

MUSICAL NARRATIVES: THEMATIC COMBINATION AND ALIGNMENT IN  
FANTASY AND SUPERHERO FILMS

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Musical Narratives: Thematic Combination and Alignment in Fantasy and Superhero Films

Musical themes in film are often transformed in ways that reflect major plot developments. Film music scholars typically explore such transformations across an entire film. However, this broad analytical brush misses the intricate ways themes can reflect narrative development in a single scene. In this thesis, I provide two musical techniques that demonstrate this intricacy. I first examine how themes are used in superhero battle sequences to outline the battle's internal development and its function in the film's overall plot. Case studies include *Captain America* (2011) and *Wonder Woman* (2017). Second, I explore how preexisting themes are combined into a new theme using musical techniques that reflect the relationship between the themes' subjects, looking closely at "Anakin's Theme" from the *Star Wars* saga and "The Edge of Night" from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. These two techniques reveal the complexity with which themes and narrative development can be intertwined.

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My thesis is dedicated to Pinar Toprak, the first female composer for a live-action superhero film, and the other women of *Wonder Woman*, *Legends of Tomorrow*, and *Captain Marvel* for giving me my chance to feel like a superhero.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### **A Preliminary Example**

In *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), the bad guy wins. The film ends with half of the Avengers team reduced to dust while the remaining half are stunned at the loss. This is not the ending the audience expected; even knowing that the second half of the story would be released in 2019, superhero films rarely end with the heroes losing so catastrophically.

Not surprisingly, the musical procedures employed by the composer, Alan Silvestri, reflect the unexpected ending. Up until the moment Thanos wins, the score follows the expected procedures for superhero films the same way the story arc does. In an early battle in the film's exposition, two members of the Avengers team are ambushed by the villain's henchmen. The heroes are losing, which is demonstrated both visually and musically: minor-inflected, unresolved brass interjections layered on top of rhythmic ostinati convey the urgency and danger that has been flung upon them. After a moment of silence when the camera freezes on a figure in the shadows, a sudden musical change announces the arrival of help. The introduction to the Avengers theme, returned to its original setting from the first *Avengers* film in 2012, begins the moment Captain America steps into view. As Captain America and two other new Avengers enter the fray, the score continues with exclusively Avengers theme-derived material. Once all three characters

turn the tide of the battle, two aspects of the theme's melody appear in canon to represent the newcomers as they work their way through the henchmen.

This musical change serves multiple narrative functions. On the most local scale, it amplifies the drama of Captain America's arrival, a procedure that occurs repeatedly in the ensemble-based film as various heroes make their first appearance. Looking at the larger narrative arc, however, this fight is the first time these particular heroes have fought together since the events of *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) when they were fighting against each other. Captain America, Falcon, and Black Widow coming to the aid of Vision and Scarlet Witch therefore marks the moment that two sects of the Avengers reunite with the common goal of defeating Thanos. The return of the Avengers theme, therefore, punctuates not only the arrival of the heroes but also the reunification of the team, a key moment in the exposition that allows the plot to move forward.

An analogous moment happens in the final battle as well. Now, more of the Avengers team have assembled to fight the hordes of Thanos's army. The battle at first appears to go well based on the music: a motive from Black Panther's theme is placed in the parallel-motion French horn texture of Captain America's theme and repeats as those two characters move to the front of the battle, leaping into combat before the rest of the good guys. However, over time, the music moves away from those thematic fragments and returns to the ominous brass interjections and rhythmic ostinati used in the earlier battle before the three Avengers arrived. Suddenly, a pillar of rainbow light shines down from the sky and from it steps Thor, Groot, and Rocket Raccoon, three more superheroes. Just as Captain America, Falcon, and Black Widow stepped in as a *deus ex machina* in

the first battle, three more appear once again to save the day. Like before, this event is accompanied by the return of the Avengers theme. Now, however, the entrance is marked by the 2012 theme's melody rather than the introduction and canonized theme ideas. The musical technique is the same as the first battle, but now the specific melodic idea is untransformed from its original version, indicating an incoming victory even more strongly.

The moment Thanos arrives on the battlefield and wipes out half of the heroes, the above thematic techniques are abandoned. Not only do the Avengers, Black Panther, and Captain America themes disappear, indicating that those heroes have lost the upper hand, the music falls silent completely. Thanos's victory is such a shocking turn of events that the music is not allowed to grant any comfort or familiarity. The world has fallen apart and the score's function in constructing the formal boundaries of that world has dissolved along with it.

### **Definition of Project**

I begin with this example because it demonstrates multiple ways in which musical themes in the score can impact the transmission of the story arc. These thematic appearances have two aspects to them: the thematic content itself, which constantly combines aspects of different heroes' themes, and the interaction of thematic return with the film's narrative development. Themes align at integral moments in the story arc, highlighting them in the battle sequence, but the thematic material itself represents who appears and, particularly in this film, whose perspective is being shown.



My thesis examines thematic usage in film music from two different angles. First, I explore the alignment of musical themes with narrative development in the battle sequences of superhero films. Second, I find and analyze themes that are created by combining other narratively relevant themes in ways that reflect the story arc. I explore how the narrative form of science fiction and fantasy stories (with a focus on the superhero subgenre) from the past twenty years can be enhanced by these particular types of thematic usage. Drawing upon scholarship such as Frank Lehman's analysis of action music concert settings and Ben Winters's exploration of music's role in the construction of narrative space (both of which I discuss further below), I focus on two key questions: *How is thematic fragmentation used within an action sequence to convey a narrative form?* and *In films that contain multi-thematic musical tapestries, are themes ever combined to reflect a particular narrative situation?*<sup>12</sup> To answer both of these questions, I look at films that contain a leitmotivic musical organization. The scores, in other words, are more than atmospheric or monothematic: they present themes or motives that become associated with some entity in their story and can be transformed based on the entity's journey within the narrative.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Lehman, "Film-as-Concert Music and the Formal Implications of 'Cinematic Listening,'" *Music Analysis* 37, no. 1 (2018): 7-46.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Winters, "The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space," *Music & Letters* 91, no. 2 (2010): 224-244.

<sup>3</sup> These three categories of film score types—atmospheric, monothematic, and developmental—are enumerated in Matthew Bribitzer-Stull, *Understanding the Leitmotif: From Wagner to Hollywood Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 258.

My analytical approach combines musical analysis with analyses of other elements in the film medium: after considering how the music relates to the plot, I further explore how choices in direction, editing, and sound design interact with that relationship. Because the score's interaction with other types of expressive media creates an integral part of my research, the film music source I examine is limited by design. Film music exists in several different forms: the music as originally conceptualized by the composer; the music as it appears in the film after being reworked by orchestrators, directors, producers, and editors; the music as it is perceived and remembered by the audience; and the music as reorganized into a concert suite, removed from its filmic context and adapted in order to fit the formal and tonal expectations of a closed-form concert piece.<sup>4</sup> Because my goal is to explore how the music coordinates with other formal choices, the versions that alter the music from its film appearance would not effectively reveal the relationships that I seek to explore.

My analysis proceeds in the vein of Jessica Green, who writes, "Music works in conjunction with other channels of information (image, dialogue, text, sound) to give the audience a more complex understanding of what is happening in the character's minds and how decisions are being made."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the music coordinates with other nonmusical components in the film medium to reveal information about character motivations, relationships, and other plot developments. In order to explore how the

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Bribitzer-Stull enumerates the first three forms of film music in Bribitzer-Stull, *Understanding the Leitmotif*, 279. Frank Lehman discusses the implications of film music concert suite arrangements in Lehman, "Film-as-Concert Music," 7-46.

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Green, "Understanding the Score: Film Music Communicating to and Influencing the Audience," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44, no. 4 (2010): 92.

music interacts with these channels of information, I first look at the music as it appears in the film. I then combine that musical analysis with an analysis of the relevant choices in editing, sound design, direction, and other formal aspects to reveal how their coordination with the music reinforces or expands the narrative development of the scene in which the music appears.

My exploration of these relationships shows that composers use themes during battle sequences to outline the combat development and highlight the battle's function in the story arc. For example, untransformed thematic material aligns with the moment the goal of the first battle sequence is achieved in *Captain America* (2011): the first full statement of the title character's theme since his creation appears the moment his success is revealed to certain characters. Themes further outline combat development by mirroring the power changes that take place. In the final fight scene of *Wonder Woman* (2017), power shifts are marked by the appearance of either one of Wonder Woman's themes or the theme for the villain, depending on who has the upper hand at that moment. To both outline the moment narrative closure is achieved and reinforce the function of each battle in the story arc, themes further establish musical processes for closure throughout the battle. Full narrative closure requires the completion of both thematic and visual processes developed during the battle, so by varying the fulfillment of these requirements the composer establishes tiers of formal closure that can be used to further highlight the battle's development. The processes for closure are presented during an early battle in the film's exposition and are altered for the film's final battle. The specific

alterations highlight the final battle's function in the story arc, which vary from the expositional battle's function.

The relationships between musical themes and other formal choices further reveal that composers combine themes to represent complex narrative situations. I explore two different methods of thematic combination. First, a motive from a preexisting theme can be added into the phrase structure of another. "Anakin's Theme" in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), for example, seems to present a new theme for a new character in the film franchise. However, the theme closes with a major-mode alteration of the cadential motive from "The Imperial March" from *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), which foreshadows the future that lies ahead for young Anakin.

Second, a new theme can be created almost entirely from musical traits of other themes to reflect a particular narrative situation. This method is demonstrated by "The Edge of Night," a diegetic song in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) that uses motives, key areas, and other components from several non-diegetic themes to reflect the singer's situation and the situation of another character who is shown simultaneously alongside the performance. In both of these examples, the specific methods through which the themes are combined reflect significant details of the story that are not revealed through dialogue or any other diegetic means. Instead, the audience is given insight into the narrative through, as Green states, the conjunction of music and other channels of non-diegetic information.

While the questions I address in my thesis involve the coordination of musical themes and narrative development, I do not try to analyze the efficacy of such techniques on the storytelling experience. I could hypothesize what a listener could glean about the story if they heard the score in isolation, but I do not wish to argue that this level of musical complexity makes a film objectively better. The process of audio-visual synchronization is complex, as Justin London explains: a theme must be aurally distinct enough from the rest of the score to be noticed by the viewer and align precisely with the image of its in-story counterpart in order for the viewer to associate the theme with the counterpart. The composer is therefore limited in how far they can transform the theme to match the narrative situation as the theme must still be recognizable enough to successfully allude to its subject.<sup>6</sup> Should the composer, director, or editor fail at any of these requirements, the transmission of the score's meaning is theoretically compromised. If these requirements are met, however, then the efficacy of such a tactic is still based on the audience's ability to "listen cinematically," as Frank Lehman terms it.<sup>7</sup> Many factors are involved, in other words, in determining whether techniques for aligning the music and the story are effective.<sup>8</sup> The exploration of such a topic is beyond the scope of this

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<sup>6</sup> Justin London, "Leitmotifs and Musical Reference in the Classical Film Score," in *Music and Cinema*, ed. James Buhler, Caryl Flinn, and David Neumeyer (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2000), 88-89.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Lehman describes various definitions of this term. He typically uses it to refer to the audience's ability to envision images while hearing a score. Lehman, "Film-as-Concert Music," 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Annabel J. Cohen explores the viewer's ability to perceive the film score from a scientific perspective. Annabel J. Cohen, "Film Music: Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology," in *Music and Cinema*, ed. James Buhler, Caryl Flinn, and David Neumeyer (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2000), 360-378.

thesis. Instead, I determine how the techniques of thematic alignment and combination are used, and not whether the coordination between music and narrative creates a more satisfying film-watching experience.

### **The Benefits of Fantasy and Superhero Films**

There are several reasons why this body of film—sci-fi/fantasy with a focus on superhero films—is ideal for exploring coordination between music and narrative. First, many groundbreaking films in this genre come from the past twenty years. This time frame follows the return of John Williams’s scoring style for the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy beginning in 1999 and Howard Shore’s gargantuan leitmotivic framework for *The Lord of the Rings* series, which began two years later. Second, the stories themselves combine fantasy and reality, a combination in which the score serves a particular role in establishing a narrative space that is both alien yet approachable.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the superhero stories in particular have repetition built into their narrative structure. This structure gives me the opportunity to explore musical patterns between analogous scenes. In what follows, I explore each of these topics in turn.

I look specifically at films from the last twenty years for two main reasons. The first reason took place in 1977, and the second in 2001. John Williams’ score for *Star*

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<sup>9</sup> Ben Winters explores the concept of “narrative space” in terms of how the label “non-diegetic” for music incorrectly separates the music from the space in which the film exists. In particular for the films I look at, the role of non-diegetic music is multifold from this perspective: it creates a filmic space separate from reality, it creates degrees of separation from reality for different characters and locations, and it uses a musical tradition that limits that separation to a level to which the audience still can relate, as I explore later. Winters, “The Non-Diegetic Fallacy,” 230.

*Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977), the first film in the series, changed the expectation for how a film score could function. Distinct melodies accompany almost every scene from action sequences and expositional sequences to ostensibly mundane moments, ultimately accompanying the film with distinct material for more than was typical for films. Williams used his themes to unify films across decades, tying his score for the original *Star Wars* trilogy to his score for the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy. The first film in this prequel trilogy, released in 1999, is the earliest film that I explore.

In 2001, Howard Shore's score for *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* expanded the bounds of thematic content once more. Shore combines themes, motives, instrument families, and modes to create several thematic networks that represent the different races, individuals, places, objects, and time periods portrayed in the film series. Furthermore, the themes develop in ways that are so closely tied to the narrative that a theme representing a team of characters appears only in fragments once that team splinters. After this more recent expansion of film score possibilities, film composers moved again into a new era of musical and narrative integration. I draw all of my examples from after 1999 for this reason: the scores fit into the Williams and Shore tradition and use a web of constant thematic material that underscores most of the film.

Though superhero films often fall into the action/adventure genre and both the *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* series are more firmly sci-fi/fantasy, all of these films are unified by their fantastical setting: they have one foot in the fantasy world and one foot in reality. The escapism that audiences expect from fantasy films is fulfilled by superheroes, space travel, elves, magic, and the extreme dramatization of Good versus Evil. At the

same time, however, the protagonists make decisions found frequently in the realm of real life. Though Captain America fights a genetically mutated Nazi scientist who wishes to harness the power of Gods, he more generally chooses to fight against injustice even when he lacks his super strength. While audiences watch two little hobbits climb a computer-generated volcano surrounded by orc armies, they are also seeing characters who were told they were too small to survive accomplish more than anyone else on that path could. The underlying thread of these stories is the protagonist who chooses to make a difference despite the external factors that push them down, a struggle to which the audience can relate no matter how far-removed from reality other aspects of the story might be.

The music of these films reflects the coexistence of fantasy and reality found in the storyline. Regardless of the level of world-building that the score must also accomplish (what music should one use to represent a desert planet controlled by a mafia of gambling alien slugs?), the musical soundscapes for these films draw upon the Romantic orchestral tradition of using distinct themes that repeat either verbatim or in a transformed way through the variation of instrument families, ranges, timbres, textures, harmonies, modes, and other musical aspects. No matter what fantasy landscape viewers visit, they are not alienated from the new world because the score uses familiar processes of musical organization. My analysis of such scores, then, necessarily disregards many of the formal procedures of Romantic music but still takes into account the comfort that familiar musical organization, and particularly the concept of thematic return, provides.



Finally, the stories represented in my research contain a similar narrative structure. Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey" archetype has been famously applied to the *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* stories in high school English classes across the United States.<sup>10</sup> For the superhero story arc, however, a more specific narrative structure aids my analysis. Amidst the various character-forming events typical of the hero's journey exposition, the superhero also works their way toward their expositional battle sequence. Through the course of the second half of the film, circumstances change that elevate the urgency of the conflict and lead to the final battle, which closes the conflict between the hero and the villain while also concluding the dramatic arc of the entire film. This two-part structure is most apparent in superhero films, though it appears in both *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* as well.

The repetition of battle sequences has positive repercussions for analyzing how music coordinates with narrative development. The expositional battle uses particular musical processes to depict the battle's victories and losses. These victories and losses create tiers of narrative closure, thereby establishing a narrative arc for the battle as each blow brings the conflict nearer to its resolution. The final battle will presumably also be structured the same way. In my observations, composers often utilize the potential for musical parallelism. They also include slight differences in the final battle's musical procedure for narrative reasons that I explore. With this repetitive narrative structure, I

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

can discover and corroborate the score's baseline structure while simultaneously exploring the different functions themes serve in association with narrative development.

The music of action sequences is further intriguing due to the narrative turmoil that it accompanies. Frank Lehman succinctly explains the difficulty of scoring a sequence that also presents a large amount of attention-grabbing extramusical content: "Action sequences must answer to dramatic, editorial, and visual imperatives, rather than to absolute musical logic...The most active, complex, and potentially interesting music of a scene tends to fall within scenes that most doggedly direct viewer attention elsewhere."<sup>11</sup> Often, action sequences use frequent cuts, rapidly changing perspectives, and loud sound effects to present a climactic finale that resolves the climax in a satisfying enough way to conclude the story arc of the entire film.

When so many changing variables pull on the audience's attention, what role is music allowed to play? Lehman lists two directions a film's creative team can pursue: use either minimal music to not distract from the other components or use active musical gestures and audio-visual synchronization to highlight important moments in the chaos.<sup>12</sup> In the genre of films I explore, the second option is the one most often chosen. This choice enables me to explore what musical material highlights those moments, whether a hierarchy of musical material is established in order to emphasize moments of varying importance, and what role themes play in this outline. Because these films contain

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<sup>11</sup> Lehman, "Film-as-Concert Music," 11-20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 20.

multiple action sequences, as explained above, I have the opportunity to corroborate my conclusions when the same type of scene reappears at the end of the film's second act.

### **Significance of Project**

Due to the relatively small amount of film music scholarship compared to the number of films available to analyze, there are various gaps in research that my project addresses. Film music research often focuses on thematic development across an entire film rather than on scenes that serve a particular narrative function. Because certain composers will often have a compositional style that does not discriminate between narrative genre (not due to the composer's choice, necessarily, but due to the wishes of the production team who want the composer's specific sound), research often centers on a composer's style rather than a specific genre of film. When it comes to film themes, furthermore, studies often explore the qualities of the music in isolation rather than its relationship to the story arc. Finally, published film research often explores films from the past rather than more contemporary subjects. For each of these topics, I take a related but different direction from the research that is currently available.

#### *Film vs. Scene*

Many film music theorists look at the usage and transformation of musical themes across an entire film. In his chapter "The Modern-Day Leitmotif: Associative Themes in Contemporary Film Music," Matthew Britzter-Stull explores a variety of films'

adherence to Wagnerian-style leitmotivic development.<sup>13</sup> His thorough survey of various transformation types compares the moment a theme first appears to when it reappears later with a specific transformation type.<sup>14</sup> Though he ends with an extended look at motivic relationships in Howard Shore's thematic library for *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, he also reinforces that his research focuses on large-scale thematic development across a film by acknowledging scene organization only once: Shore unifies scenes with one central musical theme or motive.<sup>15</sup> Justin London takes a different approach to address a similar topic in his essay "Leitmotifs and Musical Reference in the Classical Film Score."<sup>16</sup> London explores the processes through which audiences form the association between a theme and its in-story reference by looking closely at the major themes in Max Steiner's score for *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Though he conducts some scene study to determine the narrative subject that each theme references, his evidence primarily catalogs where in the entire film the theme or theme fragment appears.

Although research in thematic establishment and transformation across an entire film can reveal relationships between themes and the film's overall narrative form, I

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<sup>13</sup> For other works that explore Wagnerian leitmotivic techniques in film music, see Irena Paulus, "Williams versus Wagner or an Attempt at Linking Musical Epics," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 31, no. 1 (2000): 153-184, and Scott D. Paulin, "Richard Wagner and the Fantasy of Cinematic Unity: The Idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the History and Theory of Film Music," in *Music and Cinema*, ed. James Buhler, Caryl Flinn, and David Neumeier (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2000), 58-84.

<sup>14</sup> Bribitzer-Stull, *Understanding the Leitmotif*, 255-300.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>16</sup> London, "Leitmotifs and Musical Reference in the Classical Film Score," 85-98.

believe that there are further standardized relationships to explore between theme and narrative for various scene types. The films I explore also use and transform themes in the ways described by Bribitzer-Stull and London; however, in superhero films, thematic appearances are noticeably clustered within battle scenes. Part of my exploration into the music and the narrative, then, zooms in on these scenes to examine what organizing principle guides those thematic appearances and how different techniques of musical organization create cohesion in scenes that contain erratic visual and aural activity (though my chapter on thematic combination addresses musical development on both scales).

### *Genre*

Film music theorists often approach the concept of genre very broadly in their analyses as well. Often, a research topic centers on a single composer whose work spans a variety of genres. Theorists like Frank Lehman, for example, have dedicated research to the work of John Williams, which includes science fiction films like *Star Wars*, action/adventure films like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and *Jaws* (1975), and period dramas like *Jane Eyre* (1970) and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005).<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, theorists like Erik Heine begin with a musical concept that appears in multiple genres. Heine's categorization of chromatic mediant progressions in his article "Chromatic Mediants and Narrative Context in Film" might borrow labels primarily from science fiction and fantasy films, but his evidence pulls from a variety of genres

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<sup>17</sup> Lehman, "Film-as-Concert Music," 7-46.

including the sports films *Rudy* (1993) and *Field of Dreams* (1989), the comedy *Blazing Saddles* (1974), and the thriller *Basic Instinct* (1992).<sup>18</sup>

It is exciting to find musical theories that appear in multiple genres. Such a discovery demonstrates that music can convey universal meaning across seemingly disparate narrative structures. However, I have found two main benefits from narrowing the genre. A focused genre allows me to more closely cross-examine parallels between the narrative form and the music without having to account for drastic genre-related differences in narrative procedure, like the absence of thematically saturated battle sequences or a limited number of characters or subjects that are not associated with themes. With a relatively constant story arc, I can examine the different possibilities that exist for scoring that arc. The second benefit of narrowing the genre is the promise of a consistent scoring tradition: composers who contribute to the same genres as John Williams and Howard Shore are likely to utilize the same heavily leitmotivic scoring style. Through the course of my research into films of the same genre as those trendsetters, then, I can trust that each film I analyze will likely use a theme-based musical texture containing some kind of relationship between themes and narrative that I can explore.

### *Themes and Narrative*

Some of the most fascinating film music research comes from scholars who have found ways to categorize thematic treatment broadly in film. These theories examine the

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<sup>18</sup> Erik Heine, "Chromatic Mediants and Narrative Context in Film," *Music Analysis* 37, no. 1 (2018): 103-132.

score's organizational procedures independently from any Classical music-derived norm (even though the basis of the procedures may derive from Richard Wagner). Mark Richards' categorization of film theme types is one example of this: he surveys a variety of film themes and creates three formal categories, each with subsections, based on typical traits found specifically in themes for films.<sup>19</sup> Bribitzer-Stull's article exploring thematic transformation types further fits into this category of research, as does Heine's categories of chromatic mediant progressions.<sup>20</sup><sup>21</sup>

My research uses these categories as a base for further exploration. After using Richards's and Heine's categories to help define the important characteristics of each theme I explore, Bribitzer-Stull's categories help define the changes the themes have undergone in the battle scenes or as part of thematic combination. My next step moves beyond the musical analysis: for the two techniques I explore, I compare the thematic traits and treatment to its alignment in the story arc. I use the studies that focus on music in isolation as a springboard to then discover the relationship between the music and the narrative, focusing on the particular genres and scenes described above.

#### *Time Period*

Finally, film music research often examines films, composers, and techniques that precede Howard Shore's score for *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. In her article "Understanding the Score: Film Music Communicating to and Influencing the

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Richards, "Film Music Themes: Analysis and Corpus Study," *Music Theory Online* 22, no. 1 (2016): 1-27.

<sup>20</sup> Bribitzer-Stull, *Understanding the Leitmotif*, 255-300.

<sup>21</sup> Heine, "Chromatic Mediants," 103-132.

Audience,” Jessica Green examines how leitmotivic transformation combines with other sources of information to make the implicit events, motives, and emotions of the story explicit. She analyzes (quite extensively) Trevor Jones and Randy Edelman’s score to *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) and James Horner’s score to *Braveheart* (1995), both of which are from the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> The essays collected in James Buhler, Caryl Flinn, and David Neumeyer’s book *Music in Cinema* further present a broad variety of topics in film music theory. The book was published in 2000 and, unlike many other scholarly works, includes research on films outside of the United States; however, the number of films from after 1980 is disproportionately low in relation to the total time frame covered in the book.<sup>23</sup>

There are many questions to be explored about early film music practices and non-Hollywood films are certainly worthy of research as much as any Hollywood film. Furthermore, many research projects likely begin with a film, genre, or composer that the researcher was inclined to enjoy during their formative years, which is not a bad thing. However, as a result, contemporary films whose genres have only recently become popular are not explored as extensively as older films. As a younger researcher able to explore the films and genres that spoke to me during my own formative years, my research bridges the time gap in current scholarship. Conveniently, the films I love happen to follow Shore’s vast thematic web for the *Lord of the Rings* series and use similar techniques to score similar narratives. With the superhero genre in particular being generally unexplored yet still actively produced (in the past year alone, at least

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<sup>22</sup> Green, “Understanding the Score,” 81-94.

