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IT’S A STRANGE PLACE: THE NARRATIVE FILM MUSIC OF DANNY ELFMAN

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IT’S A STRANGE PLACE: THE NARRATIVE FILM MUSIC OF DANNY ELFMAN

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ABSTRACT

The role of film music should function as part of the narrative, collaborating with all other filmic aspects such as color editing, scriptwriting, acting, and directing to convey a narrative that engages and affects the audience. Over the course of history, film music has functioned in a variety of ways, from live bands to draw in theatregoers to the contemporary discussion of diegetic and non-diegetic music in film. Composer Danny Elfman emerges from an unusual background in rock n’ roll, but, despite initial criticism and skepticism, has proven to be a seminal film composer whose scores demonstrate an intimate connection to the narrative. Through study of Elfman’s scores to *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure* (Burton, 1985), *Batman* (Burton, 1989), *Edward Scissorhands* (Burton, 1990), and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Selick, 1993), Elfman’s compositional tactics are evaluated in regards to their role in the narrative. A short film scored by the author is created and presented in conjunction with this thesis, demonstrating how the methodology discussed within the thesis can be applied.

KEY WORDS: Film Music, Danny Elfman, Music Composition, Narratives, Storytelling
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IT’S A STRANGE PLACE: THE NARRATIVE FILM MUSIC OF DANNY ELFMAN

Introduction

In a discussion about techniques, habits, and experience in writing music for film, contemporary film music composer Danny Elfman once said,

When I'm writing music, so much of the time I feel like I'm being pulled around by a big dog. I've got the dog on a leash and sometimes I'm leading this dog along just where I want it to go. And then sometimes the dog gets real big and starts yanking me. I think when I'm reacting the way I should be, I let the thing yank me around. Because it yanks me into places where I wouldn't go. And I look at it and go, 'Oh! Thanks, boy! It's a strange place, but there had to be a reason why I went here, so I'm just going to leave it.' (Adams, 1997)

When we attend the movie theater to see a new film, we often attend with the desire to be immersed into an exciting world that is different from our own. In that sense, we become onlookers, strangers in a foreign world, and we expect to become enthralled by a unique narrative that has the power to affect us in dynamic ways. This strange place is not found in visuals alone; gifted actors, brilliant cinematographers, or visionary directors do not solely create this space. The film composer plays an essential role in creating music that does not only enhance emotions and influence audience perceptions (Green, 2010), but also serves as an indicator that “the universe in which the events we are watching take place is not real”, and upon audience acceptance of that fact, the music exists in a narrative space equal to that of the characters, completely natural in the film’s unique filmic universe (Winters, 2010). Essentially, artists in the film industry – such as directors, actors, videographers, editors, sound designers,
and composers, among many others – play an equal role in creating a narrative that transports audiences to a strange place.

This understanding of the role of film music is a product of the study of film music, an area of study that has only existed for a few decades. Since film music’s inception as classical music performed live to accompany illuminated pictures (Irving, 1949), it has garnered more and more interest as a music genre that deserves study from musicologists, students, and film music enthusiasts alike. At the core of the study of film music lies the discussion of diegetic versus non-diegetic music. As defined by Claudia Gorbman, a professor of film music, diegetic music is music that the characters and audience both hear and non-diegetic music is music that the characters are unaware of (1980). However, these lines are often blurred and I will examine the deconstruction of diegetic versus non-diegetic music as presented by Dr. Ben Winters, an English musicologist. The deconstruction of these terms will lead to a reconsideration of film music as existing in narrative space where our understanding of reality is suspended to accept that “non-diegetic” music is natural to the filmic universe created.

From this discussion, this thesis will examine the life and works of contemporary film composer Danny Elfman. Through analysis of his personal techniques and procedures, and examination of his working relationship with many-time collaborator Tim Burton, Danny Elfman’s music will be evaluated as music that dwells in a narrative space; it is music that serves as equal in importance to the visuals in terms of communicating the narrative. Danny Elfman’s music will be broken down and examined for how it functions as narrative film music and how he has become a unique and seminal composer.

This thesis seeks to understand how film music functions as narrative film music, particularly in the style of Danny Elfman. As a culmination of the research involved, a short film
will be presented with original music composed by myself. The film will apply the concepts studied throughout the thesis and aim to demonstrate the ability of music to function within the narrative space of the film. At the conclusion of this thesis, I shall have answered questions such as,

- What is narrative film music and how does it function?
- How does Danny Elfman incorporate his unique background and sound in a narrative film score?
- How can I learn from my research and produce a narrative film score myself?

In order to accomplish the end goal of my thesis, I will seek to understand the film industry, explore the existing scholarly conversation regarding film music, and study the interviews and works of Danny Elfman.
Literature Review

The film industry is a messy and complex assortment of ideas, technologies, practices, and people. Film music, and the men and women who write it, are but a small part of a much larger organism that is constantly evolving (occasionally revolving) and progressing in different directions. Unfortunately, even though film music really began to come into its own as a recognized genre in the early 1900s, film music scholarship was not a prominent area of study until the 1970s. As a result, academic writings in regards to film music are sparse and mostly centered on early film music (such as silent film music). Coupled with the study of Danny Elfman, a contemporary film music composer, finding scholarly sources to support the aim of this thesis was a challenging task—a sentiment echoed in Kylah N. Magee’s *Variations on a Theme of Elfman: Danny Elfman’s Music in Tim Burton’s Film*, a graduate thesis written on similar content (2006). In an attempt to compile the most reliable information, the sources represent a mix of journal articles, magazine articles, essays, textbook chapter excerpts, and interviews.

**Historical and Affective Significance.** To understand contemporary film music and the role it plays in modern film, it is important to study its historical context. It is equally important to understand how film music engages people and culture; the study of film music is a worthy academic pursuit and should be treated as such within the classroom and within circles of music scholarship.

Film music can be traced back to the very inception of film: illuminated pictures. Orchestras performed live music to accompany the visuals, and, perhaps more practically, cover up the sound of the projection machine (Irving, 1949). As the film industry slowly grew, different types of films began emerging and music started to become more important in the story
telling. K. Earnest Irving, in a publication of *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, describes how this classical film music (which was not written specifically for the images at first) transformed into something more crucial to the filmmaking process as the industry grew. Coupled with Mervyn Cooke’s comprehensive *A History of Film Music*, Irving and Cooke provide a substantial base for the understanding of the birth of film music within silent films and its progression through Hollywood’s Golden Age to contemporary cinema.

Irving briefly mentions in his article that the classical music heard in early pictures may be the only classical music that a person is exposed to, should they not be a concert-goer or hold a strong interest in classical music (1949). This is a sentiment that is perhaps rooted in a passionate discussion by James M. Matheison in his article “Aspects of Film Music”, published in *Tempo* (1944). Matheison advocates an understanding of the integral nature of film music in music conversations and the growing presence of the musically informed film-goer, that is, a consumer who not only observes and judges good and bad acting, but also good and bad music (1944). Through discussions and reiterations of the importance of film music to a composer (in regards to improvement and stimulation of creativity in new music) and the exposure of classical music to the common person through film music, Matheison makes a clear case to the hard-to-convince music scholars of the early 1940s of the importance of film music as a growing art form and its need to be regarded as an essential part of musical expression (1944). This dialogue is only the beginning of a deeper realization of the impact of film music.

Most contemporary dialogue on the impact of film music makes mention of two key terms coined by Claudia Gorbman in her article “Narrative Film Music”, published in *Yale French Studies* (1980). These terms are diegetic and non-diegetic, referring to music that is heard by the audience and the characters in the film (diegetic) and music that is only heard by the
audience (non-diegetic). Referencing as far back as silent films, Gorbman articulates how music adds vitality to film to create a sense of time, rhythm, and cadence (1980). There is an intimate relationship between music and scene; music (and its counterpart, silence) has the ability to change the mood and how the audience perceives the filmic information (Gorbman, 1980). This discussion is perhaps one of the earliest detailed discussions of the impact of film music and accurately portrays the early understandings of how music interacts with film and with the audience. Concerning diegetic and non-diegetic music, Gorbman acknowledges that these two terms, as applied to film music, are not quite as black and white as she presents them, yet there are others who insist that this simple acknowledgement of the fact is not enough, and that film music plays a much larger role in the narrative of a film than simply being diegetic or non-diegetic music that heightens emotions.

Jessica Green calls film music a “fundamental dialect” of film in “Understanding the Score: Film Music Communicating to and Influencing the Audience” as published in The Journal of Aesthetic Education (2010). Green argues that film music serves two primary functions: convey emotion and bring unity and continuity to the storytelling (2010). Music creates meaning within the film by assisting the audience in identifying or suspending reality and identifying characters and main themes (as well as their transformations and variations) over the course of a narrative (2010). Leitmotifs, a Wagnarian concept of themes that are associated with a character, place, situation, or emotion, are heavily utilized within film music—born out of the music of Richard Wagner and implemented by early film composers such as Max Steiner, who incidentally happens to “have laid the indestructible foundations for the style of narrative films scoring” (Cooke, 2008, p. 87) and whose music is a core part of Danny Elfman’s inspiration and influences. Though not completely enforcing my argument for music as an important narrative
tool, Green’s discussion on leitmotifs and other musical conventions as providing commentary on what is happening and as playing a crucial role in giving addition meaning to film certainly is a step in the right direction.

In a much bolder argument, musicologist Dr. Ben Winters, declares that labeling music as non-diegetic “threatens to separate it from the space of the narrative” (2010, p. 224). He deconstructs Gorbman’s terminology of distinguishing diegetic and non-diegetic music within film music to present the argument that film music is not a level of narration (implying that there are other components to a narrative that are more essential) but rather exists in something he calls “narrative space”. “The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space”, published in *Music & Letters* (2010), is Winters’ proposal that the universe of a film exists in a certain narrative space that is its reality; this reality consists of characters, situations, any elements of the fictional world created in the film, and, Winters would add, music. I strongly agree with Winters that music is an integral part of that reality and thus is of the same diegetic realm as the characters (Winters, 2010). As a result, music ought to be treated with the same care and attention as any other film component in regards to how effectively a story is being told. It is this understanding of the role of film music—its occupancy in the narrative space, as equally important to the narrative as setting, characters, situations, and all visual elements—that this thesis hopes to emphasize and highlight in the work of Danny Elfman.

**Danny Elfman.** After establishing a foundational understanding of film music, this thesis aims to describe contemporary composer Danny Elfman’s progression into the film industry and to explore how Elfman’s music interacts with the visuals of the film and how the narrative is perceived. Danny Elfman not only represents a unique and unusual transition into film music (a background that heavily influences his scores), but his approach to writing music is guided by
the principle that music ought to be an integral part of the narrative, not simply supplemental to
the narrative.

