



MUHL 588: Music of American Film

Units: 2

Term—Day—Time: Fall 2024—Wednesdays—12:00–1:50pm (Pacific Time)

Location: KDC 241

Instructor: Tim Greiving

Office: Virtual

Contact Info: tim.greiving@usc.edu

Course Description

Music is the soul of film. Film scores can animate, enhance, pump blood into, subvert, and often transcend their movie. This underlooked, underappreciated art form is one hundred years old—still an infant compared to its predecessors like opera, ballet, and theater music, but old enough to offer a rich, fascinating history. In this course we'll take a tour through that history, at times skimming along the surface, sometimes diving deep. With the aid of film clips, lively discussion, and special guests, you'll gain a solid knowledge of the most heard but least noticed art form of the past century.

This is as much a course in film music appreciation and literacy as it is a history. By the end of the semester you will learn to listen to films more attentively and to articulate the various roles music can play in film, and you will have a grasp on the major developments and evolutions of the art form and how they occurred.

(Note: We will almost exclusively focus on *Hollywood* film music, although some attention will be paid to international films and composers. We'll also limit our study to *original, instrumental scores for feature films*, without spending much or any time on television, videogames, or song-based soundtracks and music supervision.)

Learning Objectives

1. **Fundamentals:** You will learn the basic facts about how film music is created, how composers collaborate in the filmmaking process, as well as fundamental terms and definitions of the art form.

2. **History:** You will learn the broad eras of American film music over the past century, the macro shifts and trends in the art form, and the major composers who defined and contributed to its history.
3. **Roles:** You will learn to identify and describe the various roles and functions that music plays in film, and develop a vocabulary and an insight about what is really happening in the interplay between music and the images on screen.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

There will be (a total of 12) weekly writing assignments, one midterm writing assignment, and a final exam.

Weekly films and reflections

I will assign two films to watch in advance of each class period. You will write a short (150–200 word) reflection on *one* of those scores in keeping with the nature of our discussions in class.

Due every Tuesday at midnight.

Midterm essay

Building on the tools gained through the shorter assignments, you'll select any film you like—to be approved by me—and write a longer, more substantial essay (1000–1500 words) about the role that score plays in the entire film, with a brief introduction about the film and its composer.

Final Exam

A short-answer exam, the culmination of the major subjects and ideas we discuss in class.

Grading Breakdown

Grades will be recorded in Brightspace. Participation will be measured by your attendance and level of engagement in class discussions.

Assignment	% of Grade
Paragraphs (12)	50
Midterm essay	20
Participation	10
Final exam	20
Total	100

Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale.

A	93-100
A-	90-92
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	59 and below

Policies

Late work

Any late assignment will automatically be docked one letter grade per day following the deadline, unless you ask for permission ahead of time with a valid excuse.

Attendance

1. This course is being offered in an in-person modality. Deviations or exceptions will not be considered unless the instructor is presented with a directive from the offices of Student Health, Student Affairs, or OSAS.
2. Students are permitted a total of TWO (2) absences (excused or unexcused) for the entire semester without any grade penalty. These absences may not include Test/Quiz or Presentation days.
3. In case of absence, it is your responsibility to find out about assignments and prepare accordingly. I encourage you to first contact a friend/colleague in the class to find out about any missed work to be made up following an absence. Students may also contact the instructor with questions. However, the instructor reserves the right to limit office-hour advising in the instance of excessive absences.
4. If a student must miss a Test/Quiz/Exam due to an emergency, proof of the absence (such as a doctor's note) may be required.
5. If you become persistently sick or have other personal problems that interfere with this course, please contact me so that we may address the situation together.
6. Each absence above the permitted number (excused or unexcused) will result in a 5% deduction in the course grade, e.g. 90% becomes 85%.
7. In the case of an official USC Athletic Event: an official letter from a representative of the USC team, etc., submitted at least one week in advance of the event.

8. In the case of religious observance: Notify me at least one week in advance of the holiday and preferably at the start of the semester.

Course evaluation

You will have an opportunity to submit comments on the mid-semester evaluation and the standard USC course evaluation survey at the end of the semester. Be honest!

