

The magic of movie scores

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Alex Lassiter, in discussions with music experts, reports on the importance of film scores and how character themes can enhance storytelling

ALEX LASSITER: Hello, lovely people! It's Alex Lassiter with the Minnesota Daily, and you're listening to In The Know, a podcast dedicated to the University of Minnesota.

Ever since the spring semester ended, I've been watching a lot more movies in my free time. And something that I noticed is that a good movie has a really good score. For those of you unfamiliar, the score is the set of music composed specifically for a movie. And a good score includes several recognizable themes, like this one. Something so recognizable that even if I butcher it like that, you'd know it comes from Star Wars.

This episode will be a little bit different. Since we're talking about a topic that's easier to listen to than, well, talk about, and I'm sure you guys don't want to hear me squawking every time I need to give an example of a piece of music, I'll just have a piano play certain musical cues throughout the episode. That way, if you don't remember a certain character theme, maybe the sound of it will help jog your memory.

To talk more about movie themes and what makes them so recognizable, I sat down first with Patrick Warfield, the director of the music department at the University of Minnesota. I came into this episode wanting to talk about the main themes of Indiana Jones and The Avengers, both pretty recognizable themes. However, during my conversation with Warfield, he brought up two other films that I knew immediately would be way better.

PATRICK WARFIELD: I'm thinking of the Star Wars series, especially the first three canonical films. You don't know right at the very beginning which themes go with who and over time, that's sort of revealed to you, and the connections between themes become revealed. And John Williams, the composer there, is particularly skilled at that kind of thing.

LASSITER: Which was one of the things I'd wanted most to talk about. In movies, you have themes that represent a single character or a group. The protagonist's theme can often serve as the main theme of the movie, like the examples of Indiana Jones and The Avengers that I just gave. But where did these themes come from? Why do we as audience members expect to just be able to connect a certain theme to a certain character every time we go to the movies?

WARFIELD: The way we usually talk about it, I think, is going back to some operatic traditions. Especially the music of Richard Wagner, who you may be familiar with, was a big Germanic music drama specialist who is often attributed with coming up with this idea of the

leitmotif, the notion that there's a, can be a melodic or harmonic framework for a particular character, a particular idea, a particular object.

And that, many of the early film composers were enamored with that kind of music and it gets transferred right away. So you find, even quite early on, lots of examples of tunes getting associated with particular people or ideas. Of course, the Star Wars films are kind-of the obvious example, right? The love themes and the Darth Vader theme and all that kind of thing.

LASSITER: It was interesting to me that such a pivotal part of film music came from opera. I'd heard of Richard Wagner, but I didn't know he had such a profound influence on film scores. It made me wonder what else he inspired, and how exactly his technique found its way into film.

To answer these questions, I dialed up John De Haan, an opera professor at the University. And I do mean, dialed him up. At the time of our interview, De Haan was in Italy, so I was only able to reach him over the phone. But despite being in a different country, De Haan jumped at the chance to talk Wagner with me.

JOHN DE HAAN: And he especially used the leitmotif in his composition of The Ring. *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, in German, and it was well received, and it was where he first kind-of showed off his compositional technique of using leitmotifs to indicate characters and objects, and even emotions actually.

While other people are on stage and they're singing and they're delivering text and they're furthering the story, he would slip in a leitmotif of a character so that, even though the character is not on stage, and not imminently to be on stage, you would think of that character in relation to what the onstage characters are saying. I mean, he just changed the music and it worked so, it worked so beautifully.

LASSITER: So he influenced performance music a ton and inspired one of the most widely-used techniques in film and on stage. This Wagner guy must have been an incredible dude, right?

DE HAAN: He was an extremely narcissistic person, not really a nice guy at all. Just what I'm saying, you know and if my daughter brought home Richard Wagner, you know, "This is my new boyfriend, Richard Wagner," I'd be thinking, "Oh no." So he was not well thought of even back in his day, but his music is undeniably master-level.

These composers look back and when they're writing like this, I'm sure it's going through their heads, "Thank you, Richard Wagner. This is an awesome compositional technique." And they unashamedly take advantage of it. And what I'm saying is that Wagner was so narcissistic anyway, but had he known how important his compositional technique would become through the decades, into the next century, and through that century, and into our current century, he would have been completely unbearable.