<sup>23</sup> Buhler, Flinn, and Neumeyer, *Music in Cinema*.



eight superhero films have been released in theaters), there is much research still to be done concerning these films' thematic organization both now and for the foreseeable future.

### **Chapter Outline**

The first topic I explore is the alignment of themes with narrative development in superhero battle scenes. My two case studies are *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), score by Alan Silvestri, and *Wonder Woman* (2017), score by Rupert Gregson-Williams. These two films contain an increasingly standardized narrative arc that presents the superhero's origin story (or, in less diegetic terms, films that are the superhero's first appearance in the cinematic universe). Superhero origin films typically contain an intermediary battle in the first half of the story that serves particular purposes to culminate the story's exposition. This expositional battle uses certain thematic techniques to outline the narrative development of the combat. The origin story ends with a final battle that revisits those same techniques and reorganizes them to affect broader closure for the entire film. Through this chapter, I dedicate a section to each film in turn. In each section, I explore the expositional battle's musical procedures and compare them to the final battle's procedures to demonstrate that overall, themes serve three distinct purposes in the battle sequences of this narrative framework.

In my next chapter, I explore how themes are combined to depict complex relationships between characters. Through a technique I call thematic combination, two or more themes combine in various ways to reflect a narrative situation. I explore two

combination techniques, each with its own case study. First, I examine “Anakin’s Theme” from *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) by John Williams, which demonstrates how a motive from one character’s theme can be inserted into the phrase structure of another theme to depict the relationship between the two. Because the borrowed motive becomes an integral part of the theme for Anakin, the moments during the film that are underscored by this thematic combination reference this extra narrative layer.<sup>24</sup> The narrative depiction does not end with just the presence of the motive in the theme; the way that the motive is harmonically and melodically included further mirrors the story arc in more detail.

My second case study explores the combination technique in which multiple smaller traits from existing themes combine to form what is ostensibly a new theme. Like the first technique, the ways in which the traits combine depict a complex narrative situation. This is done in the diegetic song “The Edge of Night” from *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) by Howard Shore. The song combines motives, contour patterns, quasi-Schenkerian middle grounds, and modes from two different themes associated with two different characters. The aspects of each theme align with certain words in the song’s text. The words provide more context for the musical traits in order to depict two situations: that of the performer, singing in his own musical style

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<sup>24</sup> As I was completing this thesis, Frank Lehman updated his Star Wars Leitmotif Catalogue to include examples of what he calls thematic interconnection. He uses “Anakin’s Theme” as an example and outlines both literal statements of the thematic combination in *The Phantom Menace* as well as other statements of Anakin’s music that contains the same middle ground reduction as the Imperial March motive. Frank Lehman, Twitter post, May 1, 2019 (5:02 p.m.), accessed May 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/fmlehman>.

while referencing the musical style of his audience, and that of another character who concurrently rides into battle. The combination of musical elements creates a new theme that represents the two situations taking place in the scene. This combination is particularly important because, like the relationship depicted in “Anakin’s Theme,” the music reveals information (in this case, the resolution to the battle) that the scene’s other channels of communication do not convey. The music, in other words, uses thematic combination to provide audiences with plot details that the characters lack.

I conclude my thesis with a summary of the ideas presented and by exploring further directions this research can take. Film music scholarship has grown substantially in the past several decades, increasing the variety of topics and types of films explored. Film music is increasingly analyzed as its own entity that does not need to adhere to Classical norms in order to be respected or deemed worth of study. This independence acknowledges that the nature of film music analysis must take the narrative into account and that this does not make the study of such music any less valid. Film music interacts with narrative structures in many complex ways, two of which I elucidate in this thesis. These are undoubtedly not the only two ways that themes and narrative interact, but on their own they can be applied to both older and contemporary films as a means to gauge how themes outline, reinforce, and enhance their film’s narrative.

## CHAPTER II

### THEMATIC ALIGNMENT IN SUPERHERO ORIGIN FILMS

#### **Thematic Alignment Introduction**

The story arc of superhero origin films often contains a standardized trajectory. In the exposition, the hero's abilities, both physical and moral, are introduced to the other characters while both the characters and audience are introduced to the main villain. These two goals typically combine in a battle sequence that ends with the superhero gaining the trust of other allies who doubted them. Sometimes, this battle acts as a finale to the film's imaginary Act I. By the end of this battle, both the audience and other characters believe that the superhero is worthy of their trust. With the expositional hurdles of the hero's origin story crossed, the specific conflict between the hero and villain can move forward.

In Act II of the film, the conflict narrows on defeating the main villain. Often, the death of a particular character or group of characters who were saved in the expositional battle intensifies the hero's journey. The loss briefly sets back the hero as they recover, but it eventually renews the hero's motivation to seek justice and propels them directly into the final battle. The final battle serves multiple functions at various narrative levels of the story. On the most local level, it resolves the conflict between the hero and the villain. More broadly, the end of the final battle initiates the closural sequence, a series of

shots that ends the remaining open storylines. This sequence dissipates the remaining adrenaline of the final battle and gives the total story a satisfying level of closure.<sup>25</sup>

Because many superhero origin films contain these two battle sequences, their accompanying music is often organized in ways that reinforce the narrative arc of each battle sequence. If part of the score's construction, leitmotivic themes aid this purpose. In particular, they tend to serve three functions in relation to the film's narrative.

First, themes align with shifts in power that occur during combat: when a character's theme appears in the musical texture, it frequently signifies that the character has gained the upper hand against the opponent. This alignment emphasizes the specific development of the combat, increasing the importance of each blow in the journey towards the battle's conclusion.

Second, the return of a familiar theme amidst the flurry of ostinati or angular interjections creates a moment of musical stability, which establishes a sense of closure. Musical closure of this kind might simply emphasize a particular moment in the battle due to its narrative importance, like the appearance of a particular ability or weapon that

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<sup>25</sup> There are other superhero origin films that follow this trajectory beyond the two that I discuss in this chapter. As more superhero origin films are released, the familiarity with the form has necessitated some alterations to it, including the location of the expositional battle. *Spiderman: Into the Spideverse* (2018), for example, closes Act I with a battle that ends the introduction of new heroes and villains. Though Miles Morales, the main hero, does not achieve full control of his powers until just before the final battle when his uncle's death and the immanent sacrifice of Peter Parker motivates him to learn control, the expositional battle marks the first time that he and the other superheroes act together for their goal. Similarly, *Captain Marvel* (2019) moves the expositional battle closer to the film's beginning as the story starts with her almost immediate relocation from her own planet to Earth and in order to achieve her goals, she needs to gain the trust of her allies earlier in the story arc. Though the battle's location is variable, trust between characters is still the ultimate goal.

served an important role in the original comic book. More often, however, the musical stability corresponds to a moment of narrative stability within the developing action. The strength of these points of closure varies depending on the extent to which the theme has been transformed.<sup>26</sup> The varying strengths result in a hierarchy of theme-initiated moments of closure that outline the battle's development. The least-transformed thematic appearance, therefore, presents the strongest closural affect and typically appears at the end of the sequence to convey that the battle is over.

Third, themes are used to highlight each battle's distinct function in the story arc. Often, the musical process that affects closure for the expositional battle reappears for the final battle, but is reorganized to highlight the final battle's broader closural function. As already described, the expositional battle's purpose in the story arc is to show the superheroes gaining the trust of their doubters and to establish an emotional connection with figures who ultimately intensify the conflict between the hero and the villain. The final battle scene, on the other hand, initiates the closural sequence that concludes the remaining open storylines. Because the final battle scene's conclusion is the first in a series of conclusions, the strongest moment of thematic return aligns, not with the moment the battle ends (typically when the villain is defeated), but with the scene or shot

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew Bribitzer-Stull discusses various transformations that themes take throughout films, including during battle sequences. The most common battle sequence transformations that appear in his list are fragmentation, truncation, reharmonization, and modal transformation. Though topics of transformation are related to my analysis in this chapter, I look at the transformation's impact on the narrative form in the battle rather than a catalog of different available transformation techniques. Bribitzer-Stull, *Understanding the Leitmotif*, 255-300.

that creates the most satisfying closure for the entire film beyond the specific conflict between the hero and the villain.

To some extent, these three functions overlap. Certain shifts in power indicate victory over an obstacle, so a power-shifting thematic appearance can also create a tier of musical and narrative closure. A transformed thematic fragment that accompanies a subsidiary moment of closure can also function to delay full closure until the moment the battle accomplishes its function in the story arc. Therefore, that thematic appearance highlights the battle's function as a result of the layers of musical and narrative closure it creates. Themes, in other words, can function flexibly; they can provide information locally about a particular moment while simultaneously outlining the overall form of the battle sequence or indicating the purpose of the scene in the even broader story arc.<sup>27</sup>

Alan Silvestri's score to *Captain America: The First Avenger* and Rupert Gregson-Williams' score to *Wonder Woman* both use themes in these three ways during their expositional and final battle scenes. I first explore the battles of *Captain America*,

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<sup>27</sup> Frank Lehman explores differences in form priorities between action music, or “action scherzi,” and Classical works. His distinctions guided many of my own analytical priorities. For example, things deemed tonally irregular by Classical form standards like sudden modulations, deceptive endings, and constant repetition are a result of the narrative. Because of this interconnectivity between music and narrative, such “irregularities” are integral to the expression of film music and should not be considered setbacks in establishing musical cohesion. If we are to evaluate form for this type of music, then form-generating characteristics must respect changes in process over tonal or procedural coherency. Additionally, he states “a specific narrative trajectory may be embedded within the overall form of a cue/arrangement, particularly as a function of thematic development or its absence.” This version of thematic development, which I more specifically delineate as thematic transformation and return, supports my hypothesis that thematic appearances within a battle scene arise from the narrative trajectory and permit audiences to hear that trajectory along with the visual and narrative development cues. Lehman, “Film-as-Concert Music,” 17.

which use and transform Captain America's march theme to mirror and enhance the narrative. I then move to *Wonder Woman*, whose score is more complex: three unique themes represent Wonder Woman and each serves one of the three functions.

Furthermore, the battle scenes of *Wonder Woman* are organized narratively and musically into halves, each of which projects one of the three functions of themes as well. Even with the additional themes in play and the different large-scale organization, the thematic appearances still function in the three ways enumerated above: they indicate local shifts in power, establish hierarchical levels of narrative closure within the battle, and express the scene's function in the story arc.

To analyze the way each film uses themes in battle scenes, I first explore the musical traits and leitmotivic content of the relevant themes. I then examine the thematic appearances and transformations in the expositional battle and consider how they align with the battle's narrative trajectory. After performing the same procedure for the final battle, I compare the musical processes of both scenes to discover the similarities and differences in the way the themes are used in each battle sequence.

### **Case Study 1: *Captain America: The First Avenger***

*Captain America* is a straightforward example of the three thematic functions listed above. Both the plot and the musical procedures demonstrate clearly the standardized traits of the superhero origin story and thematic function in battle scenes.



### *Plot Summary*

After receiving a superhero serum from the US Army's experimental science division during World War II, Steve Rogers, or Captain America, is put to work not as a soldier but as a mascot to raise support for the war. He travels overseas to entertain soldiers, including several who had mocked his small body before he took the serum, and they give him a cool welcome due to his lack of real combat experience. While at this camp, he discovers that the regiment of his friend Bucky has been captured by Hydra, the power-hungry science branch of the Nazi regime, but the US army general does not intend to send a rescue mission. Steve decides to rescue the regiment and Bucky himself. Through the ensuing battle, Steve accesses the base where the imprisoned soldiers are being held, frees them, finds Bucky, discovers details of Hydra's larger plans, destroys the base, and confronts the head of Hydra, Red Skull, during his escape. As per the goal of this scene in the origin story exposition, Captain America's success proves to his doubters that he is a capable superhero, much more than just a tool for propaganda. His rescue of Bucky, furthermore, establishes the emotional connection that intensifies the conflict in the film's second act when Bucky is killed.

### *Main Theme*

Before the expositional battle, Captain America's theme has already appeared in the film in association with Steve's developing superhero identity. Fragments of the theme appear throughout the exposition, growing in length until he takes the serum that grants him his abilities. When he leaves the transformation chamber, his full theme appears in a two-voice, homorhythmic, semi-chorale setting that gradually becomes more

march-like, adding a rhythmic accompaniment pattern, marching band instrumentation (mainly increasing snare drum activity), and a more upbeat tempo. The theme's full A section in the pure march setting, which appears over the closing credits, is shown in Figure 2.1 with two different accompaniment patterns. Before Steve's physical transformation, elements of the melody appeared when he demonstrated his persistence, intelligence, and compassion, some of the intrinsic qualities the doctor who organized the project prioritized over physical abilities in his candidates. Because the full theme appears once Steve adds physical strength to the equation, this development associates the theme with Steve's identity as Captain America.

The musical score for Figure 2.1 is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into sections: 'Basic Idea Presentation', 'Basic Idea Repetition', 'Divergence', and 'Clause Repetition'. Chord changes are indicated below the bass staff: DM, GM, A7, DM, CM (IV/IV), GMadd2: stacked fourths, DM, GMadd2: stacked fourths, and AM. The melody in the treble staff consists of eighth and quarter notes, while the bass staff provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and eighth notes.

**Figure 2.1.** *Captain America March*, A section (Clause theme presentation and repetition)

The theme contains several identifiable traits that appear both in isolation and in various combinations during battle sequences. Its form, based on Mark Richards' categorization of film theme types, is a *clause*. A clause has two phrases: the *presentation* phrase, which contains a basic idea and its repetition, and the *divergence* phrase,

beginning with material similar to the basic idea but different enough as to not form a parallel period.<sup>28</sup> The basic idea's opening rhythm, a dotted quarter note followed by two sixteenth notes, is the most distinct element of the theme that typically identifies thematic fragments when they appear. Additionally, fourths also pervade the theme. As shown in Figure 2.1, the melody begins with a descending fourth from Do to Sol followed by two successive ascending fourths back up to Do and Fa. Because these stacked fourths appear alongside the theme's characteristic rhythm, these two components often appear together and present a stronger thematic fragment than one component in isolation. However, though modal changes or truncation may cause alterations to the melody's specific intervallic content, the rhythm is typically kept intact.

In addition to the melody's frequent fourths, the harmonies of these eight measures also revolve around fourth relationships. The G major harmony is so prominent that the accompaniment voices essentially oscillate between only D major and G major pitches for the duration of the clause, with only a few beats dedicated to a clear dominant harmony. The basic idea moves from I to IV, or D major to G major, in the first two measures. The repetition of the basic idea transitions to the divergent phrase by replacing the basic idea's G major harmony with  $\flat$ VII, or C major. This chord functions as a IV/IV that resolves to G major in the divergence's first measure, thereby using fourths as the

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Richards outlines several different formal types of film theme based in part on how similar the beginning of the second phrase is to the beginning of the first phrase. In Classical music terms, the presentation phrase containing a basic idea and its repetition followed by a four-bar continuation would make this theme a sentence; however, Richards delineates different types of continuation, like the divergence, to account for varying balances of melodic and harmonic similarity between the two phrases. Richards, "Film Music Themes," 8.

basis for secondary harmonies instead of the traditional fifth. The divergence continues to oscillate between G major and D major and moves to the final dominant harmony only on the last beat of the theme's last measure. Furthermore, the accompaniment's fourth between D and G for each G major harmony in the divergence is joined by Sol in the melody, which adds another fourth to the stack. The fourths, then, are a distinct part of the theme alongside the more easily identifiable rhythm. These components can appear by themselves, together, or in transformation. Tiers of thematic return are therefore created depending on how many thematic elements appear in their original form.

### *The Expositional Battle*

The music for the expositional battle scene does not use full fragments of Captain America's theme as extensively as the final battle; nonetheless, the three thematic functions outlined in the introduction still apply. The full theme does not appear until the end of the battle when Captain America's value as a hero is revealed publicly to the soldiers who doubted him. To mirror this delayed revelation, Silvestri uses reduced fragments of Captain America's theme during the battle until the moment this narrative goal is accomplished. In total, elements of the theme appear three times. They highlight Steve's victories during combat, create tiers of narrative closure that contribute to the dramatic cliffhanger at the end of the scene, and emphasize the scene's purpose in the story arc by placing the most complete thematic statement with the moment Captain America's doubting colleagues witness his success.

The three thematic appearances during the battle are shown in Table 2.1. The first line in the table lists the important plot events that take place during and after the battle,

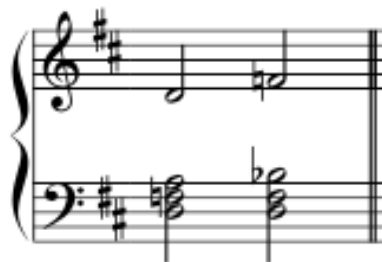
the two time frames divided by a solid line rather than a dotted line. The second line lists the details of the thematic fragment that appears. Each fragment conveys a level of musical closure that corresponds to a level of narrative closure; the resulting narrative closure indication within the battle’s story arc is listed for each fragment in the third row. Finally, the fourth row of the table includes the timestamp for each thematic fragment in the YouTube videos provided in the caption for the table.

<b>Plot:</b>	CA saves POWs	CA saves Bucky	CA leaps over chasm	CA returns to camp with POWs, doubters see his success	“Let’s hear it for Captain America!”, CA accepted as hero
<b>Captain America Theme Idea:</b>	Basic idea: minor ascending third	Basic idea-derived melody/harmony	Basic idea: minor, truncated to end on Fa	Full CA theme	Full CA theme
<b>Closural Indication:</b>	Battle goal complete; battle continues	Battle goal complete; battle continues	Builds anticipation for full battle completion	Broad battle purpose achieved	Result of broad battle purpose shown
<b>Timestamp:</b>	2:22	2:50	3:53	1:08	2:47

**Table 2.1** *Captain America* Expository Battle; Saving POWs: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAEARoQSDbo&list=PLkLimRXN6NKydb8z9wcGdwqJEyMBYwE0H&index=17>; Saving Bucky: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INt5QO3kXpw&list=PLkLimRXN6NKydb8z9wcGdwqJEyMBYwE0H&index=18>; Chasm Leap: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v\\_\\_HYqIYUM&list=PLkLimRXN6NKydb8z9wcGdwqJEyMBYwE0H&index=19](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v__HYqIYUM&list=PLkLimRXN6NKydb8z9wcGdwqJEyMBYwE0H&index=19); Returning to Camp: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAoD6-CF9Jo&list=PLkLimRXN6NKydb8z9wcGdwqJEyMBYwE0H&index=20>.

The thematic moments in the expository battle of *Captain America* serve multiple narrative functions simultaneously. The first moment presents the most reduced thematic fragment of the three that appear. When Captain America arrives in the captured

soldiers' cell, the visual perspective is from the soldiers being rescued. From inside their cell, a low-angle shot showing the top of the cage reveals a Hydra soldier collapsing due to a yet-unknown force. A shadowy figure appears and takes the keys off the soldier. At the same moment, the preceding high string sustains and percussive ostinato pattern change to a distinctly melodic ascending third, voiced in the same low range as the two-horn chorale setting of Captain America's theme. This third forms the top two structural pitches of the theme: reducing out the non-chord tones of the theme's opening tonic expansion, Do-Sol-Do-Fa-Mi would reduce to Do and Mi, with Fa as an incomplete upper neighbor to Mi. This structural base of the theme's opening idea has furthermore been modally transformed to minor. This minor third, as well as the inner voices that reharmonize the two pitches to fit the minor setting, is shown in Figure 2.2.

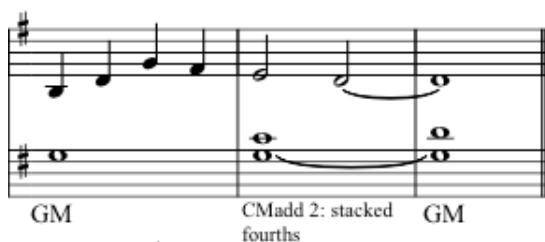


**Figure 2.2.** *Captain America* Expository Battle Fragment 1: Saving the Soldiers

The homophonic texture further references the chorale texture of the theme's first full appearance. Though reduced, the familiar interval in homophony interrupts the preceding layered percussive ostinati and scattered stepwise melodic interjections. The musical change to something familiar calls attention to the local goal of the battle that Captain America has accomplished: saving the captured soldiers. Because the thematic fragment is so reduced, however, the musical arrival indicates a pause in narrative development but does not create a strong sense of closure otherwise.

The extreme level of musical reduction has some narrative logic to it. Narratively, the perspective of this shot is from the captured soldiers, who have no clue who their rescuer is. The function of this battle is to present Captain America as a superhero to his doubters, which includes those who do not yet know who he is; the music reflects this early stage of his identity's development by using a minimal amount of thematic material. This reduced thematic fragment, then, marks both the local purpose of the battle, rescuing the soldiers, and the broader purpose of the battle in the story arc by transforming the theme to create a lower tier in the hierarchy of narrative closure.

A similarly reduced thematic fragment appears when Captain America reunites with Bucky. Though the fragment, shown in Figure 2.3, does not quote the theme directly, the harmonies move through I-IV-I, the same fourths progression that characterizes the theme. In the final move from IV back to I, a single voice sustains Fa, thereby creating a stacked-fourths harmony like the stacked fourths in the theme's divergence. The change in instrumentation and texture from the preceding material also causes a change in tone similar to the minor third earlier, calling further attention to the elements of this fragment that are reminiscent of the main theme. Like the first thematic moment, this marks another of Captain America's goals for the battle: saving Bucky.



**Figure 2.3.** *Captain America* Expositional Battle Fragment 2: Reunited with Bucky

Because a longer, more detailed thematic segment than the earlier minor third appears, Steve's identity as Captain America is shown to grow stronger as he

accomplishes more tasks. Unlike the first fragment, this one appears in the theme's original major mode. Bucky's rescue was Steve's personal goal for the battle, so the more complete thematic fragment marks this moment as both an important moment in the narrative, a step forward in the development of Captain America's identity, and a happy reunion with a figure from Steve's past. This makes the situation all the more heartbreaking when Bucky is later killed by Hydra agents in Act II of the film, another purpose of this battle in the story arc. Because this fragment preserves most of the musical traits aside from the pitch content, it creates another tier in the hierarchy of closure and pauses the combat development to elevate their reunion in the battle sequence without yet conveying ultimate closure for the battle.

After confronting a fleeing Red Skull, the sequence in the Hydra factory ends with an explosion that engulfs Captain America as he attempts to leap across a chasm to safety. As he prepares to leap, a third thematic fragment appears, shown in Figure 2.4. Unlike the two previous thematic moments, this fragment is a direct statement of the opening gesture from Captain America's basic idea, accompanied by minor harmonies and truncated to end on Fa. Because the arrival of a familiar melody creates a sense of closure, the fragment creates a sense of arrival. Simultaneously, however, its modal transformation and refusal to allow Fa its resolution conveys the danger that Steve is in and the lack of narrative resolution in that moment. This tension continues as the screen fades to black while Steve is mid-leap. The next shot moves to the army camp the next morning. With the battle space abandoned, the narrative conclusion is withheld and the audience is left wondering whether Steve survived the explosion. The tier of closure



created here is in some ways stronger than the previous two thematic fragments because the rhythm and contour of the original basic idea is preserved, therefore indicating that Captain America is even closer to achieving his goal for the battle; however, the unresolved Fa and the transformation to minor reflect the evaded conclusion.



**Figure 2.4.** *Captain America* Expository Battle Fragment 3: Chasm Leap

Both the flames and the music of the Hydra base setting fade away to a shot of the army camp. The only hint of narrative resolution comes from the army general and Agent Peggy Carter, ranking member of the military science organization who helped train Steve and the other potential candidates for the supersoldier program, as they discuss Captain America's death during his unapproved mission. There is no music while they talk, so musical resolution continues to be withheld. Midway through this conversation, soldiers begin running in the background. While Peggy and the army general explore the source of the excitement, the high string sustain that accompanied the battle space's fade to black returns. Shortly after the high sustain, a trumpet holds Sol while a French horn descends stepwise from Do down to Sol. After landing on Sol, several low brass voices alternate an ascending Sol-Do-Fa motive, the ascending fourths from Captain America's basic idea. All voices eventually rest on a dominant triad, which crescendos until the figures in the foreground of the shot have cleared the frame to reveal Captain America walking forward with the rescued soldiers and Bucky at his side.

