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The Music in the Movies

If I say the words, Harry Potter, you may suddenly think of its main theme in your head. Even if you haven't even seen Harry Potter, you have probably heard the theme. The same case goes for movies like Star Wars, Indiana Jones, Jurassic Park, Jaws, Ghostbusters, and many more. Now, try and remember music from a movie you've recently seen, one that isn't Star Wars. Like most people, you probably can't remember a melody from any of them.

What makes these movie scores stick in our head? It comes down to how predictable, and unpredictable, the music we are hearing and the scenes that we are seeing match up. However, the biggest reason movie music has changed so much is the relationship between the director, the composer, and the digital camera.

Movies could not survive without music. Music adds emotion to scenes in movies. Our memories of movies is actually influenced by the music in the scenes we hear. While we may not remember the exact music, we do remember the scene. In a study by the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, participants were shown various movies over a week. At the end of the week, researchers exposed participants to various types of music; sad, happy, and familiar (pop) songs and asked them to describe various scenes from the movies. What the researchers found is that the participants described scenes that corresponded with the music playing at the time. The participants listening to the sad music described more sad scenes while happier music gave way to more pleasant scenes. (Eerola 3).

But I want to focus on the music itself. What makes certain music so memorable? A good person to look to is John Williams. He has written some of the biggest pieces that you definitely remember. He composed the Harry Potter music, the music from Star Wars, Jaws, Indiana Jones, and ET, just to name a few. What makes Williams music memorable is the way it presents itself with the scenes on screen. Take the Imperial March, possibly the most famous song. Instead of focusing on the scene around the characters, which is space, he instead focuses on the character for the music. The Imperial March is heard as Darth Vader exits his Imperial Cruiser in the Death Star. The music, in a G minor key, gives the sense that Vader is both evil and powerful. It sounds like a military march. But what really makes it stick is the idea of unpredictability in the music. The music builds anticipation for the listeners. It is also upfront and is not quietly sidelined like is so many movies (Scheurer 12)

To compare to John Williams music, we should look at a movie where music is not given an upfront spot. Take a Marvel movie for instance. Marvel studios has created a massive cinematic universe, with many different characters, and many movies. However, there is no music in this universe. I'm not saying Marvel movies don't use music, they do, however, they don't have memorable music, something to tell you, "Hey, you are watching a Marvel movie and this will be exciting." Something Star Wars could do with a black screen and its own famous score

The biggest game changer on the scene was the introduction of computers and composing software. At this point, composing software is so good at blending the different instruments, it's hard to tell a piece created on a computer to one recorded in a studio with a live orchestra. However, the software does perform better with certain sounds, mainly percussion, than others,

like strings. Also, the software pulls down many barriers that kept a lot of people from entering the industry. Before computers, live recordings took lots of time. Now, anyone could create a pretty basic score. This creates a competitive market for composers now, who have to cut back on the costs of producing music to compete with younger, inexpensive composers, who work at their computers (Kayali 12). These factors have led to so called “copy and paste” compositions. (Lowder).

With the ability for directors to have composer's work on music during filming, a director can put in temp pieces for scenes that he or she would like the composer to copy. While it helps set the tone the director wants, it also leads to the same sounding music. Much of the music in the movies today sounds the same, with just enough difference that a lawsuit won't arise. (Radford)

This change has impacted the industry, and there are no signs that this trend is reversing. With success of the Marvel movies too, the music we hear in them is likely to stay. It will take another game changing movie, like Star Wars, to move the dial in the other direction.

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