



The History and Power of Soundtracks

Description



Behind every great film and television show is a brilliant soundtrack that makes the finished product spectacular and iconic. The soundtrack music has a fundamental place in film and television; it creates the tension, instructs the audience how to feel, and it produces memorable moments that last forever. But how did it gain its place in history?

The History of the Soundtrack

Even before there was spoken dialogue in cinema, there was music.

During the silent era of film (1894-1929), there was no recorded synchronised sound in films. Instead, dialogue appeared on short title cards between shots.

In order to fill up the absence of sound, live orchestras or in-house pianists performed music alongside a film. Live music was provided for two reasons according to Encyclopaedic website, [Film Reference](#), firstly, music masked the awful racket produced by projectors and secondly, it gave the audience a sense of reality. They could look beyond the 2D aspect of the film and become immersed in the action created by the fusion of sound and image.

The choice of music played by in-house pianists and orchestras varied from cinema to cinema. Much like music used in film today, popular hits of the day could be heard in film, if the pianist chose to play a song that everyone was familiar with. The in-house pianists or orchestra were also sometimes given pre-selected music by the film distributors, who sent out suggestions of the kind of music that should be played – for instance, if there was a chase scene the pianist would play at a fast-paced tempo, if a hero came on screen, a triumphant piece would be played ([Fischhoff, 2005](#)). Original scores for films were also produced prior to spoken dialogue. The French silent film [‘The Assassination of the Duke of Guise’ \(1908\)](#) was the first film to do this, with a score written by none other than the legendary French composer Camille Saint-Saëns.



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With the advent of the ‘talkies’ in the 1930s (films with spoken dialogue) music accompaniments in the form of in-house pianists and orchestras began to slowly die out. However, this made the production of original score music possible, film composers could now create specific music that could

be used throughout screenings. The first film to use a completely original score was written by composer Max Steiner for the classic [King Kong \(1933\)](#).

Original film scores allowed producers complete control over how the film would make audiences feel. With a perfectly chosen score indicating how audiences should react – such as creating tension during an action scene by using a fast-paced melody – films could have the desired effect producers wanted.

From the 1950s and 1960s onwards film music radically changed. The use of theme songs and soundtracks became popularised. Instead of the original score used to create emotions and reactions, theme songs, according to [Film Reference](#), were specifically developed for films in advance, with lyrics, and could be used to promote the film on radio and television. Such examples from this era include the theme song “Moon River” from “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” (1961). With theme songs, audiences could listen to and own a piece of the film outside of the cinema. The theme song would be a memory of what they had seen.

From the increasing popularity of theme songs in films developed the “compilation score” as an alternative to the original score. Compilation scores – which abound in films today – are a mix of pre-existing songs from various sources or one artist, which are sync licensed in films. Nowadays it is not uncommon for popular artists to be commissioned for compilation scores. For instance, New Zealand singer Lorde was commissioned to compile the compilation soundtrack for teen-hit [The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part I \(2014\)](#).

The Power of the Soundtrack

Memorable:

The soundtrack provides instant recognition of the film. Wherever the audience will later hear that music, they will remember the film, making the film memorable whenever a piece of music is heard on the TV, radio or in other films.

Take for instance the classic “The Graduate” (1968) soundtrack, made up predominantly of Simon & Garfunkel tracks and instrumentals by American composer Dave Grusin. Although the album contains Simon & Garfunkel music that predates the film’s release, such as their hit “The Sound of Silence”, audiences will instantly remember the film whenever they hear songs from the soundtrack. For example, the track “Mrs Robinson” is instantly recognisable as “The Graduate” theme song and one immediately thinks of the flirtatious Mrs Robinson.

Just as film quotes can make a film memorable, so can the lyrics of the song that provides the same function.

Iconic:

Not only providing a memorable moment for the audience, a great soundtrack can also inspire generations of directors and film and television scores.

One of the most iconic film scores ever composed is the original soundtrack to Alfred Hitchcock’s film “Psycho” (1960), which was composed by Bernard Herrmann. The film’s most memorable

music plays during the shower scene murder in which the use of screeching violins makes the blood curdle. The music was extremely important in creating the horror, according to Michael Brooke, Screenonline curator at the British Film Institute. [Talking to the BBC](#), he said, in a pre-release of the film without music, the shower scene did not cause much of a stir amongst the audience. However, with the later add in of the violins, “people just leapt out of their seats” with horror.

The use of the music to stir up horror became iconic and went on to inspire other film soundtracks, such as [Stephen Spielberg’s Jaws \(1975\)](#). However, the “Psycho” shower music was also [re-used in films and television](#) to become the epitome of terror. For example, in other horror films such as Wes Craven’s “New Nightmare” (1994) and Tim Burton’s dark animated story “Coraline” (2009), as well as in popular TV shows “The Simpsons” and “Friends” and in videogames such as “The Sims”.

As the “Psycho” shower music demonstrates, one soundtrack can become the epitome, and cliché, of a genre.