The downbeat of Captain America's theme lands as the gate arm into the camp clears the camera's field of view. The theme is in the exact same setting as its first appearance when Steve stepped out of the transformation chamber with his superpowers for the first time. The melody returns to the two-voice, homorhythmic chorale setting. Except for the continuing high Sol string sustain and the occasional snare drum hit, the melody is as unobscured as Captain America in the accompanying frame as he walks into the camp. Just as before, the chorale setting gradually adds more march elements, such as the offbeat accompaniment pattern and a steadier tempo. After a brief conversation during which the doubting general and soldiers admit that they were wrong about Steve, the same arrangement of the theme repeats, now voiced on loud, triumphant brass instruments. The battle's narrative resolution—Captain America's return with the soldiers—aligns with the musical conclusion to the battle's increasingly authentic thematic fragments: the theme returned, full and untransformed from its first appearance. This completes the closural process established by the battle's music: the transformed fragments created increasingly strong tiers of closure as more original elements of the theme were added so that this full thematic appearance can indicate the end of the battle.

The full theme also highlights the broader narrative purpose of the battle. The function of the scene in the story arc is to prove Captain America's abilities to his doubters and earn their trust so they can defeat the villain together in the next half of the film. The A section of Captain America's theme (the melody shown in Figure 2.1) appears twice in this post-battle scene alongside the two events that show he has earned the others' trust: first, when he initially arrives and they see his success, and second, at

the end of the scene when Bucky calls “Let’s hear it for Captain America!” and the soldiers and army general applaud him. Because both the general and one soldier in particular had called Steve too weak to deserve the serum earlier in the film, the unabashed thematic statement that plays as they praise him highlights the irony of them being front and center to see Steve succeed where they had failed. The film’s exposition focuses on Steve becoming Captain America; that identity is cemented to the public when he returns to the army camp. His theme highlights the moment this function is achieved.

In all, for this first battle sequence, fragments of Captain America’s theme highlight the important successes in the battle’s local purpose and indicate Steve’s developing identity as a superhero. Each thematic fragment punctuates a goal of the scene: saving the soldiers, saving Bucky, and escaping the Hydra base. The thematic fragments further mark shifts in power to his favor as he accomplishes each of those goals. At the same time, the fragments create a developing process to affect narrative closure. Because the fragments are transformed, they indicate that more important musical, and therefore narrative, closure is yet to come. The final thematic fragment during the battle is truncated to end on an unresolved pitch right before Captain America’s final leap to safety, magnifying the dramatic effect of the cliffhanger as the screen fades to black and withholding both musical and narrative closure for the battle. The final thematic statement ends the developing musical process of closure and marks that the goal for the battle, the development of Steve’s identity as Captain America, has been accomplished. It also establishes the musical expectation that subsequent battles will end with a full statement of Captain America’s theme to indicate his victory.

### *The Final Battle*

In the final fight scene, thematic fragments appear much more freely. With Captain America's superhero identity fully established in coordination with his theme, clearer fragments of the theme each involving the basic idea's rhythm appear more frequently to depict shifts in power during combat, create tiers of musical arrival that indicate varying layers of closure and continuing action, and highlight the purpose of the final battle in the story arc. Because the broad purpose of this battle is to initiate the closural sequence that follows, thematic fragments align with a particular visual component during the battle to deemphasize the moment the villain is defeated, the local goal of the battle. The resolution of both the musical and visual processes instead coincide with the shot in the closural sequence that provides emotional closure for the entire film.

Act II of the story follows Captain America, Bucky, and a team of other soldiers saved during the expositional battle as they destroy various Hydra strongholds. After Bucky is killed on their penultimate mission, Captain America and his remaining team members lose their motivation briefly before reaffirming their resolve to defeat Red Skull. In the next scene, they attack Hydra's main headquarters. This battle sequence is divided into three parts based on their location. First, Captain America motorcycles through the forest surrounding the base, defeating enemies as he goes. Once inside the front gates, he is quickly surrounded and overpowered. Now captured, he is taken to Red Skull. While in Red Skull's lair, the remaining members of his team arrive and the battle continues through the second location. Captain America follows Red Skull through the

facility to a plane filled with bombs intended for various major cities. After the third leg of the fight continues on the plane, Captain America defeats Red Skull and crashes the plane into an ice floe in the Arctic Ocean, presumably dying in the crash.

Throughout the many stages of this battle, all three thematic functions are utilized. In the first leg of the battle, the music is organized around thematic fragments that reflect shifts in power as Captain America defeats the various Hydra soldiers motorcycling by his side until he is ultimately captured and taken to Red Skull. These power-shifting thematic fragments also create plateaus in musical and narrative action that outline the development of the battle. Table 2.2 summarizes the plot events and thematic alignment for the first portion of the final battle. The first row of the table lists the particular events or spans of combat that take place in this part of the battle. The second row indicates the music that appears for those events: either a thematic fragment with particular transformations that weaken its arrival or non-leitmotivic ostinati for when Captain America loses his upper hand. The third row indicates the level of narrative closure established by each musical moment. Finally, the fourth row lists the timestamps for each event in the YouTube video provided in the caption for the table.

In this part of the final battle, pairs of thematic fragments align with moments when Captain America overtakes various Hydra soldiers while motorcycling towards the Hydra base. The two fragments shown in Figure 2.5, one beginning on C and the other on F#, appear respectively as his motorcycle shoots flames at a Hydra soldier behind him

<b>Plot:</b>	CA motorcycle flames	CA grenade stems	CA avoids tank blasts	CA blows up tank	CA arrives at base, overtaken by Hydra soldiers
<b>Theme Idea/ Music:</b>	Basic idea: minor, truncated to end on Me (closed)	Basic idea: minor, truncated to end on Me (closed)	Basic idea: minor, extended ending on Do (closed)	Basic idea: minor, extended ending on Sol (closed)	Non-leitmotivic ostinati
<b>Closural Indication:</b>	CA victory, battle continues	CA victory, battle continues	Stronger CA victory, battle continues	Stronger CA victory, battle continues	CA loses
<b>Time-stamp:</b>	0:28	0:30	0:41	0:46	0:55

**Table 2.2** *Captain America* Final Battle, Part 1: Approaching the Hydra Base/Capture; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RWD1yTmJQ4&t=17s>

and as he pulls the stems out of some grenades on two other Hydra soldier’s motorcycles. These two fragments transform the original theme the same way: Captain America’s basic idea is transposed to minor and truncated to end on Me, resolving the dissonant Fa that was left hanging in the expositional battle’s final theme fragment. Two more fragments appear that extend the melody beyond the Me resolution, following it with Re-Te-Do for the first fragment and Re-Te-Sol for the second. These two fragments similarly alter the original basic idea to end on a tonic harmony once again (though ending on Sol creates a less satisfying cadence, therefore conveying continuing action within the solid harmonic conclusion). These four harmonically closed thematic fragments definitively punctuate their aligned events as victories for Captain America during the developing action. They create melodic and harmonic plateaus in the musical development that lend their closural affect to the narrative events, inspiring confidence in Captain America. Highlighting this

string of victories appropriately characterizes Captain America's renewed motivation to defeat Hydra following Bucky's death.



**Figure 2.5.** Final Battle Part 1 Fragments: Motorcycle Fire Victory, Grenades Victory

However, because the fragments lack the theme's harmonic motion to IV, skip the melody's opening sixteenth-note drop down to Sol and back up, are transformed to minor, and either truncate or extend the original melody, the closural aspect of the fragments are undermined, indicating that the battle continues. They are part of the larger organizational process that takes place in this leg of the final battle: the highlighting of Captain America's battle victories (and losses) through altered thematic appearances.

Once Captain America ramps over the factory gates, the number of Hydra combatants increases dramatically and he becomes overpowered. As shown in Table 2.2, the thematic fragments that previously saturated the score noticeably disappear. They are replaced with the same ostinato patterns that appeared between thematic fragments in the expositional battle. This ostinato texture, lacking leitmotivic content, indicates that the outcome of the battle at that moment is unclear because Captain America's threat to the Hydra soldiers is no longer strong enough to warrant musical representation. Therefore, the narrative change from Captain America's success to defeat and capture is paralleled by the shift in musical material: now that he no longer has the upper hand, his thematic fragments disappear.

The next portion of the battle follows Captain America as he fights through the factory. Like in his approach, fragments of his theme indicate when he gains the upper hand. The fragments have again been transformed to end with a more closed cadence. In addition to this function, however, they align with a particular visual cue. This alignment combines with the expositional battle's technique for musical closure to convey ultimate closure for the entire film. The developing process completes on the closural sequence's final shot, which is the last shot in the 1940s setting. Because the process ends at the moment of the film's closure rather than at the moment the villain is defeated, the music displays the function of the final battle in the story arc.

Thematic fragments appear three times during this half of the battle. Each fragment aligns with shots and events involving Captain America's shield.<sup>29</sup> Though serving a larger process, the fragments still locally represent moments when power shifts to Captain America. Table 2.3 contains the plot and theme alignment for both this portion of the battle and the final portion, which takes place on Red Skull's plane. The first row of the table contains the important plot developments of the two locations. The second row indicates the thematic fragment that aligns with those events, including information about their transformation from the original and their level of musical closure. The next row presents the timestamp for each event in the YouTube video provided in the table caption.

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<sup>29</sup> Not coincidentally, the film's very first thematic fragment appeared in association with the shield as well: it accompanies the rediscovery of Captain America's shield in the present day, the first scene in the film.



<b>Plot:</b>	CA runs through base			CA vs. Red Skull on plane
	“You might need this”: shield returned	Shield returned from doorway	Leap over soldiers with shield	CA shield left behind
<b>Thematic Fragment:</b>	Basic Idea fragment: minor, closed	Basic Idea fragment: minor, closed	Basic Idea fragment: minor, closed	No theme fragments
<b>Timestamp:</b>	3:29	0:35	1:32	

**Table 2.3** *Captain America* Final Battle, Parts 2 and 3: Hydra Base and Red Skull’s Plane; “You might need this:” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pu9DGCZwmeA&list=PLkLimRXN6NKydb8z9wcGdwqJEyMBYwE0H&index=28>; Events 2 and 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWs2cUC7ZOM&list=PLkLimRXN6NKydb8z9wcGdwqJEyMBYwE0H&index=29>;

The first fragment after Captain America’s staged capture aligns with the moment he regains his shield: his team arrives, Red Skull runs away, and as Captain America begins to follow him, one of his team members says, “You might need this” and returns his shield to him. When the shield makes contact with Captain America’s hand, the thematic fragment shown in Figure 2.6 appears. Like the fragments that accompanied his approach to the base, this fragment extends the basic idea’s melody and ends on a closed cadence (this is, in fact, the same fragment that accompanied Captain America as he evaded the tank blasts in the first part of the battle). Because this fragment, like the previous ones in this scene, is harmonically closed, it punctuates the event rather than a building unresolved tension like the expositional battle’s thematic fragment that ended on Fa.



**Figure 2.6.** *Captain America* Final Battle, Shield Fragment 1: “You might need this”

The second thematic fragment, shown in Figure 2.7, appears when Captain America retrieves his shield again, this time from a doorway that Red Skull attempted to close. Now, the fragment does not end on a tonic-oriented pitch, but the harmonic accompaniment does not leave it as unresolved as the expositional battle's final fragment. As a result, the musical punctuation has a stronger element of tension to it than the moment Captain America regained his shield, conveying continuing action as the music seeks to resolve. The third thematic fragment, shown in Figure 2.8, accompanies Captain America as he leaps over twenty or so Hydra soldiers that had been obstructing his path to Red Skull's plane. This fragment similarly ends on a dominant-related pitch. With this final fragment, Captain America sails from left to right across a wide stationary shot, the shield at his side facing the audience.



**Figure 2.7.** *Captain America* Final Battle, Shield Fragment 2: Door Jam



**Figure 2.8.** *Captain America* Final Battle, Shield Fragment 3: Leap

These two fragments indicate arrival through the return of familiar material amidst the non-leitmotivic ostinati. At the same time, they also indicate continuing action due to the lack of tonal resolution (even though generally, none of these fragments indicate full closure due to their melodic alterations and modal transformation). In each of these scenes, Captain America gains the advantage over his enemies by either evading

them or regaining his shield, shifting the power to his favor. At the same time, the varying levels of harmonic closure presents tiers of musical stability that coordinate visually with his shield. This alignment procedure is utilized to affect closure for the film.

The thematic fragments that appear during the Hydra base run perform all three functions of themes in battle sequences: they represent shifts in power to Captain America and establish tiers of closure while aligning with his shield, a procedure which will pay off later when the purpose of the final battle in the story arc is accomplished. The final leg of the battle moves to Red Skull's plane. Once this happens, thematic fragments are conspicuously absent. Just as the inundation of thematic fragments earlier built confidence in Captain America's victory, the absence of his theme here conveys the opposite. The battle's outcome cannot be predicted as the music conveys no clear upper hand. The developing closural procedure contributes to this impression: when Captain America enters the cabin of the plane, the camera pans to his shield, wedged into the mechanics of the plane and abandoned. Though the shot's prominence clearly serves a formal purpose as it presents information separate from Captain America's point of view, it is not accompanied by a thematic fragment. Once he enters the plane, then, Captain America is separated from the two things that indicated his success: his shield and his theme. The established thematic processes are now used to intensify the final battle's drama as audiences are given no hint as to who will win.

At the end of the battle, Red Skull falls. He grabs onto the Tesseract, the mysterious blue box filled with supernatural energy that he planned to use for evil, and is subsequently launched into space. Though an important moment in the story arc, it is

musically understated. Magical-sounding music swells as he is carried away by a stream of blue light, but once he is gone, the music reduces down to a simple string sustain that fades as the Tesseract falls through the floor of the plane and plunges to Earth. As Captain America dives into the next task of landing the bomb-laden plane, the same minor-inflected, extended thematic fragment that ended the melody on Do accompanies him. After this fragment, the music falls silent. The villain is defeated, ostensibly the goal of the final battle, but the strong thematic return that should musically punctuate the accomplishment is altered to indicate that the conflict still continues.

Without the return of Captain America's theme, then, the tension continues as he determines what to do with the plane. Ultimately, he decides to crash it into ice in the far north of the Arctic Ocean, killing himself but avoiding any further victims. Therefore, he wins the battle against Red Skull but loses his life. Because his theme never reappears during his fight with Red Skull on the plane, this retroactively foreshadowed that he was entering a battle that he would not win.

### *The Closural Sequence*

In the story arc, the final battle does more than end the conflict between the hero and villain. It also initiates the closural sequence, a series of shots that wrap up the film's other unfinished plot lines. Though the shots of the closural sequence jump between topics, characters, and locations, they are unified by continuous music.

The different musical ideas and plot events of the closural sequence beginning earlier with the death of Red Skull, are shown in Table 2.4. The first row indicates the plot events, the second row indicates the musical idea (whether thematically related or

not), and the third row indicates the timestamp of the moments in the film (the video is not available on YouTube).

<b>Plot:</b>	Red Skull defeated	Plane crashes	WWII ends	Team toast, "Keep looking," Peggy+folder	Little boy with trash can shield
<b>Music:</b>	Basic idea: minor, closed	String elegy	Basic Idea: truncated, major	New music	Basic Idea: complete, in rhythm, I-IV motion, intervals expanded to more "American" setting
<b>Timestamp:</b>	1:45:10	1:48:08	1:48:47	1:49:00	1:50:15

**Table 2.4.** *Captain America* Closural Sequence.

Immediately after the plane crashes, Peggy tries to reconnect with Steve on the radio. The score responds with a sad elegy featuring low strings and multiple semitone dissonances, conveying the reason why Peggy receives no answer. The elegy and the rest of the music for the closural sequence contains completely new music despite the known power the return of a familiar theme has on closure. The expected musical procedure is for Captain America's theme to return and announce the narrative resolution to the battle. Just like Red Skull's defeat, the plane crash could be an appropriate narrative moment for musical closure to highlight; however, the closural sequence begins without reaching musical closure first. The audience is left waiting to receive closure for Captain America's death and for the entire story arc as the sequence moves on.

Despite the lingering sadness, two stages of musical and narrative closure are accomplished during this sequence. Transformed thematic fragments appear twice. The

first, shown in Figure 2.9, occurs at the end of the elegy. The elegy ends with a half cadence that turns into the basic idea of Captain America’s theme. This arrival accompanies the announcement of the war’s end, reinforced by planes flying over celebrations in London while a newspaper headline reads “VE Day.” Unlike the thematic fragments heard during the final battle, this one retains the theme’s original major key, which at first creates the impression that this is the battle-concluding thematic return the audience has been waiting for. However, after the first five notes of the basic idea the melody is extended once more, adding another ascending fourth that creates an appoggiatura to Sol and continuing on with more new music. In the search for musical closure after the battle, this thematic fragment forms a brief arrival, stronger than the mid-battle fragments, before continuing with unfamiliar material, creating another stepping stone on the way to full closure. Because the battle music has not yet reached its conclusion, the thematic processes that took place during the battle (including the establishment of tiers of closure in lieu of full closure) continue.<sup>30</sup>



**Figure 2.9.** *Captain America* Closures Sequence Fragment: WWII Ending

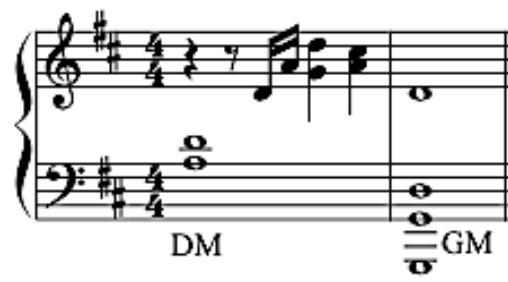
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<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, the elegy and the basic idea-derived new theme returns in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) in that film’s closural sequence to convey final closure, not a tier of intermediate closure as it does here.

Through this closural sequence, the question of Captain America's survival lingers. We see his team members toasting to him and the army general conspicuously handing Peggy a folder marked "classified" and stamped "inactive." One moment in between these two, however, suggests hope: Howard Stark, the weapons contractor for the army who made Captain America's shield and flew him to the Hydra base for the expositional battle, discovers the fallen Tesseract while in a submarine in the Arctic Ocean and tells his workers "Just keep looking." Though this hints that Captain America might make another surprise return as he did in the expositional battle, it is followed by Peggy receiving the inactive, classified folder that, as she discovers, contains an old photo of Steve before he took the serum. With this shot, she and the audience are meant to accept that he is gone.

Though the story gives us a single hint of a happier resolution, we continue to wait for the thematic return that announces the end of the film, preferably aligned with the same plot twist of Steve's survival that the theme accompanied at the end of the expositional battle. Finally, while the camera pauses on the photo of Steve, a cymbal role precedes the return of the theme's basic idea, back in its original two-voice homorhythmic chorale setting. The melody fragment with the supporting harmony is shown in Figure 2.10. The mode, harmonic motion to IV, rhythm, texture, and overall contour of the opening idea return, which makes this the least-transformed fragment found in either battle. However, the first interval of the basic idea has been expanded. The two ascending fourths become an ascending fifth and a fourth, moving Do-Sol-Do instead of Sol-Do-Fa. The altered contour maintains the tonic harmony for the duration of

the first measure, intensifying the next measure's theme-defining harmonic motion to IV (and, in a Copland-esque sense, the melody gains a more "American" sound from the octave split by a fifth rather than the two stacked fourths). This version further maintains the original basic idea's open ending by closing with the IV chord, a further connection to the original theme that both the mid-battle fragments and the war announcement fragment lacked.



**Figure 2.10.** *Captain America* Closures Sequence  
Fragment: Trash Can Shield

This music aligns with a cut to a trash can lid that has been painted to look like Captain America's shield. As the melody lands on the open cadence and gradually moves to the pitches of a dominant chord, the shield moves away from the camera and reveals its carrier to be a little boy playing in the street with his friends. This final shot of the closural sequence continues while the orchestra plays the thematic fragment, evoking all of the important elements of the theme's opening motive, before cutting to black and fully closing the World War II setting. The final battle's developing process of associating Captain America's shield with the theme created sub-tiers of narrative closure that now, at the end of the film, affects full closure.

This moment accomplishes several of the thematic functions listed earlier. Because the theme returns with its most important aspects amplified, the final tier in the



hierarchy of closure based on the expositional battle's structure has been achieved. The fragment coordinates with a shot of the shield, satisfying the visual component that the final battle added to the closural process. Instead of using this thematic return to highlight the death of Red Skull or the end of World War II, it highlights Captain America's legacy, the aspect of his character that will linger on when he is gone.<sup>31</sup> This thematic fragment, then, highlights the final battle's function in the story arc: it punctuates the entire film rather than just end the conflict between the hero and the villain, which was not accompanied by a thematic fragment at all. The final battle initiates the sequence that provides broader emotional and narrative closure for the entire film and the thematic fragment highlights the moment this closure is satisfied.

In summary, with thematic fragments of Captain America's march now in play, the music for the final battle has a much more active role in outlining the form of the action than the expositional battle did. Captain America's victories are punctuated by thematic fragments that are transformed to minor, truncated, and harmonically closed. The fragments indicate shifts in power to Captain America and create small moments of closure as he moves through various obstacles. The thematic fragments disappear when Captain America loses the upper hand and is captured, so this thematic organization highlights the narrative arc of this portion of the battle. In the next part of the battle, thematic fragments coordinate with shots of his shield while continuing to express shifts in power and tiers of musical and narrative arrival. This visual coordination conveys

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<sup>31</sup> The musical deemphasis of the final defeat of the villain is a typical technique found in various other superhero origin films, including *Wonder Woman*, which will be discussed later.

closure for both the battle and the entire film at the very end of the closural sequence when the theme's basic idea finally returns alongside the shot of a homemade shield, showing that Captain America's legacy will continue. Because the hero dies, narrative and emotional closure are difficult to accomplish; however, like the original comic books, Captain America's spirit lives with those he inspires. The return of the theme aligns with the shot that expresses this message and the three functions of themes in battle sequences highlight it as the ultimate conclusion to the final battle.

## **Case Study 2: *Wonder Woman***

### *Introduction*

There are multiple superficial similarities between the plots of *Wonder Woman* and *Captain America*. Both films take place during a world war (the final year of World War I for *Wonder Woman*); both heroes' uniforms are red and blue; both heroes stand for truth, justice, and peace; and both films involve the death of a character named Steve. Alongside these coincidences are deeper patterns within each story arc as well. Like *Captain America*, *Wonder Woman* contains an expositional battle that establishes her allies' trust as they see her in action. During this battle, she saves a town that is later destroyed by the villain. The destruction of the town drives Wonder Woman into the final battle the same way that Bucky's death motivated Captain America to make his final attack on Hydra. After the battle ends, both *Captain America* and *Wonder Woman* immediately launch into a closural sequence that wraps up the remaining open storylines

(due to their superficial similarities, both closural sequences include the end of the war and emotional closure for the death of each film's Steve).

In addition to the narrative similarities, the musical themes in both films' battle scenes relate to the scenes' narrative arcs in the same ways: the themes signify shifts in power, create tiers of musical and narrative closure, and highlight each battle's distinct function in the story arc. Rupert Gregson-Williams' score to *Wonder Woman*, however, applies these three ideas differently in a few ways. First, more themes are used to serve these functions. While *Captain America* transforms only the main march theme, *Wonder Woman* transforms three themes associated with its main character. Themes for her villains participate in the final battle scene as well. Additionally, Wonder Woman's themes are not fragmented as extensively as Captain America's theme. Instead of transforming a single motive in various ways to create tiers of closure, as Alan Silvestri did in *Captain America*, each Wonder Woman theme lends itself to one of the functions.

Each of the three themes for Wonder Woman has certain traits that make it more appropriate for a particular function, so I begin my analysis by exploring the recurring traits of these themes and their logical function in battle scenes. After introducing the themes and their functions, I examine how the themes are applied to the narrative arc of the expositional battle, which is divided into halves. The final battle, which I explore next, is also organized this way. While cataloguing the themes that appear and their alignment with the combat development, I compare how the two battles use themes in relation to the narrative arc. As in *Captain America*, this comparison reveals that themes highlight changes in power between the hero and the villain, establish tiers of closure

through thematic return, and highlight the function of each battle through the strategic alignment of the other two functions in each battle.

