

# How to write Cinematic Music in 5 Easy Steps

## (for Film or TV Drama)

In this short guide, I'll show you a step by step process which you can use to write cinematic music that would fit as underscore in a film or TV drama. This will work well for music inspired by film composers such as Thomas Newman and Harry Gregson-Williams.

### Step 1 - Choose a Chord Progression

Start by choosing 4 chords which can be played on a piano.

Aim to play these chords in open voicings (notes are spaced widely, such as the example below).

Having open 5th chords (no middle note) can help give the music a contemporary feel. Adding additional notes such as 9ths and 6ths can also help.

The image shows a musical score for piano, labeled 'Piano' on the left. It is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of ♩ = 90. The score consists of two staves, treble and bass. The first measure is a whole rest on both staves. The second measure contains two chords: C5 (C5, G5, C6) in the treble and F5 (F5, C6, F6) in the bass. The third measure contains two chords: Ab6 (Ab5, Gb6, Ab6) in the treble and F5 (F5, C6, F6) in the bass. The fourth measure contains two chords: Bb (Bb5, Gb6, Bb6) in the treble and F5 (F5, C6, F6) in the bass. The fifth measure contains two chords: C5 (C5, G5, C6) in the treble and F5 (F5, C6, F6) in the bass. The notes are written in a way that suggests they are to be played in open voicings.

**Tip** - Have a go at **NOT** limiting yourself to a particular key signature - treat every major/minor chord on the piano as a potential candidate, IF it **sounds good**.



Once you have the four chords, copy and paste these to add another four chords. Make subtle changes though, such as adding additional notes, or changing one or two of the chords:

♩ = 90

C5 A♭6 B♭ F5 C5 A♭6 B♭9 F

Piano

**Optional** - copy and paste your original four chords two more times, to form a longer section of music:

♩ = 90

C5 A♭6 B♭ F5 C5 A♭6 B♭9 F

Piano

C5 A♭6 B♭ F A♭9 B♭9

Piano



## Step 2 - Add a simple accompaniment to your piano chords

Instruments such as the examples below can be great for this style of music:

**Pads** - long sustained synth sounds

**Strings** - long sustained violins (outlining the piano chords)

**Mandolin/Acoustic Guitar**

**Dulcimer**

**Reverse Piano**

**Bass Guitar**



A musical score for piano accompaniment, showing five staves: Piano, Vlns (Violins), Pads, Guitars, and Bass Guitar. The score is divided into measures 8 through 12. The Piano staff shows chords: C5, Ab6, Bb, F, Ab9, and Bb9. The Vlns staff shows long sustained notes. The Pads staff shows long sustained notes. The Guitars staff shows a sequence of notes in measure 8, followed by a blue shaded area with a slash in measures 9, 10, 11, and 12. The Bass Guitar staff shows a sequence of notes in measure 8, followed by a blue shaded area with a slash in measures 9, 10, 11, and 12.

Measures: 8, 9, 10, 11, 12



### Step 3 - Develop the initial idea

To develop and extend your initial idea into a longer piece, you could try developing both the harmonic content (chords) as well as changing the instrumentation/orchestration.

#### Developing Harmonic Content

Piano

C Ab6(add9) Gm Ab C Ab6(add9) Bb6(add9) F

Before - C5 Now - C major

Before - Bb & F5 Now - Gm & Ab

Piano

C Ab6(add9) Gm Ab C Ab Gm F

Before - Ab9 & Bb9 Now - Gm & F



## Developing using Instrumentation changes

The musical score is arranged in five staves: Piano, Vlns, Pads, Guitars, and Bass Guitar. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The score spans measures 13 to 18.

**Chord Progression:**

- Measures 13-14: C, A $\flat$ 6(add9), Gm, A $\flat$
- Measures 15-18: C, A $\flat$ 6(add9), B $\flat$ 6(add9), F

**Instrumentation and Callouts:**

- Piano:** Plays chords in the right hand and bass lines in the left hand.
- Vlns:** Plays a melodic line in the right hand. A purple box highlights measures 14-15, with the callout "Strings imitating piano Right hand part".
- Pads:** Plays sustained chords.
- Guitars:** Plays a melodic line in the right hand. A red box highlights measures 13-14, with the callout "Mandolin (with Delay FX) + Acoustic Guitar".
- Bass Guitar:** Plays a bass line. A blue box highlights measures 16-18, with the callout "Introducing Bass Guitar".

**Measure Numbers:** 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18.

**Callouts:**

- Giving Mandolin a more prominent part
- Strings imitating piano Right hand part
- Introducing Bass Guitar

## Step 4 - Growing the intensity

Aim for your music to 'travel on a journey' as it progresses. This can be achieved by growing the intensity of the music.

An easy way of achieving this is to use instrumentation to increase the thickness of your music's texture.