Creating Emotion:

Music can have a powerful effect in orchestrating the emotions and reactions of the audience.

Imagine “Jaws” (1975) without the alternating notes “E and F” used to create the “dun-dun-dun” sound. Would the fish still have the same terrifying presence? Probably not. The soundtrack created the fear behind the shark and made the movie iconic.

While creating original music can create emotions, drama and tension, film composers can also create emotion by using existing music that the audience have already attached an emotion to. For example, the [“Inception” \(2010\)](#) soundtrack, which purposely uses Edith Piaf’s “Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien”, creates suspense in the film, as well as making use of audiences having attached meaning already to the powerful track and serving as a reminder to audiences of the antagonist’s, Marion Cotillard, prior performance in a Piaf biopic.

Part of the Finished Product:

For many directors the music is also part of the finished product in creating a masterpiece of cinema. For example, the directors Baz Luhrmann and Quentin Tarantino are famous for creating music that fits perfectly with their films.

Baz Luhrmann is known for over-the-top, lavish productions, which are mesmerising to watch, from the costumes to the music accompanying the film. As decadent as his films are, so too are his soundtracks. His most recent film, “The Great Gatsby” (2013) featuring extra luxurious 20s set design and costumes, included a star-studded soundtrack produced by Jay Z, which became as important as the film itself. According to music website [Consequence of Sound](#), Baz Luhrmann and Jay Z worked on the soundtrack together for over two years, attempting to translate “the Jazz Age sensibility of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel into the musical equivalents of our own times”.

Notably, film director Quentin Tarantino also cleverly uses soundtracks to create his movies, according to [Open Culture](#), Tarantino reportedly relies on music to help him flesh out his movie ideas:

“One of the things I do when I am starting a movie, when I’m writing a movie or when I have an idea for a film is, I go through my record collection and just start playing songs, trying to find the personality of the movie, find the spirit of the movie. Then, “boom,” eventually I’ll hit one, two or three songs, or one song in particular, “Oh, this will be a great opening credit song.”•

For these directors music plays an integral part in the overall feel and power of the film. It takes the role of a plot device, moving the action and fusing perfectly with on screen movement and dialogue.

Selling Power of a Theme Song:

A great theme song can really make a film commercially popular and memorable.

Many of the greatest film soundtracks are also best-selling albums, placing number one in charts around the world. In 2013, prior to the hotly anticipated “The Great Gatsby” soundtrack, [US Billboard charts](#) ranked the most successful soundtracks, with many albums spending a staggering amount of weeks at number 1. “Saturday Night Fever” (1978) spent a whopping 24 weeks at number 1.

By releasing a soundtrack, the audience can own a piece of the film before it is released on DVD (or VHS back in the day) and be able to listen to music over and over again, remembering their favourite part of the film.

The particularly moving “My Heart Will Go On” song by Celine Dion for “Titanic” (1997) became a sensational hit, selling more than 15 million copies in the US, as well as winning four Grammys and an Oscar.

With a best-selling theme song, hype is created for a film and audiences can take away a part of the film with them out of the cinema.

Part of the Prestige of a Film:

While soundtrack music can go onto sell very well and make the film commercially popular outside of the cinema, music can also become part of the overall prestige of the film.

The iconic James Bond title music has become somewhat of an event in itself, with many world-renowned artists at the peak of their careers singing a title song for the film. With artists such as Madonna, Paul McCartney and Tina Turner all previously singing the title music.

One of the most successful Bond songs was Shirley Bassey’s “Goldfinger” for the 1964 film of the same title. According to “Bond scholar” Dr Wesley Britton (2011), the song would go on to launch the Bond title songs’ prominence, by becoming a number one success, establishing the composer, John Barry, as the genius behind the Bond scores and jump-starting Bassey’s legendary career.

In the latest of the Bond films under Daniel Craig, the title songs have had huge success. 2015's track "Skyfall" was the first Bond song to win at the Academy Awards, the Grammy Awards and the Golden Globes, with English singer Adele picking up the Oscar for Best Original Song.

Making TV greater:

It's not just film that is benefitting from great soundtracks; television is also making use of music to engage audiences with the emotions of the drama and a powerful score that sticks in the mind of viewers.

While the television theme tune is not new, with Oscar-winning movie stars now starring in TV shows, such as Matthew McConaughey in "True Detective", the incorporation of a stunning original score akin to a movie soundtrack is not unusual. With bigger stars and even bigger budgets, TV production is now something of an art.

[The Guardian](#) recently claimed that we are in the "golden age of TV music", referencing shows such as "Hannibal", " Fargo", and the UK show "Sherlock" which has won and been nominated for Best Original Composition at the Emmy Awards multiple times. The series' use of music demonstrates that music is not a second thought for television, but is now also becoming a part of the overall quality and production of an award-winning series.

EDIT: An earlier version of the article stated that the American silent-epic ["The Birth of a Nation" \(1915\)](#) was the first film to be produced with a score. This was in fact ["The Assassination of the Duke of Guise" \(1908\)](#).