Star Wars, Musical Anachronism and Audience Interpretation

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N.B. The original *Star Wars* trilogy are sometimes referred to as Episodes IV, V and VI following the release of the prequel trilogy (Episodes I, II and III) in recent years.
Abstract

Early Hollywood composers used Romantic-style music by default, tending to draw on the recent musical past. Consequently, their scores were often anachronistic to the time setting of the film. John Williams was among the first composers to use musical anachronism deliberately to affect audience interpretation of a film. Williams’ Romantic-style score for the otherwise futuristic Star Wars trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983) demonstrates this practice clearly: the anachronistic music grounds the strange setting in a familiar, emotionally direct musical rhetoric, subconsciously helping audiences culturally attuned to Western art music to gain a deeper understanding of the narrative.

Building on Katherine Kalinak’s work about Western art music’s influence on Hollywood scoring practices, I will explore Star Wars’ deliberate musical anachronism through examination of harmony, use of leitmotif and orchestration. Using Nicholas Cook’s approach to the mutual roles of music and image in the construction of meaning, I will suggest possible intellectual and emotional audience responses to the films with particular focus on their readings of Williams’ portrayal of the opposing Light and Dark Sides of the Force.
Star Wars, Musical Anachronism and Audience Interpretation

As creatures we don't know if we have a future, but we certainly share a great past. We remember it, in language and in pre-language, and that's where music lives - it's to this area in our souls that it can speak.¹

John Williams, January 1997

What style of music would we normally expect to find in a science-fiction film score? Typically we might imagine music that is electronically generated, perhaps incorporating sound design within an electro-acoustic genre. An example of a typical science-fiction score might be Bernard Hermann’s music to Robert Wise’s 1951 film The Day the Earth Stood Still,² which makes frequent use of synthesizers with unusual overdubbing and tape-reversal techniques; or Vangelis’ score to Ridley Scott’s 1983 film Blade Runner, which was generated almost completely electronically.³ However, John Williams’ music for George Lucas’ futuristic original Star Wars trilogy (A New Hope, 1977; The Empire Strikes Back, 1980; Return of the Jedi, 1983) is grounded in the idiom of late nineteenth-century orchestral Romantic music.⁴ In a trilogy of films set in space and with futuristic technology - two defining features of many science-fiction films - this is probably not the style of music audiences either past or present would expect to hear, and it is therefore possible to label the relationship between the music and the setting of these films as anachronistic. Why then, does Williams choose to score the Star Wars trilogy in this style, and what effect does the anachronistic relationship have on the audience’s interpretation of the films (both audiences contemporary with the release of the films and present day audiences)? Williams himself provides perhaps the most obvious answer:

[George Lucas] didn’t want, for example, electronic music, he didn’t want futuristic cliché, outer space noises. He felt that since the picture was so highly different in all of its physical orientations – with the different creatures, places

² The Day the Earth Stood Still, DVD, directed by Robert Wise (1951; Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2005).
unseen, sights unseen, and noises unheard – that the music should be on fairly familiar emotional ground.\(^5\)

However, the music does more than just familiarise the audience with this other worldly setting. In this paper I aim to demonstrate that the anachronistic relationship set up by Williams has a major impact on the way that audiences perceive the narrative and setting of the original three *Star Wars* films. The paper will begin with a brief background to anachronism and the classical Hollywood score before exploring several theories about the function of music in film which will be used in specific scene analyses from the trilogy.

As one of the first modern blockbusters, the *Star Wars* trilogy helped redefine Hollywood cinema and the way in which nineteenth-century Romantic music was used in films. Therefore the analysis in this paper has important implications for our understanding of many of today’s blockbusters, the vast majority of which still employ Romantic music to some degree. Through my analysis, I will show that by combining aspects of nineteenth-century Romanticism, such as the leitmotif, with classic Hollywood scoring conventions (themselves derived from Romanticism), Williams succeeds in suggesting a fantasy narrative within a science-fiction setting. Whilst the physical world of the films is entirely alien to audiences, the story is grounded in the familiar tropes and narrative structures of the fantasy genre that Williams emphasises through his music. Lucas and Williams may have wanted to use music in this way to enable us to identify with character archetypes from the fantasy genre such as the princess, the hero and the wizard, which are recognisable to audiences because of a shared cultural background that includes fairy-tales and myths. In addition to this however, the anachronistic relationship also succeeds in bringing certain thematic elements of the films associated with fantasy - such as the supernatural Force - to the fore of the narrative. Williams also uses different anachronistic relationships to create a sense that the ‘world’ in which these characters live is not our world but rather some mythical one that spans distances in time and space.

**Anachronism**

The term anachronism comes from the Greek ανάχρονος where ανά (ana) means against or anti and χρόνος (chronos) means time. We can therefore define the term as an error in

chronology, and indeed, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes anachronism as ‘neglect or falsification, intentional or not, of chronological relation’. An anachronistic item is sometimes an object but can also be a spoken expression, a technology, a style of music, a social custom or any other object that would appear out of place outside of its original domain. Some anachronisms are intentional, such as the use of anachronistic terms when talking about future technology in order to allow audience identification without having to explain a new term. For example, in the film *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, the rebels are said to have stolen ‘data tapes’ containing the secret plans to the Death Star. Whilst it is clear that computer storage formats in the *Star Wars* galaxy are far ahead of Earth’s, the use of the word tape, which was the main storage medium of computer data when the film was released, helps audiences to recognise the function of the new technology.

In a similar, albeit less direct way, music to films can be employed in an anachronistic fashion to enable and improve audience understanding of the characters and events of the narrative. Anachronistic film music can manifest itself in a number of ways: an older style of music could be used for a film with a more modern setting, such as in Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which Romantic music (ranging from Richard Strauss’ opening fanfare from *Also sprach Zarathustra* to Johann Strauss’ *Blue Danube*) and its cultural baggage is juxtaposed with the science-fiction setting, creating conflicting meanings for the viewer. Alternatively, a style of music could be more modern than the film’s setting such as in Sofia Coppola’s 2006 film *Marie Antoinette*, in which pop music dominates the soundtrack (although contemporary pieces by Rameau are also used), inviting the audience to share the heroine’s present with ours.

