing in my living room has on the book I am reading.”

- Igor Stravinsky



Questions to think about:

1. *What two factors often lead to a composer writing film music?*
2. *What were the earliest types of film music designed to “cover up”?*
3. *Do you agree or disagree with Adorno and Eisler’s reasoning that film music also has a psychological impact on the watcher/listener?*
4. *Describe two ways in which film music enhances the on-screen image.*

Composers who work for film and television communicate with potentially the largest audience that any composer has ever commanded, not just thousands, but millions of people. The impact of a film score, together with the financial rewards it can bring, means that film music has become a very important option for composers in the twentieth and twenty-first century music market.



Since the earliest days of the cinema, music has played an important role in the overall effect of ‘moving pictures’. The use of music in film is now so much a part of everyday experience that we often forget to think about it, let alone analyse it, ignoring the considerable impact it has on audiences, to

say nothing of the immense music industry it supports. There are many theories about why music is deemed necessary to the presentation of films. Because the cranking machinery of early projectors was so noisy, some have regarded the use of music as being merely to drown out the distracting sound, in much the same way that music in opera or ballet has often been used to cover a noisy scene change.

While agreeing with this idea, the Marxist critic Theodor Adorno (1903-69) and composer Hanns Eisler (1898-1962) suggested in 1948 that music also had an important psychological impact. For them: *“music attempts to establish a layer of human mediation between the reeled-off photographs and the spectators [...] [Film music] seeks, after the fact, to breathe into pictures some of the life that photography has taken away from them”* (Adorno and Eisler, 1948, p.50)

Music aids (and is sometimes essential to effect) the suspension of our disbelief: film attempts to convince us that what we are seeing is really happening, and music can help to break down any resistance we might have. It can also comment directly on the film, telling us how to respond to the action. Music can also enhance dramatic effect: the appearance of a monster in a horror movie, for example, rarely occurs without a thunderous chord! Also, the use of *pastiche* (an eighteenth-century minuet or ‘oriental’ music, for example) can help “place” a film in a particular location, period or rather more self-reliantly, within a specific film genre which carries with it its own musical idiom.