LASSITER: So obviously, having died in the late 1800s, Wagner wasn't around for the advent of Star Wars in the 1970's. But if he was, it probably would have blown his mind faster than the Death Star (spoilers for those of you who are concerned about an almost 50-year-old movie, by the way). So how did a composer like John Williams, who did the Star Wars soundtrack, associate certain sounds with certain characters?

DE HAAN: The obvious one is Darth Vader, you know, dun, dun, dun, dun, da da, dun da da, you know, and it puts fear in our hearts. That's, to me, the biggest leitmotif in the Star Wars and most important and the most dramatic. The one thing that I recognized in, you know, you do, even if it's subconsciously realize that, okay, this is Leia's theme and, and this is Luke's.

John Williams also used different orchestration for these. In other words, he might take Luke's theme, but depending on the situation in the film, he would use different instruments to play this theme. Or you can kind of tell who Leia is thinking about because if she's supposed to be thinking about Luke, he'll play Luke's theme and you'll go, "Oh yeah, she's thinking about Luke." Just brilliant.

LASSITER: I mentioned earlier that I came into the episode wanting to talk about Indiana Jones and The Avengers as my example movies. Well, I didn't just substitute both of those for only Star Wars, as iconic as it is. When Warfield and I talked, he brought up another staple John Williams score.

WARFIELD: One of the things I was noticing, for bizarre reasons, I decided a month or so ago to watch the original Superman film, and how good the opening credits music is and I think in some ways that might be, and I'm going to say this really off the cuff, and say maybe that's John Williams' best opening theme, because there's so much happening just in that few minutes of the beginning of Superman.

LASSITER: Though most modern motion pictures have since dropped the opening credits sequence, this trend of an overture at the start of a movie isn't unique to film. Despite diving mostly into opera, De Haan mentioned musical theater's use of an overture, or a medley of the major songs from throughout the show, right as the curtain is rising.

DE HAAN: A lot of overtures in music theater are exactly what you're describing. They will say, "Okay, here's the cool music you're going to hear tonight," and then we'll just wind through all the music and the leitmotifs as well.

I'm not as up on music theater, but I know that a lot of their overtures are just a potpourri of, you know, you'll remember. I think they're putting this into the brains of the audience so that when they hear the characters sing them, they've already heard it once before. This is the exposition, and then, and then when they hear that music again, boom, "I've heard that before. I love that melody," or whatever.

LASSITER: Before I left, Warfield made one more important distinction, and that's whether the character could hear the music being played. Most of the time, main characters don't interact with their own themes unless it's for an audio gag, like Spider-Man having his own theme song set as his phone's ringtone. But the leitmotif is always set up for the benefit of the audience.

WARFIELD: Diegetic, or the diegesis, is the world of the film. And then the (non-diegesis) is the world of the viewer, in a sense. And so music can get used in both ways. You can think about, when is there music that the people on screen hear? Someone turns on a radio in the movie, and they hear music coming out of the radio. That's music that's part of the world of the film.

Or then there's the music that exists outside of the world of the film. We assume that Superman is not actually hearing his theme. We've moved into a space now where we expect largely composed, mostly music outside of the diegesis, the sort-of heroic themes of Superman, and much less of that internal space.

LASSITER: So yeah, I wanted to talk about two very different movies for this episode than the ones I ended up talking about, but the two I landed on were arguably the best possible examples of film composition I could have given. They had clearly defined character themes, unique orchestration and were both plenty iconic within their genres.

Even though I'd planned to talk about two different films originally, I suppose I still ended up talking about a movie with a score by John Williams and a superhero movie, so it all worked out in the end. Whether in a galaxy far, far away, or on the planet Krypton, or right here on planet earth, a well-thought out film score can elevate an average movie to out of this world.

This episode was written by Alex Lassiter and produced by Kaylie Sirovy. As always, we appreciate you listening in and feel free to send a message to our email inbox at podcasting@mndaily.com with any questions, comments or concerns. I'm Alex, and this has been In The Know. Take care, y'all.