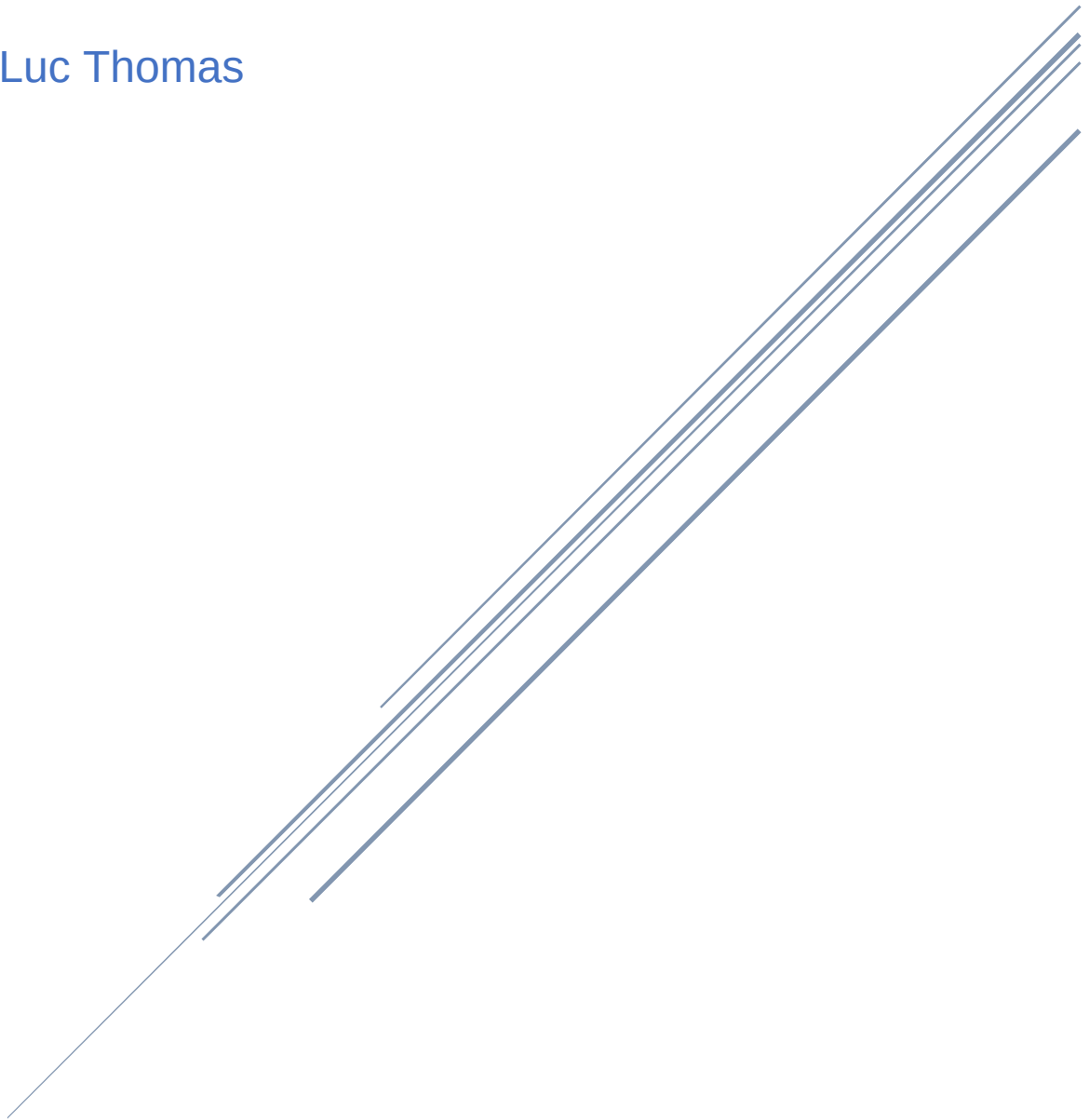


EXPLORING MEANING IN MUSICAL COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES THROUGH THE LENS OF LEITMOTIFS

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Introduction:

My introduction into composing was through Digital Audio Workstations like Logic, gaining practical experiences through working with these programs. As a result, I have very little experience in music theory or deliberate compositional techniques. Since I started composing, I have mainly used DAWs to create chord progressions, layering MIDI instruments to create an instrumental and improvising melodies. While I enjoy this process, it is not very purposeful, so I want to research compositional techniques to develop my skills to the point where I have more meaningful composition. As Russian composer Igor Stravinsky stated, “Up to a point, technique and talent are the same” (Stravinsky, I. 1958, cited in Ward-Steinman, D. 2011, p.9); I believe that to become a talented composer I need to develop my technique.

