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Film & TV Production
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Compare and contrast the creative strategies of two sound designers/composers when designing solutions for film/game/animation within a given genre. Provide examples to support your discussion.

Introduction

As a film student I believe that a film's score plays one of the largest roles in a film. It can help establish the tone of a scene or a film. When on the subject of the role of the composer, I follow the style of Hans Zimmer. Where the composer has a more hands on experience with the film's development. Rather than John Williams, which takes a more traditional position in composing a film's score. Joining the production once the majority of the film has been completed.

In this comparison essay I will be looking at that the two composers; John Williams and Hans Zimmer. I will be looking at their different style of composing music, instruments, use of experimentation in their careers and focusing on their relationship with directors. The Reason why I have chosen these two composers is because of the effect they have had on the film industry and how they have polarizing views on the composition of music. I will be focusing on their work within the sci-fi genre, especially on 2015's Star Wars: The Force Awakens and 2014's Interstellar. I have chosen these two films because they were released in close proximity of each other and are landmarks in their composers' careers in a rebirth in popularity and style, respectively.

Style

Journalist Mark Allison states that for "every movie-going generation, there is a film score composer who... come to encapsulates the sound of their era" [Mark Allison(2017)] this could be seen as Bernard Herrmann whose "brooding and mysterious tones" [Mark Allison(2017)] helped define the 1940s and 1950s noir genre. Or John Williams who defined the blockbuster era with his use of "bold and iconic melodies" [Mark Allison(2017)] in films like Jaws, Superman and the Star Wars saga. Allison defines the current movie-goer generation as the "Hans Zimmer

period" [Mark Allison(2017)] due to his popularity in the modern equivalent of the blockbuster - the superhero film - and his film scores being used as temp tracks, also known as placeholder tunes, which are used during the post-production process before the film's soundtrack has been completed. Allison argues that this has caused a "lack of innovation" [Mark Allison(2017)] within the film industry, creating a "multitude of imitators and collaborators" [Mark Allison(2017)] that have echoed Hans Zimmer's style across Hollywood. Allison describes this commonality as "fundamentally changing the sound of big-budget" [Mark Allison(2017)] filmmaking. This has had two effects on the moviegoing experience: That it helps define Zimmer's style for the current generation, but also causes fatigue as movie-going audiences recognize his style. When describing Zimmer's style, Allison, calling it an "aggressive, wall-of-sound" [Mark Allison(2017)] referencing the iconic "Inception Horn" [Mark Allison(2017)] tune and calling out on his lack of melody. However in recent years, Zimmer has moved away from this style, removing the "Inception Horn" [Mark Allison(2017)] effect and replacing it with a metronome and organ. Giving his recent scores a feeling of time and religious grandeur.

When you think about John Williams style compared to more modern composers, you'll notice his use of a "lush symphonic style" [Alison Elsridge (n/a)] with large orchestras recording the music live. Though this more traditional approach to composing music is seen as outdated and rarely used by modern composers, it is by far cheaper for the production team and studio. One of his most noticeable traits is the use of the leitmotif, which can "be heard in the horns section, but also throughout the entire piece" [Ivano Milo (2017)]. Traditionally used in operas and symphonic poems, the leitmotif can be "used to reinforce...dramatic action"[The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (n/a)], providing the audience with "psychological insight into the characters" [The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (n/a)]. The leitmotif can be heard in The

Imperial March (Darth Vader's Theme) and is used as a signal for the arrival of the primary antagonist, Darth Vader, in the Star Wars films. Because of William's lack of synthesized music, his composition can seem old fashioned and outdated when compared to modern films. However with the rise of nostalgia in recent years, with sequels to 80s classics like Jurassic Park and Star Wars, the John Williams style has seen a rebirth in popularity.

