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IB review

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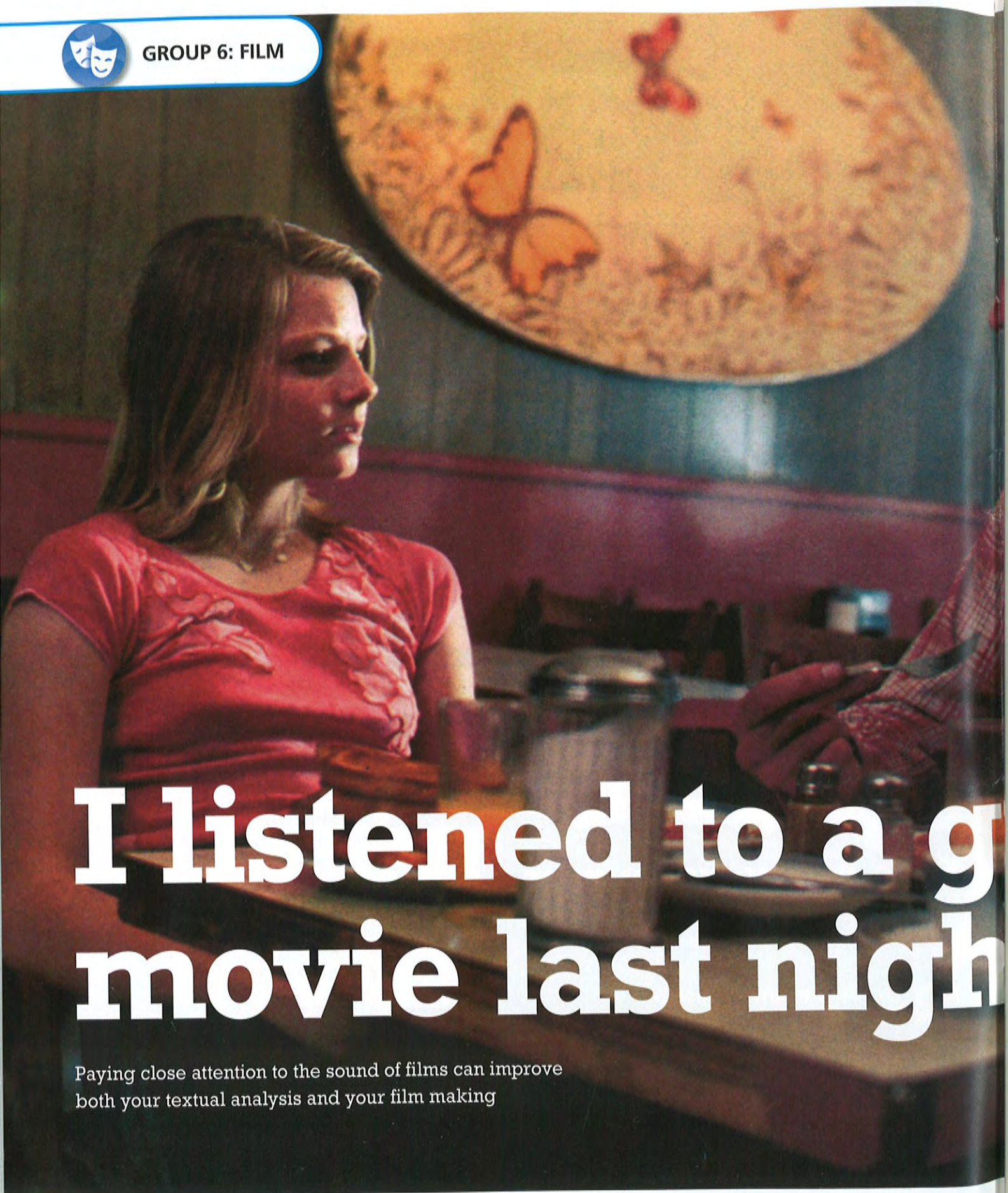


I listened to a g movie last nigh

Paying close attention to the sound of films can improve both your textual analysis and your film making

Robert De Niro and Jodie Foster in *Taxi Driver*

Exam links

Sound design and music are important elements to consider in both your textual analysis (the presentation) and your final film (production portfolio).

