**St Mary’s Catholic School: A Level Music**

****

****

**Bridging Course – Week 3**

**Re-Cap Task:** Thinking back to last week and the work you completed on leitmotifs - listen to the theme from *The Lord of the Rings.* Use specific musical language to describe each leitmotif – for example, instrumentation, harmony etc. Compare this music to the music of ‘Batman’ from last week – find and note down two musical similarities and two musical differences.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Deesm_fadg>

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

**This week in your bridging course, as you will know from the outline of the course, we will be looking at film music from *The Duchess.*** Specifically ‘The Duchess (opening)’, ‘Mistake of your life’, ‘Six years later’, ‘Never see your children again’, ‘The Duchess (End titles)’ by the composer Rachel Portman.

1. **Below is a comprehensive article and interview on the life and musical output of the composer Rachel Portman. As with last week read the article carefully and make detailed notes that will give you an excellent overview of the musician’s influences and compositional output. If you need to recap on how to make the most successful notes, there is help on the school website.**

Straight away while studying music at Worcester College, Oxford, future screen composer Rachel Portman was drawn to dramatic/theatrical composing rather than to the 'pure' forms of concert and recital music. Her first public scores were for college theater productions and backgrounds for classmates' student films. Born in 1960 in Surrey, Portman's inclinations toward music date from the age of 14 when she began to practice piano, imagining little stories, or at least scenes in her head, to accompany her own keyboard improvisations. It is not a huge leap, then, to scoring plots and scenarios of other people's stories. Among her first commercial scoring jobs were dramatic 'specials' for the BBC and a syndicated TV series for producer Jim Henson, "The Storyteller". Lively music for "War of the Buttons" (1994) was Portman's first big budget movie contribution and from there she was off and running.

But could a female composer, even in the rapidly approaching New Millennium, expect to be welcomed into the business on a par with male counterparts? If she wanted to try film scoring, she'd probably face the same gender gap that had persisted in the world of classical concert music. And yet, there were a number of pioneering figures to take note of – in fact, there had been quite a vigorous international roster of successful female composers throughout the 20th century if one only did a little research. For instance, after composer Amy Beach's famous concert tour of 1911, doors were opened for both female performers and writers, and her reputation has only grown since her death in 1944. In the decades that followed, Britain's Elisabeth Lutyens (b. 1906), Russia's Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931), Finland's Kaija Saariaho (b. 1952), Australia's Anne Boyd (b. 1946), Scotland's Judith Weir (b. 1954) and lately the young American Augusta Reed Thomas (b. 1964) were all either established or rising examples of women whose original music was both vital and personal. One can find these composers being programmed by major symphonies around the world these days. Thomas's "Astral Canticle" was nominated for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize.

Although film music has lagged behind such progressive ways, there *have* been some notable female figures over the years in movieland: Shirley Walker, Anne Dudley, Jocelyn Pook come to mind as composers who refused to be sidelined by the gender-traditions of their day. But Rachel Portman has stood out as perhaps the most successful and versatile of them all. Initially, it was the cleanness and naturalness of her music that seemed to distract people from the important historical fact of her gender but it was not long before she would rise to the very top of the game, gender aside, through talent alone: in 1996 she would become the first woman to win the Best Scoring Academy Award -- for the Jane Austin comedy-of-manners, "Emma".

Her relatively formal compositional style (she is basically a pianistic composer who only then transposes into orchestral colorings, often through a collaborative orchestrator) typically has her layering a polite classical theme-line over a persistent, rolling ostinato – therefore, period films are heavily represented in her resumé: "Nicholas Nickleby"; "Beloved"; Roman Polanski's version of "Oliver Twist". But she has also provided effective commentary behind an assortment of more modern, quirky literary adaptations: "The Cider House Rules"; "Chocolat"; "The Joy Luck Club"; "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan"; and a couple of the near-improvisational films by Mike Leigh ("Four Days in July"; "Life Is Sweet"). And hear how her sly score for "Benny and Joon" works to, at once, accompany a cast of whimsical misfit characters, and evoke something of the silent film era with which one of the characters is obsessed. To her, these films were theatrical pieces, in need of music that was more evocative than directly narrative in nature. Indeed, you seldom find a scene in any Portman score where the music actually drives the action; she is more often a back seat driver. Sometimes, if the milieu of the story is already theatrical (as in the opening narration of "Nicholas Nickleby" where Nathan Lane's character speaks directly to the camera about the "story you'll be seeing" or in the backstage Hollywood screenplay, "Their Finest") her score will start with that typical turning ostinato (more assertive here because, perhaps, the theatrical setting gives her energy); then a familiar "Portmanteau" *alla breve* theme fits on top of that. But more often, her musical ideas are not so dynamic. And as we've said, she has not tried to be a very narrative or cinematic composer over the years. Theater music, in her conception, should be indirect, unless there's a play right there on stage singing out at you.

