

Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard's *The Dark Knight*

Film Score Guides

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A Film Score Guide

Vasco Hexel

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Rowman & Littlefield
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group,
Inc.

4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706

www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hexel, Vasco, 1980- author.

Title: Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard's *The dark knight* : a film score guide / Vasco Hexel.

Description: Lanham, MD : Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. | Series: Film score guides ; 18 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016002714 (print) | LCCN 2016005181 (ebook) | ISBN 9781442266728 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781442266735 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Zimmer, Hans. *Dark knight*. | Howard, James Newton. *Dark knight*.

Classification: LCC ML410.Z557 H49 2016 (print) | LCC ML410.Z557 (ebook) | DDC 781.5/42—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2016002714>

 The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

To my students

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

I observed in the Editor's Foreword to Erik Heine's Scarecrow Guide about James Newton Howard's score for M. Night Shyamalan's film *Signs*, that Howard's way of being in the world rather subverted the contemporary dominance of the cult of personality. In this volume, Vasco Hexel explores the idea of personality through two rather contrasting lenses: the thesis on identity that is Christopher Nolan's movie *The Dark Knight*; and Howard's co-authorship of the score with Hans Zimmer, one of the most dynamic individuals to have influenced film scoring in several decades. As Ben Winters discussed in his Scarecrow Guide on Erich Korngold's score for *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, notions of authorship in film music have been neither straightforward nor easily defined since the 1930s. But Dr. Hexel's study explores just how complex both the practice and the relationships can be. As if the dialogue between composer and director is not nuanced and dynamic enough, affected by production logistics as much as artistic sensibilities, introducing two composers with very contrasting musical styles and technical approaches to the process surely generates creative energy which must be absorbed by the score.

Dr. Hexel takes us through the processes and techniques used by each composer and for those interested in Howard's method, Dr. Heine's book makes a good companion read. But what will strike even the most casual reader is the distinctive resonance between the two composers, for all their differences. As Dr. Hexel demonstrates, both have adapted readily to the opportunities provided by technology to build up sounds and music beyond what is possible with a live orchestra. The suffusion of the final score with samples and textures, both purely musical and artificially generated, shows how diversely the same creative tools can be employed. Indeed, perhaps the dynamic of Howard's and Zimmer's similarities and differences finds its metaphor in the dynamic of Batman and the Joker; both creative and powerful influences on the world they define, using similar forces to rather different yet equally impactful outcomes.

On a similarly metaphorical note, Dr. Hexel explores the evolution of the so-called Batflaps element of the soundscape, a sonic effect that ambient music designer Mel Wesson originally created to meet the absence of Batman until one hour into the film. Zimmer had suggested that Wesson

try to create the sound of wings flapping, even though Batman's suit does not have wings and he glides rather than flies. In many ways, the Batflaps are an excellent analogy for the way in which this score has been constructed for, as Dr. Hexel ably demonstrates elsewhere in the same chapter, both Zimmer and Howard have sampled live performance and used it in conjunction with the original performance. This evolution of layers of texture from the actual—removed yet connected, recognizable yet not visible, synergistic yet not the same—is a metaphor for the expectation of continuity and coherence in the soundscape that is very much a feature of the modern science fiction epic. The boundary between music and sound is, for Zimmer and supervising sound editor Richard King, utterly irrelevant: “all sound is music.”

The Series of Film Score Guides was established to promote score-focused scholarship but that simple aim has long since been outstripped by the achievements of the Series' authors. They have divulged such great variety in what the analysis and scrutiny of content and production of film music reveals that I sometimes feel that composers will now have to keep up with what the discipline is able to explain and interpret. Indeed, fans of Zimmer, Howard, Batman, and Nolan will thoroughly enjoy this book for its minute and precise unpicking of the aural experience, no matter their level of musical knowledge.