Course Schedule

Week 1 (August 28)

The Soul of Film: Why film music matters, how it all started, and how it has evolved. Film music as an heir to the concert hall, opera, theater, and the church; the various roles music can play in a film, the mechanics and artistry of film scoring, definition of terms, structure and effects of the old studio system, innovations throughout the years, etc.

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Week 2 (September 4)

European Imports: At the dawn of American cinema, several classically trained composers from Austria and Germany fled the Nazi menace—and found work in Hollywood. The circumstances of timing and their unique musical (and cultural) background shaped why and how films were scored, creating a template and language that has influenced film music to this day. Their contemporaries had to either contend with, or rebel against, the reigning aesthetic.

Required films for Week 2:

- *King Kong* (1933)
- *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938)

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Week 3 (September 11)

Mickey Mousing: Several factors informed the basic mechanics and mode of early film scoring, including the influence of ballet, silent film accompaniment, and cartoons—but the overall effect was a highly reactive, exaggerated, *external* application of music to images. This style had its reasons and benefits, but it quickly became a source of derision among classical musicians and a tradition to be rethought and subverted. Besides moving away from “cartooning,” the first big evolutionary leap in scoring was from *literalism and sincerity* to *cynicism and self-awareness*.

Required films for Week 3:

- *Pinocchio* (1940)
- *Sunset Blvd* (1950)

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Week 4 (September 18)

American Innovation: Bernard Herrmann (b. 1911) was the first homegrown American composer to substantially challenge the template and tropes of neo-romantic European scoring, introducing a more minimalistic, cell-based style; he also took score from the exterior and obvious into the psyche, emotions, and subtext of film stories, all of which helped complicate and evolve American filmmaking. Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, and a few other composers (best known for their concert music or conducting) also injected fresh ideas into the cinema-stream, particularly influencing the American Western.

Required films for Week 4:

- *Citizen Kane* (1941)
- *Vertigo* (1958)

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Week 5 (September 25)

Jazz Invasion: Beginning in the 1950s, American composers steeped in jazz writing and performance began to infuse jazz language into film music in both subtle and radical ways. This worked particularly well for stories set in places like New Orleans or New York, or stories about contemporary subjects (especially crime, crime-solving, and drugs), but it was also a reflection of the changing tastes of both audiences and filmmakers. In addition, this shift finally—if only slightly—opened a door into Hollywood for Black composers. (This period also saw the increasing value of musical economy and unique instrumental ensembles.)

Required films for Week 5:

- *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951)
- *The Pawnbroker* (1964)

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Week 6 (October 2)

Pop and Needledrops: With the advent of LPs and the explosion of teen-oriented pop music in the 1960s, it quickly became desirable (and profitable) for movies to have title songs, which also gave way to scores with a pop-based vocabulary, which then led to film soundtracks completely dominated by songs and existing music. This sea change threatened the traditional role and orchestral style of film scoring, to the point that many composers feared they were going to become extinct—but it also led to some exciting artistic innovations.

Required films for Week 6:

- *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961)
- *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)

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Week 7 (October 9)

The Funky 1970s: With the backdrop of enormous social change and a countercultural tide in every facet of entertainment, pop and rock influences vied with a thrilling burst of both traditional symphonic and new, idiosyncratic styles in film music. Composers with increasingly varied backgrounds, the introduction of synthesizers and electronic music, and younger directors in a post-studio system “New Hollywood” all led to fascinating developments in the art form.

Required films for Week 7:

- *The Conversation* (1974)
- *Rocky* (1976)

--MIDTERM due, October 9 at midnight--

--FALL RECESS, October 10–11--

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Week 8 (October 16)

The Second Coming: Enter Jerry Goldsmith and John Williams. These two titans actually got their start in the 1950s under the old order, but in the 1970s they both catapulted to the fore as near-perfect ideals of American film scoring—reviving an older tradition of theme-based, romantic, symphonic scoring but with a more modern energy as well as a more sophisticated and robust compositional integrity. Williams became the all-time gold standard, synonymous with the entire art form—which he almost single-handedly helped legitimize (in time) in the circles of “high art.”

Required films for Week 8:

- *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979)
- *Jaws* (1975)

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Week 9 (October 23)

The Space Age: In the late 1970s, synthesizers and savvy electronic musicians took hold of Hollywood, helping filmmakers cast visions of the future (both cold and pulsating with neon) but also supplying non-futuristic stories with an ultra-contemporary or unorthodox vibe. This style came and went in popularity (and later came back as retro chic), but one of the lasting legacies of this period was a democratization of film composers; electronic tools meant that now *anyone* could score a film—even rock stars.