I will be researching leitmotifs which are a technique mostly utilised in film/TV scores and operas. They are repeated through a piece, representing a character or a central theme. I will be looking at examples of leitmotifs from the soundtrack of Lord of The Rings by Howard Shore.

Research discoveries:

Leitmotifs:

Leitmotifs are deeply rooted in opera (Bribitzer-Stull, M., 2015, p.1), but I will be focusing on film scores in this essay as it relates more closely to my exhibition piece. I will be looking at the key functions and purpose of leitmotifs, using The Shire motif from the Lord of the Rings soundtrack to emphasise my points.

Leitmotifs are a vital part of film scores for a number of reasons. One is that they help identify whatever they represent in the audience’s mind and shape perception of that thing. (Green, J., 2010) states, “development of specific leitmotifs, themes...in conjunction with the other channels of information helps to create the narrative and control the way that the audience interprets the film”. For example, in the Lord of the Rings the Shire is introduced along with its leitmotif (Shore, H. 2001), which emphasises the atmosphere and influences perception of the Shire. The Shire leitmotif has a bright lead melody in a major key which instantly creates the perception of the Shire as a pleasant place where the people are contented. The use of the woodwind instrument for the melody creates a strong pastoral aura which instils the Shire with a sense of quaintness. The wistful string chords contribute to the idea of The Shire as an idyllic place and the use of one minor chord in the otherwise major progression introduces a sense of nostalgia which connotes how The Shire is like a rose-tinted memory from childhood brought to life. Narratively, this leitmotif also helps to create a greater disconnect and juxtaposition between The Shire and the darkness of the rest of Middle Earth and its inhabitants such as the Nazgul, whose theme, (Reymore, L., 2018) notes, utilises sounds specifically designed to elicit primal fear responses from the spectator.

In summary, leitmotifs are vital in conveying the narrative and the personality of both characters and locations. Lord of The Rings composer Howard Shore stated his motifs and themes “Became thematic as a way to express clarity to tell the story” (Epicleff Media, 2020), demonstrating how leitmotifs improve understanding and comprehension of plot and character.

Leitmotifs part II:

Leitmotifs are not static: they can and usually do shift and change throughout a text and these changes are vital to how leitmotifs function and are effective. (Hickman, R., 2006, cited in Green, J., p.88) explains:

“A leitmotif can be altered when it recurs during a film. The alteration can be a change of instrumentation, tempo or harmony. Through these transformations, the changing mood or state of a character can be depicted”

This quote encapsulates the importance of leitmotifs in highlighting and emphasising the character and narrative changes that occur within a film. Regarding the Shire leitmotif, Shore reprises it many times throughout the trilogy. I watched ‘Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Rings (Extended Edition)’ and noted every time the Shire leitmotif appeared and how it changed. I have collated five key moments in the table below.

<u>Scene</u>	<u>Variations/connotations</u>
Introduction shot of Frodo in the forest	• The first few notes of the melody come in - signifies Frodo’s deep connection to the Shire
Frodo meets Bilbo in Rivendell and goes through his book	• Melody plays on woodwind like in “Concerning Hobbits” – signifies how Bilbo’s book is bringing back memories of the Shire • Melody and harmony shift a few times to become more sombre – connotes Frodo’s nostalgia and homesickness
Sam and Frodo discuss returning home to the Shire from Rivendell	• The chords are pitched down – signifies Frodo’s conflicted mindset on the matter of returning home • The melody and harmony resolve satisfyingly as Frodo says “I am ready to go home” – connotes that he has made up his mind and is no longer conflicted
Bilbo is distressed after he loses control and tries to grab the ring from Frodo	• A second melody is added in counterpoint to the original on clarinet – the clarinet is similar to the zurna-esque instrument often used for the ring theme which highlights both the influence of the ring on Bilbo and his inner conflict and distress as a result • Ends without a proper resolution – connotes how there is no happy end to Bilbo’s story
The fellowship set out on the path to Mordor	• Melody is played on a deep brass instrument – connotes the epic scale of the journey ahead, similar in meaning to scene 13. • Static glissando/portamento dissonant string harmony underneath the melody – signifies Frodo’s unease and fear and foreshadows the danger ahead

	• Strings rise in intensity – creates further tension and suspense
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This table illustrates how Shore utilises multiple compositional techniques to create different meanings and subtext with the same leitmotif in order to represent narrative changes, and how those changes impact the emotional states and thoughts of characters, and the changing relationship between characters, locations, and objects.

Overall, I have discovered their purpose and how composers work to make them effective. Through that I have learnt about a multitude of compositional techniques, which I can now employ to make my compositions more meaningful in their construction.

