

10-24-2023

## How Wagner Landed in a Far Away Galaxy: Examining Film from a Musical Perspective

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### Recommended Citation

Camillone, Elise J. (2023) "How Wagner Landed in a Far Away Galaxy: Examining Film from a Musical Perspective," *Musical Offerings*: Vol. 14: No. 2, Article 2.

DOI: 10.15385/jmo.2023.14.2.2

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/musicalofferings/vol14/iss2/2>

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## Document Type

Article

## Abstract

What does music add to drama, or more specifically, movies? Without music, movies today would not be the same. When it comes to creating a film, the soundtrack is arguably just as important as videography or acting. Exploring the roots that soundtracks have in opera and investigating Wagner's leitmotif will help discover how it influenced modern-day movie scoring. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of filmmaking can be obtained by examining the role music has to play in modern movies. The soundtracks from the original Star Wars trilogy films can be used to demonstrate the application of these things by looking deeply into how each theme is formed and how each one shapes the characters it represents as well as the story that is portrayed in a film.

## Keywords

Star Wars, Wagner, leitmotif, soundtrack, opera, movies, Luke, Leia, Force, theme

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## How Wagner Landed in a Far Away Galaxy: Examining Film from a Musical Perspective

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What does music add to drama, or more specifically, movies? Oftentimes, the music is almost forgotten as the viewer gets lost in the world of a gripping plot. But when it comes to creating a film, the soundtrack is arguably just as important as the videography or acting. Without music, movies today would not be the same. The music adds to the emotional aspects of the story and to the character development that takes place in the film.

The musical aspect of film has its deepest roots in opera. Before filming was possible, people could not go and see movies like they do in today's culture. Instead, they had opera for entertainment. The opera is like a symphony concert in many ways, with a live orchestra in addition to the exciting story and characters. Most movies today, apart from musicals, are very different from operas of the past because there is not a live orchestra in the movie theater and the characters do not sing for the majority of the time. However, the music behind a film stems from traditions that were first established in opera. Richard Wagner was an important figure in developing opera and one big factor in this was his invention and usage of the leitmotif.

Exploring what Wagner did in his operas will help to reveal how film music can be essential to movies today. Diving deeper into films and the scores behind them will help bring new light to how film composers today were influenced by Wagner. The *Star Wars* movie saga is an excellent example of film scoring. John Williams, the composer of the soundtrack to the *Star Wars* films, is a highly esteemed modern-day composer who has done his work with great skill. Looking at his music in *Star Wars* will help provide deep insight into how he used it to further the plot and characters in these movies.

Wagner felt challenged to reinvent opera as a new kind of musical drama, and the leitmotif was one of his most influential innovations. These leitmotifs were musical ideas associated with the characters, objects, symbols, and ideas in a work. They took on a prominent role in many of Wagner's mature works.<sup>1</sup> His *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, also known as the Ring cycle, contains sixty to seventy distinct leitmotifs, perhaps even over one hundred if variants and transformations of these ideas are taken into consideration.<sup>2</sup> So how did Wagner go about creating leitmotifs? The words *musical association* might bring to mind a piece of music that causes a person to recall an object or emotion outside of the music. While this is true, it can also work the other way around. A memory or emotion outside of music can bring a particular song or sound to mind. Both of these ideas involve using one's memory and emotions, and ties music with extramusical materials to bring more meaning into a given situation.<sup>3</sup> Wagner ties musical themes and motives to particular characters, emotions, or objects in his story so that they are now associated with that person, idea, or thing in the listener's mind. This brings unification to the story and adds to the emotional aspect of an opera.<sup>4</sup>

An example of this powerful association that Wagner creates is in the first act of his opera *Götterdämmerung*, the last of the four operas in the Ring cycle. At the beginning of act 1, scene 3, Brünnhilde is alone, admiring the ring that her lover Siegfried gave her as a parting gift. While this happens, the Magic Potion, World Treasure, and Valkyries motifs play. The audience has just heard the Magic Potion theme in the previous scene when Siegfried drinks a potion that wipes his memory of Brünnhilde so he will fall in love with Gutrune. The World Treasure theme comes from the end of the opera *Siegfried*, which occurs just before *Götterdämmerung*. This theme was previously associated with Brünnhilde's rapidly growing feelings of love for Siegfried. The Valkyries motif is associated with Brünnhilde and her warrior sisters, the Valkyries.<sup>5</sup> If these themes were all removed and the audience was just left with Brünnhilde sitting alone admiring the ring, viewers might not have realized they were missing an element of the story. With the addition of these leitmotifs, however, they recall the previous

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<sup>1</sup> Grey, 87.

