

## Chapter 2

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# Manufacturing the Epic Score

## Hans Zimmer and the Sounds of Significance

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“Hans is a minimalist composer with a sort of maximalist production sense. So he’ll write these incredibly specific and simple pieces, but the way in which he’ll then record and produce them is on such a colossal scale and with so much movement and drive, that there’s a point, where . . . we just let the music take over everything. And they can just turn the music louder and louder and louder, because you realize the momentum of the film is entirely defined by the structure of the music.”

Christopher Nolan on Hans Zimmer, scoring *Inception*

### Maximal Minimalism

It is a rare thing for a film director to allow music to “take over everything.”<sup>1</sup> Yet this is exactly what Christopher Nolan expresses a willingness to do when it comes to the contributions of his five-time collaborator, Hans Zimmer. In a sense, Zimmer has already taken over large swathes of American film scoring practice. He has arguably been the most influential composer in Hollywood since the 1990s, being in near constant demand for blockbuster tent-poles and prestige pictures alike. Zimmer’s role as producer has allowed his reach to extend exceptionally far. The music production company he co-founded in 1989 and now leads, Remote Control Pictures (or RCP, formerly Media Ventures) is a powerful industry institution, drawing in a tremendous amount of musical talent to work under and alongside Zimmer. This collaborative atmosphere—often unabashedly friendly to ghostwriting—allows the composer and his associates to take on a staggering number of projects.<sup>2</sup> With RCP, Zimmer has been able to dictate the direction taken by a considerable amount of music for multimedia. The trends he has spearheaded range widely, from the accommodation of new scoring idioms and styles to innovations in the way music is edited and recorded. Zimmer is particularly influential by having championed the sweeping embrace of electronic technology in film music. Synthesizers in his scores routinely supplement—and in more than a few cases completely supplant—the symphonic orchestra as the primary performance force for contemporary movie scores.

What is it about this composer’s approach that is so compelling for post–Cold War American filmmakers? Nolan hints that there may be something intrinsic to Zimmer’s style—his “maximalist production sense”—that seems to stake itself out at the forefront of the listeners’ attention. Though he speaks at first in general terms about Zimmer’s practice, Nolan has a specific cue in mind: the four-and-a-half-minute finale from the sci-fi psychological thriller *Inception* (2010, 2:17:18). Entitled “Time” on the soundtrack album, this cue accompanies the apparently happy resolution of the film’s plot. Dominic Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), having successfully completed a mind-bending heist mission, is at last allowed to return home, where he is reunited with his estranged children.

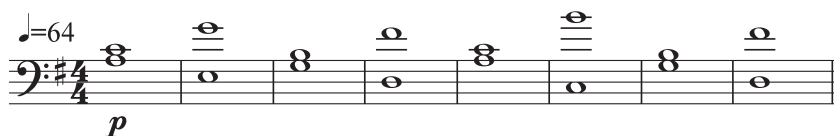
This cue’s “colossal” dimensions grow out of a simple seed. Example 2.1 displays the eight-measure long theme—if theme is the right word for this little exercise in first-species counterpoint—that impels “Time” forward. The harmony that undergirds the motif is a four-chord diatonic progression, realized through an unvarying linear intervallic pattern.<sup>3</sup>

The ostensible simplicity of the motif’s constituents belies something of an internal paradox. Each chord in the “Time” capsule can credibly lay claim to the mantle of tonic. Running through the progression we have:

- A minor—The recipient of the heaviest metrical stress in every 4-bar unit, and perpetual point of return and pattern resumption.
- E minor—The resolution of a plagal motion from A minor.
- G major—The subject of logical functional implications from all three of the other chords, including its own deceptively-resolved dominant.
- D major—The resolution of a plagal motion from G major, paralleling the earlier A to E pattern.

The two middle chords—a relative minor/major pair—are probably the strongest contenders for tonicity, and provide a lightly sentimental quality to the succession. Yet Zimmer offers no tonal disambiguation, no additional musical information to sway us one way or the other. Like the ending of the film *Inception* itself, the motif is ambivalent and open to interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

This kind of vacillation between tonal centers within a single diatonic collection is emblematic of late 20th/early 21st-century popular music, as well as Philip Glass–style minimalism. And minimalist the cue certainly is, at least in



Example 2.1 *Inception*, “Time” Capsule Basic Form

terms of the development of its material. The four-measure building block of “Time” is repeated thirteen times, on each repetition accumulating new instruments and textures but never once varying its underlying tonal organization. After beginning with the quiet piano and synth pad setting of Example 2.1, the cue gradually and inexorably grows in volume. By its ninth (Example 2.2) and tenth iterations, the thematic module has reached peak fortissimo intensity, peeling out from an ensemble of twenty-two (!) low brass instruments. Yet as soon as Cobb catches sight of his children, the music is yanked abruptly back to an exposed piano texture. And there it remains for the final three renditions. Throughout the cue, there is very little on screen to distract from the soundtrack. Virtually no dialogue competes with Zimmer’s electronics-augmented orchestra, and only a single, brief interruption between the fifth and sixth iterations of the “time” capsule temporarily suspends the inevitable unfurling of the music’s progress in “taking over.”<sup>5</sup>

“Time” is an example of a Hans Zimmer musical trademark: what I designate the *cathartic ostinato*. These are cues built from the repetition and cumulative intensification of a short motivic module. The bases for these ostinati are catchy, melodically simple gestures that are tailored for their amenability to repetition.<sup>6</sup> The obsessive reiteration of such cells is intended to have an engrossing effect. Zimmer’s repetitive structures ensure that the listeners can be led blissfully along, never worrying that the score will lead them on an unexpected course, that any unexpected musical tension might threaten to break the spell.<sup>7</sup> This gripping quality derives from the small size—and thus low cognitive load—of the repeated units. In the case of “Time,” the dream-like immersion is strengthened by the aforementioned flattening of tonal

The musical score for Example 2.2 is a multi-staff arrangement in 4/4 time, marked with a tempo of quarter note = 64. The score includes the following parts: Pro. & Strings (piano), Horns 1 and 2 (trumpets and trombones), Low Brass & Strings (piano), Elec. Guitar, Bass, and Drums. The music is marked 'marcato' and 'ff' (fortissimo). The score shows a dense texture of repeated rhythmic and harmonic patterns across all instruments, with the drums featuring a complex, driving pattern.

Example 2.2 *Inception*, Climactic Iteration of “Time” Capsule

hierarchy. Indeed, in her study of minimalist effects, Rebecca Leydon argues that some brands of repetitive music can sap away a sense of subjective volition or intention from music—exactly the state Zimmer encourages with this hypnotic, paradoxical cue.<sup>8</sup>

In a crucial and obvious way, this cathartic ostinato is not minimalist at all, despite certain minimalist trappings. While tonally and motivically the music is static, the enormous accretion of sound in Example 2.2 indicates that surface simplicity is in service of maximalist ends: maximum textural complexity and detail, maximum volume, maximum emotive power.<sup>9</sup> “Time” has the shape of a titanic wave, a crescendo that attains an unsustainable height and then breaks, leaving behind eerily still waters. This distinctive blend of hypnotic minimalism at the phrase level and unstoppable directness at the cue level is central to the effectiveness of Zimmer’s cathartic ostinati. It is a style suited for proclaiming the arrival of narrational turning points, revelations of crucial plot elements, outpourings of long dammed-up emotions and the like. Cathartic ostinati may be found lending their power to climactic scenes in many films scored by Zimmer and his associates.<sup>10</sup> But despite their characteristic sound, ostinati are ultimately but one tool in a vocabulary of distinctive methods; across his career, that the composer has developed many such Zimmerisms for imbuing a scene with high emotional and narrational significance. That is to say, cathartic ostinati like those used in “Time” are components of a larger idiom, what might be called Zimmer’s “epic style.”

## Epic Endeavors

For many filmgoers, the music of German-born, Los Angeles–based composer Hans Zimmer is synonymous with an ill-defined but immediately recognized quality of “the Epic.” Though it is an informal way to judge audience reception, a perusal of comments on YouTube clearly indicates the irresistibility of this term for many listeners. Here, for example, is a smattering of impressions from an uploaded track from *Gladiator* (2000, dir. Ridley Scott), “The Battle,” portions of which I will discuss later in this essay.

“I consider this Hans Zimmer’s best piece yet. So epic and wonderfully constructed.”

(Samuel Dodson, 2015)

“You know, I wish companies would play music like this when they make you wait a ridiculously long time holding the line when you phone, putting your call in priority sequence. . . . It would make my other work that I do when I put them on speaker seem epic.”

(pricktrooollll, 2014)

“Play this song in any part of your daily life and it will make everything you do seem epic.”

(BillyRed, 2014)

“EPICA non ci sono altri aggettivi per definirla [EPIC; there are no other adjectives to define it]”

(Cayman228, 2014)

“5:50 to 6:20. How? How does a 30 second piece of music manage to be the single most epic thing I’ve ever heard? . . .”

(KaijuKing42, 2014)

The word “epic,” without question, is overused in contemporary culture.<sup>11</sup> Much like “awesome,” the adjective’s cachet has been diluted, and it has been attached to anything vaguely impressive, rather than used to denote a precise literary genre or its attendant dramatic or constructive qualities.<sup>12</sup> Yet the YouTube posters who enthusiastically, if naively, cry “Epic!” are not without cause in citing Zimmer’s music as fitting this category. For one thing, the *Gladiator* cue hails from an elaborate battle sequence within an empire-spanning sword and sandals movie—a movie full of spectacle and heroic conflict set on a world-historical stage. Surely, this is as textbook an instance of a modern “epic” narrative in the literary sense as one could hope to find.