Fortunately, for all his eccentricities, Danny Elfman is not interview shy, and he has
shared his story, experiences, and advice in many interviews conducted by musicians and various
music or film industry publications. In Details, Kevin Allman describes Danny Elfman as a
science nerd turned eclectic band frontman turned film composer who “has a taste for the twisted
and a sure command of the unwieldy (1993, p. 182). His overview of Elfman, appropriately
entitled “A Little Nightmare Music”, pinpoints the defining areas of Elfman’s career: his
beginnings as young man heavily interested in film music and the lead singer of a unique band
called Oingo Boingo, his unexpected collaboration with Tim Burton on Pee Wee’s Big Adventure
(the first Hollywood film for both Burton and Elfman), and Elfman’s characteristic use of quirky
orchestral scores (Allman, 1993). This brief snapshot of Danny Elfman is expanded on in Doug
Adams’ engaging interview with Elfman, in an article similarly titled “Tales from the Black
Side”, published in Film Score Monthly (1997).

Adams clearly articulates his belief that Elfman is an intelligent and seminal composer,
an assertion that had to be made because many composers and music and film critics questioned
Elfman’s legitimacy and ability. Accusations of being a “hack” stemmed from Elfman’s lack of
formal compositional training and his close collaboration with his orchestrator and good friend
Steve Bartek (Adams, 1997). In my opinion, these accusations are proved to be invalid after
reading through one interview with Elfman—a sentiment that Adams seems to agree with.
Elfman is well aware of the film music scene and its roots in classical composers, especially the
ones he draws inspiration from, such as Mahler, Bartók, and Prokofiev (Adams, 1997). Elfman
does much reconstruction and deconstruction in his compositions, in regards to thematic
material—borrow ideas and inspiration from classical composers as well as the early film composers he looks up to, like Steiner, Korngold, and Waxman (Adams, 1997). Adams and Elfman also discuss Elfman’s relationship with Tim Burton, an essential component to Elfman’s career, technique, and growth as a film composer. Their shared passion for the dark and macabre brought a common interest and thought process to their creative projects together (Grow, 2015), and Elfman emphasizes how important it is to understand the tone of a film when writing a score (Adams, 1997). In every discussion of Elfman, Tim Burton cannot help being mentioned because of the importance of their collaboration and the values they share in film narrative.

Kylah Magee, in her graduate thesis *Variations on a Theme of Elfman: Danny Elfman’s Music in Tim Burton’s Films*, addresses much of what will be addressed within this thesis. She particularly focuses on the relationship between Elfman and Burton, describing Elfman’s history as Oingo Boingo frontman (and the musical background and compositional tendencies that were born as a result of those experiences) and Burton as a young, budding director who took interest in Oingo Boingo and Elfman’s music (2006). Magee makes a casual side note that happens to be the crux of this thesis: she describes the Elfman/Burton relationship not simply as one of director and composer, but one of joint storytellers (2006). This storytelling is expounded upon in detail in score analyses of *Pee Wee’s Big Adventure*, *Batman Returns*, and *Sleepy Hollow*. In all of these works, Elfman displays his characteristic sounds, but more importantly, he displays a masterful use of theme and contribution to a narrative that takes place both visually and aurally.

Elfman’s compositional process—how his music not only supports the narrative but also is, in fact, part of the narrative—is discussed at length in his interview with Bryan Lanser and Kevin Monahan (2000). The timeline of a film project is often fluid, and with sound being one of the last components to finalize on a film, an expected twelve weeks to compose, orchestrate,
and record a score may be reduced to a four or five week endeavor. When it comes to the actual composition, however, Elfman prefers to discuss emotionally with directors rather than musically (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). Elfman strives to write music that is story driven, music that tells the story with the visuals, not “musical wallpaper that does absolutely nothing” (Lanser & Monahan, 2000).

The music Elfman writes is certainly not wallpaper, as Ryan Leach points out some key characteristics of Danny Elfman’s film writing that make Elfman unique and Steven Wright traces Elfman’s notable discography. Pee Wee’s Big Adventure may have been Elfman’s lucky break into film scoring, but Batman and The Nightmare Before Christmas were the scores that really propelled him into recognition as a legitimate and excellent composer (Wright, 2006). The Elfman sound that the audience first hears traces of in Pee Wee’s Big Adventure begins to develop and mature through other films to the point where Wright acknowledges Elfman’s wide artistic range, but nods at his tendency to get “typecast as a specialist in quirky, offbeat comedies” (2006, p. 1032). Ryan Leach summarizes the techniques that Elfman employs to get his characteristic sound with examples in his article “Orchestration in the Style of Danny Elfman” (2012). Elfman often writes with an orchestral score, but with unconventional instrumentation: such as adding saxophones, celesta, or a woman’s choir. Particularly in the case of a woman’s choir, it is not so much the fact that a choir is unusual, but how often Elfman utilizes its presence in the musical texture that makes it unique (Leach, 2012). Another notable Elfman characteristic is how he separates colors within the musical texture. Certain timbres are given dominance over others, emphasizing contrasting sounds, and occasionally weaving instruments of starkly different timbres through a melody and countermelody that protrude from the texture (Leach, 2012). All of these techniques, tendencies, and methods fall in line with Elfman’s understanding
of the role of music in film. Because of an exceptionally collaborative relationship with director Tim Burton, Elfman has had the freedom to exemplify how he believes film music should function: as a crucial part of the storytelling.

**Study and Application.** As a culmination of my study of the roles of film music and Danny Elfman, I will attempt to heed his advice: “If you want to be successful, learn to imitate…On the other hand, if you want to be a good composer…learn to resist that tendency…Do your own work, work hard, and be original” (Davis, 2010, p. 292). After careful study of the various sources and films of Elfman, I will apply my knowledge and skills into a product that aims to effectively summarize the importance of film music as part of the narrative in a film.

Many of the aforementioned sources contribute to the methodology of writing a score; for example, Leach’s *Orchestration in the Style of Danny Elfman* identifies key characteristics of Elfman’s scores that my original score will emulate. However, my primary source for navigating the technicalities and difficulties of directing and scoring a short film will be Richard Davis’s *Complete Guide to Film Scoring: The Art and Business of Writing Music for Movies and TV*. Within these pages, Davis identifies practical steps and advice in the filmmaking process. He defines the roles of key individuals such as the director, producer, and composer; he defines the stages of production (preproduction, production, and post-production) and the methods involved in each of the three stages. There is a strong emphasis on the fluidity of the film process, and it is crucial that those involved in the making of a film understand the fluidity and how to work with it to emerge from the process with a successful product (Davis, 2010). These principles expressed by Davis will be applied as appropriate to my methodology in executing the product of a film score in conjunction watching, listening to, and examining several Elfman films, such as
In conclusion, the goal of the short film is to encapsulate all of the research and study on film music’s role in the narrative and Danny Elfman’s compositional technique. Film music operates within narrative space, rather than on narrative levels, creating a “unique filmic universe” where music plays an essential role in the diegesis (Winters, 2010). At the conclusion of this thesis, I will have shown how the history of film music has led to this point of understanding, how Danny Elfman contributes to and is an advocate of film music as essential to the narrative, and how this study can be applied to the creation of a score for a short film.
Historical and Affective Significance

It would be easy to suggest that the true beginning of film music took place in a dimly lit theatre, where a whirring projector played a silent, black-and-white film accompanied by musicians who were playing off of cue cards and loudly enough to attract passerby’s to attend the showing (Cooke, 2008). But why would people be attracted to come see a film because of a live band performing on a street corner? Perhaps our modern understanding and expectation of visuals to be accompanied by some sort of sound or music goes much further back, to the very first operatic production, or Catholic mass. Claudia Gorbman attributes one of the reasons music is present in film to the nineteenth century dramatic traditions (1980). People certainly expected a stage production to be accompanied by music, so is it that much of a leap to expect another form of visual entertainment to include music? Even at the inception of film, during the silent film era, sound, or the implication of sound, played an important role in the movie experience. Many early films included the use of live sound effects performed while the movie played, but even when these live sound effects were absent, moviegoers found themselves reacting to sounds that the images depicted (Cooke, 2008). This phenomenon was seen in films such as The Great Train Robbery (Porter, 1903) where the audience covered their ears when they saw silent images of gunshots being fired (Cooke, 2008). The presence of sound has always played an integral role in storytelling, so why add music?

Music was already closely associated with any form of popular entertainment, and like live bands posted outside of bars to entice people to enter, live music was an attraction factor. As the film industry grew, music transitioned to playing an important role in shaping the audience’s response to film (Cooke, 2008). Popular excerpts of music were identified by their emotional characteristics and then assigned to a corresponding emotional moment within a film; for
example, the Overture to Rossini’s William Tell may signify adventure (Magee, 2006), or a soaring violin solo for a romantic scene, or an unsettling moment could be emphasized with “Sinister Misterioso” by Beethoven – one of the many nicknames given to the extracts from musical works that formed cue books for the live musicians of early cinema (Cooke, 2008). While these musical extracts were performed based on their cohesion with the film being shown, they were not synchronized with the film, and the occasional Saturday evening crowd could cause the projector operator to speed things along or make cuts – which was reflected by the live musicians (Irving, 1949). The development of the sound track, and thus, synchronized sound, abruptly transformed the world of film and the music accompanying it. It began with the use of phonograph recordings, operated by musical directors who attempted to synchronize the recordings with the film (Cooke, 2008). Then, in 1925, the Vitaphone system was developed by the Western Electric Company and sold to Warner Bros., allowing for the production of a film accompanied with a fully recorded sound track (Cooke, 2008). From this moment forward, live orchestras were no longer necessary, and as the film industry learned new ways of recording sound, it gave birth to an array of new roles – sound engineers, mixers, and of course, film composers.

It is impossible to discuss modern film music without paying tribute to Hollywood’s Golden Age and the classical film score that arose out of that time. In 1933, composer Max Steiner wrote an ambitious score for King Kong (Cooper & Schoedsack, 1933) and “established a style and technique of scoring that was not only much imitated during the Golden Age, but continues to be reflected in mainstream narrative scoring practices to the present day” (Cooke, 2008, p. 88). This was the introduction of what would become known as the Classical Hollywood film score, and would establish itself as a model for all future film scores (Magee,
In order to fully understand the characteristics that comprised Steiner’s score to King Kong, first a discussion on Richard Wagner and a definition of leitmotif must take place. Cooke even adds that Steiner himself once said, “If Wagner had lived in this century, he would have been the Number One film composer” (as cited in Thomas, 1997, p. 157).

Composer Richard Wagner lived in Germany in the early 1800s, and his love for theatre and music led to the creation of operas that would influence the course of music history (Burkholder, Grout, & Palisca, 2014). Wagner believed in “the interrelationships between the arts” and advocated the revolutionary view of oneness within music and drama – that “the two are organically connected expressions of a single dramatic idea” (Burkholder et al., 2014, p. 683). His strong views were reflected not only in his music, but also in his political philosophy, making him a vocal German nationalist, and the author of an anti-Semitic essay criticizing Jewish composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (Burkholder et al., 2014). Though a controversial figure, there is no doubt that Wagner had an enormous impact on music, culture, and history. Not only were his orchestras massive, and characterized by lush, yet intense, orchestral textures – not to mention the shocking harmonic language for his time – Wagner created music that was powerfully narrative in nature (Botstein, 2012). In fact, Wagner believed that “the core of the drama is really in the music” (Burkholder et al., 2014). This musical storytelling is perhaps most identifying through Wagner’s use of the leitmotif.