Claudia Gorbman argues that the use of a musical style that does not call attention to itself within the film’s setting places the audience’s ears in an area harmonious with what their eyes are seeing on screen, thus allowing the music to more or less bypass consciousness and shape the audience’s interpretation of a film. In such cases, the musical style used does not necessarily have to be from the film’s era to be effective: for example, Hans Zimmer’s music to the Ridley Scott ancient-Rome epic *Gladiator* (2000) largely employs a late nineteenth-century Romantic style, with hints of Middle-Eastern modality.

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and instrumentation, but still successfully creates a framework in which the audience can empathise with the plight of the protagonist. To the uninitiated, the music in this film could simply be perceived as ‘old’; in this sense, the connection with the ‘old’, setting of the film is a crude but logical one. On the other hand, music in a style which more obviously contrasts with the film’s setting does call attention to itself, as in Brian Helgeland’s 2001 film A Knight’s Tale, which employs classic rock songs to bring the Middle Ages to the audience, rather than force the audience into the Middle Ages. Because the anachronistic relationship between setting and music is much clearer in a film like this, the music allows the audience to consciously draw connections between the cultural associations of the music and the on-screen action.

The anachronism of the music of the original Star Wars trilogy straddles the line between calling attention to itself and being harmonious with the events on screen. There is a clear dissonance between the time setting of the music and that of the film but because of the audience’s familiarity with the nineteenth-century Romantic idiom the effect of this anachronism is softened. Prior to Williams’ scores, the use of Romantic music in films had fallen out of fashion and pop songs had dominated soundtracks of the 1960s and 1970s as studios began to exploit the commercial success which the use of pop songs in films could bring. This fact can help us to understand the impact of Williams’ score on the audience hearing it for the first time in 1977; in short, the music for A New Hope could be said to have been anachronistic not only with the setting of the film but also with contemporary practice. Thus for movie-goers in 1977, the effect of the anachronism would have been greater than for us today, now that regular use of Romantic music in many genres of film has lessened the impact of such anachronisms.

**The Classical Hollywood Score**

Before the pop soundtrack began to take over in the 1960s, the nineteenth-century orchestral Romantic idiom had dominated Hollywood film scores, becoming the standard style by the 1930s and thus creating anachronisms by default. Some film music scholars

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have labelled the music of early Hollywood as late musical Romanticism,\textsuperscript{12} whilst others have called it classical,\textsuperscript{13} and still others, simply Romantic.\textsuperscript{14} Whatever the term used, the orchestral music to which scholars refer emphasised expression over form - using lyrical, songlike melodies; adventurous modulation; weightier textures; and bold, dramatic contrasts.

A quintessential example of the use of this Romantic musical language in Hollywood is Eric Wolfgang Korngold’s theme to Michael Curtiz’s 1940 epic *The Sea Hawk* (see Figure 1).\textsuperscript{15} The brass fanfare that opens the theme is the musical embodiment of the heroic deeds and adventures of the main character, Captain Geoffrey Thorpe (played by Errol Flynn). The fanfare is combined with surging strings, harp glissandi and bombastic timpani to convey an impression of heroism, in a similar way to many of Mahler’s symphonic movements. What

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1.** The poster to *The Sea Hawk*. Note the description at the top - ‘Romance, Adventure, Thrills’ - elements which are portrayed in Korngold’s score.


\textsuperscript{15} *The Sea Hawk*, DVD, directed by Michael Curtiz (1940; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005).
follows is a soaring string melody representing the love affair between Thorpe and Dona Maria. The melody’s use of chromatic harmony suggests a troubled romance and the woodwind runs, with harp interjections, help romanticise the music further. As the theme continues, the fanfare and Romantic string sections engage in dialogue, demonstrating Thorpe’s conflicts between his loyal service to his country and the deeper feelings of love he has towards Maria. In these ways, Korngold’s main theme portrays the heroism, romance and adventure of the film.

Kathryn Kalinak suggests a number of reasons for the dominance of this Romantic style in classical Hollywood scoring, including the background of the composers (nearly all of whom came from Europe, where this style was prominent), the conservative tastes of producers and the fact that the emphasis on melody offered a clear sense of continuity to the audience.16 These factors, coupled with the proximity of this era to the end of the Romantic period, meant that the use of Romantic style music was simply the default for film composers. However, some scholars point out that the use of nineteenth-century Romantic orchestral music is not as uniform as we might at first think. James Buhler and David Neumeyer, for example, suggest that by placing atonality as the logical conclusion of the late Romantic style, film music has been restricted to a particular historical period.17 In other words, Romantic film music is perceived by many as being frozen at a stage in the teleologically orientated development of music, leading scholars to label the musical style of Hollywood as ‘anachronistic, unoriginal – a nostalgic throwback’.18 Buhler and Neumeyer argue that the style of Hollywood film scores actually does depart from late Romantic practice more than we give it credit for, but because it is constrained by being perceived in a particular historical period, we have failed to recognise this. They go on to note the broad range of the Romantic idiom, suggesting that the style continued to be used in scores not only because of its characteristic sound but also because of its flexibility and the ease with which it ‘can readily absorb such features as touches of local colour, quotations from existing music, and imitations of earlier style’.19

16 Kalinak, 100-101.
18 Buhler and Neumeyer, 383.
19 Buhler and Neumeyer, 383.
The absorptive nature of the classical Hollywood style is an important facet in the Star Wars trilogy’s musical score. Although the scores for all three films are grounded in late nineteenth-century romanticism, they also explore aspects of post-Romanticism, including Stravinsky’s modernism; Prokofiev’s fusion of melody and modernism; and diegetic explorations of jazz, rock music, and Baroque genres. However, Williams also uses the late nineteenth-century style for more meaningful and dramatic purposes, particularly in relation to the way in which the anachronism shapes our interpretation of the narrative.

