

Music in Theatre and Film

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INTRODUCTION

Music in theatre and film is not merely background noise – it is the heartbeat, the soul, the unseen character driving emotion, tone, and storytelling. It has always played a central role in the art of storytelling, dating back to the earliest forms of performance. In ancient Greek theatre, for instance, music and chorus were integral to the dramatic experience, often guiding audience emotion and clarifying plot developments without relying solely on spoken dialogue. In traditional Asian theatre forms like Noh and Kabuki, musical elements were also deeply intertwined with narrative structure and character portrayal. Cook (14) highlights that these historical practices illustrate that music has long served not merely as background but as a dynamic agent in shaping the theatrical experience. Over time, this symbiosis between music and performance evolved, adapting to the cultural contexts and technological innovations of each era.

With the advent of cinema in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the role of music in storytelling entered a new chapter. Silent films relied heavily on live musical accompaniment to convey mood, tension, and rhythm. As sound technology developed, film scores became an art form of their own, with composers like Max Steiner and Bernard Herrmann crafting soundscapes that elevated narrative complexity and emotional depth (Kalinak 56). Today, both theatre and film use music not just to support storytelling but to deepen it – establishing atmosphere, signalling shifts in time or tone, and reflecting a character's inner psyche. Music operates as a non-verbal language that offers subtext, enhances visual storytelling, and bridges emotional gaps between the audience and the narrative.

This study traces how music has evolved as a vital narrative tool in theatre and film, examining its historical development, theoretical foundations, and practical uses. It shows how composers, directors, and performers strategically use melody, rhythm, and even silence to guide audience perception, heighten tension, reveal subtext, and evoke emotion. From early Greek tragedies and silent cinema to contemporary musicals and soundtracks, the paper highlights major innovations and cultural shifts that shaped music's role. Ultimately, it argues that music functions as an expressive force that transcends language and continues to redefine storytelling across the performing arts.

According to Gorbman (77), music ultimately transcends spoken language by unlocking deeper emotional registers and transforming the audience's experience into something more immersive and memorable. Understanding its impact not only enriches our appreciation of performance arts but also reveals how sound can powerfully shape the stories we tell

Conceptualisation: Music in Theatre and Film

Music plays a pivotal role in both theatre and film, serving as a powerful tool to enhance storytelling, evoke emotions, and deepen audience engagement. In theatre, music often emerges through live orchestration or vocal performance, directly influencing the pacing and mood of a production. The integration of music in theatrical performances can transform a narrative, adding layers of meaning and emotional depth. For instance, operettas and musicals have historically utilized music to advance plot and character development, creating a dynamic interplay between dialogue, song, and dance. This synergy allows for a multifaceted exploration of themes and characters, enriching the theatrical experience.

In film, music functions as a narrative device that guides audience perception and emotional response. Composers like Max Steiner have been instrumental in shaping film music, employing techniques such as leitmotifs and "Mickey Mousing" to synchronize music with on-screen actions, thereby enhancing narrative coherence and emotional impact. Steiner's approach to film scoring, characterized by the use of recurring musical themes associated with specific characters or ideas, has become a hallmark of cinematic storytelling. This method not only supports the visual narrative but also deepens the audience's connection to the film's characters and themes.

The convergence of music in theatre and film is particularly evident in the genre of the musical, where narrative and music are inseparable. The seamless integration of song and dance in such productions exemplifies the collaborative potential of music, choreography, and storytelling. As highlighted by Chenyue (597), this genre showcases how music can transcend its traditional role, becoming a central element that drives the narrative forward. Whether in the live setting of a theatre or the cinematic world of film, music remains an essential component that shapes the audience's experience and interpretation of the story.

Historical Context of Music in Theatre

Classical Antiquity

The roots of music in theatrical performance can be traced to Classical Greek drama, where music was not just an accompaniment but a structural and thematic necessity. Tragedies and comedies by playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides integrated choral odes – songs performed by the chorus that served to narrate, comment, and emotionally reflect upon the dramatic action. As revealed by West (8) these choral performances were enhanced by instruments like the aulos, a double-reeded pipe, and the lyre, a string instrument associated with both divine and mortal artistry. Music helped bridge the gap between performers and audience, offering a non-verbal, visceral communication of divine intervention, human suffering, and comic relief. The *choregos* (sponsor) often funded elaborate musical arrangements, emphasizing the cultural prestige associated with musical-theatrical performance in ancient Athens.