The term “leitmotif” came into use to explain a compositional component of Wagner’s operas. The musical work told a story by associating and identifying characters, situations, or ideas with a musical motif (Audissino, 2014). These motifs are then repeated and developed throughout the work, changing as the story changes and reflecting shifts in the narrative (Audissino, 2014). Wagner’s music was intricately tied to the words, emotions, and the narrative
of his operas, and this same musical adherence to narrative carried over to film. James Buhler introduces the phrase “narrative integration” to suggest how a filmic narrative is made up of many different components (dialogue, staging, camera angles, editing, music, etc.), and how a musical theme (motif) can reflect the course and theme of the narrative – integrating music as part of the narrative and bringing cohesion to the film as a whole (2010). The narrative function of a leitmotif could be used to reinforce something that is already being portrayed through another medium, such as a soaring lyrical melody presented as the love theme when two lovers are together, or it could be used to signify an absence, or an internal, unseen aspect, such as a return of the love theme when the lovers are separated, signifying a longing to be with each other or their thoughts of each other (Buhler, Neumeyer, & Deemer, 2010). The model of a leitmotif gave the composer the ability to bind music to the narrative (Buhler, 2010), and to provide new information or understanding to the audience (Buhler et al., 2010). Wagner utilized this technique extensively in his compositions, so it’s no wonder that Leon Botstein, a conductor and scholar who is known as a leading musicologist, goes as far as suggesting that “Wagner invented movie music before there were movies” (2012, p. 200). Botstein is not wrong, as Wagner – and particularly his concept of the leitmotif – has a clear and undeniable presence in the classical Hollywood film score.

Steiner’s *King Kong* score utilizes elements of the music to manipulate the emotions of the viewer as well as identify specific characters, and the score is orchestrated with a full orchestra – woodwinds, bass, percussion, and strings (Magee, 2006). These became key characteristics of the classical Hollywood film score. Steiner’s use of leitmotif material can be heard in the main-title music; an aggressive three-note motif to represent the monster and a romantic love theme to represent the object of the monster’s affection (Cooke, 2008). It is at a
climatic moment in the film where the music takes a primary role in informing the viewers of the narrative. Kong’s aggressive three-note motif is merged with the romantic theme to explain Kong’s complex feelings toward his victim in a way that the camera is unable to (Cooke, 2008). These early compositional decisions in the classical Hollywood film score, and especially the use of music to connect characters and situations, informed and continues to inform contemporary film scores. These characteristics are evident in Danny Elfman’s music, as he has shared that listeners could discovered a variety of composers’ influence should they deconstruct his music – from Mahler or Bartók to Steiner or Korngold (another recognized master of the classical Hollywood film score) (Adams, 1997).

Now the discussion shifts from the historical context of film music to its affective significance. I use the term affective significance to encompass the variety of ways in which music within a film affects the viewer and the understanding of a narrative. An everyday filmgoer might provide one of the most articulated reasons for the existence of music within a film: highlighting emotion. While music is certainly utilized to convey emotions or moods, it is also capable of bringing unity and continuity to the storytelling, actually shaping the narrative itself (Green, 2010). It does this by employing techniques such as leitmotivic material to define characters and present thematic transformation – differences in tempo, rhythm, and volume communicate changes in plot or character development (Green, 2010). The very nature of the music itself, its instrumentation, tonality, key, and phrasing all play a role in creating a mood or feeling that subtly affects the psychology of the viewer (Green, 2010).

Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer acknowledge emotion as one of two things music is especially good at, the second being music’s ability to influence and organize time (2010). Peter Rothbart, in his introduction to The Synergy of Film and Music: Sight and Sound in Five
Hollywood Films, identifies eight roles of music within film: establish time/place, establish tone/mood, reveal psychological states of mind, reveal unseen or impending drama, provide sources music, provide transition music (temporal continuity), provide intro or outro music (drawing the viewer into the narrative world and then easing the viewer out of it), and supply musical sound effect (2013). These roles are seen echoed in Audissino’s list of the important functions of film music: the clarification of narrative events, time construction (again, temporal continuity), space construction, and the reinforcement of stylistic or aesthetic choices (for example, the dark shadows of a scene with low-key lighting is reinforced with the dark timbre of cellos) (2014). I want to acknowledge and slightly expound upon two characteristics that were both represented in these lists: music’s ability to inform the narrative through revealing information that is unable to be revealed through visuals, and music’s ability to establish temporal and spacial continuity and unification within a film.

It has already been established that music can reinforce emotions or reveal, through the use of leitmotifs, how characters may feel when we see them onscreen. This information, provided by the music, can be redundant (the viewers receive information through the visuals and the music) or it can in direct contrast to the visuals, thus propelling the narrative forward without the use of visual cues. Examples of this include dissonant harmonies or aggressive percussive rhythms underneath a broad, romantic melody to signify that something is not quite right amongst lovers, or the characteristic frenzy of music that intensifies before a jump-scare in a horror movie (Rothbart, 2013). Music can also be contradictory to what is happening visually. By receiving audible information that seems to differ from the visual information, the audience is able to glean deeper meaning and better understand the purpose of the narrative (Green, 2010). For example, a particularly violent scene may be juxtaposed with a slow, somber ballad,
influencing the audience’s perception of the meaning behind the scene. The music actually interprets the image and assists the viewer in determining the meaning of the scene, clarifying the narrative by suggesting or emphasizing something the audience may have not noticed or realized visually (Green, 2010). Within this function, it is clear to see how film music is an essential part to the narrative of a film.

Music serves temporal and spacial continuity within a film in several ways. Firstly, through the use of main-title music and transitional music – to ease viewers into the world of the film and to provide context and connection between otherwise seemingly unconnected scenes (Buhler et al., 2010). Transitional music can also be in the form of a sound advance, where music that belongs to the following scene occurs at the end of the scene before, familiarizing the audience with the next scene before they are thrust into it or foreshadowing what is to come (Buhler et al., 2010). Music has the power to establish place (through characteristic scales, rhythms, or a specific tone) as well as maintaining the sense of space in the filmic setting when cutting away to different scenes; well-written music can encourage the viewer “to accept the nonlinear sequence of visual events” (Rothbart, 2013, p. xvi). Playing to cuts, rather than across cuts, distracts the audience by forcing them to observe the individual shots, rather than unifying the narrative to understand the overall story line (Buhler, 2010). Montage sequences are another common occurrence where music is used to bring cohesion and temporal meaning to the visuals being displayed (Gorbman, 1980). Part of the aforementioned power of music to establish place is due to its ability to suspend reality and draw viewers into a perhaps unfamiliar filmic universe, thereby creating a sense of unity where viewers can accept the actions and conversations that take place without comparing them against real-life experience (Green, 2010). This is essential to understanding music’s role in creating narrative space.
But before the idea of narrative space can be elaborated upon, two important words surrounding the analysis and interpretation of film music must be explained: diegetic and non-diegetic. Much of what has been discussed previously has alluded to an understanding of the diegetic and non-diegetic functions of film music. Claudia Gorbman is most often attributed with providing the most thorough definition of the terms, although she herself admits that these two seemingly black-and-white categories are not quite so distinct and narrative film music can function in a combination of ways. Gorbman defines diegetic music as “music that…issues from a source within the narrative” (1980, p. 197), that is, music that we can clearly see the origin of visually (for example, piano music that is being performed by a character that we see sitting at a piano). Alternatively, non-diegetic music would be music that does not originate from the physical world displayed on screen; this can also be referred to as underscoring (or simply, scoring) and the music could exist in the foreground (obviously present and noticeable) or in the background (where narrative cues are much more subtle) (Buhler et al., 2010). These distinct separations can quickly become blurred, however, and I would suggest that the diegetic/non-diegetic dialogue does not accurately represent the presence (and purpose) of music within a film.

For example, suppose the tick-tocking of a town clock is heard and the audience clearly sees the clock – it is natural to suppose that the characters within the film can hear the clock, thus making the sound diegetic. But what if the tick-tocking of the clock is heard simultaneously with rhythmic music that aligns precisely with each stroke – do we say the score is now non-diegetic because the characters cannot “hear” the music? This specific example is seen within the opening sequence of Danny Elfman’s score to Corpse Bride (Burton, 2005). Examples like
these could be explained by simply stating that the composer/sound designer is *transitioning* between diegetic and non-diegetic music.

But suppose there is a scene where a character enters a crowded ballroom where a piano and harp are performing the music the audience hears – diegetic. However, in this example from the Civil War film *Glory* (Zwick, 1989), the sound editing is rather unsettling: the diegetic piano music seems louder than appropriate and small noises such as laughs or whispers are amplified over the general hubbub of people. Then the music swells with the addition of a wordless choir. The music the audience hears is being filtered through the main character’s own hearing and emotional state. So the question arises: is the music diegetic or non-diegetic? Visually, the audience can see the piano, but aurally, the sound of the piano is not accurate to what all the guests are hearing. Additionally, a choir that is clearly non-diegetic reinforces this “diegetic” music, but the audience perceives that this musical texture exists within the mind/thoughts of the main character. The music in this scene is essential to interpreting the narrative; it is creating narrative space that is native (diegetic) to the world in the film through dialogue, sound effects, and music, as well as the variables those aspects undergo during recording, mixing, and adjusting volume levels (Gorbman, 1980).

The labeling of music as diegetic versus non-diegetic, and the reality of the blurring of the two, has been criticized as threatening to separate the music itself “from the space of the narrative” (Winters, 2010, p. 224). Musicologist Dr. Ben Winters explains how Claudia Gorbman’s definitions of diegesis as applied to film music are based upon Gérard Genette’s system of narratology, a literary concept that is used to identify the various levels of narrative devices and voices that operate within a novel (2010). These narrative levels, when transferred to film music to create terminology such as diegetic versus non-diegetic music, create a problem
because narrative cinema is distinctly different from a novel – the existence of a “narrator” (whether a voice-over exists or not) can be called into question and the music could be understood as “part of the narrative as it unfolds…not an intrusion that signals an external level of narration” (Winters, 2010, p. 226). Essentially, Gorban’s definitions suppose that music exists within film to clarify or identify parts of the narrative, whereas Winters suggests that music is not a secondary layer of narration, but rather an essential part of the primary narrative space of film.

