

# The Film Composer

## SECTION ONE Introduction: Film Music

From the perspective of filmmaking, a film, especially an *intelligent* film, is an exquisitely balanced composite of technology, creativity, and passion. What does one mean by an intelligent film? It's one that cannot be described by such adjectives as asinine, banal, soporific, degenerate, mediocre, idiotic, decadent, and so on. That is, in general terms, intelligent films are those that are, at once, immensely entertaining, and yet powerfully thought provoking, emotionally challenging and intellectually enriching. Most importantly, they fulfill the mandate of true art: via the medium of the aesthetic experience to comment upon and/or question the status quo--at whatever level it may be (global, regional, national, local, etc.) and from whatever perspective (the family, society, polity, economy, the environment, etc., etc.)--in the service of a better future. To explain this point in another way: the difference between an intelligent film and non-intelligent film, at the simplest level, is that the intelligent film makes demands on the intelligence of the viewer. This difference emerges most clearly when one makes the distinction between art and entertainment. (See the definition of *Art* in the [Course Glossary](#)--PART B of Online Course Materials.) Intelligent films, then, are also works of art.



Hans Zimmer

A good score should have a point of view all of its own. It should transcend all that has gone before, stand on its own two feet and still serve the movie. A great soundtrack is all about communicating with the audience, but we all try to bring something extra to the movie that is not entirely evident on screen.



Now, A widely underappreciated creative element of films among the unwashed

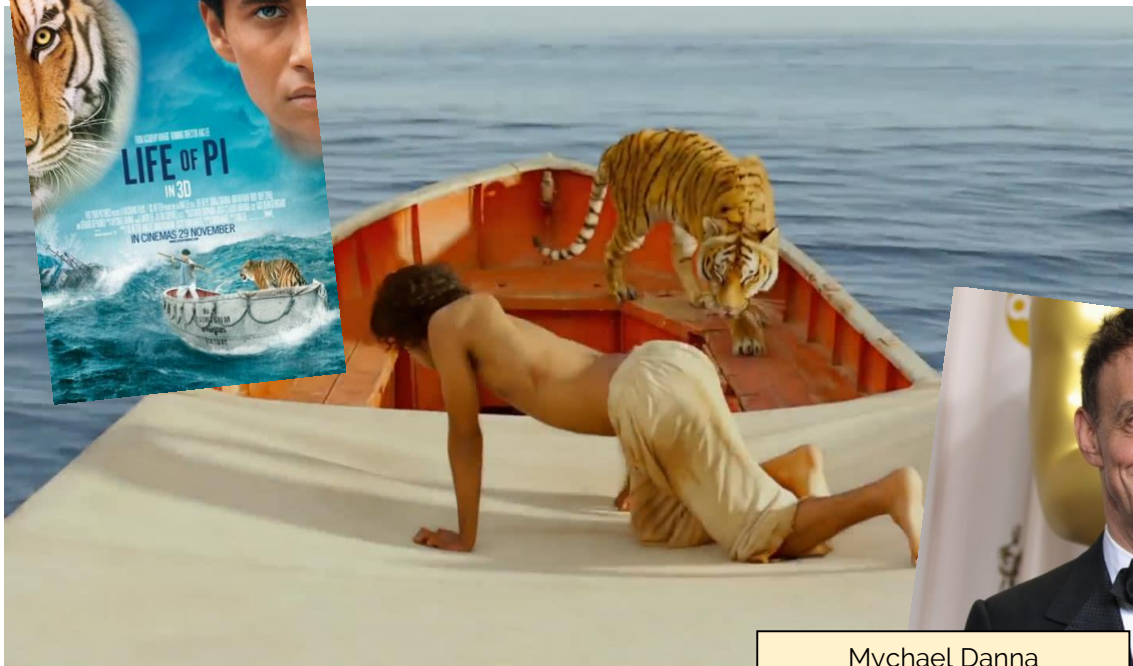


(meaning the masses) is the *sound track*--to be understood here to refer to the musical portion of the film audio and which, when it is an original composition, is also referred to as the *film score*. Since this course features a number of films and film-clips as a pedagogical device for exploring course-relevant subject-matter it is important that you learn to see films with a more attentive/critical eye than you are ordinarily used to. The irony is that in the arsenal of the filmmaker the film score is just as important (if not more so) as the other elements of the film in capturing/manipulating the emotions of the audience--which, of course, is one of the central tasks of all films. (Note: the term

"filmmaker" should be understood as a composite and not a unitary entity and reflects my obsession with debunking the theory of the auteur—which posits that a film is the work of just one person, the director.)

