

# The Role of Music in Enhancing Emotional Impact and Storytelling in Films: A Case Study of Coco and Jaws

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## Abstract:

This study examines the significant contributions of background music to the cinematic experience by using a case study and lenses the analysis on two films with different genres of film music, melodrama, and thriller music, using the instance of Coco and Jaws. It highlights how music enhances emotional engagement, storytelling techniques, and iconic songs lead to the commercial success of a film. The analysis of Coco's song "Remember Me", which serves as the emotional core of the whole film, connects themes of the closure of family and heartwarming memories. While Jaws used its unique theme to create intense tension and fear in its audiences. Both films present the credential of music to a movie, evidenced by aspects of enhancing audiences' experiences and influencing the box office, which both contribute significantly to a movie's success. In addition, the paper also identifies gaps that need to be filled, such as the emotional effect on different individuals and the long-term effect on them; improvements and research on the effect of music need to be made.

**Keywords:** Film Music; Emotional Resonance; Storytelling; Cultural Representation.

## 1. Introduction

The film industry has undergone significant alteration after the premiere of background music in 1927, *The Jazz Singer*, which is the first movie that incorporates synchronized sound and music, which not only set the foundation of the movie company Warner Bros [1]. Entertainment earned revenues of \$1,974,000 in the United States and Canada and \$651,000 elsewhere but also led to the sound film

era. Music plays a vital role in the cinematic experience [2]. It can be used to tell part of the story and enhance audiences' emotional connection with a variety of movies by using different genres of film music. In contrast, melodrama music heightens emotions such as love, sadness, and longing, which is mostly used to focus on characters that show their traits, emotions, or experiences, bringing the significant influence of effective storytelling.

In contrast, thriller music is used to create anxiety,

fear, and uncertainty and let the audience immerse in the atmosphere in a sense of danger or urgency for the sake of increasing the tension of the film. In addition, there's a tremendous commercial value of film music to a movie. A great instance of film music that not only went viral but also incredibly influenced the popularity of the film itself is the song "Remember Me" by Coco. The music hit the hearts of audiences, and its viral success was evident as it rapidly climbed the charts, gaining millions of streams and views across various platforms. Which also made a remarkable sale at its box office.

Recent studies have highlighted the critical role of music by examining and acknowledging the importance of the emotional impact of music to create advancements in technology for storytelling music [3, 4]. Also, some studies have examined how music affects audience engagement and memory [5, 6]. Nevertheless, there are still some gaps that need to be filled that are related to the influence of film music on movies, such as the long-term effect of music on the audience in different aspects and innovative technology and ideas on developing methods to affect audience emotions on different individuals' perceptions. Understanding the impact of film music on cinematic information is a credential for its stakeholders, filmmakers, and composers, for instance, to make film music improvements and innovations by examining the intricate relationship between film music and audience unique experiences. Composers are able to create more touching, emotional-based music using those elements of innovation to gain more audience attraction to not only the song but also the movie related to the music. At the same time, filmmakers are able to incorporate storytelling details into the music, creating scenes that are more intricate and immersing the audience in the atmosphere by using the help of background music. Which greatly enhanced the audience's emotional connection to the film due to the experience.

## 2. Case Description

### 2.1 Melodrama Music

The song "Remember Me" is a melodrama music that is present throughout the journey of Miguel and molds his character throughout the whole storyline. This song is from the animated film *Coco* and is present as the emotional core of the entire film. It is performed four times throughout the movie and serves as a connection bridge to connect different generations of a Mexico family tightly together. Which was originally performed by Hector for his daughter Coco before he decided to leave her to achieve his music dream; however, this song was stolen and used by Ernesto de la Cruz, which made him popular

while he performed this song; he died due to the accident at the end of the performance. Miguel, the main the movie, who is the great-grandchild of Coco, gets helped by Hector on the way of his journey to pursue his music dream and reveals the truth that this song was written by Hector instead of his idol Ernesto de la Cruz for his grandma Coco. He also plays this song later to his great-grandmother when he finally reunites with his family to arouse her memory about her father Hector to help him not be eliminated by the Land of the Dead since if everyone loses their memory about a dead person in the Land of Death, they will be erased. At the end of the movie, this song was played and remained in the audience's memories.

What's more, this song has hit millions of audiences' hearts by integrating both the character experiences and the cultural setting to present evidence of significant success on the Billboard charts. It reached as high as the top 40 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 2018 [7]. "Coco" soundtrack hits the top 40 on the Billboard 200 chart after the Oscars. What's more, the song also won an Academy Award for Best Original Song [8]. "Coco": "Remember Me" wins an Oscar for Best Original Song. Billboard contributed to the remarkable box office success *Coco* had made: \$210,460,015 domestically in the United States and \$604,181,157 internationally abroad the rest of the world, while \$814,641,172 worldwide. This song retains a remarkable status, having a long-lasting large audience base and presence. The long-term effect of the music on its movie is evidenced by the fact that it has had 97% freshness on Rotten Tomatoes till now and has had 2.9 million Spotify listeners to this song a month. The film continues to be celebrated for its contribution to both entertainment through the intrincating plot and their unique settings, as well as the use of cultural education in order to teach children the definition of death in a more positive, healthier way, which also increases the recognition of the traditional Mexico holiday-the Day of the Dead. In addition, it is influencing future projects and discussions about cultural representation in the media.