Annette Davison argues that ‘with Williams’ scores [. . .] and particularly Star Wars [A New Hope] (1977), [. . .] the structural conventions of classical scoring were emphatically reunited with the idiom and the medium of the classical Hollywood scores produced during the 1930s and 1940s’.20 Williams has been credited as almost single-handedly returning the classical film score to a position of prominence, and the act of returning to this style after a hiatus in which many of the biggest films featured pop scores, must surely have had an impact on the composer’s degree of self-awareness when scoring a film. As such, it would be naive to assume that Williams had returned to the innocence of composing in the default anachronistic style of older Hollywood. I would argue that Williams in fact had an agenda for composing in a largely nineteenth-century Romantic idiom, as opposed to many earlier Hollywood composers whose anachronistic use of music, as David Butler says, was ‘one motivated by standardisation, rather than artistic decisions regarding the use of musical anachronism to comment on or modify the audience’s response to the on-screen action’.21 This is not to say that the classical Hollywood film composers did not use the music to enhance and mould the audience’s responses but that the style of music which they used was nearly always pre-determined, thus creating anachronisms that were mere by-products of the film composing tradition. With the Star Wars trilogy, however, Williams uses anachronism deliberately, rather than by default, to shape audience responses to the film and suggest a fantasy narrative within a science-fiction setting.

In what ways, then, does Williams’ score evoke the nineteenth-century Romantic idiom and hark back to the golden age of Hollywood scores, thus setting up this anachronistic relationship between score and narrative setting? Have the functions of the music changed, or are their effects now heightened because of the deliberate use of anachronism? And how

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does this anachronistic relationship contribute to the interpretation of the *Star Wars* narrative as fantasy? Before delving into this analysis, I will provide a brief overview of some of the theories behind the way music functions in films. This will help to give some grounding to my explanations of the effects that Williams’ anachronistic music has on the films’ audiences.

**How Film Music Works**

The function of film music has sometimes been compared with the function of music in opera; indeed, Joseph Kerman identifies three ways in which music functions in opera that I would argue hold true for music in films. According to Kerman, the first function of music in opera is to flesh out details concerning a character’s deeds and emotional state; the second is to articulate actions – ‘deeds done, steps taken, events arranged, and “psychological actions” such as deciding, renouncing, and falling in love’. The third function is the way in which music creates atmosphere, establishing a particular world or area where certain thoughts, feelings and actions may occur. Implicit in Kerman’s discussion is that music imbues meaning to the narrative in conjunction with the on-stage action. This idea is different to what Kalinak calls the ‘Classical theory’ of film music, which assumes that meaning is found in the visual image and that the accompanying music can only support or change what is already implicit in the visual image. However, this thinking stands in opposition to experience – for example, when we heard tremolo strings in a scene, the music does not reinforce the suspense in the scene but is in fact partly responsible for creating it – and most scholars now understand music as having a more fundamental role in the interpretation of a film.

This sense of music’s meaning is picked up by Nicholas Cook, who claims that the *effects* of music can be discerned in the abstract, but the *meaning* of music can only be understand if we have a ‘clear grasp of the communicative context within which [. . .] meaning is realized’. In other words, we can only understand the meaning of the music when we analyse it in conjunction with a context such as film; outside of this, music can be said to posses the ‘potential for the construction or negotiation of meaning in specific contexts’ but

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23 Kalinak, 29.
not actually meaning.\textsuperscript{25} The role of music in this relationship is an interpretative one: Cook argues that the main function of film music is to shape our responses to the values, emotions and attitudes on screen, whereas words and pictures deal with the specific and the objective.\textsuperscript{26} Later in the dissertation, I will examine the ways in which the anachronistic score for the \textit{Star Wars} trilogy shapes these responses, basing my approach to the analysis on the fundamental relationship between music and image described by Cook.

The crucial difference between the way music functions in opera and films is that, unlike in opera, where music functions at the foreground level, the music for film is nearly always a background element that surreptitiously influences how we understand and interpret the film. Gorbman describes the way in which we are exposed to music in a film:

\begin{quote}
Now, in watching a conventional film whose dialogues and visuals are telling a story, we devote our concentration to its successive events and the meanings that are constantly accruing to them. Most feature films relegate music to the viewer’s sensory background, that area least susceptible to rigorous judgement and most susceptible to affective manipulation.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

Because average movie-goers are not fully aware of the music when they watch a film, it is harder for them to ponder the effect that the music is having on them, and thus the music becomes ‘a wash of sound to which we respond but whose meaning lies just beyond conscious recognition’.\textsuperscript{28} Kalinak claims that many film spectators do not listen critically and that those who do have to step outside of the confines which normally bind the spectator into the ‘fictive reality’ of the film.\textsuperscript{29} For this latter group, as Gorbman would suggest, the ‘game’ is over because they are aware of music’s ‘presence as part of the film’s discourse’.\textsuperscript{30} This allows them to second-guess the way in which audiences past and present would subconsciously react to the music in films such as the \textit{Star Wars} trilogy, because they take up a conscious critical stance to examine the phenomenon.

Thus for most of the movie-going public, a lot of film music actually bypasses consciousness, functioning as the ‘hypnotic voice bidding the spectator to believe, focus,
behold, identify, consume’. Gorbman claims that in such a state there is a ‘greater disposition for the subject to accept the film’s pseudo-perceptions as his/her own’, and in an alien setting such as the Star Wars galaxy, music’s function as the hypnotic voice is even more crucial than in films with a more familiar location. However, I would argue that in addition to this, there are also moments in scores, such as those of the Star Wars trilogy, where rather than bypassing consciousness, the music clearly draws attention to itself, often because of its declamatory nature and sitting high in the overall mix. These different methods of affecting audience interpretation are explored by Gorbman who identifies seven principles of music composition for standard narrative cinema, paraphrased below:

1) Invisibility – The workings of nondiegetic music must not be made perceivable;
2) Inaudibility – Music is not meant to be heard consciously;
3) Music is primarily a signifier of emotion;
4) Narrative cueing:
   a. Referential/narrative – Music can indicate a point of view, delineate scene boundaries, and establish setting;
   b. Connotative – Music interprets narrative events for the audience;
5) Continuity – Music provides formal and rhythmic continuity by filling in gaps between scenes;
6) Unity – Music helps to create narrative unity through the repetition and variation of musical ideas;
7) Violation – Music may violate any of the above in the service of the other principals.