Gorbman’s explanation of music’s role as a level of narration could be supported by film musicologists Eisler and Adorno’s statement that film “seeks to depict reality” (Adorno & Eisler, 2005, p. 36), and if the characters within a film cannot hear the music, then the music cannot be part of their world (Winters, 2010). This statement supposes that audiences are unwilling to suspend their disbelief – but audiences are happy to play a “game” of make-believe while watching a film (Winters, 2010). Eisler and Adorno make the mistake of treating film as an “overly realistic medium” (Winters, 2010, p. 228), when in fact we are aware that films are often far from realistic. In a musical, the audience easily accepts that music belongs in the same narrative space as the characters and their world. In the same way, when watching a film, the audience “accept[s] the filmic universe as operating according to different rules of reality” (Winters, 2010, p. 229). Then, as the filmgoers are leaving the theatre and chatting with their friends about the film, the movie is recalled as a narrative whole – including characters, situations, and music. When remembering a film, we do not separate the dialogue from our memory of the film’s narrative, nor do we think of the music as being a distinctly separate part of the film. We recognize that all of the above mentioned elements (and many others) belong to the same diegetic realm (Winters, 2010).
Winters references several French theorists in an attempt to define cinematic diegesis; in their book *Aesthetics of Film*, they explain that

…we may understand diegesis as the story caught up in the dynamics of reading the narrative, which is to say that it is elaborated within the spectator’s mind from the impression left by the film’s unfolding…the story as my own current fantasies and the memory of preceding film elements allow me to imagine it (as cited in Aumont, Bergala, Marie, & Vernet, 1992, p. 90).

Imagination is essential to analyzing and understanding film. The audience cognitively engages in make-believe while watching a film, and believes that everything that happens within a film comes from the filmic universe (Winters, 2010). In fact, Winters suggests that the “filmgoer would be ‘impoverished by understanding cinema only in relation to the reality it records’” (as cited in Frampton, 2006, p. 5). The medium of film exists to stimulate our imagination as a form of entertainment, and because it functions as such, the diegesis (the narrative, the story) must be understood as having more in common with our imagination than reality. We remove ourselves from reality when we enter a movie theater, so we should not treat the world created by a film in relation with reality. Rather, the film presents its filmic universe in its totality, with all of the various film elements, including music, allowing the audience to image, accept, and be immersed in the narrative.

Film music, therefore, is not a narrating voice, but a product of narration – dwelling within the same space as the characters and their world (the diegesis of the film). Although Gorban might label music that the characters do not appear to hear as non-diegetic music, that music still “seems to inhabit the same narrative space they [the characters] occupy” (Winters, 2010, p. 242). The music not only exists in that narrative space, it “surrounds the space of the
film and responds to the presence of characters”, influencing the very course of the diegesis (Winters, 2010, p. 242). Understanding music within film is much more complicated than identifying music as what the characters can and cannot hear – though that terminology is valid to begin a discussion on the narrative role of music. Music is part of the storytelling – it has the power to “invoke the broader, more universal themes of life”, allowing for audience imagination and perception “to bring the story or message of the film closer to their experience and issues” (Green, 2010, p. 91).

In conclusion, film music has progressed from generalized classical excerpts on cue cards played by live musicians, to the broad, sweeping sounds of the Classical Hollywood film score, to the intricate and complex contemporary film score, yet one thing remains the same: we, the audience, are deeply affected by music’s presence. I believe it is paramount to understand and analyze film music as functioning within the narrative space of a film – not by categorizing sections of music as diegetic or non-diegetic, or something in between, but to recognize music’s purpose as an aspect of the diegesis and its role as a storyteller. By the willingness of the audience to suspend their disbelief, we “are no longer required to imagine that the fantastical fictional film worlds and characters we enjoy in the cinema exist in some realistic world, separated from the music that defines them” (Winters, 2010, p. 243). Rather, we accept the whole world – setting, characters, sounds, music and all – as a diegesis true to the film we are watching, and the resulting impact and experience cannot be separated into individual parts. Buhler sums up the significance and role of film music simply and poignantly: “it [does] not simply describe the world screened; it [knows] the world and the fate of those who [act] within it” (2010, p. 37).
Danny Elfman

Composer Danny Elfman was born Daniel Robert Elfman in 1953 in Los Angeles, the son of two teachers (Hischak, 2015). As a kid, Elfman was a self-proclaimed science nerd. He enjoyed creating his own scientific experiments and often drew inspiration from some of his first film experiences: cheap sci-fi films (Allman, 1993). In fact, Elfman’s science enthusiasm was so strong as a child, that when his first daughter was born, Elfman became irrationally paranoid that the variety of experiments he performed as a child has somehow altered his chromosomes and his daughter would be born horribly disfigured. Fortunately, his irrational paranoia was exactly that: irrational, and his first wife gave birth to Mali Elfman (Allman, 1993). Young Elfman often found himself sitting in the neighborhood movie theatre, watching a horror or sci-fi flick, and becoming fascinated with the sounds of composers such as Nina Rota, Bernard Herrmann, and Franz Waxman (Magee, 2006). Even though he loved the film scores of these early Hollywood film composers, he never desired to be a composer or a professional musician; rather, he wanted to be a cinematographer (Allman, 1993). Despite winning second place in the junior high science fair (Allman, 1993) and hanging out with the “band geeks” in high school (where he began to teach himself violin, guitar, and keyboard) (Magee, 2006), Elfman was not a successful student and dropped out of high school.

After dropping out of school, Danny Elfman joined Le Grand Magic Circus, a musical theatre company in which is brother Richard performed. The group toured Europe, Richard performing on percussion and Danny holding his first professional position as a violinist. From Europe, the group traveled to West Africa, where the Elfman brothers were introduced to Highlife, a West African musical genre that juxtaposes the polyrhythmic style common to African music with the melodic brass lines of British military bands (Magee, 2006). This
experience heavily influenced Elfman’s later musical creations. Upon returning to Los Angeles, Richard asked Danny to be the musical director for his “ragtag street ensemble”, the Mystic Knights of Oingo Boingo, to which Danny agreed. Danny Elfman performed and wrote songs for the band, and eventually took over leadership of the band when Richard Elfman left to pursue film directing (Magee, 2006). While the band was under Richard’s leadership, Elfman began to teach himself how to transcribe and write music, as it was necessary for the brass and string players. He spent hours on end listening to jazz artists, such as Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, identifying multiple melodies and chords and attempting to notate them to train himself to write music for the band (Magee, 2006). During this time, Richard and Danny created a wacky, low-budget, black-and-white film entitled The Forbidden Zone, which was Danny Elfman’s first experience writing music for a film (performed by the Mystic Knights of Oingo Boingo) (Hischak, 2015).

Once Richard left to further his film career, Danny shortened the band name to Oingo Boingo and rebranded their music to be more rock n’ roll-like (Allman, 1993). The band’s music was a mix of the West African Highlife and British Punk, with a smattering of film music influences as well (Magee, 2006). Oingo Boingo was an important part of Elfman’s musical roots, and though music critics and the hardcore punks of the time dismissed the band, it never bothered Elfman, who was already determined to “piss everybody off” (Allman, 1993). This man, with an attitude of nonchalant, lighthearted cynicism, never anticipated, or even desired, becoming a film composer. So what came next for Danny Elfman was a complete surprise, for both Elfman and the Hollywood film music community.

While he was the frontman of Oingo Boingo, Elfman received a call, where he was asked to meet a young, unknown animator who was directing his first feature film, Pee Wee’s Big
Confused, Elfman responded with “why me?”, to which the young animator, Tim Burton, replied “I think you can do it – I think you have something in you” (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). As if by fate, Tim Burton had attended an Oingo Boingo concert and had enjoyed the sound of the band and the talents of Elfman. Instinctively, Burton seemed to know that Elfman had the right sound for the film. Additionally, Paul Reubens, the title character of the film, had seen Richard Elfman’s film, The Forbidden Zone, and loved it. Later, Reubens told Elfman that “he always had it in his head that whoever did the music for Forbidden Zone was who he really wanted to do Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure” (Lanser & Monahan, 2000).

When Elfman’s name appeared on both Burton’s and Ruben’s list for potential composers for the film, Elfman was immediately contacted. After a successful initial meeting in which Elfman was shown two scenes from the film, Elfman went home, created a demo, put it on a tape, and sent it in, expecting to never hear from them again (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). Then, two weeks later, Elfman received a phone call where he was told he got the job. Elfman describes the experience,

> My first reaction to my manager was to call him and tell him I can't do it. He goes, ‘I've been working on this for two weeks. You call and tell them you can't do it.’ I slept on it and decided the single piece of anything that's guided my entire life was saying, ‘Fuck it.’ Like, ‘I hope I don't wreck their movie.’ (Grow, 2015)

Elfman’s sentiment of “why pick me” and then going for it anyways has persisted throughout his entire career. During a 2013 “Music From the Films of Tim Burton” production in London, Elfman was present to sing Jack’s songs from The Nightmare Before Christmas, and became overwhelmingly anxious before the performance. Actress Helena Bonham Carter took him aside and reminded him of his career motto: fuck it (Grow, 2015). It was at this same concert where Elfman heard the Pee Wee’s Big Adventure score and realized how far he had
come from that first film scoring experience. Because he was a rock n’ roll musician, not a film composition graduate of any kind, Burton and Reubens were perhaps taking a risk with hiring an unknown in Hollywood. Yet, even though Elfman did not know much about writing music other than his Oingo Boingo experiences, he made waves in the film community by writing an inventive orchestral score during a time when scores were done on synthesizers “with an eye toward the pop charts” (Allman, 1993). Truly, Elfman did not care about how he and his work would appear to the public; rather, he was intent on producing a score true to himself and true to the film.

After the success of *Pee Wee’s Big Adventure*, Elfman began to gain some momentum as a film composer. However, he was not exactly welcomed with open arms into the film industry. Though his score to *Pee Wee’s Big Adventure* caused him to be noticed, his name was often spoken in disdain, rather than admiration. Hollywood would have much preferred to congratulate a Julliard graduate on a successful score; instead, they found themselves suspicious of a rock n’ roll musician with no formal musical training whatsoever (Allman, 1993). After the release of *Batman* (Burton, 1989), and the impressive score Danny Elfman had written for it, the disgruntled rumblings really started to grow. People refused to believe that a self-taught musician could have written the score, and many accused Elfman of being a “hummer” – a composer who cannot read or write musical notation but rather hums or sings melodic content for another individual to write down (Wright, 2006).

Elfman’s lack of musical education surely meant that Shirley Walker, the conductor for *Batman*, was the real composer, or Steve Bartek, Elfman’s Oingo Boingo bandmate and orchestrator (Wright, 2006). Even fellow film composers were unsupportive, skeptical, and even nasty at times – Elfman describes them as fighting for any and every new score opportunity.
Elfman’s success was a result of his own hard work and dedication to teaching himself music, and other “real” composers, with their college degree, detested that (Adams, 1997). Unfortunately, because Elfman was honest early on about his lack of formal training, it took several years to earn the respect of his professional community – even though his handwritten film scores from *Batman*, while nonstandard and unique, clearly demonstrated legible and inarguable musical elements (Wright, 2006). Now, Danny Elfman is firmly established as a seminal film score composer and there are very few doubts about his musical and compositional abilities.

