

Musical leitmotifs signify a specific person, place, or event in *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-03) film trilogy based on the three-volume book by J.R.R. Tolkien. The acclaimed film score by Howard Shore (b.1946) contains more than 80 leitmotifs in its three films, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Return of the King* (2003).<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on four related leitmotifs: the Shire (the home of the hobbits), the Hobbits (the short population), Frodo (the protagonist) and Gollum (an antagonist), and examines their similarities and difference. The motifs are similar in their texture, instrumentation and accompaniment, which reflects the connection between the hobbits Frodo and Gollum, for Gollum himself was once a Hobbit. I believe by exploring these four leitmotifs, one will have a clearer concept of the *Lord of the Rings* film and a deeper understanding of the relationships between the characters.

Canadian composer Howard Shore, notable for his film scores, has composed over 40 film scores including *Big* (1988), *Se7en* (1995), *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Aviator* (2004), *The Departed* (2006), *Doubt* (2008), and most recently the 3rd installment in *The Twilight Saga* series – *Eclipse* (2010). The highly successful score to *The Fellowship of the Ring* won Shore his first Oscar, as well as a Grammy Award, and nominations for a Golden Globe and a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA). In addition, *The Return of the King* was nominated for and won a total of eleven Academy Awards, a record for the number of Oscars won by a single film, which only two other films—*Titanic* (1997), and *Ben-Hur* (1959) –have matched.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*The Lord of the Rings* is not the first film to incorporate leitmotifs. Leitmotiv-use has been a common compositional occurrence in previous film scores such as John William's *Star Wars* (1977-83) and Nino Rota's *The Godfather* (1972).

<sup>2</sup>"Howard Shore," <http://www.howardshore.com/>, accessed 1 October 2010.

Howard Shore provides a full range of heroic themes with a full orchestra and massed choirs. Shore is also known for composing and orchestrating his own scores, which is something unusual in Hollywood.<sup>3</sup> Using similar harmonies and orchestration throughout the LOTR, his music provides a sense of unity throughout the trilogy. Celtic folk music and stringed instruments are prominent throughout the motifs, and violins are primarily used to highlight recurring themes of nostalgia and loneliness. Overall, Shore's score creates atmospheres and conveys emotions, revealing characters' subjective experiences and illustrating dramatic events through narrative cueing, maintaining continuity by filling 'gaps' and providing transitions, constructing formal and narrative unity through repetition and variation.<sup>4</sup>

Shore considered his score for LOTR to be a "single, coherent, dramatic work—an opera—with each film an individual Act."<sup>5</sup> This concept influenced compositional aspects such as the orchestral score, choice of instrumentation, and size of musical forces; the development of thematic material to represent characters, ideas, and cultural groups; and the use and variation of musical material throughout the three films.<sup>6</sup> Comparing this film score with Wagner's four-opera Ring cycle (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 1848-1874) is inevitable, and Shore acknowledges that "he had to look into Wagner's great and amazing work and into the opera form."<sup>7</sup> The common use of the leitmotif in the classical film score was derived from Richard Wagner's earlier use of such thematic material as a way to unify his large-scale operas. It is worth noting that there are some similarities between the two stories. They're based to some extent on the

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<sup>3</sup>Doug Adams, *Lord of the Ring*, <http://www.musicoflotr.com/>, accessed 1 November 2010.

<sup>4</sup>Judith Bernanke, "Howard Shore's Ring Cycle: the Film Score and Operatic Strategy," in *Studying the Event Film 'The Lord of the Rings'*, 176-184, ed. Harriet Margolis, Sean Cubitt, Barry King and Thierry Jutel (New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), 177.

<sup>5</sup>Adams, *Lord of the Ring*, <http://www.musicoflotr.com/>.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Bernanke, "Howard Shore's Ring Cycle: the Film Score and Operatic Strategy," 176.

same tale and perhaps Tolkien was also influenced by Wagner. Because a ring of power is paramount, it is apt that Shore chose a similar system of leitmotif-use for the trilogy of films.