I will make specific reference to these principles in my analysis of scenes from the original Star Wars trilogy. Since Romantic-style film music has generally been the area in which these principles function most effectively, composing in this style, Williams makes these devices available for his use. Despite the science-fiction setting, these principles function in very similar ways to the way they did in the 1930s, but the effect on audiences (particularly contemporary ones who, as previously suggested, were less used to Romantic music in films) is heightened.

In the following analysis, I will first consider Williams’ use of late nineteenth-century Romanticism, addressing such questions as how this idiom manifests itself and in what ways the music could be understood as anachronistic with the film. I wish to demonstrate that

31 Gorbman, 69.
32 Gorbman, 64.
33 Gorbman, 73.
the fantasy element of the narrative is emphasised by Williams’ choice of musical style within the context of different scenes, and that these musical styles shape the anachronistic relationship between the film and the music. My analysis is based on the assumption that Western audiences are culturally attuned to the idiom of late Romantic music, through its use in film scores and their exposure to late Romantic art music. For present day and contemporary audiences, there is a shared cultural past ensuring that spectators are aware, at least on a subconscious level, of the different musical devices and characteristics of the Romantic idiom.

**The Romantic in Star Wars – Anachronism Established**

The opening title sequence plays an important role in establishing the feel of a film, particularly through music, as other aspects of the film, such as narrative and characters, have often not yet been introduced. An analysis of the Star Wars opening sequence, identical all three films, shows that the title theme music is anachronistic: it is therefore worth analysing this sequence to see what it can reveal about the films. The 20th Century Fox Fanfare that begins each film was originally composed by Alfred Newman in 1933 and was commonly used in film openings; by the 1970s, however, it was only being used sporadically. It is worth noting that Lucas specifically asked Williams to bring the fanfare back for A New Hope, which perhaps suggests that the Fox Fanfare links in with Williams’ use of Romanticism and the characterisation of this film as a heroic, fantasy adventure. The heroic era of filmmaking is demonstrated in Newman’s fanfare with the militaristic, march-like use of the snare drum; fanfare brass rooted in the tonic of B♭-major; and the soaring violin melody, suggestive of romance and a feminine character.

The silence between the end of the Fox Fanfare and the opening of Williams’ Main Title theme - accompanies text on a black background (see Figure 2). The text evokes a sense of nostalgia, as it reads like the opening of a fairy-tale (as in ‘Once upon a time...’), albeit one set in another galaxy. In this way, the text captures something of the dialectical struggle between the science-fiction setting of the movie (‘galaxy’) and the very old, even mystical aspects of the narrative (‘a long time ago’). The key issues surrounding Williams’ score are the extent to which the music reflects this struggle and the implications of the anachronistic relationship between music and image.
The relationship is established by Williams from the outset with the Main Title (see Example 1), which uses the march-like idiom of Newman’s fanfare and incorporates it into the sonic world of the film score by retaining the B♭-major tonality and continuing in the same register in which Newman’s piece ended. Michael Matessino claims that the Main Title theme ‘conveys the heroism at the heart of the saga with the economy of its opening fifth (reaching upward), descending triplet (gathering strength for another try), and triumphant lift to an octave above the opening note (attainment of the goal)’. This theme resembles many heroic melodies, especially in its use of perfect intervals - compare with the rising perfect fifth in the ‘Siegfried Horn Call’ from Wagner’s Ring Cycle, for example. As a result, the music pre-disposes us to understand the narrative as an epic Romantic adventure. This is one of the reasons why the sudden appearance of the two spaceships following the opening sequence in A New Hope is so powerful: the anachronistic intrusion of these technologically advanced space craft into a world that had up to now consisted of late Romantic music and a fantasy-type affect is quite arresting.

Before the Main Title theme begins, the brass have a fanfare that Buhler claims ‘initiates the melodic impulse, first rhythmically, then in terms of pitch.’ The fanfare is based on quartal harmonies, an idea that is carried through into the accompanimental figure of the theme (bb. 4–5), where the quartal harmony is built on F. The repetition of these two bars (bb. 6–7) familiarises the audience with the phrase, which associates the E♭ of the melody

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34 Michael Matessino, liner notes to Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (John Williams, RCA Records, 1997).
35 Buhler, 33.
with the quartal harmony, before Williams subverts our expectation that this phrase will repeat a third time in bar 8 with the use of a $\text{bVII-V}$ progression in $\text{B}_b$, a classic device in many film scores. The quartal harmony in this theme has a quasi-dominant function because the $F$ in the bass and the $E_b$ in the trumpet line form the root and the flattened seventh of the dominant in $\text{B}_b$-major. However, the harmonic function is not really perceived by the audience, especially in hindsight, after the ‘true’ dominant is revealed in bar 8. Buhler therefore argues that this use of quartal harmony ‘makes the feeling of depth and sense of motion seem indefinite’.\textsuperscript{36} This links back to the introductory text (‘A long time ago...’), reinforcing the idea that at this point, we cannot fully grasp the location or time setting of this story.

In all three films, following the initial synchronisation of music and image with the appearance of the Star Wars logo and the $\text{B}_b$-major harmony, the music takes the initiative, beginning the Main Title theme before the crawling text appears on the screen. It is as if the music calls the narrative into being, so that the aural takes initial precedence over the visual.\textsuperscript{37} Buhler argues that the disparity that this creates gives the music a mythic, almost supernatural quality, because whilst the sound effects become synchronised with the image after their initial asynchronisation, the music moves beyond the bonds of the image,

\textsuperscript{36} Buhler, 36.
\textsuperscript{37} Buhler, 36.
allowing it to represent ‘what extends beyond the material reality of cultural mediation, namely the Force’.\(^{38}\)

By giving precedence to the music at the start of these films, Lucas creates an initial generic expectation that does not reveal the whole picture. Whilst Williams’ music is clearly based on classic Hollywood Romantic idioms, it is only when the audience fully appreciates the science-fiction setting of the films - with the appearance of the spaceships in *A New Hope* for example - that the anachronistic relationship is properly established.