Medieval and Renaissance Periods

Following the decline of Roman theatre, the Middle Ages saw the rise of liturgical drama within Christian religious practices. Performed inside cathedrals and monasteries, these early plays used Gregorian chants and plainsong to dramatize biblical events such as the Resurrection or the Nativity. The oral tradition and musicality of these performances helped audiences. Many of whom were illiterate – engage with sacred texts on an emotional and spiritual level (Nagler 92). As

Europe transitioned into the Renaissance, theatrical music evolved in both secular and popular forms. In Italy, commedia dell'arte featured improvised performances where music was essential for comic timing and character distinction. Stock characters like Arlecchino and Colombina often used musical motifs or songs to express their personas and intentions (Nagler 124). Meanwhile, in Elizabethan England, music played a crucial role in the works of William Shakespeare. His plays included instrumental interludes, period songs, and dances to build atmosphere, signal transitions, and emphasize key emotional beats. Nagler notes that the melancholic "Willow Song" in *Othello* functions as both a foreshadowing mechanism and a pivotal emotional moment (126).

Opera and Musical Theatre

According to Gordon, the seventeenth century saw opera emerge in Florence as a revolutionary synthesis of music and drama designed to revive Greek theatrical ideals; early works such as Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607) combined orchestration, vocal expression, and spectacle to narrate mythological stories, and later composers including Handel, Mozart, and Verdi refined the form through richer harmonies, character-focused arias, and complex orchestral storytelling (38 – 45).

By the 19th and 20th centuries, the rise of operetta and musical theatre bridged the divide between high art and popular entertainment. Gilbert and Sullivan's operettas paved the way for the American musical, which found its full expression on Broadway and in London's West End. Composers like George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim redefined musical storytelling, using music not merely to entertain but to explore complex themes of identity, love, politics, and society (Gordon 112). These modern musicals carry the legacy of ancient choral storytelling, reinforcing music's enduring power in the theatrical tradition.

Music in Film: A Historical Overview

Silent Era

Marks explains that during the silent era, film music was indispensable, with live performances by pianists, organists, or small orchestras supplying emotional, rhythmic, and narrative cues while also masking projector noise; a milestone example is D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which featured one of the earliest original full-length orchestral scores composed specifically for a film (22).

Introduction of Synchronised Sound

According to Cooke, the arrival of synchronized sound in the 1920s, exemplified by *The Jazz Singer* (1927), transformed the role of music in film, enabling composers to score scenes in advance and weave sound design directly into the storytelling so that music became an embedded narrative element rather than an external accompaniment (39).

Golden Age of Hollywood

Prendergast observes that during the Golden Age of Hollywood (1930s – 1950s), studios employed full-time composers who crafted sweeping, symphonic scores that narrated rather than merely supported scenes; figures such as Max Steiner (*Gone with the Wind*, 1939) and Bernard Herrmann (*Citizen Kane*, 1941; later *Psycho*, 1960) revolutionized the use of leitmotifs and psychological underscoring to shape audience perception (74).

Modern Innovations

Kalinak notes that contemporary film scoring blends orchestral and electronic textures, with Hans Zimmer's work on *Inception* (2010) and *Dune* (2021) exemplifying this hybrid approach through synthesized tones, manipulated sound samples, and experimental instrumentation; collaborations with artists such as Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross, and Ludwig Göransson further blur the lines between score, soundtrack, and popular music (181).

Forms, Types, and Styles of Music in Theatre and Film

Music in theatre and film plays a vital role in shaping narrative, emotion, and atmosphere. Its forms, types, and styles are diverse, often overlapping, but can be broadly categorized as follows:

1. **Diegetic and Non-Diegetic Music:** Kalinak explains that diegetic, or source, music arises from within the narrative world, such as a character performing onstage or a radio playing in a scene, and is audible to the characters themselves (45), whereas Landy notes that non-diegetic music exists outside the story space, functioning for the audience alone through orchestral scores, background tracks, or leitmotifs that emphasize emotional or narrative cues (112).
2. **Styles and Genres:** Theatre and film music draw from a wide variety of musical genres, each creating a distinct impact. In theatre, traditional forms include operatic, musical theatre, folk, and contemporary musical styles. In film, styles range from orchestral scores and jazz to electronic, hip-hop, and ambient music. For example, musicals like *Les Misérables* employ complex operatic and lyrical structures, while films like *Blade Runner* utilize electronic ambient music to establish futuristic atmospheres (Cohen 78).
3. **Function-Based Types:** Music can also be categorized based on its function; for instance,
 - a) Cooke observes that character themes or motifs provide musical identity to characters or ideas, helping audiences recognize emotional or narrative shifts (59).
 - b) Mood-setting or atmospheric music creates tension, romance, or suspense, independent of character association.
 - c) Brown notes that transitional or bridging music smooths scene changes or montage sequences, maintaining narrative continuity. In theatre, incidental music underscores dialogue, enhancing dramatic effect without dominating the scene (134).

Overall, music in theatre and film is multi-faceted: it can be narrative-driven, atmospheric, symbolic, or purely aesthetic. The careful selection and integration of musical forms and styles enrich the audience's emotional and cognitive engagement, elevating storytelling beyond mere visual or textual means.

Functions of Music in Theatre

Emotional Amplification

Music in theatre is an essential tool for emotional expression. It functions not merely as background but as an active emotional agent, guiding the audience's feelings and deepening their connection to the performance. Through specific musical choices, such as the use of a minor key, slow tempo, or dissonant harmonies, composers can underscore sorrow, tension, or foreboding. Conversely, lively rhythms and major keys often heighten moments of joy, celebration, or triumph.

Lehmann observes that such musical cues work almost subconsciously, enabling audiences to sense a character's pain, excitement, or fear before any dialogue occurs (98).

Character and Theme Development

Wolf explains that, beyond evoking emotion, music is vital to character and thematic development, with leitmotifs – recurring musical phrases tied to specific characters, ideas, or emotions, shifting over the course of a production to signal changes in character or situation; for instance, in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, Sondheim distorts and intensifies Todd's leitmotifs to reflect his psychological breakdown and growing obsession (112).

Narrative Structuring

Music also serves a structural function within theatre, advancing the plot and providing key exposition. Songs often deliver backstory, reveal motivations, or highlight pivotal narrative shifts. In *Les Misérables*, for instance, the solo number "I Dreamed a Dream" is not simply a moment of sorrow; it is a narrative linchpin that communicates Fantine's tragic past and foreshadows her downfall. Through this song, the audience gains both emotional insight and critical plot information, all within the span of a few haunting verses (Lehmann 102).

Functions of Music in Film

Film music operates as a layered narrative device rather than simply background sound, enriching storytelling, guiding audience perception, and embedding cultural meaning. Scholars commonly identify four major functions – diegetic and non-diegetic placement, mood and atmosphere creation, narrative support through cues and transitions, and cultural anchoring, as central to how music shapes a film's impact.

Diegetic and Non-Diegetic Music

A central distinction in film scoring is between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Diegetic music arises from within the film's world and is audible to the characters, such as a song on a car radio, while non-diegetic music is external to the story space and crafted for the audience alone. Gorbman explains that filmmakers can exploit the tension or harmony between these two forms to heighten dramatic effect; for instance, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in *A Clockwork Orange* functions both as a psychological trigger for the protagonist and as a disturbing counterpoint to violent imagery, intensifying narrative irony and character psychology (73).

Mood and Atmosphere

Music also sculpts the emotional terrain of a film. Chion observes that minimalist motifs in suspense or horror often cue impending danger, as exemplified by the two-note ostinato in *Jaws* (1975), which taps into primal fear and builds unbearable anticipation with striking simplicity (56). Conversely, lush orchestral arrangements in romance films evoke intimacy, vulnerability, and yearning; in *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), for example, piano-based themes mirror the protagonists' restrained passion and subtly reinforce emotional subtext.

Narrative Cues and Transitions

Beyond emotional shading, music reinforces narrative coherence. Through recurring leitmotifs – musical ideas associated with characters or themes, audiences receive non-verbal cues about relationships and developments. Lipscomb and Tolchinsky note that montage sequences

often rely on music to compress time and link events; the “Gonna Fly Now” theme underscoring Rocky’s (1976) training scenes exemplifies how scoring can symbolize determination, growth, and transformation, thereby maintaining pacing and emotional fluidity (145).