While *Gladiator* is his only entry into the classical epic genre, Zimmer has also contributed to numerous films that lie somewhere within an epic generic tradition. This chapter will focus on “epic” in this broadly conceived sense. In the span of little more than a decade, Zimmer has reflected and in some cases instituted trends in numerous spectacle-laden subgenres, including the biblical epic (*The Prince of Egypt*, *The Bible*), historical epic (*The Thin Red Line*, *Pearl Harbor*, *King Arthur*, *The Last Samurai*), and animated epic (*The Lion King*, *The Road to El Dorado*, *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*). Indeed, Zimmer’s influence extends even further once one admits movies that draw from epic narrative structures and themes, in features such as action/adventure, military, superhero, and thriller genres. Yet dramatic context is not the sole determinant of this “epic sense.” One can easily imagine YouTube users listening to “The Battle” from *Gladiator*, or any other Zimmer cue similarly yanked from its original diegetic context, and having the same reaction without having seen the film in question. Indeed, very few comments refer explicitly to events or character moments within the literal battle that the music accompanies. This less textually bound epic quality turns on the structure of the music, which, as Nolan notes, can come to actively define the momentum of its host film. More than perhaps any other composer currently working in Hollywood, Zimmer has defined the epic sound—significant, portentous, heroic, incredible—for today’s listeners of multimedia texts.

The prominence of Zimmer's epic style—and the larger trends in film scoring that represents—has meant that the composer's music has been subject to a substantial amount of critique among those who pay attention to movie music. This includes both academic and internet-enthusiast subcultures. A full survey of the critical reception to Zimmer's music is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it would be irresponsible to launch into discussion of Zimmer's stylistic traits without mentioning at least some of the problems that have been raised with his approach. For as much as huge influence (not to mention intense fandom) implies a broad acceptance of Zimmer's style, the composer's music has also spawned some remarkably passionate opposition. Some can be attributed to the simple perils of success. For example, there are the inevitable accusations—many justified—of derivativeness (especially from classical music) that hound every prominent film composer.<sup>13</sup> Allegations of unoriginality are made easier by the fact that Zimmer's musical vocabulary is limited and mostly quite conventional; he seemingly has little interest in harmony outside the tonal Common Practice, and certainly not with genuine *avant-garde* or modernist idioms. His cues are often thickly scored, but without being finely wrought contrapuntally. Countermelodies are fleeting, genuine independence of lines is rare (but not nonexistent), and often the middle range of the orchestra is treated purely as a vehicle for static sustained chord tones (if it is filled at all).

A portion of the backlash against his music also reflects a discomfort with Zimmer's hand in displacing more symphonic scoring traditions with his comparatively “untrained” exploitation of electric guitars, drum loops, and electronic samples—regardless of how well they suit their films.<sup>14</sup> The composer's predilection for digital augmentation can yield a distinctly overproduced sound, where every detail is manipulated somehow and the individuality of component parts is sacrificed for a holistic impression of busy loudness. For instance, note how difficult it is to clearly discern the acoustic instrumental components—even the nearly two dozen live brass performers—amidst the bustle of Example 2.2. One could fairly counter that this is simply the desired aesthetic at work. But this is cold comfort to those who find all monumental aesthetics suspect, either for creative or ideological reasons (more on this in due course).

Zimmer has a fantastic instinct for high-concept, franchise-defining musical devices—the more unusual or conspicuous the better. In cases where a film calls for a measure of historical or locational authenticity, Zimmer will often seek out idiosyncratic instrumentation. For example, his collaboration with the South African choral composer Lebo M helped fuse Zimmer's own Western musical sensibilities with local musical traditions, resulting in the convincingly syncretistic soundtracks for *The Power of One* and *The Lion King*. Even more thorough is the employment of Roma musicians and integration of Roma dance styles into his score for *Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows*.<sup>15</sup> Zimmer's collaborations with Australian vocalist Lisa Gerrard are particularly

striking in his epic scores, though the effectiveness of her voice tends to be more hit-or-miss. Their first project together, *Gladiator*, has a refreshing and evocative eclecticism its world-music vibe maximalized by a battery of exotic instruments.<sup>16</sup> However, subsequent collaborations like *Black Hawk Down*, *Mission Impossible II*, and *The Bible* treat Gerrard's voice more as a vague, otherizing gloss, lacking in emotional or cultural specificity. Nevertheless, even the most clichéd and crassly tokenistic nods towards other musical cultures tend to successfully suggest a widening of temporal or geographical scope in their filmic context, and thus operate well in line with Zimmer's epic aspirations.

The imperative to deliver a high-concept musical “hook” can verge on gimmickry in some cases.<sup>17</sup> This is most evident when his scores broadcast their use of some novel instrument (e.g., the pipe organ in *Interstellar*, the internet chorus in *The Dark Knight Rises*) or virtuoso artist (e.g., Joshua Bell in *Angels and Demons*, Arturo Sandoval in *The Amazing Spiderman 2*). Gimmickry sets in when these special elements are used in an overbearing or compositionally pedestrian way. Zimmer's penchant for the soundtrack hook often feels like a response to—or compensation for—the critique of over-standardization sometimes leveled against the kind of music that issues from Remote Control Productions. Zimmer's commercial influence, which is enabled by a literal company of like-minded and well-networked composers, cannot help but institute a degree of uniformity of sound and style. In James Buhler and David Neumeier's view, this amounts to a creative defect:

However effective and appropriate these scores [for recent action movies] are in themselves, the trend that they represent [has occasionally been criticized for resulting in a slick but somewhat anonymous style that fits seamlessly with risk-averse corporate film-making. This criticism has been directed particularly at the work of Zimmer, whose approach to scoring films avoids strongly individualizing stylistic markers even in non-action film and even when he develops a more or less traditional thematic structure. That is, it is hard to discern a distinctive compositional voice in Zimmer's music.<sup>18</sup>

My own position differs from Buhler and Neumeier's, in that I find Zimmer's music, particularly his epic style, to be brimming with “strongly individualizing stylistic markers.” Part of Zimmer's appeal to filmmakers is specifically that he is *not* as stylistically chameleonic as, say, John Williams (who can do a convincing Zimmer impression, though I have not yet observed the reverse). Zimmer cannot help but speak in his own, immensely distinctive voice. Buhler and Neumeier are correct in arguing that his action cues can sound interchangeable from film to film, but the approach of this essay will be to pick out those distinguishing components of Zimmer's music that make it so applicable to larger-than-life films. We must intentionally distance ourselves from the

sheer fact of his musical ubiquity in order to recognize exactly what in Zimmer's style is not generic—or, perhaps, not generic in relation to other, previously dominant scoring paradigms.

My chief intention for the rest of this chapter is to elucidate the specific means by which this “minimalist composer” with a “maximalist production sense” has managed to manufacture the epic so effectively and efficiently through his career. I will do so primarily by identifying five distinctive musical tropes that, like the cathartic ostinato, play an important role in communicating an epic affect. These are: the ponderous passacaglia, the marcato motto, the consequential chorale, the Teutonic theme, and the abstract anthem. This inventory is not meant to be exhaustive; it is mostly concentrated on musical form and texture, and leaves out some prominent elements of the epic style, especially with respect to timbre (the *Inception* “bwaaahm” sound being one particularly inescapable Zimmerism). After enumerating Zimmer's epic tropes, I venture into matters not strictly music-theoretical, namely, the representation of gender—particularly masculinity—in his epic scores. I raise this topic not only because it provides some cultural context for the technical aspects of the epic style, but also because it is an especially problematic aspect of Zimmer's style, and is thus ripe for critical analysis.

### **The Ponderous Passacaglia**

While some of Zimmer's stylistic tendencies developed gradually over the course of many scoring assignments, in a few cases, one can trace a Zimmerism to a specific first instance. This is the case for the *ponderous passacaglia*: a trope in which contrapuntal lines—usually scored for strings—are gradually added on top of a glacially paced bassline. The formula springs forth fully formed in the cue “Am I Not Merciful” from *Gladiator*. Similarities in orchestration, harmony, and melodic detail make it clear that “Am I Not Merciful” was based on the first movement of Henryk Górecki's Third Symphony, “Symphony of Sorrowful Songs.” The movement which serves as the wellspring for Zimmer's trope is a massive 8-voice modal canon for strings based on a 15th-century Polish Marian lament.<sup>19</sup> Górecki's symphony, which achieved an astonishing popularity in the 1990s, is hardly modernist in conception. Passacaglias and canons are old and imposing forms, apt delivery vehicles for feelings of epic gravitas and bleak portent. The inflexibility of the bass line, often magnified by its four-square and isochronous rhythm, can take on an inevitable, depressive quality after only a few repetitions. Furthermore, the principle of adding layer upon layer of musical detail is an uncomplicated means of achieving dramatic intensification. (It also aligns rather well with Zimmer's preference for additive minimalist procedures.) Finally, the form's contrapuntally methodical style brings with it certain cultural associations—severity, difficulty, effort—that can be tapped to good effect in depicting both external calamity and tortured psyches.