**Leitmotifs and their Anachronistic Relationship with the Film**

Up until this point in the films, music has the advantage over the image, as it is able to establish the Romantic idiom before any action even takes place on screen. However, as the first few scenes of the film unfold and the futuristic setting and associated sound effects emerge, the anachronistic relationship between music and image is firmly established. One of the musical devices employed by Williams is the leitmotif, which as a feature of nineteenth-century opera furthers this anachronistic relationship. Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler explain that leitmotifs are a useful compositional tool because they provide clear aural cues for the listener and, more cynically, suggest that they aid the composer in working under pressure: ‘he can quote where he otherwise would have to invent’.\(^{39}\) However, they go on to argue that cinema does not actually need leitmotifs because music is easily understood anyway, and because the forms and structures of film music are too short to properly accommodate leitmotifs in the fashion of a Wagnerian opera, where the leitmotif is created within ‘a large musical canvas... to take on a structural meaning beyond that of a signpost’.\(^{40}\) Furthermore the two authors argue that because the leitmotif was created to give dramatic events a mythic quality (as well as to signify characters, emotions or objects), there is no place for it in films, which attempt to portray reality.\(^{41}\)

I would dispute many of Adorno and Eisler’s claims. First, their suggestion that film music is so easily understood that it does not require leitmotifs, stems from what Mervyn Cooke describes as ‘their rigid belief that such music should aspire towards a state of modernist

\(^{38}\) Buhler, 39.


\(^{40}\) Adorno and Eisler, 5.

\(^{41}\) Adorno and Eisler, 5.
originality that is inherently more difficult for the average movie-goer to comprehend’.\footnote{Mervyn Cooke, \textit{A History of Film Music} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 82.} This modernist originality, however, is not conducive to a commercially successful narrative film, as musically inexperienced audiences need signposts, such as leitmotifs, to help them find their way about the score. This is particularly true for the \textit{Star Wars} trilogy, where the audience needs guidance from the anachronistic music because the setting is so alien to them. Second, their generalisation about all films attempting to reflect reality does not ring true for genres such as fantasy and science fiction and cannot really be applied to the \textit{Star Wars} films, which have many fantastical, supernatural elements. Finally, the assumption that leitmotifs only function as signposts is also untrue in the case of the \textit{Star Wars} films, as some of Williams’ leitmotifs take on meanings beyond their original signification, thus acting in the way that we would expect leitmotifs in full-fledged Wagnerian operas to act. Buhler makes a similar point, arguing that certain leitmotifs in the films ‘participate in a fluid semiosis where the bond between the leitmotif and what it signifies frequently dissolves’.\footnote{Buhler, 44-45.} As such, Williams uses the leitmotif as an anachronistic device, not only in the manner of classic Hollywood film composers, but also in a more Wagnerian fashion, making this musical feature doubly anachronistic.

One such example of a leitmotif that moves beyond a signifying function is the Force theme (see \textbf{Example 2}). Of all the leitmotifs in the trilogy, this is the most fully developed, and thus one of the most difficult to which to attach a specific meaning. The appearance of this leitmotif, with its portentous minor mode and upward reaching melody, generally accompanies pivotal moments in the film, particularly events that shape the destiny of our main hero, Luke Skywalker. They often involve the old Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi (who is also known as Ben), the Jedi and the Force, which Obi-Wan explains is ‘what gives a Jedi his power. It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us, it binds the galaxy together’.\footnote{“Your Father’s Lightsaber,” \textit{Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope}, special ed. DVD, directed by George Lucas (1977; Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2004).}
Williams sometimes refers to this theme as Ben’s theme in interviews and it would seem that the interchangeability of the two names for this themes relate to the multiple significations for which it is used: Obi-Wan, the Jedi and the Force. It also stems from the fact that Obi-Wan is our primary link to the Force, initially through his connection with the Jedi Knights of old, and then following his sacrifice in *A New Hope* (which is accompanied by a snippet of the theme) as the ghostly embodiment of the Force. For example, when the disembodied voice of Obi-Wan speaks to Luke as he pilots his star fighter (‘Luke, use the Force’), we hear the Force theme but here it is played over the submediant chord (in this case B♭-major) rather than the tonic chord (D-minor). In this way the third note of the melody (an E-natural) create an augmented fourth interval, giving the characteristically open sound of the Lydian modality. Combined with the reverberant, God-like quality of Obi-Wan’s voice, the Lydian inflection conveys a sense of the all-encompassing nature of the Force. For these few moments, time seems to stand still, partly because of the contrast of the Force theme played high in the violins’ tessitura, with the more action-orientated music that preceded it. The theme also occurs in a more militaristic setting in the throne room sequence at the end of *A New Hope*, thus associating the rebels (a small band of freedom fighters, opposed to the ruling empire), and their cause, with the Force. As we can see from his use of the Force theme, Williams uses his leitmotifs for a number of different and complex significations, rather than just in the ‘signposting’ function described by Adorno and Eisler.

One of the most intriguing uses of the Force theme comes in the Binary Sunset scene near the start of *A New Hope*: here the leitmotif is employed before its original signification is made apparent in a subsequent scene. As Luke steps outside of his technologically

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45 This entire scene is very anachronistic, with its coronation-like music evoking an epic period drama in contrast with the technologically-orientated science-fiction genre.
advanced homestead on the desert planet Tatooine and watches the setting of the twin 
suns (see Figure 3), a full version of the Force theme is heard even though nothing about the 
Force has been revealed at this point. According to Buhler, ‘moments like this one when the 
music seems not entirely bound up with its semiotic function are what gives this music its 
mythical character. The music seems to intuit connections that are beyond immediate 
rational comprehension’. In other words, with the Force theme’s appearance at a time and 
place in which the Force as a concept has not even been revealed, the music now draws a 
connection across the film, foreshadowing future scenes and evoking the idea that the Force 
is omniscient. The first-time viewer will only make this connection in retrospect but a 
memory of the Force theme and its use in the Binary Sunset scene could yield a sense of 
familiarity when it returns during Luke’s initial encounter with Obi-Wan. The omniscience of 
the music gives it a supernatural element as existing outside of time is a characteristic very 
often found in fantasy films but rarely in science-fiction ones. The anachronism of this 
theme is important because if the film had had a conventional fantasy setting, the ability of 
the music to portray this mythological Force would be lessened because there would be 
many more fantastical elements competing for the audience’s attention. In this way the 
anachronism between the music and the plot help to create subconscious expectations that 
the fantastical element of the narrative will be played out through the music as the trilogy 
develops.