### *Plot Summary*

*Wonder Woman* begins with Diana Prince in the present day. She looks at an old photo of herself in the Wonder Woman outfit, posing with several unknown people. A flashback takes us to Themyscira, the island home of Diana and the Amazons. As Diana grows up, she learns that the Amazons' purpose is to protect humanity from Ares, the God of war who tried and failed to destroy humans in the past. An American spy for British Intelligence named Steve Trevor stumbles into Themyscira, pursued by a group of German soldiers. After defeating the soldiers, Steve informs the Amazons of the travesties humans are experiencing as part of World War I. Diana, convinced that the war is a result of Ares's influence, decides that it is her duty to go with Steve and destroy Ares so the war can end. After unsuccessfully trying to convince the London war cabinet to make peace, Diana and Steve gather a team and make their way to the location where the fighting is the worst, presuming that to be the location of Ares.

While on their journey, Diana and her team come to one of the standoffs between allied and enemy trenches on the Western Front, the location for her expositional battle. On the other side of the enemy trench is a town filled with people whom the soldiers have taken hostage. Diana, wanting to help the town, is told by the allied soldiers and Steve that no one has ever crossed the No Man's Land between the two trenches and any attempt to do so would be fruitless. Not accepting that the battle is over without even

trying, she removes her coat to reveal her signature Wonder Woman costume that she took from Themyscira and she starts working her way across the field.

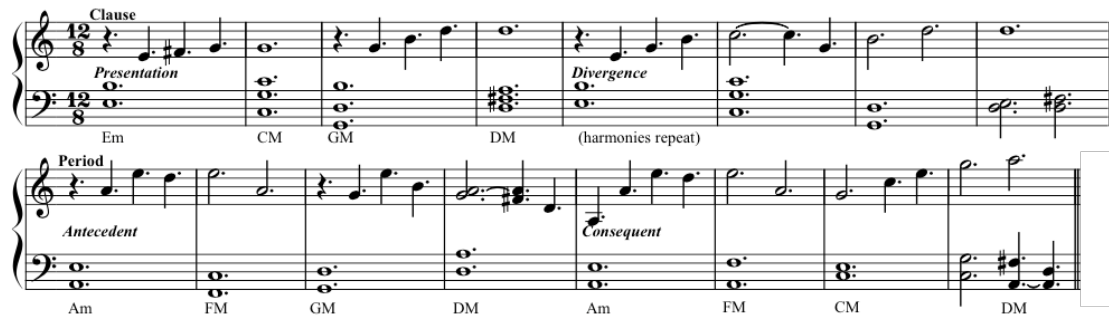
### *Three Themes*

Wonder Woman has three distinct musical themes that appear during both of her big battles: the Godkiller theme, the Amazon theme, and the Battle theme. In the most local sense, they provide leitmotivic context for the moments with which they align. More broadly, they outline the formal development of each battle. Each of the different themes serves a distinct function. The Battle theme indicates shifts in power to Diana's favor during combat. The Amazon theme appears in two ways: it either combines with the Battle theme ostinato or is transformed into an ostinato itself to indicate an intermediate tier of narrative closure as Diana approaches the achievement of the battle's purpose. The Godkiller theme indicates full closure for the two halves of both battles. Though their functions are clearly delineated, the three themes interact with each other and appear in combination to perform multiple functions at the same time the same way fragments of Captain America's basic idea were transformed to do the same.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The names for the themes are my own, based on the narrative context in which they either first or most frequently appear. As David W. Collins explains, the precise narrative associations for leitmotifs are not always fixed; as a result, the titles that I have given these themes are variable. Another title for the Godkiller theme, for example, could be the Humanity theme as it appears during moments when Diana saves humanity. Because the Godkiller sword plays a role in that, however, either title is appropriate. Ultimately, my goal is to explore how the themes reflect the story arc and battle development, not to hone in on their precise narrative connotation, so any title for the themes would accomplish my purpose. David W. Collins, "Star Wars, Lucas, and Williams: An Introduction," *The Soundtrack Show* (podcast audio), May 2, 2018, accessed May 2, 2018.

The Amazon theme first appears when the flashback begins and we fade from present-day Diana to Diana as a child, running through the streets of Themyscira. The sixteen bars of the theme, shown in Figure 2.11, underscore subsequent shots that introduce the Amazon people and their extensive training as warriors. The theme also appears as Diana explains to her mother, the Queen of the Amazons, that she must leave Themyscira in order to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves as the Amazons are meant to do.



**Figure 2.11.** *Wonder Woman* Amazon Theme: First Appearance, Clause + Period

The theme is comprised of a *clause* followed by a *period*, both from Mark Richards’s film theme types. The clause, as explained with Captain America’s theme, opens with a presentation phrase containing a basic idea and repetition, followed by a divergence phrase in which material from the basic idea appears in an altered form. The period, on the other hand, contains antecedent and consequent phrases that begin with exactly the same material before diverging (falling in line with the Classical music definition of a period).<sup>33</sup> The first phrases for both the clause and the period begin with

<sup>33</sup> Richards, “Film Theme Types,” 2.

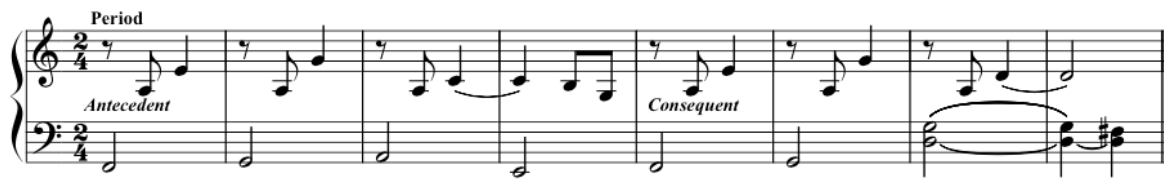
the same distinct rhythm: in 12/8, a dotted quarter rest followed by three dotted quarter notes and a long note.

Harmonically, the basic idea begins in what appears to be E minor, opening with a tonic prolongation motion from E minor to C major. The basic idea's repetition then begins with the same rhythm and melodic contour but expands the intervals to fit the new harmonies: instead of prolonging E minor, this phrase expresses a tonic-dominant root motion between G major and D major. This ends the presentation phrase on a half cadence in G major. The divergent phrase then repeats this progression—E minor, C major, G major, D major—while varying the specific intervals of the melody. The period repeats the clause's rhythm and opening harmonic root intervals but transposes the chords to prolong A minor instead. The A minor and F major harmonies in the antecedent phrase are followed, as in the clause's presentation, by G major and D major in the following two measures. The consequent phrase begins with the same A minor prolongation but moves to C major before the final D major, creating the predominant and dominant areas in the key of G major.

In the battle sequences, the main aspects of this theme that appear are the rhythm and melody of the clause's basic idea and the initial harmonic duality between E minor and G major. The material that most consistently returns in battle sequences comes from the clause, which opens with the most distinct, ear-grabbing idea in the theme. These musical aspects appear both in their original setting and as the source material for a block of sequences found in both battles. In both cases, its distinct opening establishes musical and narrative closure through thematic return the same way that the transformed thematic

fragments of Captain America’s march did. In order to transform these thematic moments into intermediary tiers of closure, the theme appears in combination with an ostinato, creating forward motion that undermines the thematic arrival’s plateau in musical development.

The next theme used in the battle scenes of *Wonder Woman* is the Godkiller theme. This theme’s first recognizable appearance, shown in Figure 2.12, accompanies Diana as she rescues Steve from the plane crash that brings him to Themyscira. Prior to this moment, the theme appears in fragments. The first fragment appears at the beginning of the film as Diana looks at the old photo in the present day. It contains just the theme’s opening interval. The next two fragments, both of which present the first two intervals, align with shots that involve the “Godkiller” topic. The first fragment underscores the moment in Queen Hippolyta’s history lesson to young Diana when Zeus took down Ares in his first large-scale attack against humanity. The second punctuates Diana’s first look at the Godkiller sword, forged by Zeus to be used against Ares should he return.



**Figure 2.12.** *Wonder Woman* Godkiller Theme: Saving Steve

The version of the Godkiller theme that appears when Diana saves Steve is the basic form of the theme. Its form according to Richards’ categorization is a *period* because, like the second half of the Amazon theme, the antecedent phrase’s opening idea



returns verbatim for the consequent phrase.<sup>34</sup> During battles, the Godkiller theme is rarely transformed or fragmented to the extent of Diana’s other themes. Its distinct opening interval draws attention to its arrival, so it subsequently is used to mark total closure for each half of both battles. To delineate a subordinate half within each battle, the distinct opening of the theme is retained and its final cadence is altered to end deceptively in a different minor key, indicating both arrival and ongoing action as it continues. For stronger closure, the 4-3 suspension into the cadence is retained.

The third theme for Diana is the Battle theme, shown in Figure 2.13. It first appeared in the film *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) alongside Wonder Woman’s first appearance in the DC cinematic universe. Both Diana and her theme arrived mid-battle to defeat a villain that Batman and Superman were unable to tackle. This theme, therefore, was composed by Hans Zimmer and Junkie XL, the composers for the 2016 film, rather than Gregson-Williams. Due to the combat focus of her role there and the different composers’ styles, this theme stands out from her others in *Wonder Woman*. When it appears, it typically retains its original electric cello and electric guitar voicing and still evokes her strength in combat as it did in *Batman v. Superman*.



**Figure 2.13.** *Wonder Woman* Battle Theme, ostinato and melody

<sup>34</sup> Richards, “Film Music Themes,” 6.

The Battle theme is a *motto* theme, another of Richards' theme types, in which either a single idea or several united ideas containing no harmonic or melodic development repeat, thereby staying in a "perpetual state of beginning."<sup>35</sup> The Battle theme is in 7/8 and contains an ostinato bass line with a repetitive melodic idea. Its opening melodic motive, Do-Me-Sol-Fi, is the first sound heard in *Wonder Woman*. It is played slowly, out of time, and with extra reverberation that obscures each pitch's attack. Though presenting a melody that the audience presumably already knows, the distortion establishes it as a memory or echo rather than a sound whose source is directly present. After the melodic fragment, the ostinato soon follows. These two ideas connect Diana's story in this film to her previous appearance outside of it; to capitalize on this extra-filmic association, the opening motive and ostinato align not with diegetic footage but with the Warner Brothers and DC Comics logos before the story begins. Once the story space begins, the ostinato appears during Diana's training sequences as a child, a teenager, and an adult on Themyscira.

During Diana's battle scenes, either the bass line or the complete texture appear. Neither part develops as part of the motto theme design, so the full Battle theme can be repeated as many times as necessary to underscore long combat sequences. Due to the ostinato's momentum, this theme does not create total closure when it returns the way that the other themes do. The Battle theme subsequently functions to indicate that Diana has the upper hand in a battle without necessarily indicating that the end of the battle is immanent. Additionally, the ostinato of the Battle theme is often combined with the

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<sup>35</sup> Richards, "Film Music Themes," 2.

Amazon theme, affecting the strong closure that the Amazon theme's return would convey otherwise.

These three themes all appear in both battle scenes. Like the final battle in *Captain America*, both scenes are divided into sections delineated by location and combatants. The battles in *Wonder Woman* are further organized by function as well: the purposes of each battle in the story arc are accomplished during each half. The music is similarly organized into distinct modules to match this narrative organization. Each module has a single thematic organization idea that highlights the function of that half of the battle.

### *The Expository Battle*

The expository battle scene serves two functions in the story arc, as it did in *Captain America*: it presents Diana to her doubters and creates an emotional connection with the town, which is later destroyed by the villain in order to motivate her into the final battle. Each half of the battle accomplishes one of these functions. The presentation of Diana's abilities takes place at the beginning of the scene as she works her way across No Man's Land. Once the allied soldiers decide to follow her and they all break through the enemy line, the fight then moves to the town for the battle's second half. In this half, Diana saves the town, creating the emotional connection that will be manipulated in Act II of the film to drive her into the final battle.

#### Expository Battle, Part 1: Diana's Presentation

During the first part of the battle, Diana easily deflects enemy bullets and missiles as she works her way across the space between the trenches. The enemy soldiers

eventually focus their barrage on her and slow her progress. With the support of Steve and her other teammates, she moves forward again and the other allied soldiers join her. Together, they neutralize the enemy trench that had kept them from the town. This half of the battle presents Diana’s abilities to her doubters, including both her teammates and the other allied soldiers. Through this sequence, the music highlights two stages of the presentation function: the presentation itself and the result of the presentation as her doubters choose to follow her. This parallels the musical organization in *Captain America* when his theme first returned as he arrived safely at the camp and returned a second time as the other doubting soldiers applauded him.

The thematic function that guides the musical organization for this part of the battle is the establishment of a hierarchy of musical and narrative closure. Two themes appear in this part of the battle to convey distinct levels of closure. Table 2.5 lists these ideas and their alignment in the combat development. The first row of the table displays the plot events that are punctuated by each musical idea, indicated in the second row, along with the relative closural strength of the music in the third row. The final row indicates the timestamp for each thematic moment in the video in the table’s description.

<b>Plot:</b>	Diana runs across No Man’s Land	Soldiers follow Diana
<b>Musical Themes:</b>	Cadential block, Amazon-derived	Godkiller theme→deceptive cadence
<b>Level of Closure:</b>	Weak closure from thematic return, strong continuing action from sequence: indicates Diana’s strength over Ares, but not closure for battle	Strong arrival indicates closure, but evades total closure for battle with deceptive cadence
<b>Timestamp:</b>	2:24-3:56	3:56-end

**Table 2.5.** *Wonder Woman* Expository Battle Part 1: Diana’s Presentation; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HDC4U8\\_ptM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HDC4U8_ptM).

The closure established by each theme is determined by both the musical content and the cadence that ends each block of music. Because of these differences in closure, the thematic appearances outline the combat development. First, Diana's run across No Man's Land presents her abilities to her doubters and, as the table shows, is accompanied by a block of music derived from the Amazon theme. The moment the soldiers join her is punctuated by the Godkiller theme, which moves to a deceptive cadence rather than an authentic one. Both ideas present a distinct balance between musical closure and ongoing development which ultimately highlights the battle's function in different ways.

The first musical idea underscores the majority of the sequence. While Diana runs across No Man's Land, she is accompanied by a block of music that sequences the ascending three-note basic idea of the Amazon theme's clause. The melody oscillates between cadences in E minor and G major, the two harmonic areas that the Amazon theme explores. Sequencing this harmonic shift results in a series of alternating major and minor cadences for the duration of Diana's run toward the enemy trench.

This cadential block reorganizes the Amazon theme to create an intermediate tier of closure to highlight Diana's presentation, a function accomplished in *Captain America* by a full unaltered theme statement at the end of his expositional battle. Closure is established by the return of familiar aspects of the Amazon theme: the three-note melodic idea and the harmonic oscillation between G major and E minor. On the one hand, this indicates that Diana constantly has the upper hand during the sequence because the enemy soldiers clearly do not threaten her enough to warrant their own thematic representation. Therefore, closure is created due to the presence of only one theme for the

duration of the sequence. On the other more obvious hand, the return of familiar thematic material, as in *Captain America* with his mid-battle thematic fragments, creates a stable plateau in the musical development and conveys narrative closure. Even when transformed, the return of thematic ideas establishes a level of musical and narrative closure.

As we saw constantly in *Captain America*, however, impure thematic return affects the strength of the closure being conveyed. Though the cadential block opens with the beginning of the Amazon theme, the melody is unable to move past the first two bars and the harmonies never explore anything further than what is necessary to create the E minor and G major resolutions. This sequencing of a single fragment essentially functions as an expanded ostinato: rather than establish musical stability through a harmonic progression or recognizable melodic form, the same idea is repeated the same way the Battle theme repeats its single melodic idea and bass line pattern. Because of this aspect of the cadential block, the closure created by thematic return is undermined. Essentially, this block transforms the Amazon theme's clause into a motto theme, creating both thematic return while conveying continuing action as the music searches for a more stable musical arrival.

Musical stability is achieved with the arrival of the unaltered Godkiller theme the moment the soldiers leave their trench and join Diana (as indicated in Table 2.5). Musically, the Godkiller theme affects stable musical arrival after the cadential block's combination of closure and continuing action: the full theme, already familiar to the audience, contains a recognizable melodic form and a functional harmonic progression

rather than oscillating truncated cadential statements. These musical characteristics alone give the Godkiller theme a stronger closural affect compared to the preceding cadential block; furthermore, though, the theme is untransformed from its first appearance when Diana saved Steve on Themyscira. Therefore, the level of thematic return is higher than the cadential block and the amount of familiar material returning creates a stronger plateau of musical development. The Godkiller theme, then, presents a stronger tier of musical and narrative closure to close out this half of the battle.

After its arrival, however, the Godkiller theme does not stay untransformed. After presenting the same period as its initial presentation, the melody continues with a second period shown in Figure 2.14 that begins the moment the allied soldiers arrive in the enemy trench. The consequent phrase of the new period first ends on a G major cadence, resolving the cadential block's conflict between E minor and G major. After this cadence, though, the phrase is extended by several bars and ends with an F# minor cadence instead. Because of this addition, what began as a plateau in development evolves into an expression of continuing action as the new minor cadence clouds the victory with a musical question mark. This evolution therefore creates another intermediary tier of closure that presents stronger closure than the cadential block and its weak thematic return but still does not indicate total narrative closure for the battle. In this half of the battle, two different techniques for establishing intermediate tiers of closure are used for the two theme ideas: the cadential block presents musical aspects of the two affects simultaneously (the same technique used for the mid-combat transformed thematic fragments in *Captain America*) and the Godkiller theme begins as a strong statement of

closure then evolves to a weaker cadence, thereby indicating complete closure before revealing that the battle is not entirely over.

**Figure 2.14.** *Wonder Woman* Godkiller Theme: Expository Battle, Diana’s Presentation, F# minor extension

The two theme ideas—the Amazon theme-derived cadential block and the Godkiller theme with its cadential extension—use their closural affects to highlight the function of the expository battle in the story arc. As explained, this half of the battle contains the presentation of Diana’s abilities to her doubters. This is reflected by the thematic organization in two ways. The cadential block depicts Diana’s specific strength that is being presented. The Godkiller theme, the stronger statement of musical closure, aligns with the moment the allied soldiers join Diana, highlighting the direct result of her presentation.

The cadential block transforms the Amazon theme in ways that highlight Diana’s moral strength over Ares’s influence rather than her combat prowess against the enemy soldiers. Depending on her success in this public display of her abilities, her team and the allied soldiers will either follow her or abandon her. Typically, the first display of a new character’s combat abilities emphasizes their superior fighting skills, as in the



expositional battle of *Captain America* where various brass interjections and non-leitmotivic ostinati aligned with display of his various impressive physical abilities. However, Diana's music during this sequence does not align with the bullets she deflects or her other quick evasions of the enemy's attacks. The metrically balanced block of major cadences overpowering minor cadences represents her moral strength over the fear and hatred that Ares instills in humanity, not her combat strength against the enemy soldiers. The Amazon theme's transformation into repeated cadences, then, depicts the hope that she spreads to the other soldiers. To corroborate this depiction, the Godkiller theme does not align with the moment that Diana and her new allies defeat the enemy soldiers; it aligns with the moment the allied soldiers leave the trench, showing that they have overcome the fear Ares imbued in them. The two thematic ideas in this half of the battle therefore highlight the details of the battle's goal by depicting the subject of her presentation and highlighting the moment its effect is felt.

In summary, these two thematic ideas—the Amazon theme-derived cadential block and the Godkiller theme—demonstrate the three functions of themes in battle scenes for this half of the expositional battle. Though not a particular priority for this half of the battle, both ideas indicate that power is constantly in Diana's favor. More prominently, they both present varying balances of thematic return and continuing action, conveying tiers of musical and narrative closure. The cadential block conveys weaker narrative closure of the two due to the transformation of the Amazon theme into an ostinato, which conveys continuing musical development over arrival. The Godkiller theme conveys stronger closure at first because it is an unaltered theme statement and

settles the aspects of the cadential block that marched forward; after the theme's first period, however, its move to a minor cadence weakens the thematic arrival and indicates that the battle continues.

Finally, the cadential block and the Godkiller theme both highlight the function of this part of the battle in the story arc. The music is comprised exclusively of Diana music, appropriate for the presentation of her strength. The cadential block reflects the nature of Diana's presentation to her doubters by highlighting her moral strength over Ares's influence rather than her combat abilities against the enemy soldiers. Similarly, the Godkiller theme begins, not when the enemy soldiers fall, but when the allied soldiers decide to join her as a result of the presentation of her strength. The cadential block depicts the battle's function while the Godkiller theme punctuates the direct result of it.

#### Expositional Battle, Part 2: Saving the Town

After the Godkiller theme's deceptive cadence punctuates the first half of the expositional battle, the fight moves to a new location: the town being held hostage by the German soldiers. The battle no longer functions to present Diana to the soldiers and her team; with her allies by her side, her next mission is to free the townspeople who will, unfortunately, be destroyed in Act II and motivate Diana to begin the final battle. Because the battle's function has changed, the main organizational idea for the music changes as well. Now, the music presents themes that alternate with non-leitmotivic ostinati to indicate shifts in power during combat—the more standard musical setup for a visually exciting fight sequence.

Table 2.6 presents the alignment between the main events of the second half of the battle and the musical themes. The major plot events are listed first. These events are divided into two columns: those that take place during the combat while Diana is saving the town and those that take place after the town is saved. The second and third rows of the table present the musical ideas that align with those plot events. The thematic ideas that appear are organized based on thematic function: the mid-combat themes all indicate shifts in power and the post-combat themes establish narrative closure for the battle. The third row lists the specific thematic material heard with each of the plot events. Finally, the last row gives the timestamps for each of the events listed, found in the video in the table's caption.

<b>Plot:</b>	Saving the town				Town is saved	
	Diana's victories against enemy officers	Diana shot out of the air	Steve saves Diana, Diana uses Lasso	Sniper appears	Town thanks Diana	Photo taken of Diana+team
<b>Thematic Function:</b>	Indicating shifts in power				Battle closure	
<b>Theme:</b>	Battle Theme	Non-leitmotivic ostinati	Amazon theme presentation phrase+non-leit. ostinati	Non-leit. ostinati	Amazon theme rhythm, half cadence sequence: simultaneous closure (weak) and continuing action	Godkiller theme→4-3 suspension, indicates full narrative closure for battle
<b>Time-stamp:</b>	:00-:59	1:41-2:00	2:00-2:23	2:23	3:43	4:20

**Table 2.6.** *Wonder Woman* Expository Battle Part 2: Saving the Town; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4-3oW3-K0c>.

Various conclusions can be drawn from the organizational differences for the two halves of the expositional battle simply by examining the table. For the first half, tiers of musical closure were employed to reflect Diana's presentation, one of the battle's functions in the story arc; for this half, the battle's second function is represented by themes that depict shifts in power during combat. To increase the emotional attachment to the town, the themes change based on the combat cues to emphasize what is at stake with each intermediary victory and loss. In this way, the particular thematic function featured in each battle half highlights the narrative function being accomplished. Additionally, the closural process used in the first half returns with one alteration in order to affect complete narrative closure for the entire expositional battle.

As soon as Diana enters the town, the bass line of her Battle theme begins. The ostinato continues as she blocks more bullets and is blasted into a room filled with German officers. After a beat of silence while she takes in her surroundings, the Battle melody aligns with the moment she begins hand-to-hand combat in this new location, as shown in Table 2.6. The music changes when the story briefly follows the activities of Steve Trevor and her other teammates as they make their way into the town, but the Battle theme returns with the cut back to Diana. Because her music underscores her easy victories during this part of the sequence, the leitmotivic association between the Battle theme and Diana's upper hand during battle is reinforced. This association returns whenever the Battle theme, either just the bass line ostinato or the melody as well, appears during battle scenes.

The Battle theme usage conveys a similar level of musical and narrative closure as the cadential block in the first half of the battle. Because it is a familiar theme, it creates a plateau in musical development that subverts the narrative tension of whether Diana will be victorious. However, like the cadential block, the ostinato pattern in both the melody and accompaniment propels the action forward, overriding the pause created by the theme's return. Without needing to be transformed or truncated, the Battle theme with its motto structure forms a low tier in the hierarchy of musical and narrative closure.

As the fight moves into the town square with the rest of Diana's team, her Battle theme disappears when she is shot out of the air by a tank mid-leap. At this moment, her high-ground advantage temporarily lost (literally), the Battle theme is replaced by non-leitmotivic ostinati that contains a new melody and meter, indicating that the threat against her has gained more credibility. The combat between Diana, her team, and the enemy soldiers continues, accompanied by non-leitmotivic material. When Steve takes down an enemy soldier sneaking up on her, she regains the upper hand. By itself, this moment does not necessarily indicate that the tide has turned; however, it aligns with the beginning of the Amazon theme's presentation phrase. The phrase continues as she pulls out the Lasso of Hestia, one of her trademark weapons from the comic books, which gives her a new ranged attack against the German soldiers. With the addition of this new weapon and the return of the Amazon theme, she regains her upper hand.