Creative explorations:

After my research into leitmotifs, I decided to carry out some creative exercises to improve my understanding of the concepts I have looked at through practice. I wanted these exercises to provide me with practice for my exhibition piece, so my creative explorations were linked to ‘No Country for Old Men’. Now that I have researched leitmotifs, I know to consider what instruments I’m using, chord progressions, key, etc, when constructing these.

Writing Leitmotifs for ‘No Country for Old Men’:

I believe practice is the most important step to developing a skill because, “experts have had many experiences in their areas of expertise. They use their mental libraries of experience-based cases to retrieve examples that help them solve problems” (Schank, R.C., Berman, T.R and Macpherson, K.A., 1999, pp.161-181). This highlights how practical experience is essential to how we learn and improve.

For this exercise, I chose to create leitmotifs for three characters and one theme.

I chose to create motifs for the central characters - Ed Tom Bell, Llewelyn Moss and Anton Chigurh - as the film focuses tightly on them while other characters have very little development.

I also chose to create a motif for death as it is prevalent throughout the film.

I then wrote leitmotifs, attempting to convey certain meanings and characteristics, looking at melody, chord progressions and using specific instruments. An example of how I used melodies is for Llewelyn Moss. He is a morally ambiguous character, caught between his relatable goals and violent actions so I wrote his melody in the Dorian mode, as it is “halfway between major and minor” (Bennet, D. 2019) which highlights his dubious nature. I used a deep synth bass sound for Chigurh as he is machinelike in his methods and is almost a Terminator-esque character. Ed Tom Bell is a conservative character, clinging to tradition and afraid of the future, so the chord progression for his theme constantly returns to the root chord, representing his inability to move on from the past.

Critical Reflection 1:

I feel that this exercise was informative, and I mostly succeeded as it gave me experience in cultivating a mindset of conveying something specific when composing, which I believe helped develop my compositional skills and the way I think about things like melodies and harmony and creating meaning with those elements. Conversely, there are some things that didn't work well. Some of my motifs felt too bright tonally and didn't match the brutal tone of 'No Country for Old Men'. I could improve this by transposing the melodies to a lower octave or changing the chord progressions to be less bright or satisfying. I now know to take these things into account when composing which will help me improve in the future.

Variations on leitmotifs:

My second creative exploration was to create variations on my leitmotifs to represent the states of the characters at different points in the narrative.

I chose to create a variation of the death leitmotif for when Moss dies, and of Bell's leitmotif in his final scene when he has retired.

For the death motif, I simply used the same melody but played on piano which was used as the instrument in Moss's motif.

For Bell's motif, I took inspiration from Shore's use of the Shire motif and used the same melody over a dissonant static harmony to convey Bell's unease and dissatisfaction with his retirement and his fear for the future.

Critical Reflection 2:

This exercise had some mixed results. It was successful as it forced me to think in a new way creatively, developing one idea in different ways which I was not used to and has aided my creative development. However, I think I could've been more ambitious and there were a few ideas I wish I had explored but was unsure of how to implement in terms of music theory. For example, I wanted to switch one of the motifs from minor to major, but I didn't know how to do that. This unfortunately limited my development slightly in this exercise.

Reflective Summary:

In conclusion, I have looked at leitmotifs: their purposes in film scores and how a variety of compositional techniques are used to fulfil these purposes and create meaning. I have carried out creative explorations to improve my understanding through practice. I have gained a new understanding of compositional techniques and their effects, and the ability to perceive these techniques through listening and comprehend how and why they have been employed. Furthermore, I have been able to begin developing my own composition skills, using the methods I have researched as the foundation to help me get into the mindset of composing purposefully to convey meaning.

Reflecting Forwards:

The insights I have gained from this work will be incredibly useful and will inform my creative practice deeply. Primarily, the techniques I have learned about will assist in the creation of my exhibition as they can be used to connote specific meaning and narrative developments which will be vital tools when attempting to convey a sequence from a film through sound. Additionally, this essay taught me something which has been very beneficial to how I think about creative work. I have the same philosophy as composers like Murray Gold, who stated, “The thing is to get everything out in one breath, to get a song out in one go” (Danicki, J., 2016), so I was reluctant to develop my knowledge of composition as I feared it would slow my creative process. However, through my exercises, I discovered I could add meaning and improve my technique while still working quickly. This has made me more open to developing my skills in the future. My goals for this essay are encapsulated by Howard Shore who, when asked to give advice to aspiring composers, stated, “Learn your craft, learn standard and avant-garde composition techniques” (Smit, A., 2020), which I believe I have begun to do through this process.

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