Within a few weeks of starting the IB film course, you should begin viewing movies in a different way. You will understand that film has it own language and that the purpose of this language is to create meaning. Just as a painter can use colour, texture, form and composition to create meaning and evoke emotion, film makers can use lighting, colour, costume, composition, camera angle and camera movement. IB film students don't watch movies — they study them. It is an active process, not a passive one.

One of the most powerful ways a film maker can create meaning is through the use of sound, mostly through music and sound design. Ever tried watching a horror film with the sound turned off? Film teachers often say that an audience will tolerate poor camerawork or editing, but bad sound will always destroy a film. It is important to keep this in mind when you make your films.

The role of sound designer is one of the five options when you create your final IB film production (5 minutes for SL, 7 minutes for HL), so let's examine the different ways sound design and music can create meaning.

Musical motifs

Like the motifs you might encounter in an English literature class, motifs in film can take many forms. One of these is the musical motif, a recurring musical theme that is often associated with a particular character.

Composer Hans Zimmer searched long and hard to create the perfect motif for the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. He needed something that suggested pent-up violence — something that was truly provocative and that audiences could actually dislike. Early versions included the sound of razor blades on piano wire. Eventually he settled on the sound of a taut string that gets tighter and tighter and never breaks. For a student, identifying this in the film is an important part of the textual analysis, but more important is recognising the intended effect. In IB film assessment, we call this **director's intention**.

Over the past 2 years, many students chose *The Night of the Hunter* as the film for their oral presentation final assessment. The better presentations discussed the way Mort Schumann's music created meaning. When Harry Powell, a preacher and serial killer with 'Love' tattooed on one hand and 'Hate' on the other, first

Questions and activities

Watch the first 45 seconds of Mathieu Ratthe's short film 'Lovefield' in silence (www.tinyurl.com/lsum687). What type of music do you imagine is playing? What Foley sounds do you expect to hear? Now restart the film and watch it through with the sound turned on. The film has no dialogue. Listen to how Ratthe manipulates the audience and controls its understanding of what is happening onscreen through the use of music and sound design.

appears on screen he is accompanied by four loud notes played on brass instruments. It is a menacing and powerful sound. Shortly afterwards we see the discovery of a dead body. We hear the same four notes. Though Powell is not present, we know this murder is his handiwork. Later in the film, we see a train thundering through the night. The four-note motif is played again and, though we never see inside the train, we know who is on it.

Instrumentation

Depending on the choices made in volume, pitch and tempo, a film's score can create different meanings. **Instrumentation** is important too. While Powell is associated with loud brass instruments, his intended victims, the two children, are associated with gentler sounds played in strings and xylophone. Here is an opportunity for you to link instrumentation with intended effect.