The Amazon theme here, as in the cadential block, expresses both closure and continuing action simultaneously. More thematic material returns in this statement than in the cadential block, creating a stronger sense of closure than before. However, the theme

is still truncated from its original form, which limits the level of closure being conveyed. Furthermore, though not transformed into an ostinato itself, the theme's presentation phrase is accompanied by the ostinato pattern that represented the enemy soldiers. The narrative closure that the theme's return would convey is undermined both musically and narratively by the rolling ostinato and its narrative association. Like the cadential block, then, the Amazon theme affects a stronger tier of closure than the Battle theme but is transformed to create a weaker tier than the Godkiller theme.

The Amazon theme appearance continues until all enemies on the ground have been defeated. This thematic shift to Diana appears to have been the final shift for the battle, even with the additional non-leitmotivic ostinato clouding its arrival. However, the Amazon theme suddenly cuts off and a new ostinato pattern begins as a sniper, tucked away in a bell tower, shoots a villager from the sky. This sudden change in music aligns with the narrative development, demonstrating further that themes indicate shifts in power during battle scenes.

The themes react to the combat in order to increase the emotional investment in the town's fate. The music changes dramatically when an innocent villager is killed, which is the moment when the battle's stakes become real. The loss of lives as a consequence of combat was not an issue in the first half of the battle due in part to the scene's function. This half of the battle no longer functions in that way, however; now, the battle is meant to form an emotional connection with the townspeople. As a result, as we have seen, the music constantly reacts to the combat, dramatically shifting between Diana music and enemy music to intensify the consequences of those shifts for the

townspeople. In this way, the thematic organization for this half of the battle reinforces the battle's narrative function just as the varying levels of musical closure did for the first half of the battle.

With the help of her team, Diana leaps into the tower and collapses it, presumably destroying the sniper. There is no music while the dust settles, raising the question of whether Diana herself survived. Once she reappears, the music evolves into a new theme with the same rhythm as the Amazon theme's basic idea but altered melodic content, sequencing a Do-Re-Mi-Re pattern on various pitches so that each statement ends on a half cadence. Though not directly thematic, this musical change from the distinctly unmelodic sniper ostinato highlights the moment the goal of this battle half is accomplished: with the last sniper defeated, the town is finally saved.

This musical pattern continues as the townspeople thank Diana for freeing them. During this sequence Diana, Steve, and the other members of her team pose for the photo that triggered the flashback at the beginning of the film. The Godkiller theme appears to mark this moment, performing the same closural function it served for Diana's presentation. Musically, its tonal stability concludes the sequencing idea's hunt for resolution. Narratively, it conveys that the battle has finally concluded in Diana's favor. Knowing that the theme could potentially end in another deceptive cadence to indicate continuing action as it did after Diana's presentation, the theme embellishes its final major cadence with the same 4-3 suspension that appeared in its first statement. This fancier cadence ends the theme on G major, its original key of resolution from Diana's presentation before moving to F# minor. This time, the theme's closural strength

continues until its cadence, marking this moment as the final conclusion to the expositional battle. The closural process from the battle's first half announces that both elements of the expositional battle's function—Diana's presentation and the saving of the town—have been officially accomplished.

In all, Diana's expositional battle is divided into halves based on the two functions of the battle in the story arc. The main organizational idea of the music for each half conveys those functions. To present Diana's strength against fear and hate, the tools of Ares, the music for the first half of the battle establishes tiers of closure by transforming the Amazon theme into an ostinato, thereby indicating both closure and continuing action (as shown in Table 2.5). The second half of the battle, shown in Table 2.6, uses Diana's Battle theme and the Amazon theme with another ostinato-based transformation to indicate shifts in power between Diana and the enemy soldiers. This organizational idea highlights the stakes of the battle in order to form an emotional connection with the townspeople who will later be destroyed in the film's emotional climax. Both of these battle halves use the Godkiller theme to indicate closure. Though both theme appearances are unaltered at first, they end with different cadences to indicate whether the battle continues or ends. Throughout this expositional battle, then, all three functions of themes in battle scenes are used: themes indicate shifts in power and establish tiers of closure, and those two functions are aligned strategically with the combat development in order to highlight the two functions of the battle in the narrative arc.



### *The Final Battle*

After the expositional battle, Diana concludes that General Ludendorff, the head of the German army, is Ares in disguise. Like in *Captain America*, the plot following the expositional battle focuses on defeating the villain rather than on the superhero's personal expositional journey. As Diana and her team arrive at German High Command, Ludendorff destroys the town saved in the expositional battle with a new gas bomb to show German leadership that they should not sign an armistice ending the war. Diana, like Captain America after Bucky's death, loses her momentum as she mourns lives that she had just saved. Channeling that emotion into action, Diana rides to the German military base where Ludendorff resides and the final battle begins.

The final battle contains the same general organization as the expositional battle. However, as in *Captain America*, certain aspects of the musical procedures change in order to highlight the final battle's broader function in the story arc. The final battle is again divided in half, delineated by villain rather than location. For both halves, the primary musical idea again reinforces the purpose of the battle in the story arc. Thematic aspects are the same as well. The Godkiller theme still indicates large-scale closure. During combat, the Battle theme and Amazon theme depict shifts of power to Diana's favor and convey intermediate tiers of narrative closure. To increase the perceived threat of the villains against Diana and create a more climactic battle sequence, themes for Ludendorff and Ares join the thematic mix.

Finally, as in *Captain America*, the villain's defeat is musically deemphasized. In order to affect closure for the entire story, themes return to highlight two different

moments in the closural sequence that follows Ares's defeat. The first moment uses a piece of the Godkiller theme to end the World War I setting. The next ends the present-day setting by closing the thematic processes that opened the film rather than the processes that developed during the wartime battles.

#### Final Battle, Part 1: Ludendorff

The first half of the battle scene presents Diana's fight with Ludendorff, whom she believes to be Ares. The musical organization of this half of the final battle mirrors the "saving the town" sequence in the expositional battle: the Battle theme reflects shifts in power during combat, the Amazon theme appears with a particular ostinato transformation that offsets its closural strength, and the Godkiller theme appears once the battle's goal is achieved to indicate full narrative closure. Table 2.7 summarizes the organization of Diana's fight with Ludendorff. The first row indicates the events that take place during this half of the battle. The second row lists the two ways that themes function during those events, which changes mid-battle before Ludendorff is defeated (this alignment is indicated by a bold line dividing the two functions while a dotted line divides the plot events). The third row indicates the specific theme that aligns with each event. For the two themes that function to affect closure, a brief explanation of their relative closural strength is also included. Finally, the fourth row provides the timestamp for the events in the video provided in the table's caption.

<b>Plot:</b>	Diana in power	Ludendorff takes serum	Diana in power	Diana impending victory	Ludendorff defeated
<b>Thematic Function:</b>	Power-shifting themes			Themes affecting tiers of closure	
<b>Musical Theme:</b>	Battle theme	Ludendorff theme	Battle theme	Amazon theme+ Battle ostinato: strong closure with continuing action	Godkiller theme→deceptive cadence: full closure ostensibly achieved but evaded
<b>Timestamp:</b>	0:00	1:29	2:03	2:52	3:33

**Table 2.7.** *Wonder Woman* Final Battle, Part 1: Ludendorff Fight; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kRTH\\_nteAM&t=200s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kRTH_nteAM&t=200s).

To intensify the climax of Diana and Ludendorff’s conflict, the power-shifting thematic block includes Ludendorff’s theme, shown in Figure 2.15, to indicate when Diana loses the upper hand rather than non-leitmotivic ostinati. At the start of the battle, Diana, driven to destroy Ludendorff/Ares after the town’s destruction, easily has the advantage, just as Captain America did as he motorcycled towards the final Hydra base. This advantage is reflected musically: the Battle theme’s ostinato accompanies her approach to the military base and the Battle melody begins when she makes her first blow against him. However, as shown in Table 2.7, Ludendorff takes an enhancing serum when he realizes that he is overpowered. The moment he takes the serum, the music shifts to his theme and he gets in his own solid blows against Diana. After she regains the upper hand again by retrieving her Godkiller sword from him, her Battle theme returns.

This sequence uses the same power-shifting thematic organization as the second half of the expositional battle. Because Ludendorff poses a stronger threat to Diana than the anonymous enemy soldiers, though, his theme is used to depict his success rather



**Figure 2.15.** *Wonder Woman* Ludendorff's Theme

than non-leitmotivic ostinati. As before, the level of large-scale narrative closure indicated by this block is undermined. Both Diana's Battle theme and Ludendorff's theme are motto themes; as a result, the ostinato-like repetition of both themes weakens the narrative closure created by thematic return, as in the expositional battle. The two different ostinati in play appropriately outline the combat development without necessarily foreshadowing the ultimate victory of either theme's owner. This musical organization is appropriate for the narrative purpose of this leg of the battle: the close depiction of combat increases the reality of Ludendorff's threat to Diana the same way that the sudden absence of Diana's music alongside the sniper's arrival intensified the danger the town was in. Therefore, like in the expositional battle, this thematic organization highlights the battle's function in the narrative arc.

After Diana regains her sword, the next two thematic moments both express increasing levels of closure in order to emphasize Ludendorff's defeat. First, the Battle theme ostinato continues beneath Diana's declaration that Ares's wrath upon the world is over. As she leaps into the air and traps Ludendorff with her lasso, the full clause of the Amazon theme appears above the continuing ostinato. The Amazon theme's cadence

aligns with the moment she stabs him with the Godkiller sword. Like the Amazon theme's two earlier mid-combat appearances, the thematic return is combined with ostinato content, creating an intermediary tier of closure that indicates that though Diana has the upper hand, the battle is not quite over.

This Amazon theme appearance conveys a different closural affect from the two previous mid-battle appearances. For this iteration, the ostinato component comes from the Battle theme's bass line in 7/8. As before, the forward-driving energy of the ostinato conveys continuing action in the combat, undermining the potential narrative closure that the Amazon theme's return creates. However, thematic return is reinforced here in two ways to combat the effect of the ostinato. First, the Amazon theme's entire opening clause appears; the other two versions did not make it past the presentation phrase.

Harmonically, this longer portion of the theme presents a recognizable progression that creates a stronger sense of tonal stability than the previous shorter segments. Finally, the ostinato material comes from a second Diana theme, not the same theme or a non-leitmotivic ostinato. Though the ostinato subverts the musical plateau created by the theme's arrival, the doubled amount of Diana music increases the impression that the immanent narrative closure will be in Diana's favor.

Because of these particular musical traits, this Amazon theme appearance creates an intermediate tier of closure that leans more heavily on the closure side while still indicating that the action continues. Narratively, then, this combination reflects that Ludendorff is essentially defeated even though his actual destruction has not yet

occurred.<sup>36</sup> Due to the alignment of this thematic combination with this moment in the combat development, the tier of closure further highlights the function of this portion of the battle.

The final theme for this half of the final battle appears immediately after Ludendorff is destroyed. As expected, based on the musical procedure for closure demonstrated twice already, the Godkiller theme marks this as the moment the scene's goal is accomplished. With its unaltered period and seemingly unaltered cadence, the pure thematic return reflects that this portion of the story arc is over.

However, once the theme ends, the camera pans from Diana to reveal the other soldiers at the military base continuing their war activities. At the same time as this camera motion, the Godkiller theme slides from its D major cadence (the same cadence as the theme's original appearance) to a deceptive B minor resolution, destroying the major cadence's strong resolution just like the Godkiller theme appearance at the end of Diana's presentation. Unlike the previous deceptive ending, however, the theme rests for several moments on its original cadence. This pause suggests that the Godkiller theme here parallels the end of the expositional battle and affects complete closure for the final battle. By allowing the Godkiller theme to fully resolve like the end of the expositional battle, the musical procedure continues the deception of Ares's identity until the last

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<sup>36</sup> Emphasizing the hero's final approach against the villain is a technique used frequently in superhero films. *Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse* (2018) also brings back a main theme just after Spiderman receives encouragement from his father mid-battle, giving him the confidence to make a final blow against the villain. This highlights the moment the villain is defeated by creating a stronger "drumroll" building up to it, but it also gives away the ending to a certain extent: the alignment of thematic return with the final approach confirms the villain's defeat before the defeat actually happens.

moment. Like each appearance of the Godkiller theme so far, its untransformed arrival affects strong closure to mark the achievement of the battle's goal. By altering the theme's cadence in a way that characterizes the narrative turn taking place, the strong arrival ultimately evolves into another intermediary tier of closure.

In summary, the first half of the final battle begins with themes that indicate shifts in power during combat, augmented to include the theme for Ludendorff. Right before Ludendorff is defeated, the thematic organization changes to create tiers of musical closure in ways that expand on the procedures used in the expositional battle. Both of these thematic ideas highlight the purpose of this portion of the battle in the story arc. To begin with, the power-shifting thematic block containing Ludendorff's theme increases his threat against Diana and raises the stakes for their fight. The Amazon theme with the Battle theme's bass line simultaneously conveys closure and continuing action, increasing anticipation for the moment of resolution and indicating that the conclusion will be in Diana's favor. The Godkiller theme's closure aligns with the moment the battle's goal appears to have been completed, but its cadence changes to reflect the discovery that Ludendorff's death was just another medial pause. These two thematic functions—indicating shifts in power during combat and creating tiers of musical and narrative closure—are employed to convey the narrative purpose of this battle portion: resolving the conflict with Ludendorff in a satisfying way and revealing that, unfortunately, he was not Ares.

## Final Battle, Part 2: Ares

Since the war did not end, Diana realizes that Ares must still be alive, though Steve tells her that humanity might be more responsible for their own mistakes than she wants to believe. After this conversation, one of the British politicians introduced in the exposition appears. He explains that he is Ares and has been prolonging the war from the safety of his seat in the bureaucracy. Furthermore, he reveals that Diana, not the sword, is the real “Godkiller” created by Zeus: Zeus gave her powers to defeat other Gods, like Ares, that make her more powerful than any human or Amazon. Ares explains that since she is so superior to everyone she is trying to protect, she should explore her strength at his side as he destroys humanity. Rejecting the offer to join him, Diana and Ares fight.

After a long fight sequence during which Ares easily overpowers Diana, Steve and the rest of the team discover a plane filled with the same gas bombs that destroyed the town, all set to detonate. While Diana and Ares fight, Steve flies the plane into the atmosphere and explodes it, saving everyone else but killing himself. For the second time in Act II, Diana is faced with a dramatic personal loss. As with the town’s destruction, her reaction evolves from grief into anger. Unlike before, however, she does not direct her anger at Ares; instead, she rages against the German soldiers around her and the scientist who created the poison bomb under Ludendorff, Dr. Maru. After Dr. Maru’s mask flies off and Diana sees that she is as physically scarred as the rest of Ares’s victims, Diana decides that humanity may be to blame for their own actions, but it is up to her to believe that they can change if their circumstances allow them. Now embracing her role as a



protector of humanity, she approaches Ares one last time and destroys him. With Ares gone, the hatred that filled the soldiers' hearts dissipates and the war ends.

Like the other battle portions, the fight with Ares uses themes to highlight the purpose of the fight in the narrative arc by either reflecting shifts in power during combat or creating tiers of musical closure. Unlike the other battles, however, the change between these two ideas is marked by an unexpected plot event: Steve's death. The interruption in the battle narrative explains why Diana gains new confidence in her mission, giving her the strength to defeat Ares. As a result, the interruption resets both Diana's fighting strategy and the musical procedure that underscores the fight to indicate that her victory is quickly approaching.

Table 2.8 shows the main events of this battle in its first row. The second row lists the thematic function that accompanies that portion of the battle. The bold line around the column containing Steve's death demonstrates the interruption in the narrative and musical procedures the event creates. The third row lists the particular themes used for those plot moments. Finally, the last final row contains the timestamps for each moment in the three YouTube links provided in the table's description. The first video contains the three events that precede Steve's death, the middle video includes Steve's death, and the final video contains the closural music that accompanies Diana's immanent victory and the victory itself.

<b>Plot:</b>	Ares in power	Steve decision	Ares in power	Steve death	Diana walking to Ares	Diana's final blow
<b>Thematic Function:</b>	Power-shifting themes			Themes Depicting Mood	Themes affecting tiers of closure: Narrative closure immanent	
<b>Theme:</b>	Ares theme	Godkiller theme	Ares theme	Grief scales	Augmented cadential block	Amazon theme basic idea fragment, x3
<b>Timestamp:</b>	0:00	1:52	2:03	2:22	1:12	2:38

**Table 2.8.** *Wonder Woman* Final Battle, Part 2: Ares Fight; first three events: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E833w9eXfr4>; Steve death: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MS5oNxCQZWQ>; Diana victory: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCD0iyXhS1w>.

The music before Steve's death is organized by themes reflecting power shifts during combat. This portion of the final battle functions in part to resolve the main conflict of the entire film (just as Ludendorff's battle was meant to), so this organizational choice appropriately emphasizes each small victory during combat. Now that Ares's identity is revealed, a new theme associated with him takes part in the power-shifting thematic block. This theme is shown in Figure 2.16. As we expect from the previous versions of this block of music, the villain's theme appears in moments when he has the upper hand, intensifying his threat and increasing the stakes for the final battle. Unlike the other power-shifting thematic blocks, however, the stakes are raised further by the absence of Diana's music while she fights. The music instead alternates between statements of Ares's theme and non-leitmotivic ostinati. In this way, the block is organized like the "town saving" sequence of the expositional battle: one theme indicates the upper hand of that character while the non-leitmotivic ostinato indicates, not

necessarily the upper hand of the other combatant, but simply that the outcome is unclear at that moment.



**Figure 2.16.** *Wonder Woman* Ares's Theme

Ares's victory is not definite at this early stage in the battle. His theme, like Diana's Battle theme and Ludendorff's theme, is a motto form and subsequently conveys forward motion through its repetition, undermining the closure of its arrival. Despite the lack of closural strength, the power-shifting thematic block shows that Diana is not winning, intensifying the drama of the final battle in a major way compared to the other battles; though Ares may not officially be declared the winner, the situation does not look good for Diana. Like the other power-shifting thematic blocks, the close depiction of combat development increases the importance of each attack, therefore highlighting the purpose of this battle in the story arc.

There is one moment of Diana music during the power-shifting thematic block, but it does not align with a Diana moment in the scene. The opening two intervals of the Godkiller theme appear when Steve realizes he can explode the plane in the atmosphere and keep everyone safe. With this decision, Steve gains a victory for their team against Ares. Because the Godkiller theme in particular is used to mark this moment, it previews that this decision plays a role in the conflict's ultimate closure. However, it is also another

stage in a process that began in the expositional battle where ideas from Diana's thematic complex highlight Steve's heroic actions. The first moment was a fragment of the Amazon theme aligned with the moment Steve saved Diana while they were saving the town. This process serves two purposes. First, as already explained, it marks these actions as power-shifting events that turn the battle to their favor. Second, the alignment increases our attachment to Steve the same way that the dramatic musical changes of the expositional battle's second half intensified the battle's consequences for the townspeople. Just as with the town, this thematic alignment makes his death all the more emotional. This thematic appearance therefore functions to both indicate a shift in power to the good guys and to foreshadow narrative closure.

After Steve's decision, the scene returns to the fight between Ares and Diana, still accompanied by Ares's music. After Ares pins Diana beneath some metal scrap, Steve's plane explodes. Narratively, this plot event repeats the process of attachment, loss, and recovery that Diana already underwent with the town. Because this process (also found in *Captain America* with Bucky) has already been completed, the second emotional death is unexpected. The thematic organization foreshadowed this event by creating an attachment to his heroics the same way the power-shifting thematic block increased the emotional reaction to the town, as already explained. Furthermore, Diana's attachment to the town ultimately served the narrative purpose of driving her into the final battle. After her grief and anger evolve into renewed belief in humanity, Steve's death similarly drives her into the final confrontation with Ares.

Steve's unexpected death is accompanied by a corresponding interruption of musical procedure. When Steve's plane explodes, the power-shifting thematic block is immediately replaced by a completely new idea that depicts Diana's grief without affecting closure or reflecting a shift in power. As soon as Steve dies, cascades of descending minor scales accompany Diana's sorrow-driven rampage against the enemy soldiers. The scales are not yet leitmotivic in the way her other themes are; they evoke the grief topic but otherwise lack a concrete narrative association derived from previous appearances. This sound block, then, does not indicate narrative closure or a shift in power to Diana the way the other themes do. Instead, it functions atmospherically to depict the waves of grief that overtake Diana, so powerful that it pushes the other thematic processes aside.

The narrative and musical interruption moves Diana into her final attack against Ares.<sup>37</sup> As she makes her move, she is accompanied by the return of a familiar musical procedure as thematic function refocuses on affecting tiers of closure. In particular, this closural block combines two ideas that affected intermediate closure previously, one from

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<sup>37</sup> Diana's evolution from anger to strength is triggered by a flashback scene from just before Steve boarded the plane. The scene culminated with him saying, "I love you." Originally, Diana's ears were ringing from an explosion so the words were inaudible. Musically, all that was heard were melodic fragments of a mystery theme. In her flashback, the music is more clear. The same music also accompanied comes their conversation about belief in humanity after Ludendorff's death. It also appeared when Diana returns to the town to see the villagers choked by gas. Looking even further back, this music also appeared during Queen Hippolyta's history lesson to Diana when the Amazons and Zeus fought Ares together to protect humanity. As she is about to kill Dr. Maru, then, Diana is reminded of her last conversation with Steve during which the music associates with loving, believing in, and saving humanity. This theme, then, is a leitmotif in itself, containing its own interactions with the film's story arc that extend outside the battle scenes, and is the impetus for Diana turning her rage against humans into love.

Diana's presentation and one from the fight against Ludendorff. The opening cadential block's fragmenting and sequencing of the Amazon theme into an ostinato returns for her final approach against Ares. This pattern conveys the same combination of continuing action and low tier musical closure as before.<sup>38</sup> This music combines with the Battle theme ostinato, the same combination that accompanied Diana's last strike against Ludendorff. As before, this combination doubles the presence of Diana music, foreshadowing the conclusion towards which the melodic ostinato and the Battle theme ostinato are driving. The last component of this augmented cadential block is her grief scales, indicating that Diana's love for humanity and her emotion felt at the loss of Steve are integral to her strength.

This threefold thematic combination amplifies the Amazon theme's same indication of approaching closure that it conveyed in its previous battle appearances. At the same time, the ostinato presence is also increased due to the Amazon theme fragment, the impression of a 7/8 bass line from the Battle theme, and the repetition of the grief scales, all indicating continuing action at a more prominent level as well. Narratively, the strengthened balance of arrival and continuing action intensifies anticipation for Ares's defeat.

Like the Ludendorff fight, increased expressions of closure appear in the music before the narrative closure—the defeat of the villain—arrives. As with previous mid-battle shifts in musical organization, this change from power-shifting themes to tiers of

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<sup>38</sup> The connection between this sequence and Diana's presentation is visual as well: she moves calmly in slight slow-motion from left to right across the screen to get to her enemy, who continuously fires ineffectual attacks at her.

closure highlights the battle's purpose in the story arc. In the fight with Ludendorff, the premature shift to closural music acted as an excitement-building drumroll to his climactic defeat. Now, the same closural technique is employed to accomplish the same result. Since this villain is definitely the true Ares, the "drumroll" is made even more intense with the presence of three Diana-associated, ostinato-based thematic ideas. The leitmotifs convey that the victory will be Diana's, but the ostinati drive the action forward to indicate that the local purpose of the battle is approaching. The process used first for Ludendorff's defeat, then, is altered here in order to reflect the more important narrative closure presented by this battle.

This teleological music accompanies Diana's final walk towards Ares as he throws his last desperate lightning strike at her. Just as with Ludendorff, Diana's final blow against Ares is accompanied by a change to a theme that presents more melodic and harmonic stability than the preceding musical block. As she absorbs this bolt of lightning into her bracers and prepares to throw it back at him, the augmented cadential block ends. A new theme enters, shown in Figure 2.17, which derives its melody and harmonies from the Amazon theme. The melody of the Amazon theme's ascending three-note basic idea is repeated three times in succession, indicated with brackets above the staff in Figure 2.17. The melody is harmonized with the progression from the Amazon theme's clause. The harmonies are labeled in the figure: E minor, C major, and D major, all projecting the key of G major. The original theme followed C major with a tonic arrival preceding the dominant harmony; here, that tonic preview is replaced with an E minor tonic substitution, thereby intensifying the tension until the tonic resolution after the dominant

harmony. The harmonic rhythm slows for the final three-note unit, building further anticipation for the final G major victory. The Amazon theme, therefore, is once again used to highlight the approach to Ares's defeat, fragmented melodically but harmonically retaining the original theme's progression to intensify the tension before the final musical resolution.



