Your notes

GCSE Music: revision notes

Film and video game music

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How film music works

- Film music creates mood, builds tension, shows what characters feel and tells the audience what might happen next.
- A **leitmotif** is a short theme linked to a character, place or idea, which comes back when they appear. Famous examples: the two-note shark theme in Jaws and Darth Vader's march in Star Wars (both by John Williams).
- **Underscore** plays under the action. **Non-diegetic music** is heard only by the audience; **diegetic music** comes from inside the story (a band playing in the scene, a radio).
- **Mickey-mousing** is when the music matches the action exactly, such as a falling scale as someone falls down stairs.

Musical devices for effect

- Tension: dissonance, chromatic notes, low pedal notes, **ostinatos**, tremolo strings, rising pitch and crescendo.
- Heroes and adventure: brass fanfares, major keys, strong dotted rhythms. Romance: strings, slow legato melodies. Sadness: minor keys, slow tempo.
- Timbre matters: the same theme can sound heroic on brass or lonely on a solo flute. Composers also use synthesisers, choirs and sound design. Hans Zimmer and John Williams are famous film composers.
- Some films reuse music from the Western classical tradition, chosen for its mood.

Video game music

- Game music must loop smoothly, because players can stay in one place for a long time.
- Adaptive (dynamic) music changes with the gameplay: faster and more intense in a battle, calmer when exploring, with short stingers when something happens.

- Early consoles used **chiptune**: simple 8-bit sounds with a few square-wave channels. Koji Kondo's music for Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda is famous.
- Modern games use full orchestras, choirs and electronic sounds, just like films.

Key terms

Leitmotif	A short theme linked to a character, place or idea.
Underscore	Music played under the action of a scene.
Diegetic music	Music that comes from inside the story, so the characters can hear it.
Non-diegetic music	Music only the audience can hear.
Mickey-mousing	Music that matches the action exactly.
Ostinato	A short pattern repeated over and over.
Adaptive music	Game music that changes with what the player does.
Chiptune	Simple electronic music from early game consoles.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What is a leitmotif?
2. What is diegetic music?
3. What is non-diegetic music?
4. What is mickey-mousing?
5. Which device is most likely to build tension?
6. Which instruments most often play a heroic theme?
7. Why must video game music loop smoothly?
8. What is adaptive music in a game?

Answers

1. A short theme linked to a character, place or idea
2. Music that comes from inside the story, so the characters hear it
3. Music only the audience can hear
4. Music that matches the action exactly
5. A repeated ostinato with dissonance and a crescendo
6. Brass
7. Players can stay in one place for a long time
8. Music that changes with what the player does

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Your notes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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