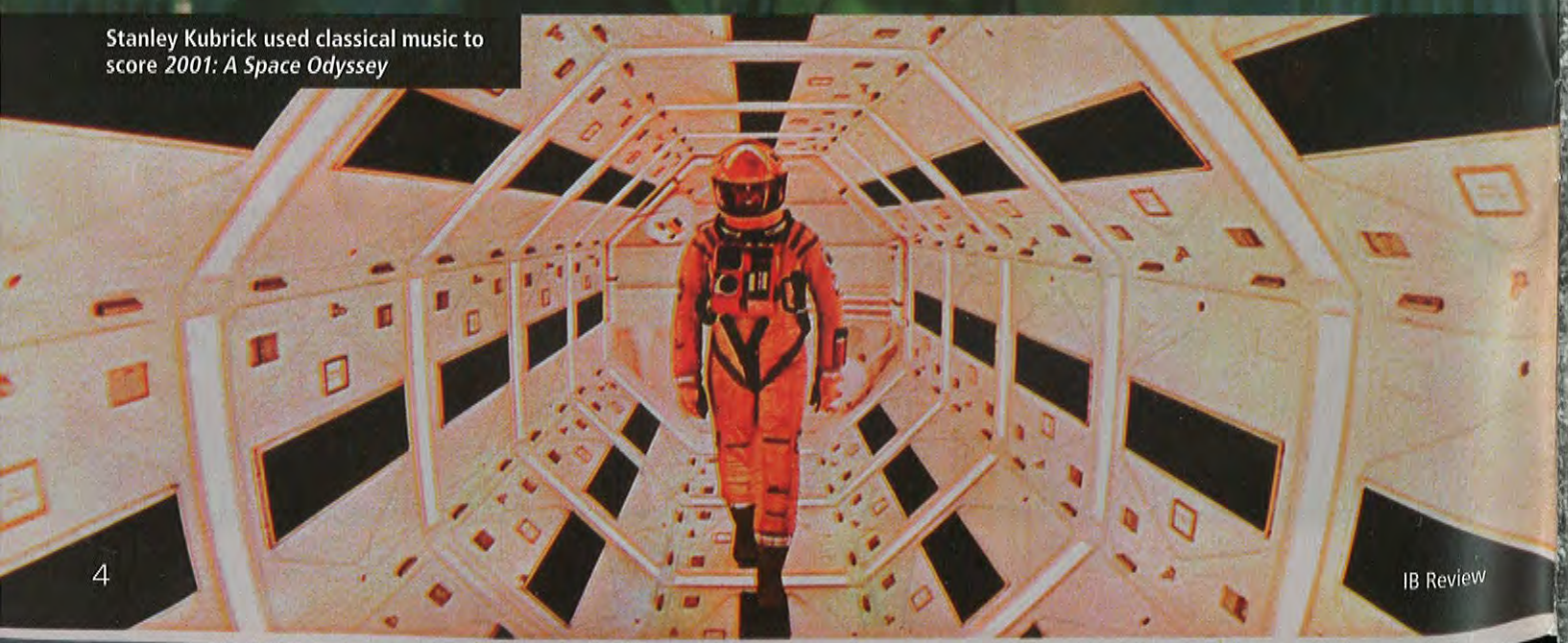
Sometimes instrumentation does not even depend on musical instruments. We are all familiar with the music used in the most famous science fiction films: John Williams' orchestral score for *Star Wars* or Stanley Kubrick's use of majestic classical music in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But in *Looper*, a science fiction film about time travel, composer Nathan Johnson chose to go against expectations. The soundtrack features music made from the sounds of fingers drumming on railings and music stands, treadmills in a hotel room, a microwave oven — both the beeping of entering the numbers and also the hum of its engine — and an industrial fan.

Johnson used software to convert these sounds into actual playable instruments. Instead of the sound of a kettledrum, Johnson replaced it with the sound of slamming car doors. He recorded this in a basement car park because of the reverberation the location gave to the oomph of the bass when the doors slammed. This is 'the how' of what Johnson did. For the film student 'the why' is much more important. Here again, we are talking about director's (or sound designer's) intention and intended effects.

Using pre-existing music

Pre-existing music existed before the film was made. Selecting such music can be a powerful way of creating meaning (as well as appealing to audiences, who may be influenced by the familiarity of the tunes). Pre-existing music can be used to create setting and add authenticity to the historical context. Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*

The Joker's motif in *The Dark Knight* was intended to suggest pent-up violence



Stanley Kubrick used classical music to score *2001: A Space Odyssey*

covers a span of 12 years and the musical soundtrack reflects those years.

The 1974 version of *The Great Gatsby* features 1920s music. However, Baz Luhrmann's 2013 version of the film features current music. You should be concerned here with the 'why' and with the director's intentions. Luhrmann is drawing a socio-cultural connection between the role of jazz in the 1920s and hip-hop in more recent years. Both musical styles challenged the status quo of their day.