During the Hollywood Golden Age, composers had the unfortunate difficulty of composing and recording the film score after much of the filming had been completed, usually working with a rough cut of the film (Cooke, 2008). This method, though on the surface appears practical, was ineffective for several reasons. Composers were pressured to finish their work quickly and they felt as if it had fallen on them to create music that would support weak pacing or communication within the film – a task likened by some to that of a mortician improving the appearance of a corpse (Cooke, 2008). Perhaps the most discouraging and frustrating reason this method was ineffectual for the synthesis of music and picture was how composers completed the difficult task of creating an original film score to the rough cut only to discover that the director or editor had made significant changes that required the music to be altered (Cooke, 2008). Because of these reasons, film music’s narrative potential was limited. It is significant to notice how Danny Elfman avoids these problems by working closely with directors, especially director Tim Burton, to understand the narrative from the beginning and to work with the creative team to compose a score that flawlessly connects to the images and other narrative aspects of a film.
Tim Burton and Danny Elfman became natural partners very quickly. What began as Burton’s intuitive liking of Elfman that resulted in their first film together, led to numerous future collaborations. Their relationship worked on multiple levels, but perhaps at the core of it was a shared love of the macabre. Additionally, both men loved horror films and they each idolized a famous horror film actor – for Burton, it was Vincent Price, and for Elfman, Peter Lorre (Grow, 2015). Allman defines the two of them as “evil mastermind tortured doomed souls, both misunderstood” (1993), and whether they are such or not, they clearly understood each other, as is evidenced by the success of the films they have collaborated together on. Elfman describes the role of the composer as similar to a psychic medium; the composer must learn how to interpret a film through the director’s head, to “tap into the director’s spirit” (Adams, 1997). The director runs the show, so it is futile to write music that does not express the film the way the director wishes. They key is learning how to “dance around the director’s impulses”, nailing the tone of the film, and still creating a score that you feel good about (Adams, 1997). Danny Elfman knows how to interpret Tim Burton’s films the way Burton imagines, resulting in an effective and mutually rewarding partnership.

Tim Burton’s directing style meshed well with Danny Elfman’s compositional process. Burton would often call Elfman far in advance to the actual shooting of his film and describe his ideas (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). Elfman would walk the set of the film to begin establishing a sense of world, and of mood. The two would discuss a film narrative in terms of emotion and tone, and Burton trusted Elfman to create the tone of the visual world he imagined aurally. Elfman believes that weak scores result from dictating directors who micromanage their composers, whereas smart directors are confident enough to hire people that they trust to be able to do what they are hired to do (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). There is a very distinct difference
between being forced to go against your instincts and write music that you feel is absolutely wrong, versus adjusting and fine tuning music to align more with the director’s preference and vision (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). Elfman’s understanding of Burton’s ideas allows the two to create films that weave music, visuals, and plot together seamlessly to present an impactful narrative. The nature of Burton’s characteristic films could be described as dark cartoons, or exaggerated, darker versions of reality, but paired with Elfman’s “grand yet self-mocking” (Allman, 1993) music, an entirely original world is created, where the audience is encouraged not to take this dark cartoon terribly seriously.

As Elfman describes his compositional process, it becomes abundantly clear that there are two characteristics that are paramount in a film scorer: flexibility and self-discipline. The process begins with a phone call to Elfman from his agent, after which Elfman will receive a script and meet the director. If Elfman understands the director’s ideas and vision, and the two seem to click, a contract is arranged. Elfman tends to decide which films to commit to and which ones to pass up based on his interactions with the director, rather on the script, since the script changes so much from the first read until production (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). Elfman prefers when directors describe their film emotionally rather than musically, because it helps him understand where the big moments are in the film, and he acquires a better understanding of how he needs to coordinate and shape the music in order to create big thematic moments that have the intended payoff (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). Directors often return to composers they have worked with before because they share a common aesthetic and they understand how to work with each other. This is the case with Tim Burton and Danny Elfman, especially since Elfman prefers to discuss films in terms of emotional affect with the director, and Burton does not
provide Elfman with specific directions musically, but rather explains the feel of the movie (Grow, 2015).

After committing to a film, the composer can expect to have anywhere from four to twelve weeks to compose the complete score. This is where the flexibility and self-discipline come in: films rarely stay on schedule and changes in post-production can mean the composer is forced to rewrite, cut, or add music at the last minute. Danny Elfman has a system for dealing with this stress, and emphasizes that part of what makes a composer a good composer is his or her ability to become inspired under pressure with a deadline to hit (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). To keep him organized and on schedule as much as possible, Elfman creates a chart of all the cues he needs to write music for. On the chart, he includes the length (time) of each cue as well as how many calendar days are left before the score must be completed (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). While working on a film score, a typical day for Elfman begins with a morning full of meetings and phone calls with his orchestrator, sound engineers, musicians and their contractors, and other film staff. Then, around two in the afternoon, Elfman settles in to start writing. He remains working for a straight twelve hours, until two in the morning, only pausing to take small breaks so he can return to work on a section with fresh eyes (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). After a few hours of sleep, Elfman arises and begins again.

During his intense twelve hours of composing, Elfman has integrated his sci-fi and horror background, his admiration of composers who have come before him, his self-taught abilities, and his philosophy on film music composition to create his unique sound. Composers are constantly deconstructing, reconstructing, and reinventing the music that inspires them, and Danny Elfman is no exception (Adams, 1997). Elfman draws the majority of his knowledge and inspiration from the film music he grew up on, such as Bernard Herrmann, Nino Rota, Max
Steiner, Franz Waxman, and Erich Korngold, claiming that the “old school guys tend to be more talented than the new school guys” (Lanser & Monahan, 2000). Though he was never heavily immersed in the world of classical music, Elfman has found himself stepping back from his music and noticing subtle nods to composers such as Carl Orff, Gustav Mahler, Béla Bartók, Igor Stravinsky, and Sergei Prokofiev (Hirschak, 2015). In regards to whether there is a right or wrong camp of composers to draw inspiration from, Elfman comments, “I've never understood why it's any different to be inspired by Bernard Herrmann as opposed to Wagner or whomever. They're both composers and they're both geniuses” (Lanser & Monahan, 2000).

Elfman’s musical choices for a score depend on the nature of the movie. Partly due to his background in musical theatre (Le Grand Magic Circus), Elfman carefully considers how his music will tell the narrative. He treats his work as a complex jigsaw puzzle: each piece must stay within the main themes or tone of the work, but he cannot stay in the same place for too long, or else the landmarks will lose their effectiveness (Adams, 1997). Elfman prefers to set up his main themes during the main titles, as is evidenced in films such as Beetlejuice, The Nightmare Before Christmas, and Corpse Bride. As discussed earlier, this allows the audience to become immersed in the filmic universe, suspend their disbelief, and become introduced to the narrative before any visual action even begins. Without a main titles sequence, the main themes are planted more subtly, as was the case when Elfman scored Mission: Impossible (1996). And sometimes, the jigsaw puzzle is even more complex: in The Nightmare Before Christmas, Elfman wrote the music and lyrics to eleven songs and then had to create a score that led into and out of each song, transforming from one song into preparing for the next (Adams, 1997).

As Elfman works through his musical jigsaw puzzle, his methodology varies. Sometimes he will work through the music chord by chord, measure by measure, working vertically through...
a cue. Other times, he knows exactly where the melody should fall, and after placing it, fills in the rest of the orchestration around it. Or, he will simply work through a few bars over and over again, searching for a specific feel (Adams, 1997). That “searching” is a key component of Elfman’s compositional style. Because of his lack of formal training, Elfman is not acutely aware of all the “rules” of music composition, so his compositions are rooted in improvisation. In a discussion about dissonance, Elfman says,

I just love dissonance and for me it's all based on improvisation. I'm sitting at a piano and I hit tones and harmonics and it pleases me… I just let it do what it wants to do. I'm playing these things and then suddenly I'm clashing against something else and I'm going, ‘Why is this happening?’ And my first reaction is, ‘Oh, I should clean it up, fix it.’ And then my second one is, ‘No. This feels to be where this thing wants to go.’ (Adams, 1997)

It is out of this discussion that Elfman makes his comparison between writing music and being pulled around by a big dog, only to end up in strange places. Elfman will often have conversations with his good friend and orchestrator Steve Bartek about his dissonant musical choices – Bartek will call Elfman to verify that a clashing note isn’t a mistake, Elfman will double check, confirm that it is intentional, and then begin to question it, asking, “This is going to sound weird when we do it. What do you think, should we fix it?” (Adams, 1997). To which Bartek responds, “No, no. It’ll be interesting” and the dissonance remains (Adams, 1997).

These dissonances born out of improvisation and the unique mind of Danny Elfman are essential to creating the characteristic sound he is known for.

Elfman’s scores are not only comprised of a unique compositional style, they often include unusual instrumentation. Because of Elfman’s tour with Le Grand Magic Circus in West
Africa, he learned much about ethnic percussion and utilizes an incredible variety of unusual percussion instruments and African polyrhythms in his music. In fact, Danny Elfman performs many of the percussion sounds that are heard in his scores (Adams, 1997). Elfman has experience constructing his own percussion instruments and he often chooses to perform and record his own samples for rhythmic precision within the score (rather than risk the complex percussive rhythms getting lost in the reverb of the full orchestra recording) (Adams, 1997).

Additionally, Elfman’s orchestras often contain saxophones, perhaps a result of his liking of jazz and improvisation. Another prevalent orchestra member is the piano and/or the celesta. Elfman is very intentional about utilizing these instruments; they are essential in creating the appropriate tone for the narrative he is presenting. The celesta and bells add the touch of magic that is often felt in Burton/Elfman collaborations, and Elfman’s frequent use of a choir (be it a women’s choir as in *Corpse Bride* or a boys’ choir as in *Edward Scissorhands*) creates an eerie atmosphere (Leach, 2012).

While Elfman’s scores are often identifiable by the sound of these instruments, it is his treatment of the colors and timbres of the orchestra that really set him apart from others. Ryan Leach examines how Elfman refrains from a simple doubling method throughout the orchestra, and rather writes lines that emphasize the separation of orchestral colors or the combination of them to create a unique texture. Every instrument is treated with importance, and Elfman is very intentional about where the melody, countermelodies, and harmonies lie in the orchestra. For example, the main title for *Beetlejuice* consists of the theme being played by a French horn against an accompaniment of tuba, trombones, low piano, and percussion. Although the accompaniment is actually louder than the melody, because of how the accompaniment colors blend, the different color of the French horn comes through clearly (Leach, 2012). Elfman’s
command of the orchestra and its variety of colors and sounds initially pinned him as the quirky comedy composer, but as he has grown in ability and renown, he has demonstrated that he is capable of powerfully scoring much more than one genre.