The first leitmotif signifies the Shire, the land of the hobbits, and is immediately heard in the first film, *The Fellowship of the Ring* as Bilbo Baggins describes a hobbit's peaceful life in the Shire. Generally entitled, "Concerning Hobbits," this theme includes a folk-like melody presented first in the pan flute followed by the solo fiddle. It has a bucolic flavor and suggests something of the rustic wholesomeness of the hobbits, no matter how far they might be from their homeland. Throughout the films this pastoral appears on the fiddle, later on whistle and clarinet, and finally as the hymn-like song referred to as, "In Dreams," which become Frodo's leitmotif.<sup>8</sup> The lush quality and melodic contour of the "Shire" theme invokes feelings of nostalgia, hope and friendship (see musical example 1). This folk melody in D major remains mostly in the major mode throughout the trilogy and represents the idyllic existence in the Shire.

This diatonic melody hints at a simple pentatonic scale while the harmonies present only a sensitive handful of chord changes. The use of folk instruments also reflects the simple nature of the hobbits. As Bilbo Baggins explains in *The Two Towers*, "Hobbits only real passion is for food. . . We have also developed a keen interest in the brewing of ales and the smoking of pipeweed. . . But where our hearts truly lie is in peace and quiet and good tilled earth, for all hobbits share a love for things that grow."<sup>9</sup> In this excerpt, the music begins with the lower strings and bassoons on arpeggio staccato quarter notes. This humorous motif consisting of syncopation becomes the accompaniment for the melody in the solo violin. The solo violin then presents the melody consisting of grace-notes and slurs, which is reminiscent of peasant folk

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<sup>8</sup>Kevin J Donnelly, "'Musical Middle Earth' in Ernest Mathijs," in *Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context*, ed. Ernest Mathijs (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 308-309.

<sup>9</sup>Peter Jackson, dir, *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Los Angeles: New Line Productions Inc., 2001) [DVD] "Concerning Hobbits" (7:00-8:00).

music. A signifier of emotion occurs as the entire string section enters on a lush and legato chord as Bilbo says the word “peace.” This emphasizes the nurturing and honest condition of a hobbit.

Because the Shire tune is so simply and flexibly constructed, Shore is able to create several distinct variations out of the material. An enriched variation of the “Shire” theme occurs in *Return of the King*, where the melody returns as the hobbits return home to the Shire. The leitmotif here begins in a slow tempo in minor mode and Shore applies the entire string section now in legato instead of staccato articulation with the addition of the harp. The shire melody has matured in a thickened texture and rich harmonies, representing the maturity of the four hobbits: Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin.<sup>10</sup> The pan flute also plays the melody in a lower range, signifying the loyalty and wisdom of the hobbit Sam, who had previously been viewed as a nuisance. Frodo and Sam have now formed a close relationship built on mutual respect. This musical fellowship theme between the hobbits eventually becomes Frodo’s leitmotif, symbolizing love, hope, faith, trust, friendship and honor.

The accompaniment for the “Shire” melody is its own leitmotif and may be said to symbolize the hobbits. This theme was always a leitmotif but just takes a while for it to become apparent. Employing the bassoon and pizzicatos in the lower strings, a jovial staccato motif mimics the free-spirit of a hobbit (see musical example 2). Like the Shire motif, this hobbit motif is in D major. This comical theme in the low register seems to represent the down-to earth nature of the Hobbits and their diminutive stature, which is also down to earth (pun intended).

The hobbits’ leitmotif also corresponds to the quaint living conditions of the hobbits as seen in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. For example, when Gandalf the Grey visits Bilbo Baggins in his house, this motif becomes fragmented and transposed. A signifier of emotion is seen here as

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<sup>10</sup>Jackson, dir, *Return of the King*, (2:58:25-3:00:00).