Zimmer's passacaglias mimic their Góreckian template in their slow unspooling of the orchestra, starting with a ground in the lowest reaches of the contrabasses and working methodically upward, eventually reaching the violins. The counterpoint is free, generally not exceeding five independent parts, with each additional voice adding volume and emotional intensity. Zimmer's passacaglias are uniformly tragic in tone, and the composer tends to assign them to dramatic low points in their respective films. Examples include the downfall of Gotham's formerly incorruptible District Attorney in *The Dark Knight* (2008, 2:16:20 with Newton Howard) and the grotesque self-immolation of the villain in *Angels and Demons* (2009, 2:11:22). One particularly notable use of a passacaglia for a movie's darkest hour is the aftermath of the attack in *Pearl Harbor* (2001, 1:60:00). In this sequence, one can detect Zimmer branching out from the influence of Gorecki, alluding now to a more Germanic strain of funereal string music. Like another string orchestra piece inspired by a bombing in World War II (Strauss's *Metamorphosen*, in response to the Dresden attacks), one can hear hints of the second movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* waft through Zimmer's December 7th elegy, as well as traces of the grim cortège from Mahler's *Symphony #1*, and even, perhaps, the "Dies Irae" from Berlioz's *Requiem*.

Example 2.3 renders the material of one full iteration of the cue "Am I Not Merciful" from *Gladiator* (2:29:04), excerpted from the point at which all four contrapuntal voices have entered. The scene from which this morose canon hails is the movie's "all-hope-is-lost" moment. Emperor Commodus Aurelius has just thwarted his sister Lucilla's plot to launch a coup against his government. Commodus confronts Lucilla, threatening her son's life unless she aids him in furthering the Aurelius line by producing with him an incestuous heir. The ground bass is austere, consisting of only four pitch-classes. The resulting modal tetrachord around D is more than a little evocative of the "Dies Irae" sequence. The increasingly twisting counterpoint suggests the tightening of a figurative noose around Lucilla's neck. For the fifth iteration of the ground bass, the previously quiet Commodus screams "Am I not merciful?!" Following this eruption, the discipline of the passacaglia also breaks down, building to a homophonic swell on D-minor, along with a scene transition to the Colosseum. In this way, the musical soundtrack

The musical score is written for a string quartet and a vocal line. It is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 85. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score consists of 11 measures. The vocal line (labeled 'Str.' for strings) begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The string quartet provides a ground bass consisting of a sequence of four pitch classes: D2, E2, F2, and G2, which are repeated in a pattern of quarter notes. The dynamics are marked *mf* (mezzo-forte).

Example 2.3 Ponderous Passacaglia from *Gladiator*, "Am I Not Merciful?"

mirrors Commodus’s state of mind—seemingly calm, but with a potential for violence seething beneath a veneer of rigid self-control. The severe form of a canonical *passacaglia* is not a musical style one would at first expect to come from a former new wave keyboardist without conservatory training. But lugubrious laments like this demonstrate how the right dramatic context can wring out music of convincingly “learned” weight and complexity from Zimmer.

## The Marcato Motto

One of the most instantly recognizable elements of Zimmer’s epic style stems from his scoring of action sequences. The *marcato motto* is a short, loud, and catchy melodic phrase, scored for either strings or full tutti, with an emphasis on brass, though, interestingly, rarely trumpets. Marcato mottos are an especially prominent component of thrillers set in the present day, like *Crimson Tide* (1995), *The Rock* (1996), and *The Peacemaker* (1997), but they routinely appear in most of his “historically” set films as well, such as the *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Sherlock Holmes* franchises. As suggested by the ‘marcato’ qualifier, successive notes in these motifs are articulated heavily and separated cleanly from their neighbors. This Zimmerism makes appearances as early as *Bird on a Wire* (1990, “Mr. Wiggley Is Back”) and *Backdraft* (1991, “Burn It All”). But the prototypical example undoubtedly hails from *Drop Zone*, a 1994 thriller about skydiving terrorists.

The excerpt in Example 2.4 comes from an action sequence midway through the film (1:12:50) in which the parachute of a competitive skydiver fails to open properly.<sup>20</sup> The onset of this material is synchronized precisely with the moment another character enters freefall in order to rescue their plummeting teammate. On the soundtrack album, the cue is cheekily entitled “Too Many Notes/Not Enough Rests.” That description is borne out through the *vivace* tempo (152 bpm) and density of the percussion part. However, the melody itself, like most marcato motifs, is not especially fleet of foot.

The musical score for Example 2.4 is written in 12/8 time with a tempo of 152 bpm. It consists of three staves. The top staff is for Horns, showing a melodic line with a slur. The middle staff is for Brass + Strings, showing a rhythmic accompaniment. The bottom staff is for Percussion, including Crash Cymbal, Snare, Hi-Hat, and Bass, with a dense, driving pattern. The score is marked with a forte (f) dynamic.

Example 2.4 Marcato Action Motif from *Drop Zone*, “Too Many Notes/Not Enough Rests”

The “Too Many Notes” motif exemplifies Zimmer’s approach to epic action scoring in several respects. Its melodic line is reinforced with parallel voice-leading that follows in rhythmic lockstep with the theme. As is invariably the case with these motifs, it is heard above an extremely active accompanimental texture. In the case of *Drop Zone*, this includes drum loops and a synth bass, with electric guitar added on subsequent iterations.<sup>21</sup> The entire effect is muscular and percussive, as though Zimmer was searching for a way to translate the General MIDI sound “Orchestral Hit” (voice 55) into something capable of carrying a melody. In *Drop Zone* and other earlier Zimmer action scores like *Bird on a Wire* (1990) and *Point of No Return* (1993), the layering of orchestral sounds above a throttling, loop-based accompaniment displays a clear lineage with 1980s-era action/thriller scoring practices.<sup>22</sup> But, as is his tendency, Zimmer effects a musical maximization with his action material, making an earlier decade’s action music louder, more heavily produced, and more densely orchestrated.

Natural minor/aeolian harmony is nearly obligatory for action marcatos, resulting in an emphasis on the minor dominant (v) and subtonic (bVII). The aeolian cadence [f#: iv<sup>7</sup> to v to i] in m. 4 of Example 2.4 is characteristic. As with other Zimmer musical fingerprints, the leading-toneless minor mode is favored for its connotations of masculine stoicism. In terms of melody, these motifs tend to have a limited range and small degree of rhythmic variety. They often feature repetition at the note-to-note level, with immediate pitch duplications of the same rhythmic duration. A distinctive attribute is their recourse to trochaic metrical stresses for strong beats—observe the “taa-taa-taa-TA-daa” in each bar of “Too Many Notes.” In the absence of true syncopation, these explosive stress patterns help lend the material a jaunty, if not quite playful, kind of energy.

This feeling of vivacious belligerence helps explain why the marcato motif has attached with such tenacity to the pirate film genre. A handful of muscular marcatos are scattered across *Muppet Treasure Island* (1996, co-composed with Nick Glennie Smith). There, they closely match the film’s puppet-based thrills and spills, particularly the frantic riffs during the film’s climactic duel between Kermit and Long John Silver. A few years later, in *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003), Zimmer and collaborator Klaus Badelt would create a full-blown character leitmotif (“He’s a Pirate”) out of the constituents of the marcato motto for the film’s breakout character, the swaggering privateer Jack Sparrow.<sup>23</sup> The theme’s catchiness is undeniable; it sounds like a hornpipe performed by a band that only knows how to play rock power anthems. “He’s a Pirate” would go on to become the entire film series’ de facto main theme, effectively basing the sound of an astonishingly lucrative franchise on Zimmer’s approach to action scoring. In fact, by the time the third *Pirates* film had hit theaters in 2007, the minor marcato had all but replaced any lingering memories of what had been the musical default for cinematic swashbucklers since the 1930s: major-mode, fanfare-filled Korngoldian

splendor, whose last hurrahs were John Williams' *Hook* (1991) and John Debney's *Cutthroat Island* (1995).<sup>24</sup>

Despite its success as a standalone theme, Jack Sparrow's leitmotif is nevertheless an exception for its memorability outside of a non-diegetic underscore context. Zimmer's marcato action motifs more frequently exist as one-off modules, repeated at most once or twice over the duration of a score. The opening battle in *Gladiator*, whose epic reception on YouTube we have already noted, features no fewer than three different marcato motifs (at 7:35, 9:05, and 9:50). Despite counting as, in one YouTube commenter's opinion, "the single most epic thing I've ever heard," all of these motifs are essentially uncorroborated anywhere else in the score. Set against the barbarous, Holst-derived dissonance of the rest of the cue, these catchy mini-themes attach to images of the disciplined Roman army as they dominate the battlefield.<sup>25</sup> Through their phrasal rigidity and harmonic clarity, the marcatos in "The Battle" represent a state of order and balance—albeit an order made possible by and sustainable only through aggressive militarism. This is an idea to which we shall return shortly.

