

# Film music – different types of atmosphere



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

I have chosen five different types of atmosphere that are found in film music, each one created a different effect and helps the film created the effect that is needed in the film. My chosen atmospheres are: Scary/Tense, Sad/Unhappy, Happy/Jolly, Mystical/Magical and Excited/Action.

Scary/Tense Scary and tense music is a common type of music in a lot of films. The films that contain a lot of this type of music, not surprisingly, are horror films. This is because the film is obviously trying to scare you so they need tense music that is quite creepy and eerie. Scary and tense music often has a repeated rhythm either in the background or as the main tune.

This sometimes gets faster as well, making you think that something is creeping up on you or getting nearer. The most famous example of this is in the film Jaws, in the parts where the killer shark is just about to strike! This type of music also often uses a minor key to make it sound a bit more sad and serious than happier music. The dynamics in scary music are often very similar. They use a lot of crescendos and diminuendos and accelerandos and rallentandos, as this variation in the music helps to build up the tension.

There music has a huge amount of different dynamics because of what the variation does. The instrumentation of scary music is usually orchestral. The string families are commonly used for the main melody as the high pitched sound helps to make the music more tense and eerie. This is found in parts of Scream, Scream 2 and Scream 3, when the killer is getting nearer to the victim or the victim is being chased. The tempo that I think works best, and is found in a lot of scary movies such as the Halloween series, is one that varies from being quite largo or andante and changing between moderato

and allegro. This is because it gives the audience a false sense of security and keeps them on the edge of their seats.

**Sad/Unhappy** There are a large number of films that have sad and unhappy music in them as I can't think of one film that doesn't have something unhappy in them or something terrible that happens. However there are a couple that have a lot of this type of music in them. One particular one is Titanic. This piece of music is in a minor key, as with most sad music. There isn't a great range of instrumentation because of the voice part sung by Celine Dion, the instrumentation that there is, is mainly a bass part with some percussion.

In other sad films, such as the Lion King, there is orchestral music played that focuses on the string family. This is because of the timbre of instruments like violins, they are very good at creating a sad atmosphere. Sad music works effectively with both forte and piano playing, or even a more extreme dynamic. The tempo of sad music needs to be slow and should be a tempo such as *lento* or *largo*.

There is not normally a lot of ornamentation in sad music and there aren't features like crescendos and diminuendos and *subitos*, this is because the music needs to be peaceful and not very jumpy. However there is quite often a *rallentando* at the end of this type of music, like in the famous film of the 70s called *Love Story*, where a young woman was dying. This used a sad theme that included a lot of the typical musical elements associated with sad music. This theme became very well known. **Happy/Jolly** Happy and jolly music is often found in children's films.

Some examples of this are at the end of *Chicken Run* and in *A Bug's Life*. The music in *Chicken Run* uses a flute for the main melody. This is effective as the timbre of the flute can be quite bouncy and jolly. Flute playing is fairly common in music trying to create a happy atmosphere. There are no particular dynamics that you would generally associate with happy and jolly music, but in *Chicken Run* they stay pretty much the same throughout the music and are mezzo forte.

There weren't any crescendos or diminuendos in *Chicken Run*, but you do find them in other music trying to achieve the same atmosphere. The timbre is usually not largo or lento in jolly music, but is quite often andante or even faster. In *A Bug's Life* there is a mainly allegro tempo. There is often repetition in this kind of music, and you can see this a lot in *Chicken Run*.

Sometimes there is feeling of a march in happy music as marches have instruments that can be quite strong, vibrant and jolly and make a happy sound. A good example of this is the famous *Dam Busters* theme from the film *Dam Busters*. Finally, I think one of the main factors that contributes to happy music sounding happy is the fact that it is in a major key, because if they were in minor keys they would sound quite serious and powerful.

**Mystical/Magical** There are a wide range of different types of music that can create a mystical and magical effect.

There can be a big difference in elements, like dynamics and instrumentation, and the end product of the two pieces of music can still produce a similar effect. In the parts of *Fantasia* that create a magical atmosphere the instrumentation is varied. There are strings to begin with but

then this changes to a mixture of strings and brass and even woodwind. There isn't really one orchestral group that works best for creating this atmosphere, but I think strings work particularly well because of the violin's timbre. The harmony in this type of music varies depending on what the composer is trying to achieve.

If the composer wants music that is sad and still mysterious and magical then he uses a minor key, but if he wants a bit jollier then he uses a major key. In *Fantasia* I think there are both minor and major keys used, because of the big difference between all the parts of the film. The dynamics play a big part in creating a magical and mystical effect, along with ornamentation. Pieces that use a variation in the dynamics and use crescendos and diminuendos work well, this is because it makes the music more interesting and alive and you need that when trying to create this type of atmosphere.

The ornamentation also does this, so elements like glissandos and tremelandos can be quite effective. In a lot of films trying to create this effect an andante pace is used, though you do sometimes find that slightly slower tempos work just as well. Excited/Action The types of films that I'm referring to that create this type of atmosphere are the action films, such as *James Bond* or *Die Hard*. This type of film music is fairly similar in most action/thriller films. This is because quite a lot of the musical elements are the same. The instrumentation usually consists of a strong background base beat accompanied with a powerful melody.

This is often found in *James Bond* films. The key of this type of music is often major, as the music needs to be quite upbeat and action like, not sad and

slow. The dynamics can vary sometimes but are mainly found to be forte or fortissimo, because this goes with the strong feeling to the music, this is found in Die Hard. Crescendos work well and, like in scary movies, a subito can get the audience's attention. A brisk tempo is needed to keep in with the whole feel of the music.

In most of the James Bond films the most famous tune uses a strong tune that drives the film forwards and leads it into action. This is created by the fast moving tempo and the strong repeating rhythm.