Experimentation

Due to Hans Zimmer's lack of traditional music education he is an interesting composer to look at. With his heavy use of experimentation and unorthodox use of an orchestra. Zimmer's most notable use of experimentation came with Interstellar. Where he went against audiences expectations for his score. Creating something that was groundbreaking and noticeable, but didn't outshine the rest of the film and complimented it. In an interview, Zimmer describes this process of reinvention as "throw[ing] out every single one of the tools and devices we had used in the past and see what we can come up with" [Ryan Lattanzio (2015)] this method of forced experimentation led to the use of unorthodox instruments for the film industry. This led to his music gaining a grander and religious effect to them. When you look at the way Hans Zimmer composes his music, you'll see that it doesn't fit the expectation. Zimmer "records different sections of the orchestra separately" [Steven Spielberg (2013)] instead of the industry standard of recording it all at the same time (which is more cost effective) and his use of a "Remote Control" [Steven Spielberg (2013)] machine, which allows its users to go through each instrument and edit it, speeding up the creation process. However the downside to the process is that it's harder to recreate his music. Another key trait is the use of electric instruments. Which creates a more punching effect and can help make his scores feel more urban and diegetic.

When you look back at John Williams' career, you'll notice that his style has almost not changed. This could be due to William's coming from a time where there wasn't much experimentation in film music, especially in the disaster genre (where Williams first became popular) and that film scores moving away from the traditional orchestra didn't happen until the late 90s and early 2000s, becoming more electronic in nature. The positive to this is that there's a consistency in his work. You can listen through every single Star Wars film and not notice a change in the instruments used or their style. Thus creating a timeless quality. A problem that could occur with modern composers like Hans Zimmer is that because of the constantly changing compositions, music score could become dated and audiences' perspectives could become negative.

Working with directors

When starting my research investigation I read an interview that Hans Zimmer held with IndieWire – Hans Zimmer on His Creative Marriage to Chris Nolan: "I Don't Think the World Understands Our Business" [Ryan Lattanzio, 2015] - where he discussed his close relationship with writer and director Christopher Nolan. When talking about the relationship that a composer should have with the film's director, Zimmer described it as "if they were married" [Ryan Lattanzio, 2015] that the composer should not just appear at the end of a film's production and create a film's score. But rather be a constant presence. Zimmer reinforces this ideology by describing his methods of working with Christopher Nolan stating when "Nolan and I work we listen to each other" [Ryan Lattanzio, 2015] and refers to them working on the same project at the same time, saying "the day he finishes his cut, there was a complete score" [Ryan Lattanzio, 2015] which suggests two things. The first is that this process saves on production time and the process of developing a film's score/music should happen as the film is being developed. This idea is backed up when Zimmer describes the process of creation as a collaboration and

linking it to being in a “band” [Ryan Lattanzio, 2015]. That the composer should be there for the development of the film.

When compared to Hans Zimmer, John Williams has a more traditional relationship with a films director. When talking about how he works with common collaborator, Steven Spielberg, Williams describes how he would watch the completed film and then “retreat to [his] writing room” [Jon Brantingham (2015)], write different aspects of the score (themes for characters and locations ect.) before going back to the director and play a few notes, so they can have a ruff idea of what he's composing and then going back to writing. This process of creation is a much less hands on approach when compared to Hans Zimmer, with Zimmer being their at the start of the films production and being in constant contact with the films director. However as discussed earlier, this is a less traditional method of composition. With the industry standard being that a composer will create a films score once the majority of the post-production has been completed. The main positive to this because the majority of the films editing process has been completed, the composer won't have to worry about needing to alter his or hers score if scenes or the edit changes. A problem that Hans Zimmer would face from writing music at the start of a films production, this including a films writing process.

In conclusion, I believe that it's hard to compare these two composers because they are still active with in the film industry. Where I have discussed how John Williams hasn't really experimented with his formula or how Hans Zimmer doesn't use a traditional orchestra, this could change. Especially with Zimmer, who is constantly experimenting with different sound techniques. Another problem with comparing them is that they come from two different backgrounds. John Williams was trained as a composer and studied the classics and past film

scores. While Hans Zimmer comes from a different background, starting his career in a band and learning his craft as he worked up the film industry. Overall I feel like I shouldn't have compared two men who have defined the hollywood score, but rather should have focused on their contemporaries like Junkie XL and Michael Giacchino.

Word Count: 1911

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