**Figure 2.17.** *Wonder Woman* Ares's death, ascending three-note gestures

Each member of the final three-note unit aligns with an important visual cue. The first harmony, D Major, occurs when Diana slams her lightning-infused wrist braces together. The predominant C major harmony aligns with the lightning as it impacts Ares's body. The final dominant on D major aligns with the moment Ares explodes. These three moments of visual alignment emphasizes the predominant and dominant areas of the phrase, building even more excitement for the G major arrival. However, the moment of Ares's destruction, seemingly the narrative resolution for the battle that the music was building towards, aligns with the dominant harmony of the phrase rather than the tonic and no G major harmony is provided. Therefore, the moment of narrative resolution is weakened due to the unresolved cadence. Like in *Captain America*, the lack of musical closure (both in terms of thematic return and phrase structure) weakens the battle's local narrative resolution, eliding it with the beginning of the closural sequence.



### *Closural Sequence*

The closural sequence of *Wonder Woman* begins immediately after Ares's death. Like in *Captain America*, as soon as the battle reaches its narrative conclusion, musical closure that would result from thematic return is absent. Instead, new music underscores the closural sequence, unifying its various locations and topics. The sequence begins at the German military camp as Diana's teammates embrace the remaining German soldiers, making it clear that the hatred with which Ares imbued both sides is gone. The scene cuts to celebrations in the streets of London, indicating that the entire war has also ended.

Amidst the celebrations, Diana arrives with Steve's secretary and reunites with her team as they mourn Steve. The suite of music that began after Ares's destruction holds the audience's attention through this sequence as they wait for the Godkiller theme to complete the musical process for closure. Table 2.9 presents the events that are punctuated by particular themes in the closural sequence. The first two rows present the main plot events of the sequence, organized by setting. Because the closural sequence utilizes only one thematic function (establishing tiers of closure), the following two rows present the themes that align with each event and their relative level of closure, the same construction used in Table 2.5. The last row presents the time stamps for the video linked in the table's caption, which does not include the first event.

Through the closural sequence, we wait for the return of the Godkiller theme to complete the procedure for musical closure established in the three preceding battle halves. However, the final battle serves a broader closural purpose than the other sections of combat. Because the film begins in the present day, this narrative setting needs to be

<b>Setting:</b>	Wartime setting (flashback)		Present day setting		
<b>Plot event:</b>	Ares defeated, WWI ends	Diana reunites with team	Diana on roof	Diana leaps off roof	Closing credits
<b>Themes:</b>	New Music	Suspension from Godkiller cadence	Amazon theme	Battle theme ostinato	Battle theme melody
			Reversing theme order from beginning		
<b>Level of Closure:</b>	Not thematic return, but changes to calmer thematic content: weak musical closure	Thematic return, but restricted: intermediate narrative closure	Full thematic return: strong closure		
<b>Time-stamp:</b>		0:10	2:09	2:29	2:37

**Table 2.9.** *Wonder Woman* Closures Sequence; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnMDXz31krU&list=PLkLimRXN6NKx45tYQfJC74OOm3bpV0udf&index=27>

closed in addition to the wartime setting. However, the procedures for musical closure outlined here were initiated in the flashback setting; as a result, the Godkiller theme's closural function is not relevant for the present day. To reflect the two tiers of closure for each narrative setting, the Godkiller theme's arrival is reduced to just the theme's cadence. The cadence includes the 4-3 suspension that appeared at the end of its original form and the end of the expositional battle. Therefore, by using the cadential embellishment that distinguished strong closure for the end of the expositional battle over the middle, this thematic fragment creates an intermediate level of closure that marks the end of the World War I setting. The restricted thematic return ends the flashback while indicating that further closure of the present-day setting still remains.

The suspension occurs the moment Diana reunites with her team in London. The appearance of the cadential idea serves the same purpose as the final Captain America thematic fragment that aligned visually with the homemade shield: it places the

established musical procedure for battle closure at the end of the closural sequence instead of with the moment the villain is defeated. This alignment emphasizes the broader, more important closure for the story arc. The return of the Godkiller theme's suspension at this moment therefore highlights the broader function of the final battle by returning to the procedure that closed the expositional battle, just as in *Captain America*.

Musical closure for the present-day setting is accomplished using thematic return, as expected for superhero origin films at this point. As Diana narrates the lessons she learned about humanity in the flashback, she climbs on the roof of her building in her Wonder Woman outfit accompanied by the divergent phrase of the Amazon theme. She then leaps off the roof presumably to save the day somewhere around her as the ostinato from the Battle theme begins. The melody of the Battle theme begins as the scene cuts to the closing credits. The Godkiller theme's 4-3 suspension satisfied musical closure for the wartime setting; these three thematic entrances similarly complete the process that opened the film by reversing the order of their initial appearances. The first music heard before the story started was the Battle theme melody followed by the Battle theme ostinato, both of which aligned with two non-diegetic logos. The next full thematic entrance was the Amazon theme, which smoothed out the transition from the present-day setting into the flashback setting.

These three moments of thematic return provide the final musical closure we have been waiting for. Lengthy statements of Diana's themes return for the first time since the final battle ended, finally creating the plateau in musical development that indicates narrative closure. Instead of using the Godkiller theme to affect closure, an expectation

based on procedures from the wartime setting, the theme choices complete the procedure that began the present-day setting. Through this closural sequence, then, all three of Diana's themes appear in order to create tiers of closure for the film's two settings. This process reflects the purpose of the final battle: to culminate the arc of the entire film, not just the conflict between the hero and villain.

In all, the three functions of themes in battle sequences are displayed clearly by the organization of three distinct themes in *Wonder Woman*. The first two thematic functions—representing shifts in power during combat and creating tiers of musical and narrative closure—appear during battle scenes to highlight the battle's purpose in the story arc, which is the third function of themes. The expositional battle begins with Diana's presentation to her doubters. It is accompanied by music that presents a hierarchy of musical and narrative closure, depicting Diana's strength over Ares's influence rather than her combat abilities over the enemy soldiers. This first musical tier of closure is created by the Amazon theme, fragmented into a melodic and harmonic ostinato to weaken the stable closure of the theme's pure thematic return. That closure is achieved by the Godkiller theme, which highlights the moment her doubters join her, showing that her presentation was successful. The next half of the battle functions to create emotional attachment to the town so that the impact of its destruction later in the film is more dramatic. Once the town is saved, this accomplishment is punctuated by the Godkiller theme, which ends with a stronger cadence than the statement that followed Diana's presentation.

The expositional battle presents the collection of musical procedures used to outline the battle's narrative arc and highlight the its function in the story. These procedures and the thematic techniques return for the final battle. First, Diana fights Ludendorff. Because the outcome of this fight is (supposedly) the battle's purpose in the story arc, themes once again reflect changes in power between Diana and Ludendorff. To build excitement for the approaching conclusion, the Amazon theme is once again placed in an ostinato setting, presenting both closure and continuing action simultaneously to create an intermediate tier of closure. Once Ludendorff is defeated, the Godkiller theme appears once more to mark the accomplishment of the battle's goal. The fight between Diana and Ares similarly begin with themes that depict shifts in power, but this musical block evolves into closure-creating themes to once again highlight Ares's defeat. Ultimately, however, Diana's moment of victory is musically deemphasized so that themes can lend the impact of their return to the moment of broader narrative closure.

The choice of thematic organization for each battle half reflects the three functions of themes in battle scenes, but the themes themselves serve the functions as well. Diana's Battle theme exclusively indicates shifts in power to Diana's favor. The Amazon theme appears as an intermediate tier of musical closure, resulting from either its transformation or its combination with ostinato ideas. Stronger tiers of narrative closure are marked with the Godkiller theme. To create further tiers of closure when appropriate for the narrative development, the Godkiller theme's cadence is transformed as needed. The strong form of the Godkiller theme's cadence appears in isolation to convey a medium-high tier of closural strength that ends the World War I setting, which satisfies

the battle scene procedure in a weak enough way that subsequent thematic return can highlight the true end of the film.

### **Thematic Alignment Conclusion**

*Captain America* and *Wonder Woman* both demonstrate the three functions themes serve in battle scenes. Through these functions, themes interact extensively with the narrative form. By aligning with particular events in the combat action, themes outline the development of the battle. This alignment indicates, at the most local level of narrative development, who has the upper hand during combat. Themes also mark moments of narrative closure during the battle. Multiple transformation techniques are applied to themes in order to create tiers of closure. In *Captain America*, Alan Silvestri aligns minor-inflected, truncated appearances of the basic idea from Captain America's theme with moments when he accomplishes various internal goals during his two battles. Rupert Gregson-Williams, alternatively, punctuates the accomplishment of these battle goals in *Wonder Woman* with full statements of different themes. To differentiate the tiers of intermediary closure, Silvestri alters the amount of transformation his thematic fragments receive; Gregson-Williams uses different themes in combination and alters the themes' cadential strength to convey those tiers.

Lastly, both films use themes to highlight the function of each battle in the story arc. For each film's expositional battle, themes highlight two moments in the battle: the moment both superheroes turn their doubters into allies and the moment that each hero saves the figure or figures who will be killed in Act II, causing the hero to initiate their

final battle with the villain. Gregson-Williams also organizes his battle music into blocks defined by the other two thematic functions in order to appropriately depict the battle's function in the story arc. As part of this process, each film's final battle musically deemphasizes the moment that the villain is defeated. Instead, themes highlight the final scene in the closural sequence, which in both cases provides closure for the entire film beyond the conflict between the hero and the villain. Because this broader narrative closure is highlighted and the local closure deemphasized, the music mirrors the function of the final battle in the story arc: resolving the film's main conflict while initiating the closural sequence, which dissipates the battle's climactic energy by wrapping up the remaining storylines.

These thematic techniques are used in other superhero origin films as well. However, because the popularity of superhero films has exploded in the past two decades, each superhero film elaborates the origin story arc in some way to keep the journey fresh for audiences. *Wonder Woman* is one example of such an elaboration. In *Captain Marvel* (2019), an extremely recent example, the titular superhero struggles with memory loss throughout the film. As a result, her expositional battle that unifies her with other allies does not contain her full thematic presentation. Composer Pinar Toprak punctuates mid-battle victories with an ascending brass interval that eventually evolves into Captain Marvel's full theme, but the full thematic presentation that aligns with the visual reveal of her suit and glowing powers is withheld until the final battle when she becomes aware enough of her own backstory to act confidently against the villains. Like in the expositional battle of *Captain America*, then, Captain Marvel's theme is reduced down to

an opening fragment while her superhero identity is in question; however, Captain Marvel's process of discovering her identity unfolds throughout the film beyond just Act I. To mirror this alteration to the origin story arc, Toprak expands the development of Captain Marvel's theme across the film as well.

With such alterations taking place to the superhero origin story arc and with many future superhero films still on the horizon, composers will likely find new and interesting ways to integrate their themes with the narrative. New storylines will necessitate different thematic techniques and new composers will bring in their own innovative ideas. For the time being, though, the three thematic functions I have explored in this chapter still appear to be at the heart of the battle music for the various new films that have entered the superhero origin story genre.



CHAPTER III  
THEMATIC COMBINATION IN FANTASY FILMS

**Thematic Combination Introduction**

Almost all films contain musical themes that are expressive in some way—themes that contribute to a certain mood, underline the emotions of a character, or enhance the action of a scene. For this reason, the way themes are transformed can have a powerful effect on the various aspects of a film with which they align. In this chapter I examine an especially lucrative type of thematic transformation that I call *thematic combination*. With this technique, motives from different established themes interact under the guise of a new theme to musically reflect complex character interactions.

Matthew Bribitzer-Stull explores the topic of thematic transformation in his article “Understanding the Leitmotif: From Wagner to Hollywood Film Music.” The various transformations he describes typically match plot developments with changes in a theme’s mode, harmonization, orchestration, or texture.<sup>39</sup> Thematic combination moves past these techniques in two ways. First, it allows the composer to specify the relationship between the themes’ associations by connecting the musical motives with material that forms a metaphor for the relationship. Second, the function of the score changes from being reactive—responding to prompts that appear in the diegesis, like a change in a character’s physical condition—to proactive by providing audiences with information about a character that has not yet been revealed in the diegetic world.

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<sup>39</sup> Bribitzer-Stull, *Understanding the Leitmotif*, 255-300.

To connect the motives, composers can use music that replicates the relationship between the motives' associations. The amount of old material and new material, therefore, must be carefully balanced. If there is too much new material, then an old motive might not be audible enough to successfully allude to its association. The old motives must therefore be substantial enough to create their allusion in a very short space of time, often in the pause after a line of dialogue or with a cut from one shot to another. Too much old material, however, would employ a different technique: placing a full, already-established theme beneath an ostensibly disparate scene.

Though not as intricate as thematic combination, underscoring a scene with a seemingly unrelated theme can also convey a connection between characters; in fact, both of my example composers for thematic combination use this technique as well. This method still gives the audience insight that the characters lack, but the audience then becomes responsible for discovering that connection between the scene and the music on their own. In *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), revenge consumes the protagonist after his mother dies. John Williams underscores the protagonist's explanation of his actions with the theme for the villain from later films in the series. The relationship between these two characters is not clearly specified; the audience can surmise that the actions were villainous, but the music paints no picture of the relationship beyond that. Similarly, when the protagonist of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012) leaves his friends to needlessly fight a villain from his past, Howard Shore underscores this decision with the theme for the band of greedy, mindless hunters of power from the original *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The music again does not explicitly

reveal the connection between the protagonist of *The Hobbit* and the antagonists of another film series. The audience can deduce that the hero's selfish pursuit for revenge parallels the selfish pursuit for power, but like in *Attack of the Clones*, the composer leaves it to the audience to reach that conclusion. These full-theme appearances, therefore, indicate only the existence of a relationship between the on-screen characters and the subject referenced by the music; had the composers employed thematic combination, the musical motives would have been connected in ways that presented the audience with more details of that relationship.

Thematic combination changes the score's role in the film structure. Typically, thematic transformations like those outlined by Bribitzer-Stull respond to situation changes that the characters in the film perceive.<sup>40</sup> If a theme appears without its association, however, then the music moves beyond the score's usual reactive role and gives the audience information about the situation that the characters lack. The concept of the score as an independent narrator is explored by both Claudia Gorbman and Guido Heldt.<sup>41</sup> Moments where the score seems to disagree with the diegesis presents the audience with a conclusion about the narrative that gives a more thorough presentation of

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<sup>40</sup> Occasionally, a character's theme will play when they are mentioned in dialogue and not physically present. Numerous instances of this are found in John Williams's score to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001), for example, when the villain's theme appears whenever the characters discuss his growing threat. Ultimately, however, the character is still concretely referenced in the diegetic world and the score aids in the subordinate role of making the allusion more explicit.

<sup>41</sup> The idea of the score as narrator is explored in Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987) and Guido Heldt, *Music and Levels of Narration in Film: Steps Across the Border* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Limited, 2013).

the story. Thematic combination forms a subcategory of this scoring technique, increasing the independence of the score even further from the diegesis.

In the following analyses I present two examples of thematic combination: “Anakin’s Theme” from John Williams’ score for *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (2001) and “The Edge of Night” from Howard Shore’s score for *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003). I choose these examples for two main reasons. First, both films contain themes that have been established for several films before the one I examine. *The Phantom Menace* is the fourth film in the *Star Wars* franchise (a prequel to Episodes IV, V, and VI) and *The Return of the King* is the third film in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. This background gives both composers a backlog of associative themes they can reference. In the case of John Williams’ thematic catalog, the three films that precede Episode I were released two decades earlier. His themes therefore had time to solidify in both the film score canon and the collective memory of *Star Wars* audiences before he distilled their motives. Though Howard Shore did not have the same benefit of time, his motivic web for the *Lord of the Rings* films extends to every theme in the trilogy.<sup>42</sup> This motivic familiarity further benefits from the frequent transitional sequences in the films during which the only aural component is the music. This type of sequence that places the music on a pedestal similarly assists in transmitting motives to the audience’s memory so Shore can reference them in subsequent films.

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<sup>42</sup> Doug Adams organizes Shore’s themes in his book *The Music of the Lord of the Rings Films*. The catalog of nearly one hundred themes range from individuals, races, and cultures to moral alignments and supernatural forces and includes the shared motives unify the themes of related diegetic components. Doug Adams, *The Music of The Lord of the Rings Films* (Van Nuys, California: Carpentier/Alfred Music Publishing, 2010).

My second reason for choosing these examples is that both use thematic combination specifically to provide information about a character's fate. The motives are connected in ways that foreshadow forthcoming events while, furthermore, the scene's dialogue does not reference those events. Choices in cinematography, editing, and sound design align with elements of the motivic combination to reinforce and clarify its meaning. Because these choices occur in the formal components of the film, the characters do not receive the information; only the audience is made aware of the future.

In "Anakin's Theme," a motive from the theme for the primary villain in the original *Star Wars* trilogy is inserted into the phrase structure of the theme for Anakin, a boy who is new to the diegetic timeline but later becomes that villain. While the familiar motive on its own informs the audience that there is a connection between the two characters, the musical connections between Anakin's music and the villain's motive depict the steps of Anakin's transformation. During the film, the theme and motive align with certain lines of dialogue to provide even more details of those steps. Anakin's ultimate fate is never stated in the film, but the music makes that conclusion even more explicit by further aligning with a distinct sound effect over the film's closing credits. Because the sound effect exists only in the diegetic world, its location in the form blurs the line between the fictional space and reality. As a result, the sound, which also does not exist in the time frame of the film, reinforces the portentous quality of the equally out-of-time motive.

Howard Shore pursues the same process in the song "The Edge of Night" in *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*. He combines motives from known themes and

connects them in various ways that, like “Anakin’s Theme,” reveals a character’s fate. However, because “The Edge of Night” is a diegetic song, the process is more complex. On one level, the singer uses non-diegetic motives to depict his own situation. On the meta-diegetic level, his melody combines with both the text and the non-diegetic accompaniment to reference the situation of another character. This deeper musical story coordinates with the direction, editing, and sound design to reveal the second character’s fate. Like “Anakin’s Theme,” these interactions are contained in the non-diegetic elements of the form (even though the singer is performing in a diegetic space), so the characters watching the performance are not aware of its message. The dual role of the performer, both aware and unaware of the non-diegetic connotations of his song, makes this example particularly complex.

I derive my methodology for finding examples of thematic combination from Kofi Agawu’s method for analyzing texted song. Agawu first analyzes the music in isolation so the text does not influence the intricacies of the music’s story.<sup>43</sup> Because these film themes inherently reference concrete plot ideas, a detailed story resulting from the themes’ combination can be discovered from this purely musical analysis. While Agawu next analyzes the expressive argument of a song’s text, I also analyze the audio and visual alignment for the moments in the film when the thematic combination appears. Finally, I combine the music’s story with the additional information provided by those formal choices. This final step reveals how both examples of thematic combination align

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<sup>43</sup> Kofi Agawu, “Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century ‘Lied,’” *Music Analysis* 11, no.1 (March 1992): 3-36.

with choices in sound design, direction, and editing to provide the audience with extensive details about a character or situation.

### **Case Study 1: “Anakin’s Theme”**

John Williams ends “Anakin’s Theme” from Episode I with a significant motive from the theme for Darth Vader, the original trilogy’s primary antagonist. To insert the motive into the new theme, Williams uses music that parallels Anakin’s development into Darth Vader. Because the theme inherently alludes to this relationship, scenes that contain the theme and motive subsequently are put into the context of Anakin’s fate as well, even though the scene without the music would not necessarily reference this development.

Thematic combination is particularly applicable to John Williams’ *Star Wars* themes due in part to the instructions given to him by George Lucas, the film’s director. For the first *Star Wars* film in 1977, Lucas envisioned long, poignant shots showing characters in moments of personal reflection. A famous example of this is the binary sunset scene in which all action pauses while the protagonist, frustrated with his future, watches two prophetic suns, one rising and one setting. The music is at the forefront of the scene, uninterrupted by plot developments or visual changes. By design, the scene lasts the perfect amount of time for a full statement of Williams’ eight-measure “Force Theme.”<sup>44</sup> In more specific musical terms, this allows Williams’ themes to contain complete presentations of opening tonic, predominant, dominant, and concluding tonic harmonies. Because the duration of most scenes allows Williams to fully explore each

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<sup>44</sup> Collins, “Star Wars, Lucas, and Williams” (podcast audio).

harmonic area in a theme's phrase structure, inserting an idea from a harmonic area of one theme into a harmonic area of another to represent the diegetic relationship between those themes' characters is fairly easy to accomplish.

As soon as Anakin Skywalker introduces himself in Episode I, audience members familiar with Episodes IV, V, and VI know that he becomes Darth Vader, the original trilogy's main villain. Through Episodes I, II, and III (also known as the prequel trilogy), Anakin is gradually corrupted by the Sith, wielders of the Dark Side of the Force, and by the end of the trilogy Anakin has transformed into the mechanically outfitted Darth Vader. Episode I introduces nine-year-old Anakin to several key figures who accompany him on his journey. In Episode II, ten years after Episode I, Anakin has nightmares about the death of his mother, left behind on his home planet after he joined the Jedi Order in Episode I. When he finds her dead, his fear and anger briefly overtake him and he murders the villagers that held her. In Episode III, Anakin's fear of loss centers now on his wife, also introduced in Episode I. After being emotionally manipulated by a politician, who is secretly the leader of the Sith, Anakin joins the Sith in the hope that he will gain the power to save his wife. As a sign of his fealty to his new master, Anakin takes the name Darth Vader and kills everyone in the Jedi Order.

Anakin's actions in Episode III are clearly foreshadowed by his vengeful actions in Episode II, but nothing in his Episode I story arc indicates this path. Anakin's childlike theme in the film, on the other hand, uses thematic combination to portray the two stages of his descent in two wars: first, Williams gradually adjusts Anakin's main thematic material with traits from Darth Vader's march, then he culminates the theme with a



recurring motive from Darth Vader's theme placed into the cadential tonic area of Anakin's theme. Within the film, the borrowed motive aligns with particular characters and lines of dialogue to clarify the story expressed by the music. In the theme's final appearance over the closing credits, the sound of Darth Vader's mechanical breathing also aligns with the motive to confirm the underlying musical narrative.

*Two Themes: "The Imperial March" and "Anakin's Theme"*

Even though Darth Vader and the Empire serve as the antagonists of Episode IV, the first film of the original trilogy, "The Imperial March" does not appear until *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). It is the first melody heard after the opening title sequence: segments of the theme underscore various shots of the opening battle between the Imperial bad guys and the Rebel good guys. In particular, thematic segments of "The Imperial March" accompany shots of the Imperial fleet of starships, a victorious Imperial laser blast, and the arrival of Darth Vader into the rebel base. Throughout the trilogy, the theme does not have one singular narrative association; it aligns visually with whichever agent of the Empire requires an impactful entrance. Whenever Darth Vader makes a dramatic appearance, however, it is always this theme that accompanies him.

The Imperial March theme is a clause, the same form as Captain America's main theme and the first half of Wonder Woman's Amazon theme. As a reminder, Mark Richards' clause shares the presentation phrase qualities of a Classical sentence but follows it with a divergence phrase in which the basic idea material returns in some form

with various alterations.<sup>45</sup> The clause structure contains many opportunities for motivic repetition, which allows one motive in particular to become quickly associated with Darth Vader after a single statement of the theme.

The presentation phrase, found in Figure 3.1, opens with a two-measure basic idea.<sup>46</sup> Its distinct motive reappears twice at the end of the basic idea and once at the end of the basic idea's repetition. The basic idea prolongs the tonic harmony G minor by venturing to E $\flat$  minor and back—a chromatic mediant motion between minor triads that Erik Heine appropriately calls the “Vader” relationship—in a Do-Le-Me-Do melodic pattern and a distinct dotted eighth- plus sixteenth-note rhythm.<sup>47</sup> This important motive is labeled in Figure 3.1 as motive *m*. Harmonically, motive *m* moves from the tonic chord to the minor submediant, which creates the unique oscillation from G in the tonic triad to G $\flat$  in the chromatically inflected *bvi* triad. This oscillation is mostly confined to the harmonic voices except for two moments, labeled in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 with an asterisk (\*). Because the false relation is relegated to the harmonies and because the motive always returns to G minor, the tonic prolongation of motive *m* is aurally distinct and yet still functionally stable. The minor submediant harmony and the melodic pattern are the two primary features of motive *m* that appear in Anakin's theme.

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<sup>45</sup> Richards, “Film Music Themes,” 1-27.

<sup>46</sup> The piano reductions I use for this case study are my only score samples that come from a published book rather than my own transcriptions. The score samples for “The Imperial March” and “Anakin's Theme” both are found in John Williams, *Star Wars: A Musical Journey*, (Van Nuys, California: Alfred Publishing Co., 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Erik Heine, “Chromatic Mediants and Narrative Context in Film,” 103-132.



