STRETCHLEARN · WORKBOOK

Music Composition for Film — Workbook

This workbook turns each module of the course into hands-on practice. You will run a real spotting session, draft and develop a leitmotif, build a tempo map that lands on picture cuts, and prepare a delivery package the way a working composer does. Pick a short scene (60 to 120 seconds) of public-domain or your own footage and carry it through every section.

The Composer's Job and the Spotting Session

Establish what your scene needs from music and produce a precise, timecoded spotting log.

Exercise: Mute-and-Watch Diagnosis

Watch your chosen scene twice: once with any existing sound, once fully muted. Note what changes in how the scene reads, then decide which of Copland's five functions your music should serve.

• What does the scene fail to communicate when the sound is muted?

• Which function fits best: atmosphere, psychology, neutral background, continuity, or tension-to-resolution?

• Is any music in this scene diegetic (source) or all non-diegetic (score)? Justify it.

• Is there a stretch where NO music would be the stronger choice? Where, and why?

Worksheet: Spotting Log for One Cue

Fill in a complete cue entry for the single most important music moment in your scene. Use the HH:MM:SS:FF timecode format and compute the duration.

Cue number (reel + M + position, e.g. 1M2)

Cue title

Start timecode (HH:MM:SS:FF)

What triggers the music to enter

End timecode (HH:MM:SS:FF)

How the cue resolves or cuts

Duration in seconds (end minus start)

Intent in one sentence (the dramatic job)

Checklist: Spotting Session Readiness

[ ] Picture is locked (no further edit changes expected)
[ ] Frame rate confirmed and noted (e.g. 24 fps)
[ ] Every intended cue has a start and end timecode
[ ] Each cue has a one-line intent in plain language
[ ] Durations calculated for each cue
[ ] At least one deliberate no-music stretch identified

Theme, Leitmotif, and Harmonic Language

Write a memorable theme, assign it as a leitmotif, and develop it through real transformations.

Exercise: Three-to-Seven-Note Theme Draft

Sketch a melodic gesture of no more than seven notes for the central character or idea in your scene. Sing or play it, walk away for ten minutes, and try to recall it from memory.

• Draw the contour of your theme as a single line (rising, falling, arched, leaping).

• Which signature interval anchors it, and what feeling does that interval carry?

• Clap the rhythm alone — is it interesting without any pitch?

• Could you hum it back accurately after a ten-minute gap? If not, simplify and retry.

Worksheet: Leitmotif Development Sheet

Take your theme and write out how it would change for four different dramatic situations using the six development techniques from the course.

Original theme: key, mode, instrument, tempo

Triumphant version: what you changed (key/mode/orchestration)

Defeated version: what you changed (tempo/register/instrument)

Sinister version: what you changed (mode/harmony/articulation)

Two-note fragment hint: which notes you kept

Combined with a second character's motif: how they fit (counterpoint, layering, opposing keys)

Exercise: Mode and Harmony Swap

Reharmonize a four-bar phrase of your theme three different ways to feel how harmony alone shifts emotion, keeping the melody identical.

• Set the phrase in Lydian — does it gain a sense of wonder?

• Set the same phrase in Phrygian — does it turn menacing?

• Add a chromatic mediant move (two major chords a third apart) at one cadence; describe the effect.

• Place a sustained pedal note under the phrase; how does the tension change?

Checklist: Thematic Material Check

[ ] Theme is seven notes or fewer
[ ] Theme has a distinctive, hummable rhythm
[ ] A signature interval is chosen deliberately
[ ] At least four developed variations are written
[ ] A short fragment version exists for hinting
[ ] The mode/world of the cue is decided on purpose

The DAW Workflow and Orchestral Mockups

Build a usable scoring template and make a sampled passage perform convincingly.

Worksheet: Scoring Template Plan

Plan a starter template by listing the tracks you will load, in score order, with the library and articulations each needs.