Figure 3. A New Hope. Luke watches the twin suns of Tatooine set in the Binary Sunset scene

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46 Buhler, 44.
The use of the French horn in the Force theme evokes Romantic associations of heroism, from the horn calls of hunting to the grand melodies of Richard Strauss’ tone poems, thus demonstrating another way in which the score could be said to be anachronistic. Classic Hollywood film composers also took advantage of this association and used the French horn for many themes associated with young, male leads. By associating such a grandiose theme with Luke before he has been fully established as the main protagonist, Williams creates expectations that Luke will display heroic qualities later in the narrative (which, of course, he does). The sense of heroism and the supernatural evoked by the anachronistic Force theme are combined to create the kind of mythical character that Buhler has written about.\(^{47}\) Collins English Dictionary defines myth as ‘a story about superhuman beings of an earlier age’: this seems to be a good description of the heroic Jedi Knights who are all but extinct at the time of A New Hope. By associating the Force theme with Luke here, Williams not only suggests a fantasy narrative steeped in myth but also foreshadows the character’s destiny to become a Jedi Knight.

The music of the Binary Sunset, as shown in Example 3, begins in the preceding scene (‘Lars Family Dinner’), in which Luke and his Uncle Owen enter into a disagreement about his future. As Luke leaves the argument, Williams softly introduces low tessitura violins with a simple tonic-dominant melody in B-major, anticipating the start of Luke’s theme in the flute a bar later (b. 2). The violin entry is very low in the mix, and is not meant to be heard consciously; rather it is simply designed as a way to ‘fade in’ the music so that it does not abruptly appear when the scene changes to the sunset sequence. This relates to both Gorbman’s second function of film music as inaudible and her fifth - music as a provider of continuity between scenes. The flute melody, a variation of the Main Title, originally came to be associated with Luke when he was first introduced in the earlier scene ‘Droids for Sale’; in this scene, as Luke responds to Aunt Beru calling his name, a French horn boldly plays the title theme, implicitly establishing Luke as the main protagonist. Returning to the Binary Sunset scene, Luke’s theme then continues in the clarinet a fifth lower, now centred on an E-major tonality (b. 4), before it sets up a dominant-tonic oscillation for the Force theme’s entry. This G\(^{##}\)-D\(^{##}\) falling fourth oscillation in the flute and clarinet (bb. 7-8) is an inversion of the earlier rising fifth and helps link Luke’s theme with the Force theme and thus, Luke himself with the Force.

\(^{47}\) Buhler, 44.
By establishing Luke as a character with heroic potential and by associating the Force theme with the supernatural, Williams goes beyond the simple anachronism of the nineteenth-century leitmotif within the futuristic setting and juxtaposes the genres of science fiction and fantasy. The mythical, almost ancient quality of the music in scenes such as the Binary Sunset make it anachronistic with the futuristic science-fiction setting, thus suggesting a narrative which is fantasy in genre. The story itself is already steeped in the fantasy tradition: a young farm boy, taught by an old wizard to become a gallant knight and understand his own magical powers, embarks on a journey which sees him rescue a princess, confront a monster, encounter ghosts, and save the kingdom from a wicked sorcerer. With the help of the music, the most defining element of fantasy - the supernatural - is brought to the fore of the films in the shape of the Force.
Pre-tonality, Atonality and Polytonality – Anachronism Developed

In the films, the Dark Side of the Force is associated with the Imperials (the empire) and the Light Side of the Force with the rebels and the Jedi. Williams portrays this conflict and differentiates the Dark Side from the Light through the Imperial March which is first introduced in *The Empire Strikes Back*. The theme develops the anachronistic relationship between the Romantic music and the film’s science-fiction setting by moving beyond the initial late nineteenth-century Romantic idiom. Unlike the Light Side motifs, which tend to employ tonality in the typical functional manner of nineteenth-century Romantic harmony, the music for the Dark Side of the Force is used in what Buhler terms a ‘pretonal’ fashion - that is, material which is often consonant and sometimes even triadic, but not employed tonally.\(^{48}\) In particular, the music of the Imperial March disregards the function of the dominant, suggesting that the Dark Side music is not Romantic or even modern but, rather, stems from a time when harmony was not governed by the tonic-dominant relationship. However, I would argue that the Imperial March could also be understood as post-tonal instead of pre-tonal. This is because Williams’ disregard for the dominant function here relates to the dominant-quality dissonances that were becoming common by the end of the nineteenth-century, marking the beginnings of post-tonal music. Whether the music is pre or post-tonal, it clearly moves beyond the initial anachronistic relationship with the setting, in order to contrast the Light Side rebels with the Dark Side empire.

Analysing the Imperial March leitmotif (see Example 4), Buhler argues that the first two bars, which juxtapose an open G and an Eb-minor chord, prime our ears to hear the ambiguous G-A-B\(^b\)-Eb-G\(^b\) harmony in the second half of bar 3 as an ‘altered minor \(^b\)VI over tonic pedal [rather] than a dominant-substitute diminished chord’.\(^{49}\) In other words, we hear the Eb-minor element of the chord in bar 3 more strongly than the diminished seventh element - G\(^b\) (F\(^#\)), A, Eb. The music neutralises the strong tonal properties of the leading tone (F\(^#\)) by disguising it as G\(^b\) and placing it within the minor-mode submediant. This neutralisation can also be found in the melody at bars 7-8, in which the arpeggiated melodic figure conceals the dominant function of the leading tone (the G\(^b\) in bar 8) by outlining this same harmony. Despite the fact that the melody leads to the tonic, we do not hear the G\(^b\) as

\(^{48}\) Buhler, 47.
\(^{49}\) Buhler, 45.
an F♯ because of its context. Similarly, the melodic figuration in bars 5-6 embeds the G tonic within the major-mode submediant, which once again eliminates any sense of reaching the tonic through the normal harmonic function of the dominant. By employing these different approaches to tonal organisation, Williams expands the scope of the score, constructing a musical world which is cohesive enough to provide continuity but different enough to portray and evoke different aspects of the narrative.