The significance of the film score in filmmaking is indicated by a number of functions; such as these:

- (a) establishing the mood of the film;
- (b) situating the story in a given geographic locale;
- (c) situating the story in a given time period;
- (d) suggesting the passage of time;
- (e) accentuating specific action(s) taking place on the screen;



- (f) serving simply as a filler for missing dialogue (like program music in television or in documentaries);
- (g) negatively accentuating other sounds crit-

Mychael Danna



ically important to a scene by *withdrawing* the film music from that scene; and

(h) serve as a thematic thread, in place of dialogue and/or subtitles, that binds the scenes in a film into a thematically coherent whole.

In other words, the film score or soundtrack is really important. Consequently, you have been (or will be) introduced to the work of one or more of these film composers (who in a number of cases also perform their own music outside of films--e.g. *Dead Can Dance* and *Tangerine Dream*): the late *John Barry* and *James Horner*, plus *Dead Can Dance*, *Mychael Danna*, *Mark Isham*, *Tangerine Dream*, and *Vangelis*. We may also touch upon the work of *John Williams* and *Hans Zimmer*.

**SECTION ONE SOURCE:** Instructor's Notes

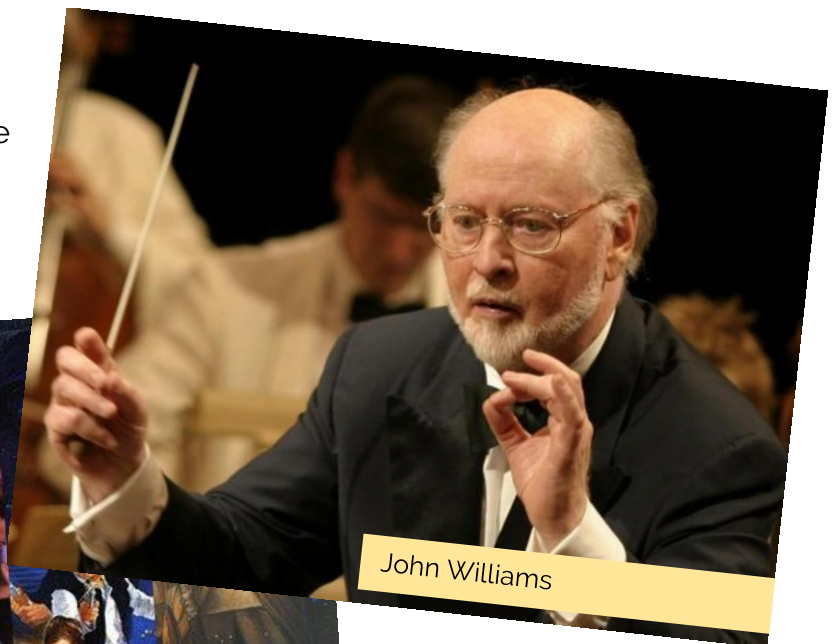
## SECTION TWO The Film Composer

The narrative and emotional intensity a musical score gives a film is undeniable. All the most epic movie scenes have almost no dialogue, but move forward through powerful visuals buoyed by powerful musical scores. The film composer may not be the high-profile stars of the movies, but the movies would be deadly flat without them.

### What Does a Film Composer Do?

The first point to understand about being a film composer is that scoring a film is (with rare exception) a team endeavor. Film composers work with directors, producers, writers and possibly even actors. So it's essential that the composer works well with other artistic personalities. They'll sit together as a team in "spotting sessions" to plot which scenes require background, scoring as well as:

- What is the emotional content of the scene
- How and why will musical composition enhance that content
- What type of music will support the scene
- What are the moments – the millisecond – certain musical points must be hit, where the music starts and ends, where it crescendos, where it retreats



John Williams

The second critical point to realize is that film composers aren't telling their own stories. They're composing to someone else's vision and that vision controls everything. A film composer writes the score, which is the sum of all the original music going into a film. They'll demo pieces of the score regularly to the film's creative team for feedback on how it's fitting into the scene. Film composers are also responsible for the [recording of the film score](#).

This isn't to say that film composers don't have their own voice. Having your own voice is critical to bringing something unique to the project. Yet, a film composer is expected to be versatile and reinforce the artistic vision of the director.