It is therefore all the more disappointing that, for the first time in the almost twenty years that this series has been running, the rights holders for the music copyright have refused to grant permission for musical examples to be reproduced in this scholarly text. They have not given a reason for refusing this permission. It could be one of any number of reasons—concern about lost revenue, anxiety about musical texts being lifted and reproduced elsewhere without authorization or payment, or perhaps something more artistic around protecting the right of the composer to keep their tools hidden from view—but without explanation it seems little more than sadly short-sighted. Dr. Hexel has therefore used a notation system which circumvents the need for this permission, is illuminating nonetheless, and which still complements Zimmer's own thoughts on his work, thoughts that any film fan will find fascinating.

Audiences may be more sophisticated these days, composers' tools more complex, directors more imaginative and receptive to production discussions about music, and films about so much more than just story. But these aspects are all an indication of how integral music has become to the immersive experience that is contemporary cinema. A few years ago, at a conference, an academic from my own discipline suggested to me that score-based scholarship as found in the Scarecrow Guides was largely pointless, now that such complicated soundscapes are so common. Vasco Hexel's book on what is really Zimmer, Howard, Wesson, and King's *The Dark Knight* shows us instead to be wary of using such limited definitions of what “score” actually is.

Dr. Kate Daubney
Series Editor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to a number of people who encouraged me to complete this book despite tremendous obstacles posed by the music copyright holders.

Hans Zimmer welcomed me to his London apartment and studio in the summer of 2013 and then visited the Royal College of Music the following October. Few composers have had a greater impact on the evolving craft of recent Hollywood film music composition, and even fewer speak of their work with Hans's candor.

Mel Wesson was most generous with his time, sharing insights on his work on *The Dark Knight*.

My colleague Matthias Kapohl, one of the organizers of the SoundTrack_Cologne festival in Germany, personifies focus and professionalism in bringing together doers and thinkers in our field.

The University of Southern California Library, including its James Newton Howard Collection, is an invaluable resource for the study of film music.

Dr. Kate Daubney, series editor of these film score guides, recognized the importance of *The Dark Knight* as a recent commercial success whose groundbreaking score deserved academic scrutiny.

In the months I was researching for and writing this book, the students on the Masters Programme in Composition for Screen at the Royal College of Music continued to inspire me with their passion, energy, and wonderfully diverse talent.

INTRODUCTION

The Dark Knight (2008) was the highly anticipated sequel to Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*, which in 2005 had pleased audiences and critics alike. A bold take on the familiar Batman character, the first film had revitalized an ailing movie franchise and moved the benchmark for Hollywood superhero movies. Making *The Dark Knight*, Nolan remained mindful of the Batman comic book source material and its devoted fan following. Nolan once again pursued his assured directorial vision, striking a judicious balance between creative integrity and mainstream appeal. He introduced two key villains from the comic books, casting Heath Ledger as the Joker and Aaron Eckhart as Harvey Dent, who later becomes Two-Face. Ledger portrayed the evil jester as a terrifying terrorist, decidedly not imitating the camp maniac Jack Nicholson had famously played in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989).

The ensuing commercial and critical success of *The Dark Knight* (hereafter referred to as *TDK*) was also the result of a compelling script that pushed this Hollywood sci-fi action film to intellectual heights rarely reached in mainstream films. Screenwriters David S. Goyer and Jonathan Nolan (Christopher's brother) helped devise a complex story that poses difficult questions about justice versus the law, right versus wrong, good versus bad. Batman's vigilantism and moral stance are challenged with a poignancy never encountered in previous Batman films.

TDK nevertheless offered spectacular action and set pieces. Striving for realism and believability, Nolan relied on practical stunts and real sets and only occasionally drew on computer-generated imagery that so gratuitously permeates many recent superhero films. The sleek visual style of *TDK* results from highly sophisticated photography, including scenes shot in the large-frame IMAX format and subtle use of green screen to turn Chicago into Gotham City.

The soundtrack of *TDK* was equally accomplished, a highly nuanced canvas of dialogue, sound design, and music. Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard, who had previously collaborated on *Batman Begins*, composed an extraordinary score. Building upon thematic and coloristic foundations laid in the first film, they now pushed into grittier, heavier, and darker territory. Once again, the musical language they employed was often ultra-minimalist, shunning swashbuckling themes and heroic fanfares that had typically accompanied Hollywood super-heroes in the past. Howard's work on Harvey Dent's orchestral theme lent the score an air of dignified resolve that poignantly contrasted the chaos brought upon Gotham under the Joker's reign. The Joker Theme was perhaps one of the most ingenious inventions in the score, whereas the Stranger motif had a most unsettling effect (both will be discussed later). The *TDK* score departed markedly from traditional Hollywood film music and subsequently was a key driver in the stylistic evolution of contemporary film scoring towards fewer redundant musical pointers in favor of a more subliminal discourse.