Cultural and Contextual Anchoring

Film music also grounds stories in specific temporal, geographic, or cultural frames. Tarantino’s use of 1960s and 1970s surf rock and soul tracks in *Pulp Fiction* constructs a nostalgic yet subversive retro aesthetic, while *Black Panther* (2018) incorporates traditional African rhythms, vocalizations, and instruments such as the talking drum and shekere to represent the Afrofuturist setting of Wakanda. As Lipscomb and Tolchinsky point out, such culturally resonant soundscapes enhance authenticity and world-building (145).

Comparative Analysis: Theatre and Film Performance Context

In theatre, music is often performed live, creating a dynamic interaction between performer and audience. In film, music is pre-recorded and precisely synchronised with visuals, offering tighter control over emotional and dramatic timing.

Temporal Structure

Musical numbers in theatre often follow a “showstopper” format – dialogue builds toward a climactic song. In film, music is more fluidly integrated and used to guide editing and pacing (Buhler 90).

Audience Experience

Theatrical music requires the audience’s imaginative engagement, especially with minimal sets or abstract staging. Film music, however, is part of a complete audiovisual experience and can manipulate audience perception more directly.

Elements of Music in Theatre and Film

Music is central to shaping narrative, mood, and character in theatre and film. Scholars highlight seven key elements – melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, dynamics, texture, and form, as essential components that uniquely contribute to storytelling and the audience’s experience.

1. **Melody:** Melody, the musically satisfying and often memorable sequence of notes, frequently carries thematic or character associations in both theatre and film. Lehman points out that recurring melodic motifs, such as John Williams’ leitmotifs in *Star Wars*, reinforce character identities and dramatic arcs (47).
2. **Harmony:** Harmony deepens the emotional substance of a scene. Cooke explains that dissonant harmonies generate tension while consonant harmonies evoke resolution, with film scores often using harmonic shifts to underscore the emotional undertones of dialogue or action and guide audience perception (112).
3. **Rhythm:** Rhythm sets the pacing of a production. Karlin and Wright note that in theatre, rhythmic cues align with choreography or dialogue, while in film, rhythm mirrors or contrasts editing tempo, for instance, rapid rhythmic patterns in action scenes heighten excitement and urgency (56).

4. **Timbre:** Timbre, or tone color, shapes the character of sound. Whittall observes that darker, lower timbres can suggest danger or sadness, whereas brighter timbres evoke joy or humor; composers use various instruments and digital effects to craft these specific timbral atmospheres (33).
5. **Dynamics:** Dynamics, referring to musical volume, convey emotional intensity. Miller explains that abrupt changes in dynamics can startle audiences or emphasize climactic moments, while in musical theatre, dynamic variation enhances vocal expression and engagement (89).
6. **Texture:** Texture describes how musical layers combine. Brown highlights that a single melodic line (monophony) can create intimacy, while rich, multi-layered textures (polyphony) convey complexity or chaos; film composers adjust texture to direct the listener's focus and emotional state (102).
7. **Form:** Form refers to the structure or organization of a musical piece. Gorbman notes that in theatre, numbers often follow familiar forms such as AABA to fit narrative arcs, while in film, the musical form frequently parallels story structure, reinforcing rising action, climax, and resolution (76).

Music thus functions as both an emotional and structural element in theatre and film, enhancing storytelling and shaping audience interpretation through its fundamental components.

Major Proponents of Music in Theatre and Film and Their Contributions

Music has consistently been essential for enhancing narrative, evoking emotion, and creating atmosphere in both theatre and film. Throughout history, numerous composers, directors, and theorists have significantly influenced how music integrates with performance and storytelling.

Richard Wagner (1813 - 1883) – Theatre and Opera

Wagner transformed theatre music with his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art,” which sought to unify music, drama, and staging into a cohesive whole. His operas, particularly the Ring Cycle, employed leitmotifs – recurring musical themes tied to characters or ideas, which later inspired film composers such as John Williams. As Wagner maintained, music should serve the drama rather than exist independently as a concert piece (Wagner 89).

Leonard Bernstein (1918 - 1990) – Musical Theatre

Bernstein combined classical, jazz, and popular music elements to craft emotionally resonant musical theatre scores. His work on *West Side Story* illustrates how music can reflect social issues and deepen character development, with Secrest noting that Bernstein’s “fusion of classical form with urban rhythms helped redefine the American musical” (212).