Gradually introduce more instruments and increase the range and volume, to help add more intensity:

The musical score illustrates the growth of intensity through the addition of instruments and changes in dynamics. The score is written for the following instruments:

- Piano:** Chords are indicated above the staff: C5, Abmaj7, Bb9, F5, Ab, Bb.
- Vlins (Violins):** Two staves. A blue box highlights the upper staves, with a callout: "Higher notes in violins".
- Pads:** A staff with a green box highlighting a section, with a callout: "Crescendo (increase in volume)".
- Guitars:** A staff with a red box highlighting a section, with a callout: "'Busier' Mandolin Part".
- Perc.** A staff with a "Shaker" label.
- Bass Guitar:** A staff at the bottom.

The score includes measure numbers 31, 32, 33, 34, and 35. The "Guitars" staff has a "Mandolin (With Delay FX)" label and a "cont. sim" (continuation) marking. The "Pads" staff has a "cont. sim" marking. The "Perc." staff has a "Shaker" label. The "Bass Guitar" staff has a "cont. sim" marking.

## Step 5 - End as you began

Ending your piece in the same manner that it began, can be an effective structure. After the musical climax, have a go at returning to the open bars, to give a calmer ending.

I've carried over elements such as the Shaker pattern and pad from the previous section, to provide an element of cohesiveness from the previous bars.

### Opening

♩ = 90

Piano

C5 Ab6 Bb F5

Pads

Mandolin (with Delay FX)

Guitars

1 2 3 4

### Ending

C5 Ab6 Bb F5 C5 Ab6 Bb9 F

Piano

Pads

Perc.

Shaker

36 37 38 39 40 41





# Full Score

♩ = 90

C5 Ab6 Bb F5 C5 Ab6 Bb9 F

Piano

Pads

Mandolin (with Delay FX)

Guitars

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

The musical score is written for four instruments: Piano, Pads, Mandolin, and Guitars. The tempo is 90 BPM (♩ = 90). The key signature has one flat (Bb). The time signature is 4/4. The Piano part features chords and arpeggios corresponding to the chord symbols above. The Pads part consists of sustained notes. The Mandolin part has a delay effect. The Guitars part has a rhythmic pattern in measures 1-2 and a slash in measures 3-7.





Chord progression: C5, Ab6, Bb, F, Ab9, Bb9

**Piano**

**Vlrs Flau**

**Pads**

**Guitars**

**Bass Guitar**

8 9 10 11 12

The musical score is arranged in five staves. The Piano staff shows a sequence of chords: C5, Ab6, Bb, F, Ab9, and Bb9. The Violins/Flutes staff has sustained chords. The Pads staff has long, sustained notes. The Guitars staff is marked with a repeat sign. The Bass Guitar staff has a simple line with a few notes in measures 11 and 12.



Chord progression: C, A $\flat$ 6(add9), Gm, A $\flat$ , C, A $\flat$ 6(add9), B $\flat$ 6(add9), F

**Piano**

**Vlns Flau**

**Pads**

**Guitars** (Mandolin (with Delay FX) + Acoustic Guitar)

**Bass Guitar**

Measures 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18



Chord progression: C, Ab6(add9), Gm, Ab, C, Ab, Gm, F

**Piano**

**Vlms Flau**

**Pads**

**Guitars**

**Bass Guitar**

19 20 21 22 23 24

The musical score is written for five instruments: Piano, Vlms Flau, Pads, Guitars, and Bass Guitar. The Piano part is the most complex, featuring a series of chords: C, Ab6(add9), Gm, Ab, C, Ab, Gm, and F. The Vlms Flau part has a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The Pads part has a sustained, arched line. The Guitars part has a rhythmic pattern marked with slashes. The Bass Guitar part has a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The score is numbered 19 to 24 at the bottom of the Bass Guitar staff.



C5 Abmaj7 Bb9 F5 C5 Abmaj7 Bb9 F5

Piano

Vlins Flau

Vlins

Guitars

Dulcimer

Perc.

Shaker

Bass Guitar

25 26 27 28 29 30

*cont. sim*

Chord progression: C5    Abmaj7    Bb9    F5    Ab    Bb

**Piano**

**Vlins Flau**

**Vlins**

**Pads**

Mandolin (With Delay FX) *cont. sim*

**Guitars** *cont. sim*

**Perc.** Shaker

**Bass Guitar**

31 32 33 34 35

Piano

C5 Ab6 Bb F5 C5 Ab6 Bb9F C5 Ab6 Bb Ab9Bb9

Pads

Perc.

Shaker

36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46

The musical score is divided into three staves: Piano, Pads, and Perc. The Piano staff shows a sequence of chords and melodic lines. The Pads staff has a continuous, flowing line. The Perc. staff has a steady shaker rhythm. Measure numbers 36 through 46 are indicated below the staff.