**Figure 3.1.** “The Imperial March” Presentation Phrase (basic idea and repetition)

Other aspects of “The Imperial March” that appear in “Anakin’s Theme” are found in the divergence phrase, shown in Figure 3.2. After the basic idea repetition, the melody (which opens with rhythmic and harmonic similarities to the basic idea, hence Mark Richards’ hesitation to call it a sentence) creeps down an octave chromatic scale from G to G, skipping only D in the descent. The pitches of the descent are circled in Figure 3.2. The harmonies beneath the scale are G minor, C# minor, and Eb minor, ending on the appropriate harmonic area for another statement of motive *m*. Lower-neighbor sixteenth-note ornaments highlight the downbeat of each new harmony. The *m* motive prolongs the final tonic area the same way it prolonged the opening tonic area with two statements. In total, motive *m* appears five times throughout the theme, ending each section of the 2+2+4 structure. Because the theme appears frequently in Episodes V and VI, motive *m*’s distinct rhythm, contour, and harmonies easily become associated with the story’s villains.



**Figure 3.2.** “The Imperial March” divergence phrase

Jumping backwards in diegetic time about thirty years and forward in reality about twenty, Episode I introduces audiences to young Anakin with “Anakin’s Theme.” Over the credits, a full concert arrangement in ABA’ form transforms the theme in particular ways that depict the events of Episodes I, II, and III. After A presents Anakin’s unaltered thematic material, A’ inserts motive *m* twice, once for each theme statement’s final tonic area, using two different methods: one derived from “The Imperial March” and one derived from Anakin’s A section.

Very few surface-level aspects of Anakin’s theme allude to “The Imperial March.” Whether to adhere to the diegetic timeline (Darth Vader, and therefore his thematic material, does not actually exist yet in the story) or to reinforce that Anakin as we knew him is destroyed once he becomes Darth Vader, the A section of Anakin’s theme is different from “The Imperial March” in almost every way. The only obvious shared trait is the use of the tritone as a structural interval, even though the particular applications do not overlap. The tritone is the root interval between the presentation phrase (G minor) and the divergence phrase (C# minor) of “The Imperial March.” In “Anakin’s Theme,” the melody and harmonies constantly juxtapose the pitches A and D# to highlight the key of A Lydian. These two usages have quite dissimilar affects: the two tritone-separated harmonies create dissonance to characterize the villains of the story while the tritone that results from A Lydian’s two major tetrachords establishes childlike innocence. Despite this weak tritone connection, the two themes are generally distinct from each other.

The introduction and A section to “Anakin’s Theme” present Anakin’s character free from the interference of the Dark Side. The introduction presents the theme’s second

phrase in the key of E Lydian followed by two bars of an accompaniment pattern that establishes the home key of A Lydian. The theme itself is a parallel period, in Mark Richards' categorization.<sup>48</sup> The antecedent and consequent phrases both open with the same A Lydian. Figure 3.3 presents the antecedent phrase and labels this A Lydian segment as *a*. This segment harmonizes the E-centric melody with the A Lydian progression I-II-VII7-I over an A pedal. Both the melody and harmonies feature D#, the tritone in E major and the mode-defining pitch of A Lydian. The second half of the phrase, labeled *b* in Figure 3.3, presents a contrasting idea to the *a* segment by fragmenting the rhythm of the *a* segment's second measure, creating a sense of acceleration characteristic of Richards' film theme period.<sup>49</sup> The *b* segment in the antecedent and consequent phrases retains its rhythm, contour, key, ornamentation, and length but changes harmonically. Additionally, though the first *b* segment ends with Sol in the melody, the end of the antecedent phrase is a firm arrival on the tonic pitch.<sup>50</sup>

The musical score is written for piano in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It consists of two segments, *a* and *b*, each spanning four measures. Segment *a* is labeled "A Lydian harmonies, E major melody" and features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The melody starts on E4 and moves through F#4, G4, A4, B4, C#5, D5, and E5. The bass line consists of a steady A4 pedal point with chords of A major and A Lydian. Segment *b* is labeled "A major cadence" and features a more rhythmic melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The melody starts on E4 and moves through F#4, G4, A4, B4, C#5, D5, and E5. The bass line consists of a steady A4 pedal point with chords of A major and A Lydian.

**Figure 3.3.** “Anakin’s Theme,” A Section, Antecedent Phrase, *a* and *b* segments

<sup>48</sup> Richards, “Film Music Themes,” 6.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>50</sup> In his article, Mark Richards discusses that cadences in film do not follow Classical definitions or requirements. My hierarchy of “open” and “closed” cadences comes instead from a comparison of the various phrase endings to each other rather within this film than to a wider corpus. Richards, “Film Music Themes,” 6.

In the consequent phrase of the period, shown in Figure 3.4, the harmonies of the *b* segment change significantly. First, the phrase begins with a D minor chord, or the minor iv, instead of the F dominant seventh chord over an E pedal that opened the *b* segment of the antecedent phrase. The D minor harmony is highlighted with a 2-1 suspension in the lowest voice, which prolongs the harmony for two beats and creates a sense of resolution that parallels the final cadence's 4-3 suspension. As the first clear minor sonority in the piece, these two beats affect the mood established by the *a* segment's Lydian chords. The mood shifts for only those two beats, however: after a second-inversion tonic triad, a ii<sup>o</sup>7 chord resolves to tonic via mostly stepwise motion, including the same 4-3 suspension found at the end of the antecedent phrase. The gentle resolution undermines the concern created by the darkness of the minor predominant. Now, the melody ends on Do rather than Sol to conclude the parallel period.

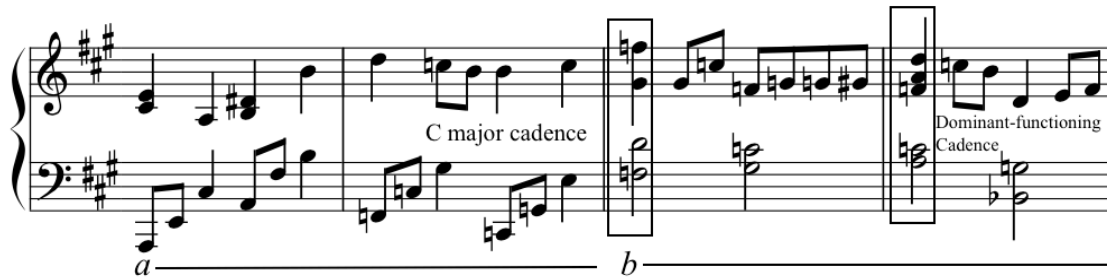
**Figure 3.4.** “Anakin’s Theme,” A Section, Consequent Phrase, *a* and *b* segments

The B section in the ABA' form is typical for John Williams' concert works; a similar type is found in his concert arrangement of “The Imperial March.” Keys change via chromatically altered tonicizations and chromatic mediant motion. Certain stylistic ornaments from the A theme reappear, but the main motives are generally absent. The fluid rhythm and harmonic instability drives toward the arrival of familiar material in A'.

The theme in A', like in A, is a parallel period. However, the opening *a* segment explores a new harmonic area beyond A Lydian. The full antecedent phrase is shown in Figure 3.5. Though the *a* segment begins in A Lydian, as expected, it modulates to C major,  $\flat$ III, after one measure.<sup>51</sup> Next, the following *b* segment deviates further from its analogous moment in the A section by opening with the D minor triad that began the A section's consequent phrase. This minor harmony appears on the downbeat of both measures in the *b* segment. The first measure foregoes the 2-1 suspension and replaces it with an added fourth before moving to the second inversion tonic triad. The second measure of the *b* segment adds a seventh to the D minor harmony and moves to a G minor triad, a dominant-functioning chord in C major, to end this antecedent phrase with a half cadence instead of authentic. Both the transposition to the far-removed key of C major and the new half cadence demand stronger resolution in the consequent phrase; as a result, the consequent phrase's *a* segment is more harmonically unified in A major. The melody appears on A rather than E and the D# in the harmonies is replaced with D $\natural$  after one measure, expressing A major rather than A Lydian. Unlike in previous *a* segments, then, the melody and harmony are tonally unified. However, this unification is short-lived as the following *b* material diverges further than before.

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<sup>51</sup> This chromatic mediant relationship here, the motion from A Major to C Major, would be classified by Erik Heine as a "Magic" chromatic mediant: two major chords with roots separated by a minor third. Heine, "Chromatic Mediants," 108.



**Figure 3.5.** “Anakin’s Theme,” A’ Section, Antecedent Phrase, *a* and *b* segments

The last segment of A’, shown in Figure 3.6, fully abandons the earlier *b* segment material. Instead, the first three measures of the *b* segment sequences the *a* segment’s final measure three times in a descending chromatic pattern. The sequence ends on an F minor harmony, or the minor submediant in A major. After reaching this harmony, the *a* segment idea disappears and is replaced by motive *m* from “The Imperial March.” After moving through B $\flat$  major, A major, and F minor, the *m* motive stabilizes on the final tonic area in A major.<sup>52</sup> This new segment, *c*, totals four measures, twice the length of the analogous *b* segments. In sum, two elements of “The Imperial March” interrupt the phrase structure of “Anakin’s Theme” here: the chromatic descent from the divergence phrase and the *m* motive. The *c* segment then repeats verbatim, reaffirming the new musical process. A’ therefore expands the phrase structure of A from *abab* to *abacc*, a total addition of six measures from the expected length.

<sup>52</sup> Though Heine does not codify chromatic mediant motion between two chords of different qualities in his article, the root separation of a major third qualifies this oscillation as either the “Vader” type or the “Magic” type, the type found in the roots between A $\flat$  major and C major in the *a* segment of A’. The association here, then, is a mix between wondrous magic and evil, the line that Anakin coincidentally traverses often in his journey through the Force.





**Figure 3.6.** “Anakin’s Theme,” A’ Section, Consequent Phrase, *c* segment

A brief codetta re-establishes Anakin’s identity following the Imperial intrusion of A’. First, A Lydian is reestablished by the return of the introduction’s accompaniment pattern and another *a* segment. The *a* segment is punctuated by neither *b* nor *c* segment material; the new measures, shown in Figure 3.7, begins with the D minor triad from the final phrase of A, including its 2-1 bass line suspension. From that suspension, the bass line descends through more A minor harmonies (*iv-i6- bvi6-i*), expanding what had been two beats of minor to two full measures.



**Figure 3.7.** “Anakin’s Theme,” Codetta, Final Phrase

The new melodic material for this section is drawn from “The Imperial March.” First, the *m* motive’s distinct dotted rhythm voices a descending octave on Do, an interval taken from the first beat of the divergence phrase of “The Imperial March.” Instead of returning up to Do on the second beat as “The Imperial March” did, “Anakin’s Theme” leaps up to Sol and ornaments it with the same sixteenth-note lower-neighbor ornament found on each harmonic change of “The Imperial March”’s divergence phrase. The lower neighbor inverts into an incomplete chromatic upper neighbor, landing on the flatted sixth scale degree. From there, the melody leaps down a fourth to outline the F minor harmony, inverting the *m* motive’s ascending fifth into a descending fourth. This inversion of the *m* motive leads to a true statement of it, the first of the four that end the piece. Because the harmonies move from A Lydian to F minor in a mere four beats, this transformation is much more straightforward than in A’. There is no sequence to draw out the minor submediant arrival; the D minor chord from Anakin’s A section immediately pivots the phrase to minor and arrives at the harmony for the *m* motive within a single measure rather than four.

Motive *m*’s appearance in “Anakin’s Theme” and the two methods that lead to it present several metaphors about Anakin’s story. In terms of key area, Lydian’s two major tetrachords, displayed in the *a* segment’s harmonies and E-centered melody, emphasize youthful innocence. The key, simple melody, 4-3 suspensions, and constant major harmonies depict Anakin as an innocent child without a hint of darkness in his character except for the single D minor triad in the consequent phrase of the A section. When A’

extends the space occupied by D minor and transposes the *a* segment melody to A, the imagery of Lydian is lost. This is the first hint that Anakin's character is changing.

The sequence—both the material and the type of sequence itself—represents Anakin's first foray into the Dark Side. The sequencing idea is drawn from the *a* segment, material that represents Anakin's innocence, but the chromatic descent is derived from the melody of "The Imperial March." This literal musical descent signifies Anakin's narrative descent to the Dark Side, the conclusion of which is indicated by motive *m*. Because the material sequenced comes from his *a* segment, an integral idea in young Anakin's musical characterization, the music explains that something from Anakin's past is used to corrupt him over time until he evolves into the subject represented by motive *m*.

The developing role of D minor paints an image of Anakin's second and final transformation to the Dark Side. When D minor first appears at the end of the A section, it is the first clear minor sonority in the piece. Though it quickly moves back to A major, that flicker of darkness grows in importance in A' as it occupies two downbeats instead of one. This expanded presence precedes the "The Imperial March"'s corruption of the phrase; in other words, D minor does not take part in the Dark Side infiltration here, but is enacting its own process separate to the events of Anakin's first descent. In the codetta, however, the D minor triad redirects the phrase into a new minor progression that smoothly arrives at the minor submediant more quickly than the sequence did. Not only does D minor now play a role in the descent, but it does the job more efficiently and, due to the three additional motive *m* statements that follow it, more thoroughly.

Metaphorically, then, Anakin's final transformation begins with another figure from his past who grew in importance during his first struggle. That figure quickly pivots him deeper into darkness after he seems to revert back to his innocent state. Though different procedures are used to arrive at motive *m*, both use a component of Anakin's uncorrupted theme to lead him to the minor submediant harmony.

These musical metaphors reflect Anakin's story in Episodes I through III. The A section represents Anakin in Episode I, untouched by the Dark Side. Both the material that is sequenced in A' and the D minor triad used in the codetta appear as part of his introduction to the audience. Anakin first acts on his Dark Side emotions in Episode II when his fear of his mother's death drives him to murder. His mother, a key figure in Anakin's life in Episode I, corresponds to the sequenced *a* segment material that descends into the *m* motive. Anakin returns to normal until Episode III, symbolized by the return of the A Lydian accompaniment idea and the untransposed *a* segment in the codetta. When Anakin dreams of his wife's death, he tries to prevent it with more proactive but ultimately destructive steps. His wife, Padmé, first appeared in Episode I, but their relationship becomes romantic in Episode II. The D minor triad similarly first appeared in the A section, the material uncorrupted by "The Imperial March." In A', D minor becomes more present as it occupies two downbeats in the antecedent phrase. In Episode III, Anakin joins the Sith lord in the hopes of saving Padmé and kills the Jedi. These choices are driven by his fear of losing Padmé and place him on the fast track to becoming Darth Vader by the end of the film. In the same way, the D minor triad

generates the minor progression and “Imperial March” motives that lead to the minor submediant and the *m* motive in half the time it took in A’.

At the end of his theme, the future is uncertain for Anakin. On the one hand, all but one of the motive *m* statements prolongs a major triad rather than minor. At this stage in the story, Anakin is only nine years old, not yet corrupted by the Jedi’s ascetic values or the Sith’s easy solutions. The last of the four closing *m* motive statements, however, loses the treble voices to more closely match the original bass instrument range of “The Imperial March.” Furthermore, the final sonority is no longer the A major triad, but a unison A. Though still grounded in the time period of Episode I, the last music the audience hears is undeniably ominous.

#### *In-Film Alignment*

There are two scenes in which “Anakin’s Theme” appears with motive *m*. Because the motive combines with the theme to inherently reference Anakin’s dark future, scenes that contain this music are marked with this knowledge. In both scenes, the *m* motive aligns with particular lines and characters to fill in more details of the music’s story.

In the first scene in which the theme and motive appear, Padmé and Qui-Gon Jinn, the Jedi who advocates for Anakin to join the Jedi Order, discuss how to fix their broken ship that has stranded them on Anakin’s planet. Qui-Gon feels their best option is to allow young Anakin to compete in a race so they can trade the prize money for the ship repairs. Motive *m* happens at the end of Padmé’s line “Are you sure about this? Trusting

our fate to a boy we hardly know?”<sup>5354</sup> Padmé’s fate, as we see in both Episode III and in the role of D minor in “Anakin’s Theme,” motivates Anakin’s final transformation into Darth Vader. Though their romantic relationship is nowhere near the horizon in Episode I, the music already hints at her role in Anakin’s life. Because this indication takes place in the score, this knowledge is given only to the audience and not the characters. Padmé is not aware of the extent to which Anakin will affect her fate, but the alignment of the motive with her line marks her as one of the key figures in Anakin’s journey.

The theme and motive next appear when Anakin’s mother congratulates him on winning the race. The *m* motive aligns with her words “I am so proud of you.”<sup>5556</sup> Just as the previous *m* motive highlighted Padmé as one of the people Anakin fears to lose, this appearance marks the other key figure in his descent: his mother. Her line demonstrates the love and support that Anakin fears to lose in Episode II (and that the Jedi naively say should be scrapped as a Jedi in order to reduce the temptation of the Dark Side). The music again connects Anakin’s mother to Darth Vader for the audience’s benefit, further illuminating the steps Anakin takes before turning to the Dark Side.

The audibility of these two motive *m* appearances varies. Neither are impossible to hear, but the first appearance diminishes the motive’s rhythm, making the distinctive melodic contour difficult to discern. The second appearance is additionally covered by

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<sup>53</sup> *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, directed by George Lucas, screenplay by George Lucas (Lucasfilm Limited, 1999), DVD (20th Century Fox, 1999).

<sup>54</sup> This scene is found at 44:13 in the film.

<sup>55</sup> *The Phantom Menace*, directed by George Lucas.

<sup>56</sup> This scene appears at 1:10:10 in the film.

unfortunate aural interference from the space equivalent of a camel, which draws the audience's attention away from the score. In case audiences missed the music's message due to these reasons, the concert arrangement fortunately appears at the end of the film's credits, conveying the full prophetic weight of the theme.

The credits are a unique moment of liminal space in a film. They signal the end of the diegesis as the scrolling names of the cast and crew abruptly remind audiences of the story's artificiality. The direction, editing, sound design, and other formal aspects cease attempting to suspend disbelief about the *Star Wars* world's existence. Despite these clear indications of the diegesis's end, however, the score continues to play. For the *Star Wars* films in particular, the credits have their own musical form to bookend the form-delineating text scroll and fanfare that opens each film in the series: the score's penultimate chord lingers with the final shot of the film and elides its resolution with the downbeat of a rearranged version of the opening fanfare. Aligned with this musical resolution is the visual cut to the first credit card. As the credits proceed, the fanfare transitions into longer arrangements of some of the film's new themes.<sup>57</sup> In the credits for Episode I, the title march is followed first by the musical track from the film's final battle and second by the concert arrangement of "Anakin's Theme," analyzed above, that presents Anakin's journey.

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<sup>57</sup> Frank Lehman explores the differences between concert arrangements and diegetic theme presentations in his article "Film-as-Concert Music and the Formal Implications of Cinematic Listening." Looking forward in my analysis, the diegetic sound interference with this concert arrangement lends itself more to the conclusion that this arrangement is a more diegetically relevant piece than other concert arrangements often are. Lehman, "Film-as-Concert Music," 7-46

Though the credits depart from the story world, “Anakin’s Theme” is invaded by a unique piece of diegetic material: the sound of Darth Vader’s mechanical breathing, synchronized with the four final motive *m* statements. Formally, this sound should not exist in this space. The score and the sound exist on different levels of the diegesis; because the score is non-diegetic, it can appear in the credits without implying that the corresponding plot events are continuing. In other words, the return of the final battle music does not mean the battle is still raging. Darth Vader’s breathing, however, exists exclusively in the story world. The existence of the sound, well-known by the *Star Wars* original trilogy characters, can only exist alongside the existence of its source. With this sound effect appearing in the credits, Darth Vader trespasses outside the confines of the diegetic space, undercutting the film’s closed form and disturbing the subconscious barrier between reality and fiction.

Narratively, furthermore, Darth Vader does not exist in the story at this point. The events of Episode I take place twenty years before Episode III. Vader’s trademark sound in the credits reaches forward, beyond the temporal boundaries of this film, making this appearance even more significant. After watching Anakin’s Episode I storyline unfold without a sign of evil in him, this sound reminds us of what is in store for him, despite being at a moment in the form when diegetic information should no longer be transmitted. The choice in sound design here reinforces the goal of Williams’ thematic combination: to foreshadow narrative events for the audience, even outside of the diegetic space.



In summary, John Williams uses one type of thematic combination to foreshadow Anakin's journey through the prequel trilogy. A tonic-prolonging motive from "The Imperial March" is inserted into the final tonic area of "Anakin's Theme" in particular musical ways to paint a clear picture of Anakin's future. While motive *m* aligns with particular lines of dialogue in the film to reveal which characters motivate his actions, the final moment in the credits truly confirms that, despite his wholesome character in Episode I, young Anakin will become Darth Vader.

### **Case Study 2: "The Edge of Night"**

While John Williams employed thematic combination at the phrase structure level, Howard Shore unifies his non-diegetic themes for the *Lord of the Rings* series at the motivic level through motivic networks. Though Doug Adams thoroughly explores these connections in Shore's score, scholarship examining his music often overlooks motivic connections to the film's diegetic music.<sup>58</sup> Diegetic pieces appear frequently in the film series, taking the form of songs or poem recitations with text by either J. R. R. Tolkien or the screenwriters. Depending on the language of the text, these pieces can provide in-film commentary on the story. An untranslated Elvish text, for example, would prove too enigmatic for the audience to comprehend but English texts can subtly comment on a scene, situation, or character meta-diegetically. These songs, then, can function in the diegetic space the same way that the score can function non-diegetically.

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<sup>58</sup> Adams, *The Music of 'The Lord of the Rings' Films*.

Shore utilizes this function in “The Edge of Night” from *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. The song comments on the story using both its diegetic components, the text and the melody, and the non-diegetic component, the accompaniment in the score. The melody uses thematic combination to connect motives from two different themes and depict the singer’s situation. Shore then aligns the different motives with particular accompaniment features and lyrics to clarify the details of the story that the music depicts the same way that John Williams uses purely musical connections to clarify the connection between Anakin and Darth Vader. In “Anakin’s Theme,” thematic combination freed the score from its reactive role. When applied to a diegetic song, this technique impacts the singer in a similar way: by using motives from non-diegetic music to reveal information that he should not know, the singer moves beyond his diegetic role.

In the context of the scene, the song ostensibly functions as entertainment. The hobbit Pippin is told by Denethor, the steward of Gondor, to sing for him while he eats. This meal follows the departure of Denethor’s youngest son Faramir, whom Denethor told he wished were dead after one of Gondor’s cities was overtaken by enemy forces. Faramir leaves to reclaim the city while Denethor, clearly apathetic to Faramir’s almost certain death, asks Pippin to entertain him. To depict the two layers of the story, Shore combines motives from the themes for the Shire (Pippin’s home) and Gondor (Pippin’s current location) to create Pippin’s melody. This combination represents Pippin’s situation. The Gondor motives then align with particular words and accompaniment features to represent Faramir’s situation. Aspects of the cinematography, sound design,

and editing further delineate the two stories by treating the two spaces—Denethor’s throne room and the battlefield—in different ways. Like “Anakin’s Theme,” the musical narrative moves beyond the visual presentation to reveal Faramir’s ultimate fate to the audience.

### *“The Edge of Night” Music*

The music for Pippin’s song “The Edge of Night” combines motives and other musical characteristics from two non-diegetic themes. The song’s music and text are shown in Figure 3.8. The phrases are organized as AABABA’. A and B each elaborate a single pitch, G# and C# respectively, and open with a leap from C# to G# (ascending in A, descending in B). A’ slows the rhythm of A and alters the pitch content for the penultimate harmony. After Pippin finishes singing, a non-diegetic clarinet restates the A phrase over C# octaves. Though functional harmonies and tendency tones are absent, the key is C# dorian: C# centrality is expressed through the melody’s constant C# downbeats and the accompaniment’s C# octaves in A’ and the postlude. Pippin and the clarinet both close their melodies on G# rather than C#, denying the song a complete sense of closure.

Despite the melody’s open ending, A’ creates closure in other ways. The eighth notes, triplets, and sixteenth notes of A augment into quarter notes and eighth notes, doubling the phrase’s length. Though lacking a functional harmonic progression, the second half of A’ diverges from the G# area: the melody descends through an F# Major triad first before returning to G#. Due to this divergence, the return to G# creates the impression of a cadence even though the accompaniment’s C# octaves make it clear that this pitch is a fifth above Do rather than Do itself.

A Home is be-hind, the world - a-head, and there are ma - ny paths to tread.

B Through sha - dow, to the edge of night, un - til the stars are all a - light.

B Mist and sha - dow, cloud - - - and shade:

A' all shall fade, all - - - shall - - - fade.