Example 4. Imperial March from *The Empire Strikes Back*.

The effect that the Imperial March has on the empire and the Dark Side of the Force is to make them appear threatening and frightening in a more profound, less superficial way

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50 Buhler, 46.
than by portraying them through atonal music. This would have been an easy route for Williams to take given the precedence in classic Hollywood scores to portray evil through atonality (see Max Steiner’s music for the entrance of Kong in *King Kong*,\(^{51}\) or Franz Waxman’s score for *The Bride of Frankenstein*).\(^{52}\) The music stages a threat to the tonal order of the Romantic idiom through the way in which Williams subtly undermines the tonic-dominant function whilst still inhabiting the same harmonic world. Buhler compares the Imperial March with Luke’s theme (the Main Title): ‘where the Imperial March seems ruthlessly ordered but stuck in place almost by the force of will, defying proper tonal motion, the Main Title soars, freely resting on the dominant’.\(^{53}\) However, it is also possible to argue that the Main Title is the one that is more ‘stuck’, since it has no choice but to follow dominant-tonic conventions. These reflections demonstrate the way in which the anachronistic Romantic music can be manipulated and developed to portray the opposing forces of good and evil in these films.

Williams deviates further from the nineteenth-century Romantic idiom when establishing an alien landscape by employing atonality and polytonality. For example, polytonality is used in *A New Hope* to portray the desert landscape of Tatooine as mysterious and otherworldly by alienating the audience, who find it much harder to engage emotionally with the

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\(^{51}\) *King Kong*, DVD, directed by Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack (1933; London: Universal Pictures, 2005).


\(^{53}\) Buhler, 48.
music if it is not so familiar to them (see Example 5). The woodwinds form two harmonic groups, the higher of which alternates between the E\textsuperscript{b}-minor and D\textsubscript{b}-major triads and the lower of which alternates between the E-minor and D-minor triads. This passage bears a startling resemblance to the opening bars of the Introduction to the second part of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (see Example 6); and there is a good reason for this resemblance. Editor Paul Hirsch recalls how the *A New Hope* team assembled the temp track for the film: ‘We used some Stravinsky, the flip side of *The Rite of Spring*... George said nobody ever uses that side of the record, so we used it for Threepio walking around in the desert’.

\[ \text{Largo } j = 48 \]

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\begin{array}{c}
\text{Example 6. The opening two bars of Stravinsky's introduction to the second part of *The Rite of Spring* (transcription by Stravinsky for piano four hands).}
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This demonstrates that the nineteenth-century Romantic idiom employed by 1930s and 1940s Hollywood composers was not the only influence on Williams’ score. However, these additional musical styles are heard in relation to the nineteenth-century Romantic idiom, which has been established as the norm in the sound world of this film. As such, the Stravinskyan music comes across as very strange and modern, even though by 1977 in the art world, Stravinsky’s music was far from cutting-edge. Despite the alienating effect, at no point could these Stravinskyan influences really be deemed as science-fiction music; rather, the musical anachronism created by the relative strangeness of this Stravinsky-esque moment within a nineteenth-century sound world serves to create an other-worldly feel within what is already an unfamiliar universe. The music here alienates audiences, helping

\[ ^{54} \text{Rinzler, 273.} \]
them to perceive aspects of the films as fantasy in genre because the world portrayed is so different from our own.

**The Diegetic Music of Tatooine – A New Anachronism**

Once the audience has grown accustomed to the Romantic idiom of Williams’ score, the style of the music starts to be taken for granted, and the initial impact of combining this type of music with the science-fiction setting fades. However, our understanding of the anachronistic relationship between music and image is refreshed and taken in new directions through the diegetic music of Tatooine, which creates new anachronistic relationships with both the film’s setting and the overall Romantic idiom of the score. Gorbman comments that, ‘curiously, critics often make the error of classifying film music as either nondiegetic and therefore, they contend, capable of expression, or diegetic, “realistic,” divorced from the tasks of articulating moods and dramatic tensions’. ⁵⁵ This is a false distinction between the roles of diegetic and non-diegetic music because diegetic music is equally capable of conveying information about a scene, often in ways that are not possible through non-diegetic music.

In *A New Hope*, Obi-Wan and Luke enter a cantina to find a pilot who can take them to the planet Alderaan. In the cantina aliens are playing other-worldly musical instruments (see *Figure 4*). As Williams recounts, Lucas asked him, ‘Can you imagine these creatures in some future century having found in a time capsule or under a rock an old 1930s Benny Goodman swing-band record? Can you imagine what their distorted idea of how to play it would be?’ ⁵⁶ To fulfil Lucas’ idea, Williams employed a trumpet, saxophone, clarinet, Fender Rhodes piano, steel drums and synthesizer. Crucially, the two pieces the aliens play were equalized during the recording to disguise the instruments and give them a slightly bizarre, other-worldly quality. ⁵⁷ Despite the unfamiliar timbral quality of the musical sound, the content of these two cues can be identified clearly as being derived from American swing music of the 1930s, through their improvisatory quality, typical jazz harmonies, walking bass, and use of swing rhythms and blue notes. The pieces can therefore be said to be anachronistic not only with the film’s futuristic setting but also with the non-diegetic music in the films, thus giving

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⁵⁵ Gorbman, 23.
⁵⁶ Rinzler, 429.
⁵⁷ Matessino, liner notes to *A New Hope*. Equalisation generally refers to the altering of amplitude levels at different frequencies for a piece of music.
the impression that all manner of musical styles can be brought into this narrative world. Since there is no world that we know of in which all of these musical styles can co-exist, it puts the world of Star Wars outside of our time and space, setting it in a fantastical otherworld. The swing style of the music evokes associations with smoky night clubs and seedy establishments while the actual acoustic quality of the music still allows us to think of this music as ‘other’ because the timbres are unfamiliar to us. The music is a short-hand for setting up a scene; this is one of the reasons why using different types of diegetic music that are familiar to the audience and have strong connotations works so well in the context of the film. One could indeed argue that, had synthesized music been used, conveying the impression of a futuristic type of music, the scenes in the cantina would in fact not have been as effective in conveying an impression of the cantina’s atmosphere because the connotations of synthesized music are less clear.

