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Music and Film
Assignment 2
Score: A Film Music Documentary

Dear Reader,

You should watch *Score: A Film Music Documentary* (2017) but, before you do, you need to become a bit of an audiophile. Now I'm not saying you need to run out and take out a loan against your car to spend five figures on a DAC, an amp, and a pair of top notch open-back headphones (if you do, please invite me over). I'm just saying you need to start paying attention to how the audio devices in your sphere reproduce the music, movies or television their being fed. Is the bass present but not overpowering? Are the highs crisp? Can you still hear the vocals between both? Does the music envelop you a little as it moves from left to right? Start asking these questions of the headphones and speakers at your disposal. Once you found the ones you like best, sit down, put on *Score*, and realize how much you've been missing.

Score: a Film Music Documentary directed by Matt Schrader (and scored by Ryan Taubert) is, well, a documentary about film music. It features an edited collection of interviews and behind-the-scenes clips of prominent Hollywood composers. And not just the once you've never heard of, we hear from John Williams and Hans Zimmer too. It uses these interviews to outline the history of film music, the process of scoring the film, and illuminate a little of the experience of being a film music composer. Sprinkled throughout in ample but not overwhelming quantities are high-quality, expertly mastered recordings of famous film scores. We get clips from Lord of the Rings, Jaws, Vertigo and, yes, Star Wars. You might start wishing you'd taken out that loan. I know I did.

See, I watch almost all my movies with other people. As a result, the audio is usually being dribbled into the world through Costco soundbars, microscopic computer speakers, or, for the ones I was most excited about, movie theater sound systems with their muddy reproductions and sine-curve frequency responses. Not everyone shares my budding audiophile dispositions. But I sat alone to watch *Score* as a class assignment so I donned my birthday-presented-from-my-parents-and-sister-and-girlfriend-and-grandma-and-grandpa-and-dog headphones (Bowers and Wilkins PX7s, if you're interested). It was awesome. As the Shire theme was analyzed for its use as an emotional tool, I was feeling the joy and melancholy of its many renditions on a whole new level. The woodwind's notes rang out clear and pure, the violin and cello strings had just enough mid-bass presence to feel full, entire instruments suddenly appeared in the track. As *Score* continued, I continued to experience this emotional amazement. Familiar tune after familiar tune were suddenly given new life by the documentary's music-centric mix (often dipping or outright eliminating the movie's audio), studio-like recordings and music-expert's illustration. At the end I had a list of at least ten movies I had to go back and watch with my headphones, just to re-experience their scores.

If the goal was to cultivate a new appreciation for movie music, *Score* is a success, assuming you bring the right gear. But even if, for some unimaginable reason, you did watch it through a 15\$ Bluetooth speaker you found half-off at Walmart, *Score* might still succeed at imparting extra awareness of the importance of film scores. Listening to the way these craftsmen talk about music, and following along as they demonstrate the ways particular musical tricks and flourishes can be used to induce emotions, introduce a setting, direct your attention and often tell half the story, you can't help but gain a respect for the craft. However, not all is amazing with this documentary.

If the goal was for the audience to leave feeling like they had some real knowledge of the process, history, or broader culture of film music, *Score* misses the mark primarily because it lacks structure. The interview style is great for gaining insight but limiting for telling a story. For example, what might be classified as the 'history' segment is an obviously incomplete collection of interesting single-score developments in the field. You get only a vague sense of where the film score medium, started, some steps along the way, and kinda where it is now. I found myself wanting for more understanding of the trends in the field over time and the way they evolved into modern scores. Additionally, *Score* completely ignores anything that wasn't a Hollywood blockbuster and in only a few instances addresses some 'off the beaten path' experiments in the Hollywood sector. In a similar way, some time is dedicated to illustrating the process of completing a score, but with little organization and minimal detail. We see clips of a recording studio with a full band and director, learn some of the different roles people can fill in the recording both, and watch some composers absentmindedly experiment with their instruments, but are never fully explained the process. In some ways, *Score* is a like an impressionist painting, it's beautiful and emotional, but you can't get a good handle on reality.

Which why I started this by saying you, dear reader, need to become an audiophile before you watch *Score*. A good pair of headphones for music is like a good pair of eyeglasses for paintings, you must bring them to really experience the art. And *Score* is good piece of art. It highlights the emotion and power of film music, elevating it with just enough detail about the mechanisms behind the magic to inspire awe. If you go in looking for a lesson, you might be let down. But for movie buffs, music buffs, and anyone looking to gain more appreciation for cinema, its essential. As John Bleasdale put it in his review: "Having watched the film, it would take someone with ears of cloth and a heart of stone not to start fishing out some of the old soundtracks to enjoy them anew."¹ Aww dang, guess it's time to call the bank while I browse amazon for a new amplifier.

¹ <https://cine-vue.com/2018/03/dvd-review-score-a-film-music-documentary.html>