<sup>2</sup> Grey, 88.

<sup>3</sup> Bribitzer-Stull, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Grey, 87.

<sup>5</sup> Bribitzer-Stull, 95-96.

associations, and this addition strengthens the story's context. The viewer is hit with the realization that as Brünnhilde is admiring the ring and thinking fondly of her lover, Siegfried has just forgotten who she is. While viewers may still understand this if they have been paying attention to the story, the music intensifies the moment in a way that makes it impossible to ignore. In the words of Matthew Bribitzer-Stull, the author of *Understanding the Leitmotif*, "This is association at its best: a complex and powerful blend of memory, emotion, and meaning. And it requires all three elements; the meaning is dependent upon both memory and emotion."<sup>6</sup>

This association explains how Wagner used the music in his operas to further the plot and character development, which leads to the discussion of how music furthers a film. It can work in a very similar way to how Wagner goes about creating musical association in his operas. Naturally, one of the most obvious forms of communicating the story and point of a film is with the dialogue. However, as in Wagner's operas, movies also have many other non-linguistic techniques available to consider using in order to convey meaning. One of these techniques is the music in movies. It often contributes in this way, expressing implicit meanings. When used like this, the music has been created *for* the film rather than just passively being *in* the film.<sup>7</sup> That said, film music often is associated with emotions as it is a non-explicit way to insinuate specific emotional states. Music can also create a general mood such as suspense, dread, or excitement. Both of these ideas tap into using musical association to allow the listener and viewer to understand what is being portrayed.<sup>8</sup> Leitmotifs are also employed in modern films, allowing connections to be drawn within the film itself, contributing to a movie's unity.<sup>9</sup> Whether the association has been made within the movie itself, or draws from a well-known outside association, the music is portraying something important to the meaning of a film.

Musical scores, especially ones that employ leitmotifs, function to help anchor characters and places in a recognizable musical location.<sup>10</sup> John Williams's work in the scores of the *Star Wars* movies (specifically the original *Star Wars* trilogy from the 1970s and 1980s) demonstrates this

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<sup>6</sup> Bribitzer-Stull, 97.

<sup>7</sup> Neumeier, 100-101.

<sup>8</sup> Buhler, 134-135.

<sup>9</sup> Buhler, 130.

<sup>10</sup> Halfyard, 9.

stylistic and expressive technique of musical association in movies quite well. His themes are memorable and easily singable, and they act as leitmotifs that help the audience remember characters and locations. Each key character is represented by an individual theme, and these themes are all present in every movie that its character appears.<sup>11</sup> They also portray the correct general emotion that is associated with the main object of each theme. For example, the Imperial March theme (see Example 2), which is the main theme associated with Darth Vader and the Empire, is clearly recognizable to almost anyone as portraying a sinister force out to flatten anything in its path. Williams also uses many of these themes as leitmotifs. Most famously, the Force theme occurs many times when the force is referred to in the movies.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Princess Leia has her own theme. It is also closely linked with a secondary theme that links her romantically to Han Solo.<sup>13</sup> These are just a few of the many thematic leitmotifs that Williams uses in *Star Wars*. Just listening to the tracks of these movies, even a casual observer would not miss the constantly repeated thematic material.

So how do all these themes work together to reinforce the ideas and emotions portrayed in these movies? As stated previously, every key character has a unique theme. These could be categorized into two groups, good themes and evil themes, which would be an appropriate way to categorize them because it aligns with one of the most basic principles in the *Star Wars* saga: balancing good and evil. Of the themes in the original trilogy, the good themes include Luke's theme, Force theme (which doubles as Obi-Wan Kenobi's theme), the Rebellion Fanfare theme, Princess Leia's theme, Han Solo and Leia's Love theme, Luke and Leia's Sibling theme, and Yoda's theme. The evil themes include the Empire theme, Darth Vader's theme (also known as the Imperial March), the Emperor's theme, the Death Star theme, Jabba the Hutt's theme, and Boba Fett's theme. Nearly all of the good theme categories appear to be interwoven with each other, sharing similar qualities in tone and timbre. For example, many of them are soft and pensive in quality and evoke emotions of nostalgia or hope. To convey this, many of them have large intervallic leaps as a significant part of their melody. Additionally they are most often in major keys. The instruments used also tend to be more tender in quality, for example, French horn and flute can be found used in good themes quite frequently.