## The Consequential Chorale

Zimmer's music can leave the impression of being, for lack of a better term, "chordy." It is often reliant upon tightly voice-led triads and seventh chords in close positions with minimally complex melodies or counterpoint. One hallmark of Zimmer's epic style is the use of chordy minor-mode progressions within textures resembling chorale harmonizations. These *consequential chorales* transfer the composer's facility with classical-style functional harmony into a dramatic language brimming with chordal inversions, expressive suspensions, and heavily stereotyped cadential routines. With their slow and stolid voice-leading, passages built on this principle are manifestly the product of someone whose musical imagination comes from his hands-on experience as a keyboardist (and sequencer) rather than from an orchestration textbook. Almost all are straightforward tonic prolongations. Zimmer is particularly fond of reaching the *i*-chord in root-position by way of  $V^6$ ; the inverted dominant in turn is approached by leap rather than step, necessitating an expressive chromatic interval to  $\#7$ .

Like the ponderous passacaglia, these progressions intimate matters of deep import. Examples range in topic from lurking submarine danger (*Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, *Crimson Tide*) to noble sacrifice (*The Rock*) to unspeakable personal loss (*Power of One*, *The Lion King*). One particularly striking usage is the theme for the Israelites in *The Prince of Egypt* (dir. Brenda Chapman, 1998: 50:10). This granitic progression swings across two tonal idioms, starting with a Middle Eastern—allusive scale but invariably giving way to Zimmer's impassive diatonic harmony. On the rare occasion they assume a major-key context, Zimmer's chorales tend to be placed in a much higher

pitch range. Instances of “beatific” major chorales in *The Thin Red Line*, *The Da Vinci Code*, and *The Prince of Egypt* appropriately project a feeling of religiosity and transcendence.<sup>26</sup>

Example 2.5 presents a transcription of the tail end of the “Am I Not Merciful” cue from *Gladiator*. This passage arrives just a few moments after the material in Example 2.4. The fortissimo Latin chanting and roiling percussion is reduced to make plain the chorale-style homophony that underlies the sequence. The music follows the mortally injured hero Maximus as he is lifted into the Coliseum to fight one last time. Zimmer chains together two chorale-style paragraphs for the below- and above-ground stages of Maximus’s ascent. The first eight-measure idea, twistingly chromatic and laden with wrenching suspensions, sits firmly in Zimmer’s “Wagnerian” mode.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, the completely diatonic (and leitmotivic) second leg is more redolent of a Baroque lament-bass. For this twelve-measure phrase, three component voices behave quite differently in terms of contour and direction, their linear differentiation contributing to the affective richness of the chorale. The tenor voice is stuck hitting the same pitch (A) repeatedly, like a fatefully tolling bell. Meanwhile, the soprano line arcs up and then downwards, straining for some sort of escape only to come crashing down in failure. This sense of collapse is reinforced by the trajectory of the bass line, perhaps the most expressive element of this passage. Together with the other voices, it articulates three sinking gestures. In the first of these, it drops from  $\hat{5}$  to  $\hat{1}$  to form a weak imperfect authentic cadence in D minor. It then sinks further from  $\hat{1}$  to  $\hat{5}$  for a Phrygian half cadence. The final  $\hat{3}$  to  $\hat{5}$  to  $\hat{1}$  motion in the last gesture functions as the ultimate nail in the coffin, forming a perfect authentic cadence that sums up the affect of the cue. The overstatement of Maximus’s predicament through this doom-laden music is an effective means of monumentalizing his suffering. Zimmer implies that the protagonist’s fate is tied at an almost mythological level with the destiny of the Roman Empire and, by extension, Western civilization itself.

The musical score for Example 2.5 is presented in two systems. The first system is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a tempo marking of quarter note = 100. The top staff is labeled "High Brass + Chor." and the bottom staff is labeled "Str. + Chor. + Low Brass". The first system ends with a double bar line and a fermata. The second system is marked "Tutti" and "f" (fortissimo). The score shows a transition from a chromatic, suspended passage to a more diatonic, lament-like passage.

Example 2.5 Consequential Chorale from *Gladiator*, “Am I Not Merciful?”

## The Teutonic Theme

Direct influences from popular music predominate in Zimmer's earliest decade of film scoring. Even well into the 1990s, some of the composer's scores bear traces of a rock mindset, with heavy syncopations and avoidance of functional harmony. (The aeolian theme for 1996's *Broken Arrow* is perhaps the last major example of this). Yet as the composer became attached to more and more epics, another style arose, one that hybridized Zimmer's skill with classical harmony with his rock-informed love of drum loops, electronics, and head-banging rhythms. This new manner is epitomized with what might be called the *Teutonic theme*. Teutonic themes are brooding minor melodies that use "Germanic-sounding" musical techniques as a symbolic shorthand for the qualities of strength and honor. Allusions to common-practice German art music are easily discerned in many of Zimmer's epic scores: from Bach in *Dead Man's Chest* to Mahler in *Hannibal*. But it is Zimmer's debt to Wagner that is most evident in his epic style, especially the melodic construction of heroic themes. The implications of drawing so heavily from Wagner have been noted in the musicological literature, particularly in Marc Weiner's analysis of Wagnerian allusion and ideology in *Gladiator*.<sup>28</sup> For our purposes, a more technical investigation will help supply analytical weight to claims of stylistic influence and ideological resonance.

Example 2.6 traces the influence of a single Wagner allusion through a number of Zimmer's themes (all transposed and annotated with respect to C-minor). The clear model here is Siegfried's heroic leitmotif from the *Ring* cycle. Siegfried's motif itself has a simple melodic skeleton: it first ascends from  $\hat{1}$  to  $\hat{3}$  to a dramatic apex pitch on  $\hat{6}$ , and then builds up to a half cadence via

Wagner  
*Ring Cycle*  
 Siegfried  
 Leitmotif

c min:  $\hat{5}$   $\hat{1}$   $\hat{3}$  (2  $\hat{1}$ )  $\hat{6}$   $\hat{3}$   $\hat{4}$   $\hat{5}$   
 I i VI (ii<sup>o</sup>) III ii<sup>o</sup> V  
 [alt.] i VI iv ii<sup>o</sup> i<sup>o</sup> ii<sup>o</sup> V

Zimmer  
*The Lion King*  
 Mufasa Theme

c min:  $\hat{5}$   $\hat{1}$   $\hat{3}$   
 i i III<sup>6</sup> VI VII<sup>7</sup> i V i i V i

Zimmer  
*Crimson Tide*  
 Main Theme

c min:  $\hat{5}$   $\hat{1}$   $\hat{3}$   $\hat{6}$   $\hat{3}$   $\hat{4}$   $\hat{5}$   
 i VI<sup>6</sup> iv v i v i i i<sup>6</sup> VI III iv V<sup>4-3</sup> i

Example 2.6a Wagnerian Themes

Zimmer and Glennie-Smith  
*The Rock*  
 Main Theme

c min: i VI iv v i iv i<sup>6</sup> VII<sup>6</sup> i<sup>6</sup> f min: v<sup>6</sup> IV<sup>6</sup> V<sup>6</sup>

f min: i VI<sup>6</sup> ii<sup>7</sup> V<sup>6</sup> i VI iv i<sup>6</sup> iv V<sup>4</sup> i

Zimmer  
*Gladiator*  
 Main Theme

c min: V i VII i<sup>6</sup> III V<sup>4</sup> iv V<sup>3/iv</sup> iv i<sup>6</sup> V<sup>6</sup> i vii<sup>6</sup> i<sup>6</sup> iv V<sup>4</sup> i

A-Section

c min: i VII<sup>6</sup> III VII v i i VII<sup>6</sup> VI<sup>6</sup> VII v i

B-Section

... i V<sup>3</sup> i<sup>6</sup> iv i<sup>6</sup> VI iv V V<sup>4</sup> i

Example 2.6b Wagnerian Themes cont.

an evenly timed  $\hat{3}\text{-}\hat{4}\text{-}\hat{5}$  line. The submediant chord—a heroic outpost of major strength amidst minor somberness—is the most poignant chord in the progression, especially those harmonizations when it coincides with the melodic  $\hat{6}$ . The climb from  $\hat{3}$  to  $\hat{5}$  is also accompanied by a striking progression: III to  $\text{ii}^{0\flat}_5$  to V—striking because Wagner appears blithely unconcerned with the parallel octaves formed between bass and melody.

In *The Lion King* (1994, dir. Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff), a noble theme for Simba’s ill-fated father provides some of the first hints that Zimmer was beginning to channel Siegfried. However, it is largely the mythotragic tone through which “Mufasa’s Theme” resembles Wagner’s music, more so than any specific structural echoes. But with the following year’s highly influential *Crimson Tide*, we find a thorough and almost brazenly undisguised reference

to Siegfried's motif. The *Crimson Tide*'s theme's first two measures follow the harmonic and melodic trajectory of Wagner's motif, and its seventh measure is a direct reproduction of the ending of Siegfried's motto. Brass-heavy orchestration helps drive the connection home, while rock-drawn rhythms and electronic sweetening keep the theme sounding appropriately contemporary and technological.

Though a little less on-the-nose, the Wagnerian inspiration is also foregrounded in the long-breathed and modulating main theme from the action movie *The Rock*, which was composed with Nick Glennie-Smith. Note in particular the way in which the melody reaches its apex  $\hat{6}$  in both of its halves, a connection that is especially transparent at m. 5. A half decade later, the primary theme for Maximus in *Gladiator* marks a slight motion away from bald-faced Wagnerianism, with correspondences less overt, more buried in the overall structure of the tune. In the case of the  $\hat{3}$ - $\hat{4}$ - $\hat{5}$  line, the melodic similarity now occupies a different kind of phrase-formal function, in this case a tonic prolongation, rather than motion to the dominant. Nevertheless, secondary parameters like orchestration and voicings insure *Gladiator*'s melody still projects an echt-Germanic, if not strictly Wagnerian, feeling.