**Figure 3.8.** “The Edge of Night” Melody and Text

One of the source themes for these melodic characteristics is the theme for the Shire, Pippin’s home. The Shire theme’s first appearance in the trilogy is shown in Figure 3.9. It is a parallel period structure, ABAB’, with two-bar ideas that have similar motivic content as “The Edge of Night.” The A and B phrases of both the Shire melody and Pippin’s melody contain a particular contour that I term the “There and Back Again” contour. Symbolically, this contour represents an idea that the hobbits frequently discuss while accompanied by the Shire theme: no matter how far they travel, the Shire is back home waiting for them (furthermore, the phrase “There and Back Again” is the title of an older hobbit’s memoir about his earlier travels as well as the final lyric in the vocal arrangement of the Shire theme that appears over the first film’s closing credits). Musically, this idea is represented by unfolding and re-folding a consonant interval and filling it in with passing tones. The first phrase of the Shire theme does this with the fifth

between D and A. Pippin then uses this contour in the second half of his A and B phrases: the A phrase unfolds G# to B and fills it with A#, and the B phrase unfolds C# to E and fills it with D#.

A distinguishing factor of the Shire's music, like its Irish folk music source, is its free melodic ornamentation. When the Shire theme first appears in the film, the tin whistle soloist freely adds complete and incomplete neighbor notes and retardations throughout the melody, as shown in Figure 3.9. Pippin ornaments his melody three times, each notated in Figure 3.8. He adds an upper neighbor note to the first A phrase's highest pitch and to the dominant placeholder pitches in A' and a retardation into the highest pitch of the melody in the first B phrase. Though the embellishment tradition appears, Pippin's usage is restrained compared to the Shire theme, suggesting that Pippin is holding back from a full display of his music culture.



**Figure 3.9.** “The Shire Theme”

Finally, the Shire influences the instrumentation of the postlude. Throughout the film, different wind instruments voice the Shire theme depending on the situation. In its

first appearance, before evil entered the hobbits' life, the theme is played on tin whistle. When the characters reference their happier times in the Shire, then, the score voices Shire theme fragments on either tin whistle or the closely related timbre of the flute. For more melancholy moments when the hobbits' journey home is uncertain, the theme appears on clarinet.<sup>59</sup> The clarinet melody that closes Pippin's song therefore evokes the Shire in a distressing way. Because the postlude is non-diegetic, this insight into Pippin's mind is available only to the audience.

Though the Shire theme provides the contour, embellishments, and instrumentation of Pippin's song, it does not account for other aspects of the melody. The key area of C# dorian and each phrase's opening leap come from the thematic network for Gondor. Gondor's main theme appears in two forms depending on the kingdom's condition. "Gondor in Decline," the most common form at this stage in the story, is shown in Figure 3.10. Both versions share the same opening phrase, which begins with a declamatory ascending fifth from Do to Sol (the second half of "Gondor in Decline" also begins with the same motive, making this theme a period). The rest of the opening idea continues with the melodic outline Do-Sol-Te-Sol, the same outline found in Pippin's A phrase (though the space from Sol to Te is filled in with a passing tone as per the Shire's contour pattern). Furthermore, Pippin's B phrase opens with a descending fourth from Do to Sol, the inverted form of Gondor's opening interval. Finally, the Gondor theme provides the mode for Pippin's melody. "Gondor in Decline" is harmonized with the dorian-based progression i-IV-III-i. Though expressed through melodic centrality rather

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<sup>59</sup> Adams, *The Music of 'The Lord of the Rings' Films*.

than functional harmonies, Pippin’s melody uses the same pitch collection transposed down a half step. These two motivic ideas and the mode connect Pippin’s melody to Gondor as well as the Shire, filling in more details of the musical story.



**Figure 3.10.** “Gondor in Decline”

In all, Pippin combines the opening motives, melodic outline, and mode from Gondor’s theme with the ornamentation, contour, and instrumentation of the Shire theme to create his melody. There is a diegetic reason for this combination: as he warns Denethor before he sings, “[Hobbits] have no songs for great halls and evil times.”<sup>60</sup> Through his melodic combination, he attempts to rework his hobbit music for a less cheerful setting. The combination of themes reflects Pippin’s desire to please his new employer but, as the clarinet reveals, his mind is on other more distressing things. Because these traits exist in the melody, a diegetic element of the song, the motivation behind the resulting narrative can be attributed to the character himself. Combining these motivic choices with traits of the accompaniment, however, creates the secondary narrative that is expressed non-diegetically for the audience’s benefit.

The orchestral accompaniment darkens certain moments of Pippin’s melody. At first, the initial AAB portion of the form is unaccompanied. In the following A phrase,

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<sup>60</sup> *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson, screenplay by Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, and Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema, 2003), DVD.

isolated instrumental voices enter and sustain the pitches of the opening Gondor motive in a higher octave. Through the following A and B sections, accompaniment voices enter on new diatonic pitches approximately every bar. In the pause between B and A', the accompaniment adds C $\natural$  to the pitch cluster. Though the low voices attempt to stabilize the chromaticism with C# octaves on the downbeat of A', chromatic pitches continue to enter at an increased rate of every half bar, undermining the tonal stability of the octaves. Just after Pippin finishes his penultimate note, all accompaniment voices cut off abruptly and his last note is unaccompanied once more. The tension of this activity directly opposes the closural aspects of the melody discussed earlier, including the slower rhythm and the dominant placeholder. Based on the text's interaction with these musical moments, the different affects of the melody and accompaniment represent the two different narratives being presented: Pippin's and Faramir's.

### *Music and Text Alignment*

The features of the accompaniment align with particular lyrics to clarify more details of Faramir's story. Like the melody, the text has the potential to serve a benign, superficial function, but because the accompaniment enhances certain words, the text setting depicts Faramir's sad situation instead. By itself, the text is not ominous, dismal, or steeped in tension: you travel away from home and though hardships may block your path, those things will fade and all will be well. However, certain words align with Gondor motives and accompaniment features to depict a darker narrative.

The text is taken from a hobbit poem:



Home is behind, the world ahead  
and there are many paths to tread.  
Through shadow to the edge of night  
until the stars are all alight.  
Mist and shadow, cloud and shade.  
All shall fade, all shall fade.<sup>61</sup>

Right away, the music for the opening line “Home is behind” presents two depictions of the word “home.” In the purely musical sense, the opening leap from tonic to the final pitch in the melody, C# to G#, parallels the act of leaving home. Because the melody does not return to C# at the end of the song, the subject does not make the journey home and the meaning of the text becomes more tragic. Thinking in terms of thematic combination, this interval comes from the Gondor motive. Therefore, Gondor is the home being left behind. Had the text been an allusion for Pippin’s situation alone, then this line would be voiced on a motive from the Shire melody. Neither Pippin nor Denethor leave Gondor through the course of the song, so the subject of the opening line is Faramir, who just left Gondor behind in the previous scene.

When the inverted Gondor motive appears at the opening of each B phrase, it highlights a particular word that holds a very specific meaning in the *Lord of the Rings* world when taken out of the context of the poem. The word “shadow,” the only word in the six short lines of poetry to be repeated, aligns with the two inverted Gondor motives. In the story, “shadow” refers abstractly to the evil forces of the world like Sauron, the main villain who threatens to cast his Shadow over Middle Earth, and the Balrog, a

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<sup>61</sup> *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson, text by J.R.R. Tolkien (New Line Cinema, 2003), DVD.

demon monster who is told to go back to the Shadow, returning from whence he came.<sup>62</sup> The combination of this word with the inverted Gondor motive, then, forms an image of what would befall Gondor should the “shadow” take power. To add to the ominous foreshadowing, the accompaniment darkens the second statement of the inverted Gondor motive further. Just after Pippin sings the second “shadow,” the orchestra adds B to their C#-G#-A# pitch cluster, making a dissonant half step that further characterizes the dark events of Faramir’s situation.

As the accompaniment grows more chromatic, other words and motives continue to be corrupted. At first, the accompaniment functions as text painting, matching the innocence of the text: the instruments, voiced an octave higher than the melody, echoes Pippin’s pitches as he sings “Until the stars are all alight,” as if each pitch were a star appearing overhead. For this line, the pitches are diatonic and double the melody. There is nothing malicious about the accompaniment’s pitch collection for this A phrase (aside from the aforementioned half step when B joins the cluster). In the silence between this line and the next, however, the accompaniment adds C $\natural$ , breaking free from the vocal line’s pitches. This chromatic shift frees the accompaniment from both its supportive role and from the poem’s intended affect.

The next line of text, “All shall fade,” opens with the audible disagreement between the C# octaves in the low voices and the chromatic cluster in the upper voices. Like the lyric “Home is behind,” the text can be applied as both a musical metaphor and a

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<sup>62</sup> *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, directed by Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema, 2001), DVD.

clarification of the underlying narrative. Musically, “All shall fade” describes the pitch cluster’s literal obscuring of the C# tonic octaves. Because the text and the tonic octaves are joined by this chromatic activity, the line no longer contains the reassuring affect it had in the isolated context of the poem. Because this lyric is voiced on the Gondor motive, the melody specifies a subject for this distressing combination. Gondor and likely Faramir (based on the conclusion of the setting for “Home is behind”) are the ones that shall fade. Because the non-diegetic accompaniment is the only component of the music to darken the text, only the audience can piece together this combination to discover the foreshadowing of Faramir’s situation.

Finally, the accompaniment influences the last word in the text: “fade.” Though a gentle word, it is approached by the abrupt cutoff of the chromatic cluster. The context of the word becomes significantly more ominous, reinforcing the melody’s worrisome tonic evasion foreshadowed by the line “Home is behind.” With “All shall fade” officially transformed into an ominous statement, it becomes clear that Faramir does not make it home to Gondor. Based on the musical violence that precedes the word “fade,” furthermore, his fate is likely not a kind one.

### *In-Film Alignment*

The Gondor and Shire themes combine to create a story whose details are clarified by the alignment of each motive with the text. Just as the visual alignment of “Anakin’s Theme” in *The Phantom Menace* provided specific subjects for the story outlined in the theme, the details of the situations presented in “The Edge of Night” are clarified due to the corresponding scene’s cinematography and editing. Cinematography,

or the visual organization within a frame, can be affected by the camera's focus level, the angle and distance from the frame's subject, the speed of motion within the frame, and what details are included or absent. Those shots are then connected through editing. Various decisions concerning editing include the frequency of cuts and the deliberate continuity or discontinuity between adjacent shots. To contribute to the music's dual narrative, the cinematography and editing choices create and distinguish the two spaces conveyed in Pippin's thematic combination. While aspects of the cinematography separate the two spaces, the editing reinforces the music's depiction of Faramir's story. Through the alignment of these two spaces with the music, Pippin's role as a non-diegetic narrator becomes clear and the details of the two narratives are revealed.

The scene presents two spaces: Denethor's throne room and the field in front of the overrun city of Osgiliath.<sup>63</sup> Visually, the two spaces are treated very differently. In Faramir's space, the camera's distance from its subjects and the speed of motion within each shot vary, creating a smooth visual narrative that unfolds through the course of the scene. For example, the opening shots in this space show Faramir and his men riding to their destination, but the destination is not revealed until midway through the second A phrase, "And there are many paths to tread." It is then revealed that their path ends at a wall filled with hundreds of orcs. Near the end of the song, the camera artfully moves from a stationary close-up of an orc drawing back an arrow to a tracking shot along the arrow, culminating at its tip, to a final close-up of Faramir, which forms the conclusion

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<sup>63</sup> The video for the scene is available through this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07tyg4JZWkA>.

that he is the arrow's target. As the scene proceeds, furthermore, shots of Faramir are in increasing slow-motion while the chromaticism in the music builds, matching the audience's growing horror as they realize Faramir's fate. These choices in cinematography are deliberately organized to construct a visual story on their own.

The poetic treatment of Faramir's space is frequently interrupted by Denethor's shots, which are exclusively stationary close-ups. The only variation between them is the distance between the camera and subject, which moves the audience uncomfortably closer to his face as the interruptions continue. While Faramir's shots use the camera to explore the space of the battlefield, Denethor's shots force the audience to focus on a single subject within the throne room at an uncomfortably close range. Like Pippin, the audience is trapped in Denethor's throne room. The visual construction of this space, therefore, is dramatically different from Faramir's space.

Furthermore, the activity within each frame is very different between the two spaces. Denethor eats while Pippin sings to him; as each frame moves closer to his face, then, the relatively unimportant eating motions become increasingly disruptive. On the other hand, the large-scale movements of Faramir's army across the battlefield use long distance shots, causing the motion to take up a small amount of screen space. Smaller movements, like the drawing of an orc arrow, are similarly balanced within the frame so the motion is visible but not overpowering its surroundings. Shots of Denethor break this balance. The distance between the camera and his mouth, for example, is so short that the entire screen is taken up by his chewing and no other items are visible in the frame. These shots inflate his movements and severely disrupt the visual story unfolding in Faramir's

space. These differences reinforce the two layers of narration that the music provides and highlights Denethor's apathy towards Faramir's situation.

Similarly, each space's unique sound choices align with the music to distinguish the two stories being told. Denethor's sound effects—the tearing of meat and other chewing sounds—only occur in moments of silence between lyrics. On the one hand, this coordination foregrounds the chewing sounds and subsequently strongly conveys Denethor's disinterest in Faramir's fate the same way the visual choices did. At the same time, it also highlights Pippin's non-diegetic function. While Denethor and his sounds exist only in the pauses of the music, Pippin's voice coincides exclusively with shots of Faramir's space. Pippin's thematic combination is therefore directly aligned with the secondary narrative that it creates. Because Pippin's voice coordinates only with Faramir's space, the audience has no choice but to view him as a non-diegetic narrator even though his performance began as a diegetic piece of entertainment.

While the music, cinematography, and sound design together delineate the two spaces of the scene, the editing parallels the behavior of the accompaniment, which depicts the development of Faramir's story. As the scene proceeds, the number of cuts increases and the length of each shot decreases. By the end of the scene, the cuts create rapidly changing perspective shifts that coincide with the increasing accompaniment entrances and chromaticism in the second B phrase and A'.

Throughout the sequence, furthermore, cuts align increasingly with aural cues. This has two effects. First, it emphasizes the increasing chromaticism and editing rate, building tension as the end of the song nears. Second, the alignment of an aural cue with

an image has the same influence as the accompaniment's alignment with a word or motive: its affect combines with the specific subject to further construct the underlying narrative. The first chromatic pitch in the accompaniment, for example, aligns with a cut to Denethor, reinforcing his malignancy in the story. When the chromatic cluster corrupts the line "All shall fade," the scene cuts to the Gondor riders. As the earlier musical analysis of this moment suggested, Gondor is confirmed to be the subjects facing their destruction due to this visual alignment. The highest dissonant pitch in the accompaniment falls before the lyric repeats, building even more trepidation. This high pitch aligns with a cut to Faramir, riding towards the wall in extreme slow-motion. Just as the chromatic cluster beneath the Gondor motive indicated the doom of the riders, the shot of Faramir with this intense pitch confirms Faramir's fate as well before the final words "All shall fade."

The music, text, and visual elements increase in intensity until A' when the drama of Faramir's story reaches its apex. The increasing cuts, audio-visual synchronization, and chromatic activity build until the accompaniment suddenly cuts off. Just before that cutoff, the apex of the tension aligns with a shot of the orc captain noiselessly mouthing the word "Fire." The accompaniment goes silent after this command, which is filled by the sound of hundreds of arrows firing in the direction of the Gondor riders. The sound at this moment shifts from Pippin's non-diegetic storytelling, reinforced by the poetic visual treatment of the space, to diegetic, which forces Faramir's situation into reality.

The music's abrupt cutoff begins a series of evaded resolutions from different information channels. Musically, Pippin's melody avoids resolution by ending on Sol

rather than Do, indicating that the subjects of the space will not return home. Visually, even though the entire scene has been building up to the battle, the battle space is abandoned after the first strike; neither the horses raging to the left nor the arrows flying to the right reach their destinations. The Gondor motive, the chromatic pitches, and the lyric “All shall fade” together reveal Faramir’s fate musically, but the other aspects of the scene are abandoned mid-process and do not confirm that information. The only source of visual resolution is metaphorical: the shot immediately following the loosed arrows is an extreme close up of Denethor’s mouth, dripping with red juice. This time, Denethor’s interrupting shot serves a function as a visual stand-in for the blood of the Gondor army as the arrows reach them.

With the battle space abandoned, Pippin’s role as a non-diegetic narrator is abandoned as well. He no longer sings non-diegetic motives and his voice no longer coordinates with the battle space. When he sings his last note unaccompanied (the non-diegetic orchestra that joined Faramir’s space has abandoned him too), the camera centers on him as there is no longer a secondary space for it to show. Both the song and Pippin return to their original diegetic function. Like Pippin, the audience is trapped in Denethor’s throne room even though our minds remain at the unresolved battlefield. During the postlude, the audience’s perspective literally matches Pippin’s eyeline as we see Denethor’s profile while he eats unconcernedly. In the non-diegetic space, the melancholy clarinet represents Pippin’s thoughts as we watch him cry from a new camera angle that places the apathetic Denethor in the foreground.



Unlike Pippin, the audience knows what has befallen Faramir. After the Gondor motive combines with the opening lyric “Home is behind,” establishing Faramir as the subject of the underlying narrative, the further alignment of the motive with the chromatic accompaniment on the final lyric “All shall fade” reveals his fate. The scene’s visual aspects and sound design confirm the alternate narrative but do not directly confirm the music’s conclusion. The characters, unaware of the narrative created by the thematic combination, discover Faramir’s fate later when his barely living body is brought back to the city. Because this revelation of fate takes place in a diegetic song, Pippin’s role is momentarily transformed as he uses non-diegetic motives to narrate action happening miles from him. Pippin’s song coordinates with the form to establish Faramir’s space, but once that space is abandoned Pippin returns to his diegetic role as entertainment for Denethor. Despite these repercussions for Pippin’s role in the film form, the musical elements of the melody combine different motives and other traits from the Gondor theme and the Shire theme. The melody in isolation depicts the situation of Pippin, performing his own cultural music for an unfamiliar audience, but the melody’s elements are combined with the text and the orchestral accompaniment to depict Faramir’s simultaneous situation. The details of that situation are clarified through the song’s visual alignment and the choices in sound design that delineate the two spaces.

### **Thematic Combination Conclusion**

In both “Anakin’s Theme” and “The Edge of Night,” elements of different themes are combined to create what seems to be a new theme. The aspects of the old theme

interact within the new theme in ways that mirror or foreshadow the narrative situation of the in-film counterparts. For “Anakin’s Theme,” aspects of the “Imperial March” enter at various stages of Anakin’s phrase structure to depict his decline to the Dark Side through the course of *Star Wars: Episodes I-III*. The story presented in the theme is clarified by the theme and motive’s alignment within the film. “The Edge of Night” similarly combines aspects of the Shire theme and the Gondor theme to depict the situation of Pippin, the Shire-based hobbit performing in Gondor. The melodic elements borrowed from the Gondor theme align with particular words in the text to further depict the situation of Faramir. This musical combination is supported by the visual splicing of Pippin’s performance with shots of Faramir riding into a doomed battle. Both examples of thematic combination reflect specific character relationships (in the case of “Anakin’s Theme”) and situations (in the case of “The Edge of Night”) of which the characters are as-yet unaware by using musical interactions to depict each narrative in more detail than could be provided by a single leitmotivic appearance.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

This thesis covers several facets of film music that are not often addressed by scholars. Though “Anakin’s Theme” has admittedly been discussed so frequently that new theories about it have appeared even as I write this sentence, the broader concept of thematic combination and its potential to interact with a story in a highly detailed way is a more under-explored topic.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the music of battle scenes in any genre, let alone superhero films, is often overlooked by film music researchers. Whether because the superhero genre has gained popularity only recently, because the story arcs have not been standardized as thoroughly as other narrative types, or because the scores of such films have not yet gained the same social prestige as others, scholars have not delved as deeply into this genre of film music beyond, perhaps, the cataloguing of superhero theme characteristics across different films or the exploration of possible musical metaphors in a theme that reflect its associated hero’s story.

Instead of isolating my analysis to interactions within the music alone, I examine how those musical traits outline and interact with the story development. When thematic fragments highlight the important moments of a battle sequence, the combat development becomes clearer despite the competition from other attention-grabbing channels of information. The interaction of thematic fragments with the battle’s development further increases the impact of the battle in the overall plot, creating a more exciting narrative

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<sup>64</sup> Frank Lehman, Twitter post, May 1, 2019 (5:02 p.m.), accessed May 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/fmlehman>.

climax. Thematic combination gives audiences details about the story and its development that are often not revealed by other information channels. To reveal these relationships, a certain amount of narrative analysis must accompany the musical analysis. As I have shown, adding this analytical step reveals further levels of intricacy with which the music and the story interact.

In the case of thematic combination, the score gains a more independent role in the narrative framework. In general, the score's independence in film is a topic often discussed in film music research; what has not been explored is a broadly applicable technique through which the score gains this independence. For the benefit of these conversations concerning the score's role in the storytelling form, then, thematic combination presents one avenue by which the score moves past a merely supportive role.

The conclusions of my battle scene analysis and the analytical procedure itself can similarly contribute to other current conversations in film music scholarship. Though an area of film music that is generally under-examined, battle music provides a lucrative field for exploring interactions between a standardized story archetype and the score. I see two main benefits from my research in this area. First, I provide a method for interpreting battle scene music that explores its points of intrigue, takes into account the score's necessary interaction with the story, and does not prioritize any adherence to Classical music norms in order to be deemed a success. Second, my conclusions can act as a guide for someone who wishes to compose battle music but lacks a model for how to do so. Using the three thematic functions that I have uncovered, a new composer has a

model for how to begin. My research, then, both serves a pedagogical purpose and provides an appropriate vocabulary for anyone looking to explain how music contributes to battle scenes.

Since my two chapters seek to abstract the musical features of my case studies into broader theories, a logical next step would be to apply the ideas of thematic alignment and thematic combination to more diverse films and genres to see how effective they are as analytical tools. As a fan of superheroes, I can say confidently that the three thematic functions I outline are all found to some degree in the battle scenes of *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), *Justice League* (2017), *Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse* (2018), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), and even various superhero television shows like *The Flash*, *Legends of Tomorrow*, and *Supergirl* on the CW network and *Agents of Shield* on ABC. For each of these stories, thematic return depicts shifts in power during battle scenes, outlines the combat development, and highlights the most important moment of narrative closure.

These additional examples include more than superhero origin stories. Because the story archetypes vary, the battles serve different functions within the different narrative arcs. Within the superhero genre, then, there are further story archetypes to discover that still use these thematic functions to some extent. Further research on this topic could explore how themes are used in battles that, for example, take place in the film's exposition but do not necessarily function to present the superhero to their doubters, as found in sequel films. In addition, one of the most famous superhero themes is John Williams's theme for *Superman* (1978). This film precedes those I explore by

three decades, so the application of these story archetypes and thematic patterns to this film could determine just how recently these trends began.

Many films outside the superhero genre also contain action sequences, which similarly involve “dramatic, editorial, and visual imperatives” that compete with the music.<sup>65</sup> My initial question of “When so many changing variables pull on the audience’s attention, what role is music allowed to play?” therefore does not have to apply only to superhero films. Action films, adventure films, horror films, period dramas, and more follow different story archetypes in which action sequences may serve a standardized function. Further research can uncover whether these action sequences serve similar narrative functions to the battle sequences in superhero origin stories. Following that discovery, the same procedure I employ in this thesis can be applied to the action sequences of these other genre films in order to reveal whether themes reappear in ways that are comparable to the techniques I have explored.

Thematic combination can also appear in other films. Unlike my exploration of thematic alignment, there are no scene, story, or genre restrictions for my current definition of this concept. Furthermore, as my quick introductory peek at the final battle in *Avengers: Infinity War* demonstrated, non-motivic traits of different themes can also be combined to depict narrative situations. Just as Black Panther’s melody can be combined with the texture of Captain America’s theme to reflect the two of them leading the charge against Thanos, various thematic traits can join together to depict detailed narrative situations. This technique can therefore appear at multiple levels in any film or genre,

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<sup>65</sup> Lehman, “Film-as-Concert Music,” 11-20.

though the amount of detail in the depiction may vary; further research is subsequently a matter of close listening and careful musical analysis to determine the extent to which a film's score represents narrative situations in this way.

The two topics I examine in this thesis present numerous options for how themes can express narrative development in film. By using analytical methods that do not force Classical norms onto music that interacts with multiple sources of expressive media, other creative compositional techniques have the opportunity to present themselves. With the two ideas I have outlined, this thesis can both help readers find words to explain why their favorite scores work so well and help composers pave the way for new techniques.

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