From the frenzied variety of musical style represented in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, to the swirling strings, harpsichord, and piano duet of *Corpse Bride*, to utilizing the theremin, vibraphone, synthesizer, and bells to create an appropriately sci-fi-esque score to *Flubber*, to the brooding, driving brass march of *Batman* (Hischak, 2015), Danny Elfman has established himself and continues to establish himself as a seminal film composer. Despite receiving no formal training, he has taught himself to perform and write music to a high caliber, learning from listening and from doing. He approaches film music with aesthetic and narrative in mind, and collaborates with others to tell a story. He refuses to create “musical wallpaper that does absolutely nothing” (Lanser & Monahan, 2000), and insists upon interpreting a director’s vision musically, resulting in truly remarkable narrative film music.
Study and Application

I first became noticeably aware of Danny Elfman after attending Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) in theaters and falling in love with the sweeping choir and exciting string parts in the score. As a cellist, Elfman’s inventive and expert handling of the stringed instruments provoked my interest and I soon found myself listening to many of his scores, fascinated by his style and impressed by the seamless connection his music had to the visuals and narrative of the films he wrote for. Now, after learning more about Danny Elfman, I am even more convinced that the man is an expert, set apart from his contemporaries because of his musical background and unusual beginnings as a film composer. As I prepared to write my own narrative film score, I listened to and read about several of Elfman’s scores to identify key elements of the “Elfman sound” (as was discussed in the previous chapter) and how Elfman wrote musical themes that presented the narrative effectively.

**Study.** The first film I examined could be no other than Elfman’s first Hollywood film: *Pee Wee’s Big Adventure* (Burton, 1985). In his review of the film music of Danny Elfman, H. Steven Wright claims that though Elfman and Burton were both unknown names at the time, “Elfman’s musical accompaniment for Pee-Wee’s quest was a critical element in the artistic success of the film” (2006). In his first Hollywood film score, Elfman draws inspiration from and pays homage to two of his role models: Nino Rota’s “frantic oompah riffs” are reconstructed in the playful “Breakfast Machine” cue and Bernard Herrmann’s iconic screeching staccato strings (from *Psycho*) can be heard when Pee Wee discovers that his bike is stolen (D’Angelo, 2014).

Despite these noticeable borrowings, film critic Mike D’Angelo asserts that Elfman “makes what he borrows his own” (2014). The *Pee Wee* score is full of colorful comedic visuals,
propelled forward by Paul Reuben’s quirky character and Tim Burton’s animation experience, and Danny Elfman rises to the aesthetic by writing music that “promises fun, excitement, and strenuous efforts to entertain” (D’Angelo, 2014) right from the opening of the film, when the only visual is white text on a black screen. In an opening sequence with a breakfast machine, Elfman is able to find the rhythm of the editor and write music that matches the on-screen visuals so well that the exaggerated, mixed meter writing portrays the odd ingenuity of Pee-Wee just as well as the breakfast machine itself (Magee, 2006). Elfman’s themes emphasize repeated notes (perhaps related to Pee-Wee’s narrow-focused obsession with his bike) that careen into unrelated keys and then abruptly return home (Wright, 2006). In one particular scene, Pee-Wee angrily pounds on the door of a neighbor at the exact tempo that had been previously established by Elfman as Pee-Wee was marching up the front walk. This suggests that Elfman had a close working relationship with Ruebens and Burton early on, allowing Elfman to be fully involved in the narrative planning of the film. Elfman’s score unifies Pee Wee’s Big Adventure into an effective and cohesive filmic universe; without Elfman’s musical cues to define and unite the comedy, Pee Wee could have fallen flat as a sketch comedy – but Elfman’s score “gives the film its goofy grandeur” (D’Angelo, 2014).

After Pee Wee, Elfman was quickly typecast as the creator of quirky, idiosyncratic scores for offbeat comedies. Though that perception still persists (mainly because of how good Elfman is at those particular kinds of films), Elfman really established himself as a versatile and capable composer after the release of Batman (Burton, 1989). Elfman had been learning how to write music for films by doing it, and when Burton invited Elfman to join him in the production of Batman, there was some pushback from other production members, who felt that Elfman would be incapable of producing an effective action score – and they wanted a bigger name attached to
their film, rather than the still relatively novice Elfman (Grow, 2015). However, after presenting the brooding horn theme associated with the hero, Elfman won over the rest of the team and went on to win a Grammy for “The Batman Theme” (Grow, 2015). Though Elfman’s music may have initially been overshadowed by the source music (music the characters listen to in the film) by rock musician Prince, the “brooding and sinister” orchestral score “with occasional flashes of Wagnerian grandeur” released Elfman from the comedy niche he had been pinned in and paved the way for future productions, many of which were horror films or dramas (Wright, 2006).

Korngold and the Classical Hollywood film score influence Batman’s horn hero theme, but Elfman darkens the hero theme by shifting to a minor key and placing a strong emphasis on low brass. Elfman’s percussion background is extremely beneficial and evident in the score, with rapid snare rhythms (mimicked at times by the woodwinds) and percussive hits that accentuate many of the action sequences. Elfman commands the narrative and shapes audience understanding of the film with his use of motifs and themes. During the main titles, the audience is introduced to Batman’s theme, and it is presented in pieces throughout the film as Batman appears in scenes or to anticipate exciting action scenes (Magee, 2006). Batman’s theme undergoes all sorts of variations, depending on the emotional and narrative situation. It is even transformed into a secondary love theme, which occurs during Bruce Wayne and Vicki Vale’s romantic encounters. This theme is essentially the Batman theme, but orchestrated with piano, harp, and simple chords in the strings. Elfman’s uses of Wagnerian-style motifs are not solely tied to characters, however, as there are two other main themes within the music that function differently from Batman’s theme.

Throughout the score of Batman persists a low, syncopated ostinato that seems to represent the evil in Gotham City. Before Jack Napier becomes the Joker, this theme
underscores a moment between Lieutenant Eckhardt and Napier, and it occurs again during a flashback where Bruce Wayne’s parents are murdered (Magee, 2006). Significantly, there are hints of this theme right before the reveal of the Joker, who is accompanied by his own set of music cues. Magee describes how the Joker’s music, composed in the style of a Straussian waltz with a distinct circus-like sound, is played as if the Joker himself has control over it, as if he is aware of an underscore to his absurd spontaneous dancing (2006). The Joker’s music is not characterizing in the same way Batman’s theme is, however, because the Joker’s music is not altered or varied based on the emotions or situations of the character. This creates a sense of mysterious lunacy for the viewer, as the audience can never be sure what to expect from the villain – and the music plays an important role in establishing that part of the narrative.

Two other moments in the score that are worthy of mentioning are the music cues “Clown Attack” and “Descent Into Mystery”. During “Clown Attack”, the low ostinato that represents that evil of Gotham City persists, this time adding pizzicato strings. As the theme escalates, percussion accelerates the rhythm and the spiccato strings are reminiscent of Pee Wee’s Big Adventure. Additionally, in this scene, Bruce Wayne is identified by the Batman theme for the first time, however the theme is inverted from its original ascending pattern to a descending pattern. In “Descent Into Mystery”, Elfman introduces one of his characteristic elements to the Batman score: a choir. During this climatic moment in the film, Batman rushes to the Bat Cave in the Batmobile, and an emphatic choir accentuates the moment with rhythmic and melodic content that is not unlike Carl Orff’s “Carmina Burana” (Magee, 2006). The addition of a choir influences the audience’s perception of the scene, increasing its grandeur and weight. This cue also contains massive crescendos that coincide with the camera angles, such as swells in the music as the Batmobile speeds by or during the visual illusion where it appears as though the
Batmobile will drive straight into a rock wall.

In the final moments of the film, all of the aforementioned themes are combined in dramatic encounters. Batman’s theme is present in all of its variations, including the love theme, and the Joker’s music is manipulated in such a way that it seems as if Batman himself is forced to hear it and the narrative is controlled by it. With the sound of a full orchestra, Elfman adds organ and the choir, truly creating a climatic moment for the final battle of the action film. With *Batman*, Elfman establishes that he is more than capable of scoring music for action-adventure films, and he will go on to scoring many more comic book hero films, as well as films that incorporate dark action and drama. It was also during this film that Elfman first walked the set of a film to get a feel for what the film will look like, after which he can respond musically in creating the score (Magee, 2006). Now, Elfman tries to walk the set of every film he scores, as he draws much of his musical inspiration from the visuals and overall tone of the film, not necessarily the script. *Batman*, though causing skeptics to accuse Elfman of being a “hummer”, certainly propelled Elfman into the spotlight and prepared him to move forward in becoming the notable film composer he is today.

It would be remiss of me to not include *Edward Scissorhands* (Burton, 1990) in an examination of some of Danny Elfman’s most iconic works. Not only is the film (and in particular, the film’s soundtrack) counted as one of the most beloved films among Burton and Elfman fans, Elfman himself remarked that the score remains one of his favorites. Because the film had very little buzz, Elfman expressed that he felt “unencumbered” while working on it, as if he and Tim were working on a student film together – “Although I wasn’t confident in what I was doing made any sense,” Elfman said, “Tim didn’t seem to care” (Grow, 2015). Whether it was the unhurried frame of mind Elfman found himself in while working on *Edward* or the
creativity of the narrative, the score is one of Elfman’s most magical and story-like. Instrumentally, Elfman wrote for a conventional orchestra, but special significance is placed on harps, celesta, and a wordless female choir, and these instruments are utilized to their full effect to create the “dreamy waltz with the naïve simplicity of a children’s song” that is the thematic material for the title character (Wright, 2006). Along with the expected playfulness of woodwinds, wild percussive rhythms, and harsh brass pronouncements, Elfman also interjects some creative instrument choices such as a saxophone leading the motif in “Ballet de Suburbia” and a solo accordion in “Esmeralda” (Clemmensen, 1996). These instrumental choices are directly correlated with the direction of the narrative.