Given the importance of Arthurian legend to several of Wagner's mature operas, one might expect *King Arthur* (2004, dir. Antoine Fuqua) to have been the most natural fit for Zimmer's Teutonic themes. However, the movie marked the end of the composer's overt drawing from Siegfried's leitmotif. A few shades are still present in the extremely long paragraph that constitutes the film's main theme, partially pictured in Example 2.6. For example, the melody climaxes on the submediant, and bears a drawn-out, suspension-filled final cadence. But the makeup of the *King Arthur* theme is emblematic of the more recent direction of Zimmer's melodies, which bear less differentiated melodic subunits and tamer rhythms.<sup>29</sup> One should also keep in mind that at this stage in his career, Zimmer had arrived at a very well-ensconced and comfortable personal style. It is therefore just as likely that for *King Arthur*, Zimmer drew inspiration directly from his own works—a hint of *Crimson Tide* rings through before the final cadence—as much as from any specific Wagnerian prototype.

## The Abstract Anthem

Zimmer's Wagnerian themes are, for the most part, children of the 1990s. In the first decade of the new millennium, one begins to sense in Zimmer's output a certain embarrassment with conventional melody, a hesitance to write anything that is overly catchy, ornate, or goal-oriented. Instead, we find increasing recourse to minimally complex motivic ideas—*abstract anthems*—that persist through a cue or even score. When the basic unit of recognizable melodic information is no more than a measure's worth of material, it becomes quite easy to create suspenseful cues—and sometimes spin out whole



themes—from the process of minimalistic cumulative repetition. At their most successful, underscore constructed this way can be kaleidoscopically entrancing, especially when conjoined with a cathartic ostinato, as is done in the climax to *The Da Vinci Code* (2006, dir. Ron Howard, 2:42:18). At their weakest, they can fall victim to a feeling of creative anonymity, a problem most acute in Zimmer's themes for the action video games *Call of Duty 2* and *Crysis 2*.

This anti-thematic attitude represents a pronounced shift in approaching films with larger-than-life pretensions; even the most idiosyncratic of past film composers like Alex North and Leonard Rosenman tended to fill their epic scores to the brim with elaborate themes. When asked in 2010 whether his philosophy towards film scoring has changed, the composer responded:

Yeah, I think so. It's evolutionary. For instance, I wouldn't be able to write a tune like *Gladiator* anymore because it feels like it's inappropriate for where we are. I think I have a very good sense of that other devilish German word "Zeitgeist"—the heartbeat of the times. If you wrote a big overtly heroic theme, it would just feel wrong . . . I'm not interested in the massive heroic tunes anymore. I've been there, done it, got the t-shirt, even the crew jacket. Now, I'm interested in how I can take two, three or four notes and make a really complex emotional structure. It's emotional as opposed to sentimental. It's not bullshit heroic; it has dignity to it.<sup>30</sup>

The composer's motivation for adopting a terse form of motivic identification appears to have its roots in a fatigue with traditionally heroic (read: John Williams-esque) themes, which Zimmer feels communicate sentiment rather than emotional complexity. The practical upshot of this shift away from "bullshit" musical heroism is a progressive stripping away of melodic content, until all that is left are abstract motivic anthems and the varying underscore contexts they find themselves in.<sup>31</sup>

Thematic abstraction is particularly clear in the hugely influential music for the *Dark Knight* trilogy, which Zimmer co-wrote with progressively decreasing input from co-composer James Newton Howard. Zimmer has referred to the specifically *anti*heroic quality of Batman as justification for denying the character a full-blooded theme.<sup>32</sup> To Zimmer, Batman's vigilantism is a symptom of arrested psychological development, which he translates by eschewing traditional thematic work and instead placing his motifs in relative stasis. The one piece of melodic material that is preserved through all three films is incredibly spare: a two-note motion from D to F and back, which is essentially Batman's "theme" throughout the franchise. Once in a while, the intervallic cell is harmonized in a striking way, and it is frequently subjected to augmentation and diminution. Yet in no case is it ever developed into anything larger than a repeating minor third ostinato.<sup>33</sup>

Zimmer's reliance on these abstracted ideas for big-budget epic films has been controversial, providing grounds for a critique from Buhler and Neumeier:

Because the music in the film never comes into thematic focus—it never coalesces into a distinctive musical shape that exceeds the rudimentary form of its basic material—the thematic connections serve only to create variants that circulate around this thematic void, and if we go to the music looking for a clarifying identity, we will find it refusing the terms that would insist on measuring actions and affects according to essential being.<sup>34</sup>

Buhler and Neumeier suggest that the absence of full-bodied themes prevents certain modes of teleological development, and this siphons away the potential for growth, progression, or climax. In some places, the slenderness of the recurrent material neutralizes a sense of dramatic rising action, making sequences early in the film feel equally as dire and significant as the climactic battles in the final reels. This flattening of dramatic tension is particularly acute in *The Dark Knight* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2008). Despite their incredible production values, the action scenes from early, middle, and late stages in that film are barely differentiated in terms of musical score, and as a result have essentially the same degree of suspense.

Yet, as with Zimmer's tendency towards over-production, we should not discredit what appears to be a highly intentional aesthetic just because it does not align with earlier scoring practices. In this case, the use of abstract motives and minimal thematic development undeniably imparts a distinctive temporal quality to many of Zimmer's epic scores, an immersive state of permanent portent that manages to maintain a high level of tension without recourse to traditional tonal or thematic teleology. This combination of urgency and stasis—maximal minimalism in another guise—places Zimmer's music once again in sharp distinction with earlier epic film scores, but, critically, also with the minimalist and electronic genres with which it might otherwise easily compare.

The drive to abstract away melodic information and maximize musical urgency can lead to a blend of other Zimmerisms that we have already observed, spawning hybrid tropes like a “marcato chorale.” We may see this transformation in “Molossus,” the centerpiece chase cue from *Batman Begins* (dir. Nolan, 2005). The sequence is characteristically unrelenting in its constant synth loops and thunderous volume—though even this is not enough to prevent it from being obscured by sound effects at several junctures. Forty seconds into the scene, an aerial shot of Batman's armored vehicle careening through Gotham prompts the closest thing the film has to a traditional heroic theme. Over the churning ostinato, Zimmer supplies a relatively long-breathed melody, vaguely in the Wagnerian style, replete with a (loose) antecedent/consequent structure and active if resolutely diatonic harmonic

support. Example 2.7 provides a transcription of this passage. Note the dense layering of separate ostinati, á la *Inception*, as well as a counter-line in the violins. This violin theme is barely audible in the film’s final mix, but nevertheless stands as a nice compositional detail, in fact prefiguring a leitmotif for the character Harvey Dent in the next film.

Despite standing out among the cue’s grim ostinati, these two comparatively expansive themes are not in store for any traditional development. “Molossus” revisits the horn theme only in fragments, never restating its consequent phrase. As the chase barrels forward, melody comes to play progressively less of a role, to the point where it no longer behaves as an integral musical parameter and instead becomes subordinated to harmonic progression as such.<sup>35</sup> For example, when the hero enters a tunnel, Zimmer and Newton Howard return to the chord progression that supported the long-breathed themes from the beginning of the cue. Yet now the melody is abandoned in favor of marcato repetitions of a single chord tone (replicating third staff of Example 2.7). These sawing chords are byproducts of the generative harmonic succession beneath, rather than parts of an internally motivated melody. The conclusion of the cue continues Zimmer’s trend of stripping away the capacity for chorales to support autonomous melodies, as it converts the progression itself into a marcato motto. Example 2.8 reproduces this section. Each chord occupies twice the duration of earlier progressions. The metrical augmentation slows harmonic momentum precipitously without tampering with the pace of the still present eighth-note pulse. This helps to signal the narrative resolution of the action sequence, but it also underlines exactly how thorough Zimmer’s sublimation of melodic energy into pure harmony has been in this remarkable cue.

♩ = 105

Comparable figurations throughout...

Strings *ff*

Violins **Secondary Theme**

Horns *f* **Main Theme**  
 Antecedent Consequent

Strings + Brass Repeat 1st 2nd

Brass + Synth *ff*

Synth Drums

Example 2.7 Melodic Theme and Counter-Theme from *Batman Begins*, “Molossus”

Same quarter note  
 marcato pattern throughout

The musical score is for strings and brass. It begins with a 4/4 time signature and a key signature of one flat. The first measure shows a marcato pattern of quarter notes in the right hand, with a similar pattern in the left hand. The score continues with several measures of rhythmic patterns, including a change to 3/4 time in the final measure.