### 2.2 Thriller Music

As scholar Hoeckner, B. said, Thriller music significantly lowered likability and certainty about characters' thoughts. During subsequent cued recall of screen content, thriller music increased anger attributions and lowered sadness attributions (Film Music Influences How Viewers Relate to Movie Characters [2]). The thriller music in the movie "Jaws" is a good instance of the illustration of how it contributes to the movie. In the movie, the "da-dum, da-dum" rhythm, which is the Theme of "Jaws" conducted and composed by John Williams, foreshadows

and serves as an ominous sound that instantly evokes a sense of approaching danger. The short and simple signal yet brings a powerful theme of the shark, building a sense of tension and anxiety before the presence of the shark, connects the audiences to the movie by heightening the horror of the shark, which brings deep and long-lasting memories of this signal to audiences' minds. It also contributed to the movie's success by the evidence of the box office: \$266,567,580 domestically in the United States, \$210,653,000 internationally, and \$477,220,580 worldwide (box office Mojo). In addition to Academy Award nominations for Best Sound as well as the winner of Original Score, BAFTA Award for Best Original Music, Golden Globe Award for Best Original Soundtrack, and 18th Grammy Award for Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media, in addition to the rank of the sixth greatest score by American Film Institute. Spielberg later said that without Williams's score, the film would have been only half as successful, and according to Williams, it jumpstarted his career. Audissino (2015) incredibly shows the importance of film music to a film itself. The theme of *Jaws* also brings significant commercial value nowadays [9].

The rhythm not only serves as an ominous in the movie but also the representation of the movie "*Jaws*", which is widely used on film derivative products, such as clothes printed "da-dum, da-dum" with a shark on them or a mug with lyrics from the *Jaws* theme, and so on. As highlighted by the scholar Amanda Howell, "the widely reproduced and widely recognized leitmotif ultimately achieved a life of its own beyond the haunted waters of the film and well past the classical score's aesthetic of audibility". As evidence of the further use of the soundtrack, Spielberg used it in a sequence in his comedy *1941* to enhance the film's comic effect, which is also used in the opening of the comedy *Airplane!* As well as the animated films *Finding Nemo* and *Shark Tale*. Presents a significant recognition of this theme.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 Emotional Resonance

Music serves as a catalyst for emotional expression throughout *Coco*. The song "Remember Me" is the heart of this film's emotional core, as it contains a variety of emotions such as love, loss, warmth, and so on. These different aspects of emotions are highlighted by different editions of this song and act as a bridge connecting with audiences' emotions. For instance, when Hector first performs this song in front of Coco, when he wishes his daughter could remember him after he leaves and pursues his music dream, the heartfelt performance emphasizes

his love for Coco and the sorrow of farewell. In contrast, while Miguel performs this song to Coco to stimulate her memory about her father, Hector, it brings closure and healing to his family. This creates different emotional atmospheres for the audiences according to the shift of the theme, letting the audience not only feel the emotional connection but also develop the theme connection, letting them immerse in the movie, by the evidence from the eye blinking experiment from Tessa D, showing the relationship between film and music that create emotional arousal (Seeing into Screens: Eye Tracking and the Moving Image, Tessa Dwyer). Depending on the unique experience each audience has, music can also minimize the distance between the film and the audience by fostering a shared emotional experience. Audiences can connect their journey through the powerful melodies and lyrics through the relatable theme. For example, in the film *Coco*, through Miguel's journey across The Land of Death, audiences feel this connection with the definition of death and remembrance; they may relate to their own experience, bringing memories about their deceased kinsfolks. However, there's still an absence of experiments to show how music could contribute to film through the biased views of different audiences.

In contrast, in a thriller movie, music will bring emotional tension and serve as an ominous. In *Jaws*, particularly John Williams's iconic theme, the "da-dum, da-dum" rhythm immediately evokes a sense of upcoming danger, effectively foreshadowing the shark's presence. This simple yet powerful motif heightens audience tension and anxiety, creating an emotional connection to the film. As Hoeckner et al. (2011) noted, music significantly influences how viewers relate to characters, and in *Jaws*, it amplifies feelings of fear and anticipation [2]. The score brings an alternation about how audiences perceive both sharks and characters. The recurring theme signal fostered an emotional connection with terror and aggression, which enhanced the horror and threat of the shark throughout the film—and contributed to the horror elements of the film significantly.