Gandalf, a tall wizard, awkwardly makes his way into the small hobbit home. The music, sequenced up in thirds, seems to represent Gandalf's tall height while the fragmentation of the motif reflects the lack of ceiling room. The wizard ducks and hits his head on a wooden beam precisely on beat two in the music. This "whack" sound magnificently accompanies the music which is followed by Gandalf's percussive exclamation, "oohh!"<sup>11</sup> The witty timing of Shore's music reflects the humor and irony of the scene, for Gandalf is usually a sophisticated wizard capable of conquering anything. In the end, the music like the scene is endearing because Gandalf sacrifices his head and comfort in order to visit his beloved vertically-challenged friend.

As previously mentioned, the Shire leitmotif organically transitions into Frodo's theme, usually entitled "In Dreams" which begins in C major and later moves to D major, the same key as the Shire and Hobbit leitmotif (see musical example 3). This theme is simply a variation of the Shire leitmotif (from example 1); the first three notes are alike and the contours similar. Frodo's melody is simply an augmentation of the Shire motif but instead utilizes the entire string section instead of just one solo instrument. Frodo's theme also contains a lush lyrical melody which ascends in the upper register. Because his theme is conically placed higher than the hobbits motif, Frodo's stature is elevated. Instead of being just a simple hobbit, he is viewed as being innocent and pure—the perfect ring bearer. Though Frodo is the protagonist of the film and the protector of the Ring, he often longs for the Shire and dreams of returning home. Performed by Enya, "In Dreams," is fully presented during the end credits of *The Fellowship of the Rings*, with words and music by Fran Walsh and Howard Shore.

This theme follows Frodo throughout the trilogy and represents the safe world of his dreams. It first appears in the first film, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, as Frodo tells Gandalf that

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., (6:15-17:00).

he wishes the ring had never come to him and none of this had ever happened.<sup>12</sup> Like the Shire theme, Frodo's leitmotif also represents themes of loneliness and nostalgia. This occurs in the first film as Frodo mourns Gandalf's death. Here the wooden flute takes the melody as a choir hums and sings "oohs" in the background.<sup>13</sup> In a way the leitmotif has become a religious hymn, almost Requiem-like, with voices accompanying the theme in the flute. At the end of the trilogy the theme is transposed up a whole step to E major and reflects Frodo's triumphant endeavors. Overall "In Dreams" is threaded throughout the trilogy to represent Frodo's hope and dreams of destroying the ring and returning home to the Shire.

The second leitmotif represents an antagonist, Gollum, and is generally referred to as "The Pity of Gollum." This theme consists of two figures. The first contains a triplet motif which ascends and descends in the clarinet voice in dissonant pitches (see musical example 4). This figure begins in A minor and moves to E minor and is first heard in the prelude of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Here the horns sustain chords while strings play the legato triplet melody. The viewer here only sees Gollum's eyes as he skulks in his dank cave. The Pity theme accompanies this moment and creates an ominous and lonely ambiance.

This leitmotif not only reflects Gollum's cold and dark personality, but comparable to "In Dreams," it also evokes feelings of nostalgia and loneliness. Gollum's motif occurs throughout the trilogy each time he is mentioned even before his physical introduction late into the first film. Gollum's theme is not only a leitmotif for his character, but it is also a leitmotif for selfishness and obsession. Representing greed and bitter anger, this melody occurs in the clarinets in the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., (23:10-24:00).

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., (1:30:10-1:34:14).

first film as Bilbo suddenly becomes possessive over the ring. Bilbo turns violent and eerily calls the ring “My Precious,” the exact name Gollum gave the ring before Bilbo stole it.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the trilogy Gollum’s motif remains in the low register of the clarinet which reflects a sense of solitude and wandering. This motif represents Gollum’s hatred and pity, for as Gandalf explains, “He hates and loves the ring, as he hates and loves himself.”<sup>15</sup> The enfolding triads of this melody represent Gollum’s wretched state of existence. Gollum’s leitmotif consists of a second figure, which contains a slow minor figure in the violins and represents pain and suffering (see musical example 5). Some critics assign this theme as the leitmotif for the “Ring” or “Argonath” (the ancient and desolate land of humans); however, I view this leitmotif belonging to Gollum because it appears alongside him almost every time he emerges. Thus Gollum is one with the ring and is unable to separate himself from it.