In the end stages of a project, the film composer again sits with directors and editors to insert the score into the film and create a final cut of the movie.

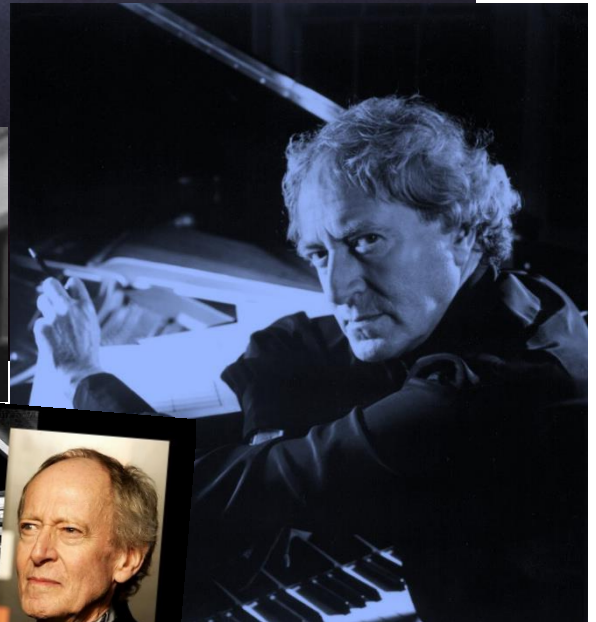
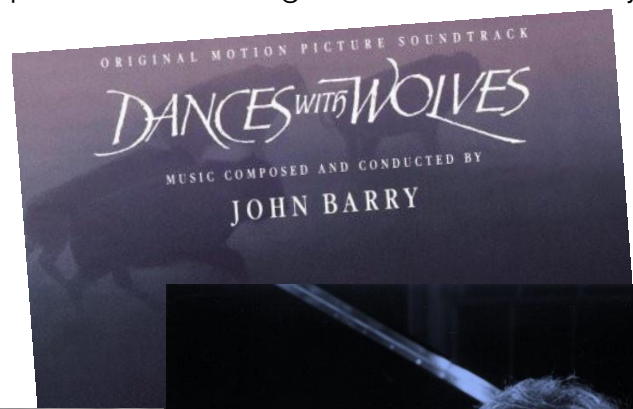
The rule of thumb is that a film will have roughly half its duration requiring background music. So a 90-minute film would typically require a 45 minute score. You can expect it to take anywhere from two to four months to score a film.

## How Does One Become a Film Composer?

Well, it's not easy. Becoming a film composer is a highly competitive field. Composing film scores doesn't just get strong marks for glamour and compensation, which attracts a lot of people. There just aren't that many films made each year. The demand for film composers isn't great.

But someone is composing movie scores, so why not you? If this is really where your heart lies, be ready to put forth the effort.

Most of the well-known film composers already had established reputations in other musical fields before moving into film. You can go to school and get a degree in film composition, but most of these programs are master degrees. Thus it may be more worthwhile to get a strong background in music, music composition, as well as general liberal arts. A film composer needs a



strong background in arts, history and culture so they can bring this sensibility and knowledge into their work.

Here's the point that is so obvious it's easy to overlook: Love movies! If you don't love movies the way you love music, this is going to be a tough road. The people who'll hire you, directors and producers, are movie geeks. Think Quentin Tarantino. If they tell you they want a score with the knuckle gripping of the "[Bullitt](#)" car chase combined with the incongruence of a "[Kill Bill](#)" scene, you should know what they're talking about.

Watch and learn about movies and moviemaking with the same intensity you give to music and composing. One place to start is [with the great film composers](#); not to mimic them but to learn from them.

A film composer is also in sales (of yourself and your point of view), project management, and team building. Develop skills in networking, socializing, and time management. Networking will be a large part of how you find opportunities. You're not going to be able to network with the Hollywood bigwigs. If you could, you'd already have an agent.



Instead, work (for free!) and network with film students, budding filmmakers. Network with your peer group to get experience and build the relationships you'll need in the future. You'll also need the student film work to get the experience and demo tapes you'll need to make the leap into paid work. To do this kind of networking, you'll need to live in one of the movie capitals: Los Angeles, New York, possibly Toronto or London.

NOTE: Section Two is a modified version of material sourced here: <https://www.connollymusic.com/stringovation/how-to-become-a-film-composer>