It is rare for two of Hollywood's most successful composers to collaborate on a film score and James Newton Howard may not be an obvious candidate to work with Zimmer. Howard has a reputation of being quiet and very private,¹ whereas Zimmer exudes confidence and thrives in the limelight. As will be shown, Zimmer is a self-taught rebel. Howard holds a postgraduate degree in music. Zimmer is an experimenter who likes to tinker with synthesizers but does not read notation. Howard is at ease with music technology but still jots down ideas with pencil and paper. Zimmer's music has had an idiosyncratic sound in discrete time periods of his working life thus far. Howard is perhaps one of the most versatile film composers working today, with a diverse stylistic palette. And yet the two composers together crafted a score that holds together as a coherent body of work. Access to the orchestration scores proved invaluable in determining the composers' respective share of the workload. Ambient music designer Mel Wesson was the creative link and common denominator between Zimmer and Howard and he very generously shared his insights on the creative process.

With his contribution to *TDK*, Hans Zimmer confirmed his standing in the industry as a visionary film composer who not only delivers scores with popular appeal but also continues to push the boundaries of his craft. Although other film composers have composed more scores and won more awards, Zimmer may be the first-ever film music super-star. There is a remarkable level of public interest in his work and he has a considerable fan following.² Lively discussions on web forums, fan pages, and podcasts abound and Zimmer is an audience magnet wherever he makes a public appearance.³ However, whereas Howard's music has previously been thoroughly analyzed,⁴ this book offers the first treatise on one of Hans Zimmer's scores, with a comprehensive analysis and contextual discussion of the music and the creative and technical processes and practices that produced it.

This book largely follows a format that will be familiar to readers of previous entries in this series of film score guides. Chapter 1 gives a biographic overview of Zimmer and Howard and Wesson. Chapter 2 puts *TDK* in critical, textual, and historical context, tracing the origins of Batman through his many incarnations in comic books, television series, and films. It evaluates *TDK* as part of and in contrast to a growing body of commercially driven Hollywood franchises before outlining ways in which Nolan differentiated his version of Batman from previous film adaptations. Chapter 3 outlines the technical approach of Zimmer and Howard, highlighting Zimmer's groundbreaking emphasis on collaboration and how his workflow differs from Howard's. Chapter 4 comprises an analysis of the score, addressing spotting, instrumentation, and orchestration, itemizing primary and secondary musical themes and motifs and illustrating pertinent scoring techniques and devices. Since, inexplicably, the rightsholders denied permission to show detailed music examples, the

score analysis here largely relies on Helmholtz pitch nomenclature and descriptions. Chapter 5 focuses on the relationship of music as part of the soundscape, exploring the collaborative creative process that brought together the music and sound design teams and emphasizing the shared sonic territory and conceptual and technical overlaps between music and sound design.

1 MUSICAL BACKGROUND OF THE COMPOSERS

Hans Florian Zimmer

Hans Zimmer was born on 12 September 1957 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany.¹ Growing up, Zimmer's parents did not own a television set because they considered television an inferior cultural medium. They did, however, have a piano in which young Hans took a keen interest. Hans's father, whom he lost at age six, was a scientist and inventor. His mother was an accomplished musician who, due to the horror and displacement of WWII, never got to pursue a professional career. Zimmer's father played jazz clarinet, which he would sometimes play for Hans in his study. By contrast, his mother preferred the "very strict and German" Bach and Mozart. When she decided to hire him a piano teacher, Hans found the lessons too structured and limiting, pressuring him to practice scales and learn to read notation. Hans quit after just two weeks. As a result of his continued refusal to receive structured tuition, Zimmer cannot read or write notation to this day.

*