In Return of the Jedi, when the audience first encounters the giant, slug-like alien Jabba the Hutt in his throne room, the accompanying diegetic music uses a quasi-Baroque style, and indeed, the soundtrack album labels the track ‘Jabba’s Baroque Recital’. The music is actually a curious mix of Baroque and Classical styles, employing ornamented Baroque-like figurations but also Alberti bass and periodic phrasing (see Example 7). In terms of instrumentation, Williams employs a harpsichord and synthesizers producing flute and chamber organ-like sounds, reminiscent of Walter Carlos’ 1968 album Switched-On Bach. Less prominent than the similarly functioning music of the cantina band in A New Hope, the music is designed as purely background material and can be seen as anachronistic both with...
the non-diegetic score and the film’s futuristic setting. William’s decision to use a different type of musical idiom to represent Jabba’s court helps the audience to differentiate between locations and realise that his is not a location they have encountered before. The use of Baroque music in this scene helps to establish Jabba as an aristocratic being of some importance, and his dungeon-like palace as a royal court.

Example 7. ‘Jabba’s Baroque Recital’ from Return of the Jedi.

There is a striking contrast both in the musical style of the diegetic and non-diegetic music and in the ways in which these types of cues are used, effectively colouring the audience’s interpretation of events. Through the use of such different musics as jazz in the cantina and Baroque in Jabba’s palace, Williams establishes the Star Wars world as not our own, but as a mythical one, set ‘a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away’, that can happily accommodate all styles of music. Williams therefore uses musical idioms which have clear cultural connotations but are not contemporary styles for mainstream audiences in the 1970s and 1980s or, indeed, today. The background music in these settings is familiar enough for the audience to relate to, but also bizarre and anachronistic enough with the
Romantic idiom of the score for it to seem alien and other-worldly, thus suggesting a fantastical world which is different from our own.

**Luke and the Cave - Anachronism Reversed**

One of the most striking musical features of *The Empire Strikes Back* is Williams’ use of the synthesizer in a non-diegetic context. In a score that has mainly employed the standard nineteenth-century orchestral forces, the appearance of the electronic instrument, particularly in the cave scene on the planet Dagobah represents a type of reverse anachronism whereby musical forces that might traditionally be associated with space and the future, such as the synthesizer, now appear unusual in a film dominated by the orchestra. The synthesizer is out of place not only because it is the only electronically generated sound in the music but also because the audience hears this instrument now in the context of what has been portrayed as a fantasy narrative with which this instrument would not traditionally be associated.

In the cave scene Luke, under the Jedi Master Yoda’s instructions, enters a cave filled with the Dark Side of the Force. Yoda advises Luke that he will not need his weapons but Luke chooses to take them anyway. His entry into the cave is accompanied by sustained atonal strings gradually increasing in rhythmic motion, and thus heightening the tension. As the spectre of Darth Vader appears, the music introduces a high solo French horn and synthesizer, accompanied by tremolo strings and brass stabs. Luke’s decision to fight Vader using his lightsaber causes him to fail in his task; in using his weapon to combat the Dark Side, Luke in fact becomes the Dark Side. Following Luke’s decapitation of Vader (see Figure 5), Lucas reveals Luke’s failure in a dramatic fashion, by having Vader’s helmet explode to reveal Luke’s face inside. As the hero’s face is revealed in the villain’s mask, a minor version of the first phrase from Luke’s theme (the Main Title theme) is heard, reinforcing Luke’s vulnerability to the Dark Side. Williams’ combination of the classically heroic French horn and the technological synthesizer suggests that the scene we are witnessing is not a depiction of reality because the synthesizer is a totally unexpected intrusion which would not occur within the normal scope of the film’s Romantic score. The close proximity of the two instruments suggests that the heroism of the French horn, which represents Luke, is being distorted by the synthesizer; this could be seen to represent Luke’s misunderstanding of the Force or the power of the Dark Side.
In a science-fiction setting in which synthesizers would have been an obvious choice for the soundtrack, Williams subverts the audience’s expectation through his anachronistic score, such that when a synthesizer is used, it draws our attention and holds it. In a paradoxical way, the use of the synthesizer actually reinforces the Romantic style and its connotations of heroism, adventure and fantasy as the main idiom of the movie.

**Anachronism Revisited**

Williams thus sets up a number of different anachronistic relationships in his scores for the original *Star Wars* trilogy. The original desire for the music was for it to have ‘a familiar emotional ring so that as you looked at these strange robots and other unearthly creatures, at sights hitherto unseen, the music would be rooted in familiar traditions’. This has led to the creation of an orchestral score steeped in late nineteenth-century Romanticism, which is anachronistic with the futuristic locations of the films. Consequently, Williams is able to evoke the mythic with his leitmotifs for the Light Side of the Force, which move beyond their traditional role in films as signification in order to suggest the supernatural - one of the most important elements in the fantasy genre. This, combined with the composer’s use of classic Hollywood conventions to evoke the heroic adventure films of the 1930s and 1940s, merges with the fairy-tale plot to suggest a fantasy narrative within a science-fiction setting.

Deviations from the music’s Romantic idiom range from the subtle to the more obvious. For example, the use of triadic harmony in a pre or post-tonal fashion for the Imperial March, subtly undermines the tonal order of the Light Side. The use of the synthesizer, on

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the other hand, is a much more obvious deviation from the Romantic idiom and presents a clear type of reverse anachronism. The varied musical styles of the diegetic music also set up new anachronistic relationships with both the score and setting of the films, enabling audiences to understand locations whilst simultaneously appreciating their other-worldly existence.

Ultimately, there are many anachronistic relationships between music and various aspects of the film, such as the narrative, the setting, and other parts of the score itself. For example, the use of the synthesizer is anachronistic with much of the orchestral Romantic idiom of the rest of the score and with the narrative’s fantasy quality, but not with the technological world in which the story is set. The way in which the music navigates the relationship between the fantasy aspects of the narrative and the science-fiction setting has contributed to the Star Wars trilogy being one of the first examples of the cross-genre blockbuster with which audiences are so familiar today.
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