Example 2.8 Marcato Chorale from *Batman Begins*, “Molossus”

## Masculinity and Militainment

As we have seen, Zimmer’s epic music tends to speak with a very tough accent. It turns out that much of its phraseology is drawn from a larger lexicon of conventionalized gender signification in Hollywood. The representation of masculinity (and particularly antiheroic masculinity) runs like a throbbing vein through nearly every example cited in this chapter. In some cases, the musical gendering is so over-the-top that it cannot help but suggest that Zimmer’s sense of maleness is one that is “in crisis,” as American masculinity has been so frequently characterized since the mid-1990s.<sup>36</sup> His assaultive action music in particular feels over-compensatory—as though, through its sonic extremity, it were shoring itself up against the techniques of some other, presumably less “macho” scoring practice. In interpreting Zimmer’s music through a gendered lens, I do not wish to facilely essentialize Zimmer’s aesthetic, or to suggest his music is on the whole single-mindedly bombastic or brutish.<sup>37</sup> Most of his soundtracks contain many dimensions, and are amply capable of both subtlety and depiction of non-male characters. Nevertheless, an overview of the composer’s oeuvre shows that much of his most popular and characteristic music is, in a sense, self-essentializing. Many Zimmerisms, like the marcato action motifs and percussion loops, are manifestly aimed at injecting a scene with as much testosterone-infused energy as technologically possible. Others, such as the minor dominants and heavily abstracted leitmotifs, seem tailored to harden the edge of his music, giving it a darker, more serious tone. A few are even intertextual in nature, siphoning off some of the virile masculinity of Wagner’s Siegfried, or indulging in the mechanized savagery of Holst’s Mars.

More generally, Zimmer’s modus of maximalized minimalism operates through a process of sonic domination. It does so even when it aims to convey beauty, transcendence, or sentimentality. His is a style that strives to deliver an overwhelming amount of force, preferably through as few “words”—that is, distinctive, independent musical ideas—as possible.<sup>38</sup> It is primarily in this way that, in Zimmer’s music, the Epic often blends seamlessly into—and is sometimes synonymous with—the Male. The fusion of these two categories helps account for the artistic compatibility between the composer and some

of his frequent collaborators. Zimmer's suspicion of overt musical heroism, for instance, aligns comfortably with the cerebral anti-sentimentality and "dark and gritty" aesthetic of Christopher Nolan's projects. At the same time, his maximalist bent allows his music to hold its own against the wanton pyrotechnics and steroidal action sequences of the typical Michael Bay or Jerry Bruckheimer film.

Of course, not every musical topic Zimmer employs is coded masculine. While female subjectivity *per se* is rarely represented in his recent scores, feminine-coded tropes are utilized widely, and in fact have a pronounced effect on the composer's epic style. Films with prominent narrative themes revolving around women clearly call for such style topics. For example, the score to the thriller *The Da Vinci Code*—a movie that emphasizes the "sacred feminine" and Marian mythology—is appropriately brimming with nonmasculine-coded musical devices. Warm cello and viol lines entwine with wordless soprano vocalises, while long stretches of static harmony dampen goal-driven musical energy (while still investing scenes with another, more ethereal kind of activity). In other contexts, musical techniques like these may be employed to suggest cultural otherness—particularly the sort of hybridized alterity Hollywood favors above all else, what could be called the "ancient-exotic." Deployments of this trope in films like *The Last Samurai*, *King Arthur*, and *The Bible* exhibit similar strategies as *Da Vinci Code*. In these movies, the expressive solo (and often "ethnic") instruments suggest unfamiliar times and places. Their scores are awash with non-semantically legible voices, either from women or children. And whenever a mystical state of timelessness is called for, tonal teleology is suppressed by drones and non-functional pitch organization.

The first five minutes of *Gladiator* are particularly illustrative. Zimmer opens the film with a dense succession of variously female- and male-coded topics. Static harmony, exotic instrumentation, and pastoral rhythms highlight Maximus's familial and spiritual side—aided by amorphous vocalises from Zimmer's preferred chanteuse, Lisa Gerrard. As soon as "The Battle" gets underway, however, these sounds (mostly) cede ground to more masculine topoi, musical ideas whose strict rhythms, Wagnerian resonances, and obdurate sense of harmonic momentum portray the other side of the gendered binary—military order, balance, and violence. The gendered tropes that greet the listener at the beginning of *Gladiator* thus accomplish several symbolic tasks simultaneously. They establish the ancient setting in an effective way; they provide a degree of depth to the protagonist, Maximus, before he has spoken a word; and they erect a division between spirituality/nature and rationality/civilization that will inform the whole remainder of the film.

Given the way in which even patently feminine musical tropes are enlisted to deepen male characters in scores like *Gladiator*, it is ironic that Zimmer rose to fame not as a "man's man" composer. Rather, his early successes established him as a composer capable of rendering female points of view with skill and sensitivity. For every *Black Rain* and *Days of Thunder*, there was a *Thelma and*

Louise and *Driving Miss Daisy* (and *A World Apart*, and *A League of their Own*, and so on). It was only with his score for Ron Howard's firefighter action-drama *Backdraft* in 1991 that something began to crystallize in Zimmer's style, an admixture of tropes that would soon come to define Hollywood's newest way of representing heroism as a function of masculinity.<sup>39</sup> In *Backdraft*, we find for the first time a reliance on synthesized brass, electronics, and bass for expressing raw strength. Meanwhile, the role of communicating sentiment—always in a carefully controlled way—is delegated to mid-range strings in the *profundo* chorale or passacaglia style.<sup>40</sup> Zimmer's themes for *Backdraft* exude a feeling of practiced straightforwardness. Their simple, hymn-like harmonic progressions confidently stride through four-square rhythms, with very few non-chord tones or embellishments to distract the ear—besides, that is, the requisite sincerity-signaling suspensions, in inner voices of course.

Tonal forthrightness goes hand in hand with the emergence of yet another trope of Zimmer's epic style: the techno-militaristic march. In *Backdraft's* main theme, the device is realized by a persistent snare obbligato and electronically augmented brass-band orchestration. Zimmer's strategy here is fairly transparent: appropriate various connotations from the armed services—honorability, sacrifice, and homosocial solidarity—and transfer them onto the profession of firefighting.<sup>41</sup> Given the direction that Zimmer's epic music would take in later decades, the most uncharacteristic aspect of *Backdraft's* theme is, in fact, its bright major key.<sup>42</sup> The shift in modal sensibility from major themes to minor themes owes to a more fundamental change in cinematic attitudes towards heroic sincerity in the 1990s. *Backdraft's* band of firefighters is meant to inspire hope through their wholesome selflessness. In contrast, the well-trained, well-equipped fighters of *Crimson Tide* or *The Rock* (or *Batman* and *Man of Steel*, for that matter) are positioned to inspire not hope but *respect*—and perhaps a bit of intimidation. Sheer power and competency the music asks us to value, not warmth or humanity.

The gender politics in Zimmer's soundtracks are inextricably linked to matters of demographics and genre. Many of the projects assigned to Media Ventures and Remote Control Productions belong to genres aimed at the coveted 18-to-34-year-old male demographic: action-thrillers, dark superhero movies, and bloody historical dramas. Quite a few revolve around small units of militarily trained protagonists. These "militainment" movies play out all sorts of tensions having to do with male heterosexuality and homosociality in high-stakes environments, and as a result tend to be rich sites in which to observe Zimmer's musical encodings of masculinity.<sup>43</sup> Militainment glorifies American military might, and positions it as a natural means to solve complex threats. Most militainment films are careful to skirt around outright jingoism, often by expressing a modicum of post-Vietnam/Cold War anxiety towards military power. For example, in *Crimson Tide*, *The Rock*, and *Black Hawk Down*, the initial mission fails somehow, either through mutiny or tactical defeat. Nevertheless, it is hard to call even the most skeptical of these films progressive from any kind of feminist perspective. Female characters, if they are present at all,

serve in an ancillary capacity, as wives/daughters or, in the case of *Tears of the Sun*, a strong-willed doctor reluctantly in need of rescue.<sup>44</sup>

Functionally, these are movies about tight-knit male communities structured around the ability to enact destructive force and motivated by the imperative to thwart their enemies from doing the same. Accordingly, Zimmer's music is involved in legitimizing the capacity for the good (male) guys to commit necessary violence. His method for doing so is emblematic of larger trends against heroic overstatement in film underscore. We have already seen how many of Zimmer's protagonist themes do not radiate the brightness and optimism of, say, a Williams or Horner hero leitmotif. Rather, they take themselves very seriously. Indeed, the mere presence of a raised leading tone in minor might sound too consolatory! Even his major-mode theme for Superman in *Man of Steel*—which the composer deliberately crafted to sound hopeful—is restrained and self-important, with none of the sense of fun, nor the winking bluster, present in forerunners by Williams or Shirley Walker.<sup>45</sup> Again and again, Zimmer's modern scores cultivate the dark and burdened attitude of a man who is reluctantly forced to take action against a complex threat.

The process of motivic abstraction that we have observed (what Buhler and Neumeyer faulted as underdifferentiation) can have dramatic implications for the tonal identity of an entire score. For instance, the action thriller *The Peacemaker* (1997) lacks any sort of melodic identification specifically doled out to the protagonists, male or female. Instead, it leans on a generalized hard-edged action vocabulary, infused with various "Other"-allusive topoi, most of which characterize the Slavic terrorists behind the movie's plot. Perhaps perversely, Zimmer's reticence towards musical heroics effectively gives the antagonists dominance over the score. The anti-heroic tendency becomes even more pronounced with the success of *The Dark Knight* trilogy.<sup>46</sup> One could imagine that in a different franchise, Batman's murky thematic material (that grim minor third!) could plausibly have stood as an antagonist's theme.