#### 3.2 Cultural Representation

"Culturally specific music shapes the film," highlighted by Lee Unkrich, the co-director of *Coco*, who made significant contributions to the film. Indeed, *Coco* film soundtracks are deeply related to Mexico traditional music, to the credit of Germaine Franco, who supervises the orchestrations of the score, infusing them with Mexican flavor, representing their resolution of making authentic traditional Mexican songs and showing the wide range of Mexican artists they recorded of many genres-banda,

marimba, mariachi, trio, and son jarocho. This cultural authenticity of their music enhanced the film's setting. It enhanced the viewer's understanding of Mexican traditional holidays, particularly the Day of the Dead, while the whole movie is related to the journey of Miguel's journey during this Mexican heritage. The music not only entertains the audience but also brings educational meaning, helping audiences appreciate the cultural practices, as there is an enormous number of audiences as well as views on this movie, acknowledging the part of Mexican culture and enjoying the traditional Mexican melodies in the film as a result of the Mexican indigenous festivity of Day of the Dead, which was inscribed to the Unesco Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In addition, it also brings relative relief and a healthy definition of death to children, as deceased people may go to The Land of Death, whereas forgetting is the only way to cause the elimination of the soul, bringing an encouraged perspective on the loss of a loved one, by the credit from Alicia Hinojosa, a psychologist who has a doctorate in thanatology, showing that children will take notes of death from adults, even in the movie, which, by watching *Coco*, the happiness in the Mexico traditional music along with the intriguing scene will help them to take their fear out of death. However, there's still some criticism about this movie about whether Disney Pixar gets the Day of the Dead celebration correctly in *Coco*.

### 3.3 Commercial Success

*Coco* grossed \$210.4 million in the United States and Canada and \$603.8 million in other countries, for a worldwide total of \$814.3 million at its box office. Credit from *Coco*'s production team stated that the film was deeply rooted in music, which also contributed to its commercial success. Scholar Haifeng Xu's study investigates how the search volume of movie soundtracks correlates with box office performance, revealing that pre-launch interest, especially for existing songs, enhances revenue outcomes. The soundtrack in *Coco*, for example, the song "Remember Me," was launched before the film as promotional material for *Coco*. The beautiful melodies and heartfelt performance, along with the authentic and unique Mexican style, quickly gained an enormous amount of popularity on platforms such as YouTube, resulting in millions of views as the audience anticipated the film. In addition, the song "Remember Me" also received award recognition that contributed to its success at the box office. Evidence of the song "Remember Me" earned enormous awards, such as the Oscar for Best Original Song, the Billboard Top 40, and so on. As *Coco* is a musical movie, the award for the song increases the visibility and can attract an au-

dience while watching the award reveal.

*Jaws* grossed \$266,567,580 in the United States and \$210,653,000 in other countries for a worldwide total of \$477,220,580. The film release breaks the box office record of *The Exorcist* (1973) [10]. The iconic score created by John Williams' memorable theme created an immediate sense of tension, which increased the pressure and anxiety atmosphere while watching the film and helped to develop the storytelling between the shift of the scene. As with the music "Remember Me", the theme is used in the first trailer *Jaws* has released as a marketing tool. The mighty melodies gained audiences' excitement, which contributed to the anticipation of the film. Themes are also used in a variety range of merchandising from soundtrack sales, where the score has been released through soundtrack albums with different versions, released as an LP by MCA in 1975 and as a CD in 1992. In 2000, two versions of the score were also released for the film's 25th anniversary. A re-recording of the entire *Jaws* score by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra conducted by Joel McNeely and another by Decca/Universal featuring the entire 51 minutes of the original score, which contribute to the merchandise revenue for *Jaws*. What's more, the music has been featured in promotional materials for *Jaws* merchandise, such as toys, games, and clothing, most of them printing the theme of *Jaws* serving as the ominous shark, creating significance in the brand identity and making the film more recognizable by the "da-dum, da-dum" theme.

### 4. Conclusion

Music not only enhances emotional engagement with the audiences by varying emotions in the rendition of songs but also serves as a powerful storytelling tool, shaping audience perceptions and memories, stimulating their own relatable experiences according to the variety of audiences, or creating an extended atmosphere throughout the horror film using different genres of film music. In *Coco*, the heartfelt melodrama song "Remember Me" not only resonates with themes of family and remembrance of the deceased but also drives commercial success through its cultural authenticity and emotional depth, which creates a high audience's anticipation. This also brings the significance of education, meaning the healthy way of explaining the definition of death to children through the happy melodies in *The End* and *Land of Death*. In contrast, the success of the movie *Jaws* is influenced by thriller music, in which the suspenseful score of *Jaws*, particularly the iconic "da-dum" motif, effectively builds tension and fear while watching the film, also becoming a hallmark of the thriller genre and widely used by other movies to create tension as well as comic effect. As the film industry

continues to improve, the innovative use of music will remain crucial in connecting with audiences and enriching their viewing experiences. Nevertheless, there are still limitations on how film music will affect audience emotions individually based on the variety of personal experiments, culture, and so on, as well as the explanation and experiment about the long-term effect of film music on audiences in various aspects. Professionals in the film industry and music industry should keep working on these limitations and make innovative film music and improvements through a technique based on the experiments of individual bias and long-term effects on them, which may also result in the success of a movie in the future.

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