Required films for Week 9:

- *Halloween* (1978)
- *Blade Runner* (1982)

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Week 10 (October 30)

Digital Revolution meets Analog Tradition: As much as changing trends in popular music and new technology impacted film scoring, the old ways—of using symphonic orchestras to tell stories through themes and development—continued to thrive, carried forward by a new generation of composers with great success and subtle transformations. The digital revolution brought the good (sampling, mockups, easy editing) *and* the bad (endless rewrites, mockups, composing for sampled sounds instead of human beings).

Required films for Week 10

Tuesday:

- *The Land Before Time* (1988)
- *The Fugitive* (1992)

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Week 11 (November 6)

The Zimmer Effect: A young German synth programmer from the pop world came to Hollywood... and film music was never the same. Hans Zimmer not only immediately became the hottest flavor in town and a favorite among a slew of successful filmmakers, but his unique contributions—groove-based scoring, digital mockups, working with a team—permanently affected the art and the industry, with both positive and negative consequences.

Required films for Week 11:

- *Rain Man* (1988)
- *The Lion King* (1994)

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Week 12 (November 13)

Minimalism and Globalization: Zimmer was part of a larger shift away from through-composed, highly choreographed scoring toward different expressions of minimalism and writing music independently from picture. While Bernard Herrmann had pioneered this to some degree, many scores became divorced from specific action and story beats and created more of a prevailing mood, rhythmic pulse, or hypnotic dream state. This, combined with an influx of musical sounds, styles, and composers from beyond America and Europe further removed film scoring from its Golden Age roots.

Required films for Week 12:

- *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992)
- *The Matrix* (1999)

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Week 13 (November 20)

Anyone Can Score: From self-taught movie nerds to French John Williams fans, from industrial rockers to indie singer-songwriters, from experimental electronic musicians to Dutch DJs... in the new millennium there was absolutely no recipe for *who* could score films, or *how* to do so.

Required films for Week 13:

- *The Social Network* (2010)
- *Arrival* (2016)

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Week 14: NO CLASS

--Thanksgiving Holiday - November 27--December 1--

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Week 15 (December 4)

Today's Trends: A look at the current trends and tropes of film scoring—the good, the bad, and the ugly. On one hand, composers are becoming ever more integral collaborators at the earliest stages of filmmaking and directors' appreciation (and literacy) of the power of music is increasing... while at the same time experimentation and personality are being stifled by digital workflows and the blandness of corporate, risk-averse content production.

Required films for Week 15

- *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)
- *Joker* (2019)

--FINAL EXAM: Friday, December 13 — 11:00am–1:00pm--
Location: KDC 241

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

You will need a laptop, internet access, and access to Brightspace.

USC Technology Support Links

[Brightspace help for students](#)

[Software available to USC Campus](#)

Sharing of course materials outside of the learning environment

USC has a policy that prohibits sharing of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment. Please do not share or otherwise distribute class materials, music scores or recordings produced by me or any students in the conduct of this course without expressed permission.

SCampus Section 11.12(B)

Distribution or use of notes or recordings based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study is a violation of the USC Student Conduct Code. This includes, but is not limited to, providing materials for distribution by services publishing class notes. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the Internet or via any other media. (See Section C.1 Class Notes Policy).

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

Academic dishonesty has a far-reaching impact and is considered a serious offense against the university. Violations will result in a grade penalty, such as a failing grade on the assignment or in the course, and disciplinary action from the university itself, such as suspension or even expulsion.

For more information about academic integrity see the [student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Class policy regarding AI generators:

This course aims to develop creative, analytical, and critical thinking skills. Therefore, all assignments should be prepared by the student working individually or in groups. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare

you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, using AI-generated text, code, or other content is prohibited in this course, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Statement on University Academic and Support Systems

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress:

To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the [Financial Aid Office webpage](#) for [undergraduate](#)- and [graduate-level](#) SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

Support Systems:

[Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline consists of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

[Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-2500

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

[USC Emergency](#) - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

[USC Department of Public Safety](#) - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call

Non-emergency assistance or information.

[Office of the Ombuds](#) - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.