Woodwind tracks and library

Brass tracks and library

Percussion tracks (tuned and untuned)

Keyboards and harp tracks

String tracks (Vln1, Vln2, Vla, Vc, Cb)

Folder/group structure for muting sections

RAM available and SSD streaming plan

Exercise: Articulation and CC1 Pass

Take an eight-bar string line and bring it to life. First it will sound flat; your job is to make it breathe using articulations and the mod wheel.

• Assign keyswitches: where does the line want legato vs. staccato vs. spiccato?

• Draw or perform CC1 so every long note swells and tapers — describe one phrase's shape.

• Add CC11 to balance level on top of the dynamics; what did it fix?

• A/B the flat version against your shaped version — what specifically sold the realism?

Worksheet: Mockup Mix Stage Map

Recreate the orchestral stage for your cue by assigning panning and depth to each section.

Violins 1 pan position

Violins 2 / violas pan position

Cellos pan position

Basses pan position

Front-desk (drier) vs. back-row (more reverb) assignments

Shared reverb send and which scoring-stage IR you used

Which line is pulled forward for clarity, and how

Checklist: Believable Mockup Check

[ ] Tracks are in standard score order
[ ] Articulations change to match each phrase
[ ] No long note has a flat CC1 line
[ ] Each section sits in its real seat via panning
[ ] One shared reverb glues the room together
[ ] Melody is audible without fighting the faders

Syncing to Picture and Delivering the Cue

Lock the music to the edit, mine the temp track for intent, and prepare a clean delivery package.

Exercise: Tempo Map to a Hit Point

Choose one picture event in your scene and build a tempo so a strong beat lands exactly on it. Use the bars-to-time math from the course.

• What is the timecode of your chosen hit point, and what is the musical accent that should land there?

• How many bars and beats fall between your cue start and the hit?

• Using 60 / BPM per beat, what tempo lands the accent on the frame? Show the calculation.

• Did you need a gradual ramp (accelerando) or a clean tempo, and why?

Worksheet: Temp Track Decode Sheet

If your scene has a temp (or pick any existing track as a stand-in), analyze it as a brief without copying it.

Temp tempo (approx BPM) and whether it locks to picture

Instrumentation and overall texture

Where it enters, swells, thins, and exits against the scene

Emotional arc described beat by beat

The one or two qualities the director would most love

Your original idea that serves the same arc

Worksheet: Delivery Package Spec

Define exactly what you will hand the post team for your cue, confirming format details before export.

Sample rate and bit depth (target 48 kHz / 24-bit)

File format (WAV or AIFF)

Frame rate and agreed start reference

Stem list (e.g. strings, brass, woodwinds, percussion, extras)

Full reference mix filename

Naming convention used (cue_title_version_stem)

Peak headroom target (e.g. around -6 dBFS, no limiting)

Checklist: Final Handoff Check

[ ] Hit points land on the correct frames
[ ] Temp was decoded for intent, not copied
[ ] All files are 48 kHz / 24-bit WAV or AIFF
[ ] Stems and a full mix all start at the same reference
[ ] Headroom preserved with no brickwall limiting
[ ] File names encode cue, version, and stem
[ ] Frame rate and start point confirmed with the music editor

Your Action Plan

1. Pick a 60-120 second scene and lock its frame rate (e.g. 24 fps).
2. Run a spotting session and write a timecoded cue sheet with one-line intents.
3. Draft a 3-7 note theme; confirm you can hum it back after a gap.
4. Develop the theme into at least four dramatic variations as a leitmotif.
5. Choose the mode and harmonic language that set the scene's world.
6. Load or build a score-order DAW template with articulations mapped.
7. Program the cue, then shape every sustained note with CC1 and switch articulations to match phrasing.
8. Recreate the orchestral stage with panning and a single shared reverb.
9. Build a tempo map so your key accents land on the picture hit points.
10. Export 48 kHz / 24-bit stems plus a full mix with preserved headroom and clean file names.