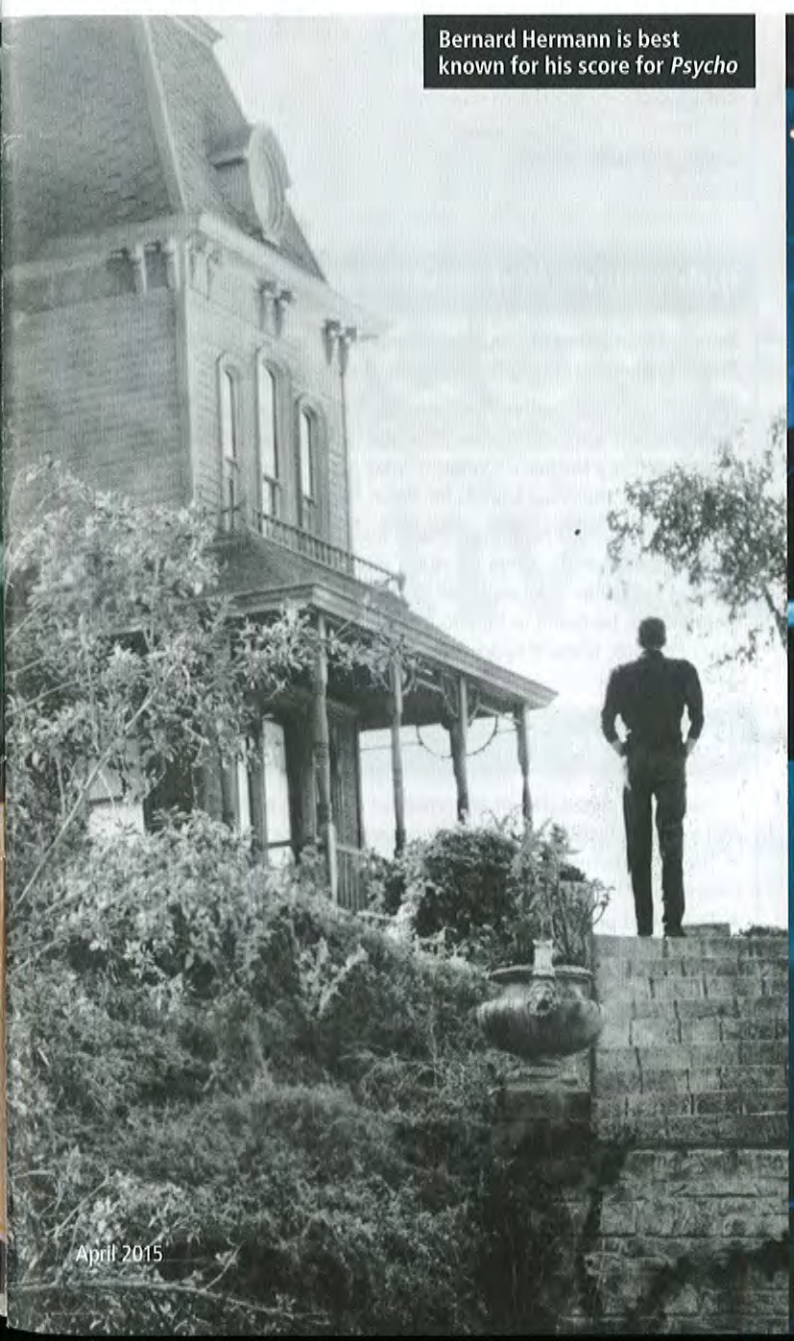
Billy Elliot, set during the 1984–85 miner's strike in England, uses pre-existing music in a number of interesting ways. Some of the music is there to set the time period of the film, while other songs are chosen for their lyrical content. T. Rex's 'Cosmic Dancer' (1971) predated the film's setting by 13 years but the lyrics perfectly reflect young Billy's dreams. The use of The Style Council's 'Walls Come Tumbling Down' creates meaning on two levels: the lyrics challenge entrenched authority while the performers of the song were part of Red Wedge, a collective of musicians who attempted to raise the political awareness of young people hoping to contribute to the downfall of the Conservative government of Margaret

Theory of knowledge

1 Even when movies were silent, the audience's experience of a film included music played live in the cinema. How much of a role did music play in 'knowing' the meaning in a silent movie? In this context, can music be considered a language? Given the link between music and culture, could films be perceived differently in different cultures? Which ways of knowing are used by film audiences? See (and listen to) how Michael Moore uses music to influence people's beliefs through his documentaries.

2 How effective are the silent movies at delivering their messages? Does the addition of music add to that message? What about adding dialogue? Is there a hierarchy within the senses? Does sight influence perception more than hearing?

3 To what extent is film language a language? How does it fit with our definitions of formal language? Let's be more specific and choose one element of film language: is sound design a language?



Bernard Hermann is best known for his score for *Psycho*

John Williams composed an orchestral score for *Star Wars*

The music in *Donnie Darko* adds authenticity to the setting

Thatcher. These were similar aims to those of the miners. In your oral presentation, you are expected to address the socio-cultural context of the film you have selected. Don't overlook the choice of music when investigating this aspect of film language.

Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* is another film that uses 1980s music to add authenticity to the setting, but Kelly goes much further. Many of the songs in the film contain lyrics that explain or foreshadow events in the plot. The film contains Joy Division's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' and INXS's 'Never Tear Us Apart'. Why should two songs with such opposite sentiments appear in the same film?