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<sup>11</sup> Lawson, 261.

<sup>12</sup> LaFave, 147.

<sup>13</sup> Lawson, 261.

Inversely, many of the themes of the evil category share similar qualities in tone that convey a more harsh feel, often using instruments that tend to have a lower, gruffer range, such as low register strings or brass. They often tend to have more chaotic and fast moving rhythms to add to a sense of evil. These themes also tend to be more rhythmically based in general, relying less on their melodic material and more on color and texture to convey darker emotions.

Throughout the large-scale story arc of the original trilogy, there is a musically supported theme of the equilibrium between the Light and Dark. In *Episode IV: A New Hope*, the most prominent theme is the Obi-Wan Kenobi/Force theme. This representation of good demonstrates the wonder that the characters experience as they newly encounter the power of the Force. The soundtrack of *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* is musically dominated by Darth Vader's theme, demonstrating that evil is the seemingly more powerful force at hand. At the end of this movie, the audience is left not knowing whether or not Luke is going to ultimately decide to follow his father's footsteps and join him in his path of darkness. In *Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi*, no particular theme stands out as especially prominent. This matches with the story's theme that good and evil are evenly matched and balanced.<sup>14</sup> This zoomed out perspective shows how the music in these movies strengthens the plotline in a broader sense.

The themes can also be examined more individually in order to understand how they enhance character development. Williams uses and develops his themes in a way that matches how their respective characters develop over the course of the story. This usage of leitmotifs work alongside the visual to heighten the viewers' perception of what is happening in the movie.

To begin, Luke's theme (see Example 1) is approached differently throughout the trilogy to follow his character development. His theme is grand, perhaps one of the best remembered themes from the saga. It is almost too big for Luke's character; however, it expresses Luke's idealism and accentuates his naiveté, and does keep up with his development as a character. In *A New Hope*, it is usually brash, brassy, quick, and flashy. This speaks to Luke's optimistic determination throughout the first film. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, his theme is most often stated in the minor mode, where Luke's optimism is put to the test,

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<sup>14</sup> Paulus, 159.

especially with his training in the Force. In *The Return of the Jedi*, the theme is associated as much with the Rebel forces as it is with Luke individually. This demonstrates Luke's maturing sense of where he fits into the story and acceptance as a part of a larger effort.<sup>15</sup>

### Example 1: Main Title/Luke's theme



Darth Vader's march theme hints at his internal instability. On the outside, this theme is imposing and dark, just like Darth Vader seems to be upon first contact. However, his character has many more layers to it. He is not as stable in his dark ways as it would appear. His internal conflict becomes apparent by the end of the trilogy, as his character is redeemed at the end and he turns once more back to the side of the light, from which he had long ago strayed. Darth Vader's hidden instability is shown in the lack of tonal certainty within his theme. Overall, the theme is in a minor key, but its opening motive outlines a perfect fifth based on the sixth scale degree in the minor key, which in both a harmonic (the chord it implies) and melodic (the perfect interval) sense recalls a major sound (see Example 2). In fact, the first three notes of this theme (the only three notes used in the first two measures of the melody), E-flat, G, and B-flat, outline an E-flat major chord, which is the submediant of this theme's overall key, G minor. In the second phrase of the theme, the tonic is lowered a half step, further obscuring the tonal center (m. 4 of Example 2). The second half of the theme further confuses the listener's ears with copious amounts of chromaticism (mm. 5-8). Then the theme returns to the tonally vague opening motive that outlines a perfect fifth (b. 4 of m. 7).<sup>16</sup> As an evil theme, this melody is usually accompanied by a rhythmic ostinato made up of quick moving notes. This, along with the loud brass that usually play it, contributes to a harsh and dark sound that befits the dark side.

<sup>15</sup> Paulus, 160-161.

<sup>16</sup> Paulus, 161-162.