As we have seen, the shift Zimmer championed in the way protagonists are rendered stems from a desire to avoid over-explaining character dynamics through music. Naive as it might seem, Zimmer's philosophy essentially equates motivic minimalism with musical realism. Yet the stripping away of anything too buoyant or lyrical has an additional effect, particularly in ceaselessly propulsive action cues such as "Molossus" (and essentially everything from *Man of Steel*). The decidedly *non-heroic* music that results from this approach is a feeling of constant threat.<sup>47</sup> Our heroes are not motivated because of an innate benevolence, and their musical characterization reflects this outlook. Rather, it is the necessity of action against evil that rouses a Zimmer protagonist.

This is not to say that, compared to its antecedents, Zimmer's music is any less compulsory in the way it dictates its audience's identifications with characters and scenarios. We kid ourselves to imagine that *any* film music is not manipulative in this manner. But instead of bludgeoning the listener with the hyperexplicit rhetoric of good versus evil that marks some of the less subtle

heroics of earlier scoring practices, Zimmer's music strives for something different. His maximal minimalism seeks to overwhelm the listener with a feeling of unremitting urgency. Zimmer's epic music is a kind of musical bulwark, vigilantly guarding gender roles whilst norms of masculinity have been subjected to accelerated change and critique in American culture during the composer's career. Music like "Molossus" wishes for the listener to surrender to the idea that danger is ever-present and implacable. The normalization of threat creates a situation in which (male) heroes who use violence or vigilantism—who are in a sense *familiar with* or even *one with* of the threat—seem like the most natural and inevitable means to confront it. In an era grappling with an endless war on terror, creeping government surveillance, and frayed trust between the public and law enforcement, this musical ideology may seem downright unsavory. Yet whether it knows it or not, Zimmer's brand of epic significance is perfectly suited to its age.

## Conclusion

In 2013, on a web-based question-and-answer session with Zimmer, a fan with the handle "kreativtek" asked the composer, "Why is your music so epic?" Zimmer's response was somewhat non-committal:

I don't know why my music is so epic, it's just how I hear things in my head. I use very simple devices and tunes. It's usually not the size of the orchestra or the production that makes things sound epic, it's usually the commitment of the players. A great string quartet can sound louder when they play with fire and heart, than a boring orchestra, and a single note by [rock guitarist and collaborator] Jeff Beck can slice right through your heart.<sup>48</sup>

Certainly, a passionate performance can lend music more emotional depth, but attributing the purportedly epic quality of his scores to the energy of his instrumentalists, rather than anything intrinsic in his actual composition, is something of a dodge. Nevertheless, Zimmer's admission of thinking "small" with his musical devices, and his allusion to the size of his ensembles, suggests an awareness of a more substantive answer to the fan's simultaneously naive and insightful question.

In this essay, I have attempted to provide a more musicologically thorough answer to kreativtek's question. I have argued that Zimmer's epic style—a now pervasive sound in contemporary cinema—is based in several distinctive tropes, many of which are grounded in an aesthetic of maximalized minimalism. Furthermore, I have claimed that this style relies on masculine and at times militaristic musical codes. By the time of this chapter's printing, it is likely a suite of new epic scores will have issued from Zimmer's pen (or, more likely, computer)—continuations of the *Da Vinci Code*, *Batman/Superman*,



and Pirates franchises, plus undoubtedly some standalone projects. Whether these scores entrench themselves in the Zimmerisms that have proven so successful for the composer in the past, or stretch out in new directions, as tentatively staked out by *Interstellar*, remains of course to be seen. Regardless of its longevity, however, the epic style will undoubtedly be seen (and heard) in decades to come as an enormously characteristic component of the late 20th and early 21st century's cinemascapes. And, unless global audiences inexplicably lose their appetite for grandiose spectacle and portentous narrative, Zimmer's musical stylings will continue to find a welcome home in epic multimedia.

## Notes

1. Christopher Nolan, "The Music of Dreams." Extra on *Inception* Blu-Ray (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Home Video, 2010).
2. Precise authorship for specific cues is often difficult to determine with Zimmer soundtracks, given the considerable amount of compositional delegation he often places on his co-composers, arrangers, and producers. One can rarely be certain if a cue contains 100% Zimmer music, arrangements of his themes, or entirely ghost-written material. For example, Lorne Balfe is officially credited as "producer" for *Inception*. (See [www.lornebalfe.com/biography](http://www.lornebalfe.com/biography). Accessed June 2015.) Yet elsewhere he is credited as writing "additional music." (See [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1154632/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1154632/?ref_=nv_sr_1). Accessed June 2015.) The exact nature or percentage of Zimmer's input is subject to intense debate in online fora where these matters are discussed. As much as possible, this essay bases ascriptions of authorship to information provided from ASCAP cue-sheet records compiled on the authoritative but unofficial website [www.hans-zimmer.com](http://www.hans-zimmer.com).
3. The cue ends, in the manner of many minimalist works, abruptly. It terminates on D-major with a marked lack of culmination or inevitability.
4. Scott Murphy analyzes another ambiguous diatonic progression [a-F-C-G] that is associated with heroic struggle and, more loosely, "the epic" in contemporary film. Murphy attributes the spread of this progression from rock in Hollywood chiefly to Zimmer. Murphy, "A Pop Music Progression in Recent Popular Movies and Movie Trailers," *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 8.2 (2014): 141–62.
5. This and all musical examples are the product of the author's by-ear transcriptions from the original film and OST albums. Specific orchestration details for Example 2.2. were gleaned from a video of a staged rendition of "Time" with a more easily discerned drum part, though this is admittedly a component that may have been altered or fleshed out for live performance. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNkynm9ZxAM>, Accessed June 2015).
6. Speaking on one such cue from *The Da Vinci Code*, Zimmer states, "It's evolutionary, not necessarily revolutionary always. So the idea of these patterns and these things building on top of each other is really just minimalist music taken to a romantic level." Dan Goldwasser, "Breaking the Rules with Hans Zimmer," *Soundtrack.net*, <http://www.soundtrack.net/content/article/?id=205>. Accessed June 2015.
7. Rebecca M. Doran Eaton has performed relevant research and empirical studies on the different effects that minimalism is capable of producing in contemporary film music. See, for example, Eaton, "Marking Minimalism: Minimal Music as Sign of Machines and Mathematics in Multimedia," *Music and the Moving Image* 7.1 (2014): 3–23.

8. Rebecca Leydon, "Towards a Typology of Minimalist Tropes," *Music Theory Online* 8.4 (2002).
9. The idea of maximalism as being a central aesthetic in 20th-century art music is memorably formulated by Richard Taruskin, but he notably draws no connection between American minimalism and the specter of early 20th-century maximalist values. See Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
10. Examples include: *The Thin Red Line* ("Journey to the Line"); *Mission Impossible 2* ("Injection"); *Black Hawk Down* ("Leave No Man Behind"); *The Da Vinci Code* ("Chevaliers de Sangreal"); and *Interstellar* ("Cornfield Chase").
11. The blog attached to dictionary.com labeled "epic" one of its "Worst Words of 2013," noting that it is "so overused that it has been on banished word lists three years running. But epic refuses to be banished," <http://blog.dictionary.com/worst-words-of-2012>. Accessed June 2015.
12. Even internet culture seems to be aware of this. See, for example, Charlie Jane Anders, "Is It Time to Retire the Word 'Epic'?" <http://io9.com/is-it-time-to-retire-the-word-epic-1599903132>. Accessed June 2015.
13. Zimmer is usually forthcoming but unspecific about his classical influences. For example, of *The Lion King's* musical style, he notes, "It's African choirs with Mozart in harmony," but neglects to point out his direct compositional model, the *Ave Verum Corpus*, a piece to which Zimmer has returned repeatedly in his career. See Tim Appelo, "Composer Hans Zimmer Talks 'Interstellar' Origin, Punk Influence in 'The Dark Knight,'" *The Hollywood Reporter* (November 3, 2014), <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/composer-hans-zimmer-talks-interstellar-745891>. Accessed June 2015.
14. Like many film composers of his generation, Zimmer was not formally trained as a composer (and certainly not as an orchestrator), but rather cut his teeth in the world of popular music, as a keyboardist, guitarist, and bandleader in the 1980s.
15. On the political and humanitarian motivations behind the use of Roma music in this score, see Tina Daunt, "How 'Sherlock Holmes' Turned Hans Zimmer onto the Roma Cause," *The Hollywood Reporter* (December 19, 2011), <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hans-zimmer-sherlock-holmes-roma-gypsies-275467>. Accessed June 2015.
16. In addition to his standard synth-augmented orchestra, *Gladiator* features duduk, yangquin, cimbalom, Arabic flute, Spanish guitar, and a contingent of ethnic percussion. "I never wanted the score to sound like musical anthropology or archaeology—I was looking for ways of placing the music in its own imaginary ancient world and letting it echo into our times," claimed Zimmer. (Liner notes for *More Music from the Motion Picture Gladiator*. Decca Records, 2001).
17. On Zimmer's usage of such hooks, see Jon Burlingame, "20-Billion-Dollar Composer: For Hans Zimmer, 'The Real Risk Is Playing It Safe,'" *Variety* (May 7, 2014), <http://variety.com/2014/music/features/20-billion-dollar-composer-for-hans-zimmer-the-real-risk-is-playing-it-safe-1201173698>. Accessed June 2015.
18. James Buhler and David Neumeyer, *Hearing the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 467.
19. Michael Steinberg, *The Symphony: A Listener's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 169–77.
20. The cue is so influential that one critic, in the midst of praising "Too Many Notes" as "wonderful," nevertheless claims it is "the bane of any action movie composer's existence." David Hirsh, *VideoHound's Soundtracks: Music from Movies, Broadway, and Television*, ed. Didier C. Deutsch (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1998), 123.