Stephen Sondheim (1930 - 2021) – Musical Theatre

Sondheim was renowned for his intricate lyrics and sophisticated compositions that explored psychological complexity. Productions like *Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods* pushed musical theatre into darker, more nuanced thematic territory. Gordon observes that “Sondheim elevated the expectations of audiences, demanding intellectual engagement through lyrical and musical intricacy” (143).

Max Steiner (1888 - 1971) – Film Music

Often called the “father of film music,” Steiner composed scores for over 300 films, including *King Kong* (1933) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939). He pioneered synchronized orchestral scoring that closely followed a film’s emotional beats. Cooke notes that Steiner believed music should “guide the audience’s emotional response without being intrusive” (45).

Bernard Herrmann (1911 - 1975) – Film Music

Herrmann, particularly in collaboration with Alfred Hitchcock, redefined the horror genre through scores like *Psycho* (1960). His use of dissonance, orchestration, and minimalism generated tension and psychological depth, with Kalinak observing that “Herrmann’s innovative use of strings in *Psycho* introduced a new language of suspense in film music” (97).

John Williams (1932 - Present) – Film Music

Williams is one of the most iconic contemporary film composers, creating music for *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Harry Potter*. He revived the leitmotif technique and demonstrated the narrative power of film music. As Audissino states, “Williams’s scores are central to the mythic resonance of modern blockbusters” (15).

Hans Zimmer (1957 - Present) – Film Music

Zimmer is recognized for blending electronic elements with traditional orchestration, producing immersive soundscapes in films such as *Inception*, *Interstellar*, and *The Dark Knight*. He often collaborates in teams, emphasizing music as part of the film’s overall sound design. Winters notes that “Zimmer’s work embodies the cinematic shift toward experiential, rather than melodic, film scoring” (123).

Challenges and Ethical Considerations of Music for Theatre and Film

Cultural Appropriation

One major ethical challenge in using music for theatre and film lies in the risk of cultural appropriation. When composers or producers incorporate music from culturally specific traditions without proper consultation, understanding, or credit, the result can cross the line from homage into exploitation. This is particularly sensitive when the music belongs to marginalized or historically oppressed communities, where misrepresentation can perpetuate stereotypes or dilute cultural meaning. Ethical practice requires thorough research, collaboration with cultural bearers, and equitable recognition or compensation for the communities whose music is being adapted. By engaging cultural consultants and maintaining transparency in creative choices, theatre and film productions can demonstrate respect and authenticity rather than appropriation.

Licensing and Copyright

Another significant challenge involves navigating the complex legal and ethical frameworks surrounding music rights. Filmmakers and theatrical producers frequently rely on pre-existing songs or compositions, which are protected by licensing agreements and copyright laws. Failure to secure appropriate permissions not only exposes a production to legal action but also raises moral questions about artists’ ownership and fair compensation. Beyond legal compliance, responsible practice includes crediting original creators, understanding moral rights, and

negotiating licenses that reflect the value of the music being used. This approach upholds both artistic integrity and ethical accountability, ensuring that the creative contributions of composers and performers are respected and sustained.

Conclusion

Music in theatre and film operates far beyond the level of background accompaniment; it is a core narrative engine that shapes story arcs, guides audience emotion, and signals cultural meaning. From the ritual choruses of ancient Greece to the grand operas of the nineteenth century and the innovative scores of today's blockbusters, music has consistently served as a vital link between performance and perception. Its melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic elements enrich dramatic action, while its capacity for leitmotif, mood-setting, and thematic development gives audiences a deeper understanding of characters, settings, and conflicts. This enduring role underscores music's ability to transform performances into immersive experiences that resonate across time and culture.

At the same time, recognising the functions, techniques, and ethical dimensions of music in theatre and film is essential for contemporary practitioners and scholars. As productions increasingly draw from diverse traditions and experiment with multimedia forms, creators must navigate issues such as cultural appropriation, licensing, and fair attribution to ensure respectful and authentic engagement with musical material. Such awareness affirms music's place at the heart of performance and cinema, not only as an artistic tool but also as a medium of cultural dialogue and ethical responsibility. By understanding these dynamics, artists and audiences alike can appreciate how music continues to evolve while sustaining its fundamental power to move, inform, and connect.

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