*Edward Scissorhands* is a beautifully stunning and heartbreaking tragedy, and Clemmensen remarks that the “most remarkable aspect of the score is its ability to tell Burton's story without the visuals”; it is able to “embody the heart-wrenching emotions of Edward's discovery and downfall with thematic and choral elements never restrained” (1996). This film is an excellent example of how the composer can assist in shaping the narrative, which is why the music so effectively tells the story, even without the visuals. Elfman was brought on early in this film (as he is with many Burton films), and he was tasked with writing a single theme for the film. When Burton was presented with two options for the main theme, they deliberated extensively between the two before deciding that they were both so well done that both would be included in the film (Clemmensen, 1996). The first theme is the overarching idea for Edward’s journey; it sets the tone of the film in the opening credits and the light waltz employs an elegant celesta that represents the innocence of Edward and the wintry setting, plucked strings, and a wordless chorus. This theme establishes the narrative space in regards to time and tone, as well as introducing us to the childlike and innocent nature of the main character.
The second theme, a “crushingly gorgeous” love theme (Clemmensen, 1996), propels the narrative to yet a higher caliber of storytelling. The simple yet undeniably tragic harmonies of the choir permeate this theme, firmly cementing the narrative’s grip on the audience’s hearts. Elfman learned about choral techniques while working on the score, and he “layers the singers brilliantly, allowing portions to serve as counterpoint within the group in an effort to maximize the harmonic resonance of the combined voices” (Clemmensen, 1996). Elfman chooses to never resolve this theme to a natural melodic conclusion, instead finishing the cue with a note of longing, away from the home key, and further exemplifying the tragic nature of the story. These themes are woven all throughout the film, hinting at each other and being deconstructed and reconstructed in new ways, such as in the gypsy, Spanish flavor heard during the suburban housewives’ fascination with Edward, or during “The Cookie Factory”, which is reminiscent of Pee Wee’s breakfast machine. One of my favorite moments is the frenetic Spanish tango, featuring an explosive violin solo, that Elfman writes while Edward cuts the hair of pets and women alike in a fashion both dangerous and incredible. The emotional pull of Elfman’s music conveys the narrative of Edward Scissorhands so much that it is impossible to discuss the movie without discussing the impact of the music on the audience’s impression of the film. Elfman and Burton brought together their respective areas of authority, music and visuals, to produce an exceptional story. Their partnership in the narrative process of Edward Scissorhands is one that rivals only The Nightmare Before Christmas, which is often considered Elfman’s magnum opus.

In The Nightmare Before Christmas (Selick, 1993), labeled by Hischak as the “quintessential Elfman project” (2015), Elfman’s music was so intimately tied to the narrative that it drove the storyline as much as, if not more than, any other filmic aspect. Nightmare is commonly mistaken as another Burton/Elfman – Director/Composer collaboration, but in fact,
Henry Selick directed the film. However, the narrative of *Nightmare* was born out of a poem written by Tim Burton, inspired by his horror idol Vincent Price and a response to his fascination with Christmas holiday movies (Halfyard, 2010), and Burton and Elfman worked on creating the narrative of the film together before even approaching the director. Burton would draw pictures of the characters in his poem (Grow, 2015), and he and Elfman worked chronologically through the poem: Burton describing the action and how he envisioned characters responding, and Elfman creating a song with that information (Halfyard, 2010). The result was ten fully composed songs before the film even began shooting, and Caroline Thompson (the screenwriter for *Edward Scissorhands*) was brought in to write a script around the songs (Halfyard, 2010). Because of this, the narrative of *Nightmare* is considered to be the product of Elfman just as much as Burton. Film musicologist Janet Halfyard goes as far to assert that though the “characters and the outline are Burton’s…the songs and their lyrics that drive the film’s narrative are Elfman’s creations” (2010). Elfman himself sings Jack Skellington’s songs, as he became so personally invested in the character of Jack that he could not relinquish Jack’s songs to another voice (Grow, 2015). Fortunately, no doubt due to his good relationship with Tim Burton, Burton allowed Elfman to sing Jack’s songs.

In *Nightmare*, all of the previously identified characteristics of Elfman’s sound are present and incorporated magnificently into the score: big brass explosions, complex percussive patterns, delicate celesta and piano moments, both spiccato and soaring strings, oompah-ing low tones, and jazz references. The only thing that is missing is a wordless choir – however, the many voices of the residents of the Halloween Town often function as a delightfully unnerving choir. The music has an old-fashioned feel, and Elfman intentionally strove to create a timeless score that incorporated influences from 1930s jazz (e.g., “Oogie Boogie’s Song”), Kurt Weill
(e.g., “Sally’s Lament”), and Gilbert and Sullivan (e.g., “What’s This”), while of course including his personal idiosyncratic writing in songs like “This Is Halloween” (Halfyard, 2010).

Hischak describes Nightmare as a “cockeyed operetta” (2015) and it is exactly that, as the music does not simply consist of leitmotifs that subtly weave into the subconscious of the audience, but the vigorous opening “This Is Halloween” sets the tone of the film and establishes that the characters are directly tied to the music. Each song is set up by the music preceding it and then moves along the narrative to prepare for the next song. Not only is the narrative propelled forward by the lyrics and music, but also the visuals and music are paired in such a way to tell another layer of the narrative. Nightmare takes place in four worlds that seem to exist alongside of each other: Halloween Town, Oogie Boogie’s realm, Christmas Town, and the world of humans (our world). Each of these worlds has its own visual and musical color palette. Halloween Town is painted with blacks, whites, and oranges (the typical colors associated with Halloween) and its music is minor with angular melodies and unpredictable harmonies. This discordant, macabre quirkiness characterizes Halloween Town (especially seen in the street corner band that performs a despondent version of Jingle Bells) (Halfyard, 2010).

In contrast, Christmas Town is bursting with vibrant reds, greens, yellows, and blues, set against a white base color (provided by the snow). Jack’s breathless singing of “What’s This” is in a major key and features lyrical, rising phrases. None of the music originates from the Halloween Town themes, making it distinctly representative of Christmas Town. In the ‘real’ world, the colors are washed out and it has no songs of its own. The opposite of the ‘real’ world is Oogie Boogie’s realm, which assaults the viewer with “psychedelic fluorescents” set against a black base color and the music is distinctly Cab Calloway inspired (Halfyard, 2010). Oogie Boogie’s lair reminds the audience of a speakeasy of the Prohibition era, suggesting danger and
organized crime (Halfyard, 2010).

At the end of the film, Elfman seamlessly transitions between these worlds in “To The Rescue”. The moments that take place in Halloween Town feature Sally keeping an eye on Jack’s presence in the ‘real’ world, and are clearly marked with thematic excerpts from “Jack’s Lament” and “Sally’s Song”, demonstrating their relationship and also grounding the scene in Halloween Town. When the scene shifts to the washed out pastels of the ‘real’ world, the underscore features a few fragmented thematic material from the Halloween Town songs (such as “Making Christmas”) and “What’s This”, showing Jack’s presence in the real world on Christmas Eve and his attempt to impersonate Sandy Claws. Then, in a scene change to Oogie Boogie’s lair, a jazz clarinet wails with the snap of pizzicato bass, bringing the audience down to the speakeasy-feel of Oogie Boogie’s realm. In Nightmare, Elfman’s lyrics and music function as strong narrative material, in terms of advancing the plot, establishing time, and establishing space. It is in this film, the ones that came before it, and the many others that Elfman has written since then, that demonstrate how Elfman writes exceptional narrative film music.

**Application.** In order to apply the concepts I have learned from the study of film music and Danny Elfman, I will write a narrative and score a short film that was written, directed, and produced by Kevin O’Brien. Before outlining my process for the short film I have scored, I will identify some of the practical components of scoring for film (as explained in Richard Davis’s *Complete Guide to Film Scoring*) and how those components apply (or do not apply) to my thesis product. Unfortunately, due to conflicting schedules and availability, I was unable to collaborate with other individuals to fully create a filming experience. Because of this, the decision-maker roles that Davis presents (the producer, director, writer, and potentially the actors) are absent from my project. There are two common ways for a film to be conceived: 1) a
director with an idea approaches a producer, the producer agrees to the pitch, hires a writer, and
then begin contacting actors after the script is finished, or 2) a writer presents a screenplay to a
director with whom he has a relationship with already, the director agrees to direct the screenplay
and the two find a well-known actor who also loves the idea, then the trio presents the pitch to a
producer (Davis, 2010). From there, the film goes through preproduction (the inception,
planning, and development of an idea), production (the actual shooting of the movie), and post-
production (picture and sound editing) (Davis, 2010). In my case, I am scoring a short film that
was shot and edited by people unknown to me, so I am leaping straight into the post-production
stage. However, the cut I am scoring is completely silent, allowing me to interpret and impose
my own narrative onto the story. Without the presence of a director or a writer, I am, as the
composer and sound designer, providing the entire narrative with the content of my music and
use of sound design, aligning it to the visuals and edits as I deem appropriate.

The film composer first becomes actively involved during the spotting session in post-
production – although it has been discussed how Elfman has sometimes been brought on earlier
in the filming process (in the case of The Nightmare Before Christmas, Elfman was actively
involved starting in preproduction!). During the spotting session, the producer, director, and
composer decide how they are going to use music in the film. Davis emphasizes three areas of
importance to consider when spotting: 1) remember that the composer is a partner in mixed
media, meaning that the music functions in different ways throughout the film depending on the
content and progression of the narrative, 2) ask if there needs to be music in a given scene, and
3) if there is music, define the purpose of the music, especially in regards to how it will propel
forward the narrative (2010). As I watched the silent cut of the film I scored, I kept these three
principles in mind. Though I did not have to work through any dialogue or action-packed
scenes, I still needed to consider when music is necessary and how much (or how little) is needed to effectively communicate the tone, time, and space of the narrative.

Before I even sat down at a piano to play through a creative brainstorming session, I watched the silent cut of the film several times. The short film is just under four minutes long and depicts a young man shoveling in a sandy crater for an unknown reason. The colors are washed out and dead, and the end goal of the man’s shoveling is never realized. Throughout the man’s digging, he will occasionally glance up, looking at a tree that hangs over the edge of the crater above him. At the climax of the film, the man drops his bag and shovel, stares at the tree, and begins climbing out of the crater. Upon reaching the top, the colors suddenly become vivid and bright, and the man pulls himself to his feet. He pauses a moment to look down into the crater, then turns and walks away, the visual fading to black. As I watched, I took mental notes on how the colors and cuts of the film affected my perception of the possibility of the narrative and tone. The contrast between the vivid shots and the washed out shots are key narrative points that I wanted to reflect in my music; emotionally, I perceive the main character as numb and despairing as he digs, but he is brought out of his despair when he observes the tree, as if he is remembering something. Then, I definitely had a sense of determination as he climbs out of the crater and resolve as he stands atop the crater, looking out at the sand. These emotions I gleaned solely from the visuals influenced my written narrative I constructed for the film.

The full narrative can be read in detail, with time cues, in Appendix A. In summary, the film, which I named Sand, is about a man who returns home after being away for some time and finds it gone, replaced with a sandy crater, with no explanation. In shock and despair, the man digs for clues, for any evidence, as to what happened to his family. He is at this for days, filling bags with sand, hoping that he might find something as he searches. As he glances at the tree
that hangs over the crater, he faintly hears the sound of a child’s laughter, remembering a happier
time spent with his family – a memory tied to that tree. He suddenly drops his bag and shovel,
consumed only with the desire to reach the tree. When he pulls himself over edge of the crater,
he realizes he has spent countless days in futile digging. Holding fast to the memory of his child,
he resolves to continue his search for answers elsewhere, choosing to remain hopeful rather than
despair.