21. Drum loops are present in virtually every Zimmer action sequence. Only *Interstellar* completely lacks them, and this feels like one of the score’s “hooks,” a decidedly intentional effort of the composer to play against type.
22. That precedent idiom is epitomized by the synth-pop soundtracks of Harold Faltermeyer, the person responsible for the quintessentially “80s” sound of movies like *Top Gun*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, and *Running Man*.
23. The use of *Drop Zone*’s “Too Many Notes” in *Pirates* first trailer may have clued listeners in to the provenance of this idea. A few spots—most notably the leitmotivically kaleidoscopic climax of the third film (“I Don’t Think Now Is the Best Time”)—actually include outright *Drop Zone* quotations.
24. Remarkably, even the staunchest holdout from an earlier era of symphonic scoring practice—John Williams—appears to have felt the pull of Zimmer’s mode of seafaring action music. In the centerpiece swashbuckling cue from *The Adventures of Tin Tin* (2012), “Sir Francis and the Unicorn,” Williams forsakes sparkling Korngoldiana in favor of the more hard-edged Zimmeresque approach. Though achieved without sacrificing his own considerably more refined talent for orchestration and harmony, Williams clearly bowed towards Zimmer’s *Pirates of the Caribbean* model in aspects of voicing, rhythm, articulation, and melody. The same year’s score to *War Horse* contains an even more surprising example of something that sounds like it could have come straight out of *Gladiator*: a series of textbook marcato mottos during the “Dash through No Man’s Land” sequence.
25. The last of the three marcatos accompanies the literal arrival of the cavalry and the wolf of Rome. The motto is notable for being one of the few places Zimmer indulges in the brassy, Miklós Rózsa-style modal parallelism so characteristic of golden era Hollywood epics that the composer otherwise studiously shuns. Stephen Meyer interestingly suggests that chordal parallelism in classical epics may be “aural symbols of totalitarianism”—an apt interpretation for *Gladiator* as well. Meyer, *Epic Sound: Music in Postwar Hollywood Biblical Films* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 14, 81–3.
26. The classical references in these major-mode cases tend to be less Bachian and more Wagnerian (especially the Prelude to *Lohengrin*), or in some cases Vaughan Williams-esque (especially “Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis”).
27. More specifically, these measures allude to the “Woe of the Volsungs” material from Siegfried’s funeral march in *Götterdämmerung*.
28. These implications are, to put it mildly, problematic. Suffice it to say, Zimmer’s awareness (and at least partial ironizing) of the ideological baggage borne by his borrowings from *Götterdämmerung* does not fully divest them of potentially fascist undertones. See Marc Weiner, “Hollywood’s German Fantasy: Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator*,” in Jeongwon Joe and Sander Gilman (eds.), *Wagner & Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 186–209.
29. While Zimmer himself does not appear to be in the business of these Teutonic themes any longer, others have assumed this mantle. For example, Mark Isham’s promotional theme for the US armed services, “Army Strong” (2006), clearly evokes the musical structure and rhetoric of Zimmer’s darkly noble minor melodies in melodic construction, instrumentation, and rhythmic character.
30. Rick Florino, “Interview: Hans Zimmer Talks ‘Inception’ Score,” *Artist Direct* (July 12, 2010), <http://www.artistdirect.com/entertainment-news/article/interview-hans-zimmer-talks-inception-score/7323382>. Accessed June 2015.
31. For more on the way Zimmer’s musical practice emphasizes affect over thematic development, see James Buhler’s contribution to this volume.
32. Appelo, “Composer Hans Zimmer Talks ‘Interstellar.’”

33. The anthem for Batman is not even the most abstract motif in the trilogy; the Joker receives a major second (C and D) in the sequel, and Bane a simple 5/4 metrical pattern in the final entry. These villains' material is arguably less about pitch than timbre, with a sliding cello representing Joker and Arabic chanting signifying Bane.
34. Buhler and Neumeyer, *Hearing the Movies*, 486.
35. An interesting chromatic sequence occurs midway through the cue (d-bb-f-Db-eb-B-d) that does temporarily alleviate tonal monotony, though it ultimately represents only 15 seconds of a five-minute cue, otherwise unbendingly fastened to D-minor.
36. Several excellent studies on gender representation in American film music have been undertaken in recent film musicology. See, for example, Heather Laing, *The Gendered Score: Music in 1940s Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1991) and Peter Franklin, *Seeing through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood Film Scores* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). For a feminist interpretation of the "masculinity crisis," see Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). See also John Benyon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 75–97 for an overview of the topic.
37. Christian Clemmensen is one of the most vociferous critics of Zimmer's macho airs. On the score to *The Dark Knight Rises*, Clemmensen writes: "The totality of the dwelling in the bass region has reached the point of laughability. Any veteran composer can unleash horrifically rumbling, masculine force from the bass while also employing concurrent appeal from the treble, a technique Zimmer still chooses not to attempt." ([http://www.filmtracks.com/titles/dark\\_knight\\_rises.html](http://www.filmtracks.com/titles/dark_knight_rises.html). Accessed June 2015.)
38. Minimalism has been criticized for concealing implicit masculinist values with an affectation to aesthetic neutrality. Peter Shelley's dissertation (2013) on critical discourses surrounding minimalist music and visual arts, considers this issue in depth. Shelley, "Rethinking Minimalism" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Washington, 2013). Summarizing the feminist critiques of Anna Clave, Shelley notes that "minimalism's commingling of cool and aggressive formal characteristics—its complete rejection of expressivity on the one hand and the severity of its geometric or even industrial rigor on the other—produces a quintessentially late-modern rhetoric of power" (319).
39. On how *Backdraft* articulates an "idealised, unapologetically traditional masculinity" including through its music, see Stella Bruzzi, *Men's Cinema: Masculinity and Mis-en-Scene in Hollywood* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013).
40. One can also detect in *Backdraft* the beginnings of what is now a pronounced disinclination to use orchestral woodwinds. Like the long-breathed melodies Zimmer eschews post-*Batman*, winds are deemed too expressive, too associated in Hollywood with feminine subjectivity, to be permitted to participate in Zimmer's musical discourse except as sporadic flashes of color or quirkiness.
41. In this respect, *Backdraft's* accompaniment is similar to the sorts of martial music frequently attached to other non-military cultural venues like the space program and professional sports. One of the most curious applications is the usage of the *Backdraft* theme itself for the American broadcast of the cooking competition television show *Iron Chef*.
42. Glimmers of this sunnier view of heroism are detectable, albeit in a comparatively anemic form, in certain more recent Zimmer themes from *The Pacific* and *The Amazing Spiderman 2*.
43. Roger Stahl notes that the term "militainment" is a distinctly post-9/11 idea, entering into the public lexicon in the early 2000s. Stahl, *Militainment Inc.: War, Media,*

- and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010). Amanda Howells provides an especially useful look at the use of music in militainment films, particularly *Black Hawk Down*. Howells, *Popular Film Music and Masculinity in Action* (New York: Routledge, 2015), especially 109–15.
44. The exceptions to this rule are Terrence Malick radically un-militaristic *The Thin Red Line* (1998), which is essentially shorn of female characters in the first place, and Mimi Leder's *The Peacemaker* (1997), whose hypercompetent if naive female co-protagonist, played by Nicole Kidman, is eventually able to hold her own against George Clooney's macho braggadocio.
  45. Music theorist Mark Richards suggests a hidden melodic linkage between Zimmer's and Williams' themes, though the observed similarities lie at an extremely rarefied structural level and seem unlikely to have been intentional. Richards, "Hans Zimmer's Score to *Man of Steel*," *Film Music Notes* (August 11, 2013), <http://www.filmmusicnotes.com/hans-zimmers-score-for-man-of-steel>. Accessed June 2015.
  46. Another important milestone in this stylistic shift is the decisive influence of John Powell, perhaps the most compositionally talented Media Ventures graduate, whose atmospheric music for the *Bourne Identity* franchise similarly relies on muted, minimalistic antiheroics.
  47. Nicholas Reyland coins the phrase "corporate classicism" to describe the affect-driven style of Zimmer and his acolytes. In addition to pinpointing stylistic hallmarks of the Zimmer sound, Reyland links this musical style with contemporary intensified continuity practices, noting how it may give the sense that "disaster is always impending." Reyland, "Corporate Classicism and the Metaphysical Style: Affects, Effects, and Contexts of Two Recent Trends in Screen Scoring," *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, 9.2 (2015): 115–130.
  48. Reddit AMA, "I Am Hans Zimmer—Ask Me Anything," 2014, [https://www.reddit.com/r/IAMa/comments/1g4wkt/i\\_am\\_hans\\_zimmer\\_ask\\_me\\_anything](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAMa/comments/1g4wkt/i_am_hans_zimmer_ask_me_anything). Accessed June 2015.