Beginning in F minor chord, a whole step higher than Gollum’s first motif, the violins play a leading tone (B) to scale degree 5 (C) in the upper register. This theme is then transposed down to A-flat minor and ends in G minor. This motif is dissonant in that the leading tone occurs on the strong beat, is held for a long duration (a quarter note) and is accompanied by a crescendo. By the end of the first film the two figures are reorganized and developed into “Gollum’s Song,” an upsetting articulation of his warped psyche and intentions towards the hobbits.<sup>16</sup> Similar to an agonizing sigh motif, this leitmotif is known as “Gollum’s Theme” or “Menace of Gollum.” The minor second interval symbolizes Gollum’s physiological pain and struggle between his past and present. Gollum was once a Hobbit named Smeagol but transformed into the evil Gollum when he murdered his friend for the ring.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., (27:00-27:39).

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., (23:10-24:00).

<sup>16</sup>Adams, *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring Annotated Score*, [http://www.lordoftherings-soundtrack.com/fotr\\_complete.html](http://www.lordoftherings-soundtrack.com/fotr_complete.html), accessed 1 November 2010.

Throughout the trilogy the evil Gollum constantly battles his good Smeagol side. He often argues with himself using plural pronouns such as “Us” and “We,” perhaps reflecting his conflicting personalities or his fear of being alone. Shore is able to provide unity in the trilogy by employing similar instruments in various leitmotifs. For example in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the Shire’s music uses Celtic instruments like the hammered dulcimer. In *The Two Towers* the cimbalom, a distant relative of the dulcimer, represents Gollum’s heritage with twitchy chromatic figures. Eventually, the cimbalom becomes so strongly associated with Gollum that it appears alongside him, even when his menace does not.

Gollum’s leitmotif is commonly known as “Gollum’s Song” which is performed in the end credits to the second film, *The Two Towers*. The song performed by Emiliana Torrini includes lyrics by Fran Walsh. This melody is in minor mode and employs triplets in the strings which are derived from the first figure of Gollum’s motif. A choir begins the song singing on “oohs” which are taken over by violins in a high register. Reflecting a sense of agony, the cellos play a counter theme while the harp and string rise and fall on pizzicato arpeggios. Overall the minor second motif reflects not only Gollum’s loneliness and shame, but all states of being haunted and possessed.

As seen in the themes of Frodo and Gollum, a leitmotif’s meaning and function may remain the same throughout the film, or change as it recurs in new contexts to reflect the character’s development as the story progresses. However, according to Judith Bernanke, a leitmotif cannot be “limited to representing only the immediate visual presence of someone or something; music can also connect the present with the past and the future.”<sup>17</sup> In the LOTR film trilogy, the characters of Frodo and Gollum become the link between the past and future of the

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<sup>17</sup>Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 123.



ring. This is observed in the commonalities between their leitmotifs. Gollum's second motif ends in G minor, which shares a common tone with D major, the key of the hobbits, Shire and Frodo's leitmotifs. The D major of Frodo's theme thus becomes the major dominant to Gollum's G minor theme. Due to this, it may be argued that D major has the potential to be the dominant (V) of G minor, like Frodo has the potential to be like Gollum. Although Frodo's and Gollum's leitmotifs may at first sound completely different, the two are also closely related in their texture, instrumentation and accompaniment.