**Example 2:** Darth Vader/Imperial March theme

A theme that Williams uses to unite every *Star Wars* movie is the Force theme (see Example 3). In the first *Star Wars* movie ever made, *A New Hope*, this theme is closely tied to Obi-Wan Kenobi. However, soon it becomes clear that it represents something much larger than Obi-Wan: the Force. In the words of Obi-Wan, “The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.”<sup>17</sup> The theme becomes strongly associated with its subject, playing at every mention of the Force. It also carries intense meaning during many important moments. One example of this would be during the fight scene between Darth Vader and Obi-Wan. As Obi-Wan looks to Luke with a meaningful glance, the first phrase of the theme begins to play very quietly. In that moment, he lowers his lightsaber and lets Darth Vader strike him down, all with a small smile on his face. In retrospect, it seems that Obi-Wan knows his death will cause Luke to complete his training as a Jedi knight and redeem his father. All this is conveyed in just those seven notes. Later on, it becomes clear that this theme is synonymous with the Force. The music can be seen as an actual representation of the presence of the force.<sup>18</sup> And what better way is there to convey this invisible idea in these movies than with music? In the *Star Wars* stories, the Force is a powerful thing that ties life together, just as Obi-Wan says. With the theme of balancing the light and dark throughout the stories, it seems fitting that the Force theme would have elements of both the light and the dark intermingled in its melody. While the Force overall is portrayed as good, there is an element of mystery to how the dark side of the Force interacts with the good side. This is reflected in the musical construction of the theme. It is very stable in its tonality, with no chromatic alterations. It has the grand leaps and sweeping feel characteristic of many good themes. However, it is in the minor mode, perhaps pointing to an element of dark mystery in the power of the Force.

<sup>17</sup> Lucas.

<sup>18</sup> Paulus, 165-166.

**Example 3: Force theme**

Princess Leia's theme (see Example 4) seems to be derived from the force theme. The first five notes of her theme are a retrograde of the last five notes from the first phrase of the Force theme, revisited in the major mode (see Example 5). Perhaps this hints at her true lineage and demonstrates that the Force is a part of her as well, even from the beginning. This theme is often heard played by instruments capable of producing very tender and sweet sound, most memorably French horn and flute.

**Example 4: Princess Leia's theme****Example 5: Opening of Leia's theme and Force theme, transposed to show parallels**

From Leia's theme, her love theme is derived (see Example 6). It is easy to hear how it represents her character, since it begins with the same leap of a major sixth that a listener's ears will immediately recall from her original theme. This time, however, the theme no longer is solidly in major. The love theme is in a major key, but in its second phrase, it starts to become tainted with a minor sound (Example 6, m. 3).<sup>19</sup> This is a good musical representation of Han Solo, the object of Leia's love, since his character is more rugged and less pure. It also is often played by the French horn when it is heard, and contains many large intervals, characteristic of the good themes. This theme conveys all the proper

<sup>19</sup> Paulus, 168-170.

emotions of a love theme and sets the right mood whenever Leia and Han come on-screen as lovers.

**Example 6:** Princess Leia and Han Solo's Love theme



Last, Luke and Leia's Sibling theme (see Example 7) only appears in the third movie of the original trilogy, because that is when the two discover that they are siblings. It is a brilliant combination of both Luke's and Leia's themes, while remaining simultaneously unique. How did Williams do this? The opening figure is intervallically the exact same four notes from the opening of Luke's theme, so it doesn't take much to see the connection there (see blue circles in Example 8, mm. 1 and 3). The iconic opening major sixth from both of Leia's themes is outlined by the first and last notes in the first two phrases, as shown by the green markings in Example 8.<sup>20</sup> It appears to be interwoven throughout the theme. The soft horn that plays the theme during its first appearance also matches well with the timbre of the French horn often playing when Leia's theme appears, and the tenderness of the theme fits well with her character. During the scene where Luke tells Leia that she is his sister, he begins by talking about the Force, and the Force theme is playing fittingly in the background, but the moment she comes to understand what he is telling her about their relationship, their joint theme begins for the first time. The theme is recalled in the movie whenever a mention of Luke and Leia as siblings appears, except for the instance when Luke first realizes it. During this instance, only Leia's theme plays as Luke realizes she is his sister. Perhaps because she herself has not yet come to the realization, the theme has not yet been fully born.

<sup>20</sup> Paulus, 170-171.

**Example 7:** Luke and Leia's Sibling theme**Example 8:** Connection between Luke's and Leia's themes.

While listening to all of these themes, it is clear there is a lot of thought and intention behind it all. Perhaps to the absent minded viewer it is not blatantly apparent, as it might be to someone looking and listening for all the connections. Nevertheless it strengthens the connections between characters and their actions or emotions, whether that is conscious or subconscious for the viewer. This music that stemmed from Wagner's idea of the leitmotif adds an element of coherency to the story, and without it many of the emotional connections would be lost. Wagner's leitmotif went further than he could have imagined. When he was alive movies did not even exist, but composers today are still utilizing the techniques he formulated, and it is still relevant in modern culture even to people who probably don't even know who Wagner is.

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