The film also contains two **montages** where the music and lyrics overwhelm the **diegetic sound**. The first uses a Tears For Fears song, 'Head Over Heels', to introduce the main characters in a school setting. In many parts of the montage, Kelly lines up the action with the lyrics even though the song was written decades before the film was made. The final montage takes another Tears For Fears song, 'Mad World' (but using a version sung by Gary Jules), to show the effects of the film's final events on all the main characters. Again Kelly lines up the visuals to match the lyrics.

Look for how Kelly sometimes uses the pre-existing music diegetically (heard, for instance, in the background on a radio or at a party) while at other times the songs are non-diegetic. Again, you should question Kelly's intentions in making these choices.

Foley sounds

When you make your final production film, poor **Foley sounds** (or the absence of Foley sound) will be very noticeable and can ruin an audience's enjoyment of your film. The golden rule is 'Everything should have a sound'. This includes doors closing, cups being put on tables, the rustle of clothing and, most importantly, room tone for each location in which you film. There are some excellent room-tone tutorials online.

Music and characterisation

Watch the opening credits for Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and listen carefully to the musical score composed by Bernard Hermann. This was Hermann's final film score. — he is probably best known for his shrieking strings in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The goal of the opening music in *Taxi Driver* is to get us inside the mind of Travis Bickle. The score moves between the smooth romantic sound of jazz-tinged saxophone to discordant snare drums. The music not only characterises Travis but also foreshadows the events that will follow.

Hermann achieved a similar effect at the end of *Psycho*, where he puts us inside the mind of Norman Bates. At this point Norman has been arrested and is sitting alone in a cell. We hear his thoughts in voiceover but it is the accompanying music that reveals most. The music borrows ideas from **serialism**, a method of composition that uses a series of values to manipulate different musical elements. Serialism began with Arnold Schoenberg's 12-tone technique, where he ordered the 12 notes of the chromatic scale but allowed no repeated notes. Unfortunately, many audiences found it unlistenable — until it was used in films. Hermann uses these discordant sounds in the final scene to reflect the fractured state of Norman's mind. We have moved from director's intention to composer's intention, something worth considering when you prepare for your presentation.

Earlier in the same film, Hermann's music helps us imagine the thoughts of Marion Crane. Hitchcock does not need a voiceover, as Hermann's score reveals the struggle in her mind: should she steal the money or return it? The score contains two layers of strings. One set of stings remains harmonic while the other strings move between harmony and disharmony, similar to Marion's vacillations. Combined with this, Hitchcock poses Marion in front of a mirror so we can see 'two sides' of Marion Crane. The intended effect is clear.

Conclusion

When preparing for your presentation, play your selected extract with the screen turned to black. Focus on the sound design and music. What effects do the composer and sound designer intend? Does the sound design in this extract relate to other parts of the film?

Glossary

Diegetic sound Sound in a film whose source can be seen, e.g. objects on screen making noise and people speaking.

Foley sounds Recreating the sounds of everyday objects on screen during post-production in order to raise the sound quality.

Instrumentation The particular combination of instruments or objects used to create sound.

Montage A technique of short segments of shots fused together to suggest that a period of time is condensed, thereby delivering more information in a shorter period of time.

Serialism A method of composition that uses a series of values to manipulate different musical elements. A serial pattern in music is merely one that repeats over and over for a significant stretch of a composition.

References and resources

Zimmer H. and King. R, 'The Sound and Music of *The Dark Knight Rises*', available on the DVD version of *The Dark Knight Rises*.

www.soundworkscollection.com is a wonderful website that features short films on the sound design of many recent films. The short film 'Gary Hecker — Veteran Foley Artist' shows Hecker at work as he creates the Foley sounds for *Robin Hood* and *2012*.

For some humorous examples of how music can completely change the original meaning, there are many samples online where the original music has been replaced to create a new meaning. A good example can be found in Christopher Rule's reimagined trailer for Mary Poppins: **www.tinyurl.com/7sb79zh**

Key points

- Music and sound design are powerful elements of film language and are used by directors and composers to create meaning.
- The pitch, tempo and volume of the music influence the creation of meaning.
- The use of pre-existing music can enhance the setting. Some pre-existing music is used because of its lyrical content.
- As a film student, your focus should be on the effect of music and sound design, that is, the director's intentions.

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