Both Frodo's and Gollum's leitmotifs employ folk instruments like the violin and clarinets and represent themes of pain, nostalgia, loneliness and wandering. This application of similar instruments is appropriate, for both characters are alone in their burden of the ring. Both are controlled and possessed by it, yet feel a sense of responsibility to it. Frodo and Gollum are both hobbits who long for the past: Frodo dreams of his home the Shire, while Gollum longs for his previous life as Smeagol. In a way, the similarities between these two leitmotifs and characters are linked by the ring's destiny. Throughout the trilogy, there is a constant fear in both Frodo and Gollum for what was and what will be. The ring's past lay with Gollum who once owned the ring while its future lies with Frodo who is sent to destroy it.

Both Frodo and Gollum's leitmotifs also reflect the journeys they've taken. Struggling between his good hobbit Smeagol and evil Gollum side, Gollum's journey is a psychological one. Nonetheless, Gollum fails in his journey, for he remains greedy and possessed by the ring which ultimately leads him to his death, and ironically to the destruction of the ring. Contrary to Gollum's journey, Frodo's is a physically one where he travels from the Shire to the fires of Mount Doom. Luckily, Frodo's journey is successful and he returns safe to the Shire and is reunited with his hobbit friends.

At the end of the trilogy, the journey ends for both Gollum and Frodo. The ring is destroyed and both are safe from its menacing powers. Gollum sleeps safely forever in the arms of death while Frodo can now sleep in peace and is thus sent off on a ship into the West. In a way, both must also say goodbye to their closest companions: Gollum to Smeagol and Frodo to Sam. Though the trilogy ends the journey still continues and as Gandalf reassures, “Death is just another Path...this isn’t the end.”<sup>18</sup> This is observed in the song “Into the West” performed by Annie Lennox in the end credits of *Return of the King*. Employing a large string soundscape, this final song unites both Frodo and Gollum’s leitmotifs. “Into the West” has a melodic contour similar to Frodo’s “In Dreams” and begins in a minor key like Gollum’s theme. Nevertheless the piece ends in the same peaceful C major key which opens Frodo’s theme, “In Dreams.”

In conclusion, Howard Shore’s leitmotifs for the Shire, Hobbits, Frodo and Gollum demonstrates the close connection to the dramatic narrative, underscoring events as they occur on screen, and revealing the subtle experiences of the characters. Shore explains that his motifs act as “guideposts,” directing viewers’ attention to onscreen events as well as their relationships with other dramatic elements, just as Wagner refers to a music drama’s “melodic elements” as “signposts for the emotions.”<sup>19</sup> Though Shore’s incorporation of leitmotifs in *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy has often been linked to Wagner’s Ring cycle, perhaps he was also influenced by Wagner’s idea of a “Gesamtkunstwerk.” Just as in Wagner’s concept of a unified artwork in his operas, Shore interweaves his film music to complement and enhance the dialogue and images on the screen.

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<sup>18</sup>Jackson, dir, *Return of the King*, (3:05:00-3:05:20).

<sup>19</sup>Adams, *Lord of the Ring*, <http://www.musicoflotr.com/> , accessed 1 November 2010.

## Figure Page 1: Musical Examples

Example 1: The Shire Leitmotif<sup>20</sup>

Violin

Vln.

Example 2: The Hobbits Leitmotif<sup>21</sup>

Piano

Pno.

<sup>20</sup>Bernanke, "Howard Shore's Ring Cycle: the Film Score and Operatic Strategy," 179.

<sup>21</sup>Howard Shore, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, Piano/Vocal/Chords, arr. Tod Edmonson, Ethan Neuburg and Jackie Worth (CA: MMII New line Tunes (ASCAP). Warner Bros. Publications, 2005).

## Figure Page 2: Musical Examples

Example 3: Frodo's Leitmotif, "In Dreams"<sup>22</sup>



Example 4: Gollum's Leitmotif 1



Example 5: Gollum's Leitmotif 2



<sup>22</sup>Shore, *Symphonic Suite from The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, arr. John Whitney (CA: Alfred Music Publishing, New Lines Tune (ASCAP) and South Fifth Avenue Publishing (ASCAP, 2002), all subsequent examples will be from this source.

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