With the narrative solidified in my mind, now it was my job to present this narrative
aurally. Because I was working with a completely silent cut of the short film, my responsibility
included not only music, but sound effects and sound design as well. First, I wanted to establish
a soundscape that matched the differences in color visually. When the scene is portrayed in vivid
color, the man hears the sounds of birds and insects, as if he is being drawn out of his shock to
reality. In addition to the diegetic sounds of nature, the man also hears a faint echo of a child’s
laughter during a few of these visually bright scenes. The laughter only exists in the man’s mind,
as he remembers, a narrative point that is only conveyed through this sound design. In contrast,
the deadened colors of the crater are accompanied only with a constant dry, airy wash, and the
sounds of his feet, shovel, and bag against the sandy terrain. These two soundscapes
demonstrate the dichotomy of the narrative: the man’s numbness as he despairingly digs and the
pauses in his labor where he remembers his family. I adjusted the EQ of these sounds as
appropriate, also adding reverb and other manipulative effects to create the specific sound I
desired, creating the soundscape of this four-minute filmic universe.

After establishing this base soundscape (which I am still able to alter later, as I deem
necessary), I composed the music for the film. Because I will present this film with a live
performance of the score, I have limited my instrumental options to who I know will be able to
perform with me. I decided to use primarily piano and two cellos, with the addition of MIDI samples of celesta and women’s choir. The complete score can be reviewed in detail in Appendix B. My inclusion of the celesta is in homage to Elfman, and like the celesta’s representation of innocence in *Edward Scissorhands*, the celesta in *Sand* represents the innocence and joy of the man’s family. *Sand* consists of two main themes, the celesta theme (sometimes doubled in the piano) that represents the memory of the man’s family, conveying emotions of childlike wonder, joy, and hope – I will refer to it as the child’s theme. In its purest form (first presented in measures 3-5 in the celesta), the child’s theme contains an A natural. The majority of the score is in F minor, so the A natural of the child’s theme injects major tonality (thus, the slightly uplifting feeling) into the minor score – paralleling the camera shots that inject vivid colors as the man looks up throughout the rest of the washed out, crater shots. The child’s theme is often accompanied with piano chords that are rolled towards the top note, again reinforcing the man’s eyes looking upward and emotionally reaching for hope.

The second theme is significantly less melodic than the child’s theme. I will refer to it as the crater theme, and it consists of low piano notes and pizzicato in the cellos. It is first introduced in measure six, heard at the same time the audience first sees the washed out colors as the man digs. It returns for a longer amount of time in measure eighteen. The slow moving, low piano notes reflect the shock and despair of a man who is numb to his situation, while the pizzicato cello notes, especially those in the second cello part, reflect the constant passing of time. The crater theme is simple, and could be described as empty – and emotion I hope to lead the audience to interpret from the scenes where the crater theme is present.

Throughout the score, these two themes are transformed and presented in a variety of ways, in order to convey the narrative. In measures ten through twelve, the crater theme
becomes more active and full (the cellos switch from pizzicato to arco) as the visuals portray the man deep in thought as he is walking. This alteration precedes another shot of the man looking upward, which is reinforced by an altered fragment of the child’s theme (measure fourteen in the celesta). This same pairing (fuller crater theme with more motion followed by a fragmented child’s theme) happens a second time (with slightly different alterations) in measures fifteen to seventeen. Then the crater theme returns to its original form in measure eighteen. As the man walks, and nears the wall of the crater, the crater theme begins to transform to its fuller version again, until it fades away and the cellos use pizzicato to emphasize the emptiness of the crater theme (and the man’s emotional state), the passing of time, and the beating heart of the man (seen in the cello two part in measures 29-32). Occurring at the same time is the child’s theme, drawn out, in the celesta. These two themes juxtaposed represents the decision that the man is faced with: to remain in the crater or not. On the last note of the child’s theme (measure thirty-two), the man drops the bag of sand he was carrying, suggesting that he is moved by emotion. In measure thirty-three, I use silence to give weight to the moment – the man is on the verge of making a decision.

Measures 34-42 are the climax of the film. In this section, a women’s choir provides harmonies and atmosphere – the introduction of the choir represents a change, and a movement forward. This is the most active moment of the score; the piano moves consistently back and forth from low to high octaves and the second cello plays sixteenth notes. The first cello plays a lyrical transformation of the child’s theme, but altered so that it is in a minor key and rhythmically different. It is also written in a combination of the harmonic progressions characteristic to both themes. This music is meant to push forward, as the man is climbing out of the crater, pushing forward himself. Emotionally, the music draws from the child’s theme to
represent how the man is grabbing on to the memory of his family and eagerly making his way toward the tree at the top of the crater. Despite being in a minor key, the music is both hopeful and determined. Upon reaching the top of the crater, in measure forty-three, the rolled piano chords are played (recall that these chords often precede or are presented with the child’s theme) and the choir fades out. For a moment, the vivid colors and the bird sounds dominate the audience’s experience, suggesting a return to reality. As the man stands, the child’s theme is played in full, combining harmonic elements that have been previously presented in the score but transformed in a major key (measure 45 to the end). In measure forty-eight, as the man sees the shovel and the sand bag at the bottom of the crater, the crater theme makes a brief appearance, once again tying that particular musical content to the work and despair of the crater. The man walks away from the crater as the piano (emphasized by the celesta in moments) plays the child’s theme one last time, implying that the man has decided to hold on to hope and search for answers elsewhere, leaving the hopelessness and emptiness of the crater behind him.

As examined in this thesis, the score for Sand is narrative film music, manipulating sound and compositional techniques to create time, space, and emotional affect that align with the other components of the film to convey the narrative to the audience. As a result, though there is no dialogue in Sand, the audience should still perceive a distinct narrative and become immersed in another world for a brief time. The success of Sand will be determined by the audience’s perception and interpretation of the film – to which there is no right or wrong response, as long as there is a response.
Conclusion

In the hectic busyness of our modern lifestyle, the film industry provides us with welcome relief by allowing us to escape to a strange place, immersed in a filmic universe and welcomed into a story not our own. Storytelling has always existed as a fundamental part of our humanity, and with music commonly referred to as the universal language, it is no surprise that music plays a crucial role in storytelling. Film composers are essential to the narrative process of a film, and Danny Elfman is a prime example of how well constructed scores inform the narrative and affect audience interpretation.

It is my hope that this thesis contributes to the growing conversation and study of film music, and that it not only validates film music as a worthy discussion topic, but also affirms Danny Elfman’s position as an influential contemporary film composer. However, it is not without its weaknesses. The lack of peer-reviewed research regarding film musicology and Danny Elfman made it difficult to find reputable and reliable sources of information, resulting in a heavy reliance on interviews to present information about Elfman. As the film industry develops and expands, I am certain that there will be more educational research to draw upon in the future. Additionally, the actual scores for the examined Elfman films were not acquired, resulting in an evaluation based on the findings of others and my own evaluation from listening to and watching the films. Were physical copies of the scores available to reference, a more detailed analysis of the music could have been presented. Finally, an original product generated from this thesis could have been more impactful if it had been created with a team of individuals fulfilling the roles in a film production, particularly being able to demonstrate the relationship between director and composer and their ability to work together to inform the narrative. Though this was originally the intention for the short film product, unfortunately due to
scheduling and lack of available talent, finding a team of people to collaborate with was unable to be realized.

In the future, this information could be utilized in many different research settings. Music has always been tied to culture, and as our culture changes, so will music. This thesis, tying together information about storytelling, the film industry, and music, could lead to further examination of cultural changes and developments. And there is no doubt in my mind that Danny Elfman has established a place for himself in the history books of film music. As he continues to write music, I am sure that there will be room for future research and study of his scores, not to mention how (or if) Elfman will grow and change stylistically or philosophically in his film scoring. Finally, there is much more to be discussed regarding how music functions within various platforms, and how our emotions and interpretations of those platforms are manipulated by the presence of music. Music and storytelling are essential components of the human experience, so there will always be a place for further discussion and understanding of those two topics and their relationship.

Film has revolutionized how we tell stories, and we are still discovering new, unique ways to present a narrative. Intricately tied to these films is music, and its presence exists not as “musical wallpaper”, providing a background for the real story, but rather as an essential part of the storytelling. Film music has a distinct affect on audiences—evoking emotional responses, subtly unifying a film, and prompting a certain interpretation, among much else. Behind every great story is a team of storytellers, and in the case of the film industry, these individuals include the producer, director, writer, actors, and the composer. They are joint storytellers. Their stories invite us to travel. So I invite the audience to travel; become immersed in the wonder of another world, connect to narrative never heard before, and allow the experience to affect you and take
you somewhere unexpected.

“It's a strange place, but there had to be a reason why I went here, so I'm just going to leave it.” -Danny Elfman
References


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Appendix A

Screenplay for Sand

00:00 – 00:09  Black screen
00:09 – 00:17  Vivid colors, close-up on man looking up, remembering the laughter of his child
00:17 – 00:20  Fade to black, the memory fades
00:20 – 00:40  Washed out colors, the man has been digging for days, searching for clues as to what has happened – his family used to live at this place but his home has been replaced with a vast sandy crater, he is in despair
00:40 – 00:51  The man walks slowly, the weight of his loss pressing heavily upon him, so much so that he drops the sand bag and considers giving up completely
00:51 – 00:55  Colors aren’t quite vivid, but not quite washed out either, the man glances up again, faintly remembering his family
00:55 – 01:03  He returns to his task of digging through the sand
01:03 – 01:08  He pauses yet again, looking to the side, his thoughts are clouded
01:08 – 01:52  He decides to continue digging because this is all he can do, he does not have the willpower to make any other decision, though his despair and grief is great and he has very little hope, he feels he has no choice but to continue his work
01:52 – 01:57  The man is walking toward the edge of the crater, he pauses when he gets there, not realizing his aimless digging has brought him to the edge
Vivid colors, he is looking up and it becomes clear what he sees: a tree, on the edge of the crater – the man has distinct memories of laughing with his child by that tree

Close up on the man’s eyes, a bug buzzes by his ear, he is lost in memory

Moved by emotion, the man drops the sand bag he had over his shoulder, transfixed by the tree and the memories it represented

The man hears the voice of his child say, “I love you, Daddy”

He sticks his shovel in the ground and stares at the tree a moment longer

Inspired with new resolve and hope, the man suddenly decides to climb out of the crater, he is solely focused on reaching the tree at the top, perhaps motivated by the irrational hope that his child might be there, waiting for him

He pulls himself to the top and stands, noticing the birds chirping and feeling lighter than he had felt in a long time

He turns around slowly to look out over the crater

The shovel and the sand only represent grief and despair to the man, there are no happy memories in the crater

The man realizes that he cannot continue his life digging in the crater, hopelessly searching for clues that are not there

He resolves to remain hopeful, leave the crater behind, and hold on to the memories of his family, searching for answers elsewhere

Fade to black