It should come as no surprise, then, that as soon as she graduated from the 1990s, her New Millennium career would devote more direct attention to actually creating a few of those 'singing' pure-music concert pieces: specifically a 'dramatic choral symphony' called "The Water Diviner's Tale", then a carefully scripted tone-poem for the BBC Symphony on the theme of global warming and environmental warning, "Endangered" -- and, by 2003, for the Houston Grand Opera, a true stage-set vocal work, her own original opera based on the famous Saint-Exupery children's fable, "The Little Prince".

Not so long ago, I found her willing to talk about what had led up to such a daring, transformative experience as tackling modern opera -- and the relative pleasures of both stage and screen music:

Rachel Portman - Interview by John Caps

**Rachel Portman:**Well, as you've already chronicled, my earliest 'real' composing for money was for the screen and I learned really fast that it's not so far removed from the music behind a stage play – a screen story plays-off on its own stage. The first film I did was only a year after I left Oxford. It was a Channel 4 TV film. Then I started getting commissions but still only periodically. That was in 1982 or '83 and I was 21 or 22 but I knew fairly quickly that's what I wanted to do. In those days it still involved a lot of waiting: I used to work stuffing envelopes; I worked as a cook. But I had a huge faith that that was the right thing to do: I was completely fixed on writing music for drama. I look back now and sometimes think, 'Gosh, I wasted it. Why wasn't I writing other (pure) music; why wasn't I developing?' But I couldn't see beyond it. I just knew that I had to learn a craft and learn to write music for the screen.

There was a composer back then who influenced me a lot: Benedict Mason, a close family friend, and he helped me when I was in my teens and I couldn't write out the pieces I was composing. He wrote them out for me and helped me get into a better school which helped me get into Oxford. He was my mentor and I would help him copy some of his scores. So that was the best school in the world – to have somebody like that and it was through him that I had these grand desires.

**John Caps:**So try and relate the scoring of a theatrical production to scoring a film. First of all, what can a movie score do for a film?

**RP:**Well, all sorts of things: it can be an equal partner to the actors; it can be like another actor in the film. Also if it's used wisely, it can inform and affect the scene just as much as a lot of the dialogue. And that is what you should think to do if you're writing a score to a movie. It is a supporting role but an important one – and if you take it all away, there's no color in the film – it can feel like that. Of course, when it's used badly, it's the most annoying and irritating thing, if there's music that you find repellent. It's certainly over-used in films these days and I'm always fighting that. But there's a fear coming from filmmakers and studios these days – a fear of having scenes without music at all, a fear of silence. And if you think about this life we lead, how everyone walking down the street these days has music plugged into their ears: we live our lives to a soundtrack.

But intelligent film music can add a separate element, a new perspective all its own -- and it's so much more interesting if you're allowed to do that as a composer. There's a film I did a few years ago called "The Human Stain" – a wonderful film by Robert Benton and he let me put in music that stood up with the film without interfering – music added a force there that you can't really tell where it's coming from; music was like another character and the director let me go ahead and do it that way. He didn't discuss why or what or what it should be or anything; but it all came out.

"Oliver Twist" was another really interesting collaboration for me. Roman Polanski was a really interesting collaborator who's so knowledgeable about music. It takes someone with a lot of confidence in music to be able to leave you alone in a way. Music can be very threatening to a director because a director usually can't hear what it is you're doing and then you're in the studio recording and it's too late. But he had the confidence to talk in emotional terms about what each scene was and – not what music should be but rather what he wanted *from* music. And actually, now that you've got me thinking, music is used in a very operatic way in Polanski's "Oliver Twist". For instance, when a villain arrives like Bill Sykes, his theme arrives, playing up the scene. It was really fun and great working with him.

**JC:**So is that kind of music directly applied to a narrative what attracted you to trying an opera – along with your fondness for melodic and vocal music?

**RP:**Exactly... and so I was searching for a subject to make into a children's opera because there are so few operas you can take a child to. And, as you've hinted, I was also looking to expand my own activities beyond the cinema and back onto the stage – even into vocal writing which can be so much more assertive, per se, than film scoring can be – that is, film music can't be too melodic or it turns into song and it can't be too insistent or it starts to take over the film. So anyway, I was thinking in terms of melodic opera as a genre. I have four children myself and I just decided to write my own opera for them and 'their kind'. I was working with a producer Jim Keller who works with Philip Glass and he's the one who originally suggested the "Little Prince" idea to me. But I thought it would be too hard to dramatize. Sometime later, the same thing was suggested as an idea to Philip but he said, 'This is not really interesting to me but what about Rachel?' So I reconsidered it and it all grew out of that.

**JC:**By then you already had a solid history of film composing but had you written vocal music before?

**RP:**A little. Of course, there's not really any chance to use voice on film: some people do use wordless choirs but it's very different – it's very attention-seeking (to try and insert vocal music in a film score). But I've always loved writing for the voice and wanted to understand it more and, as you've also already hinted, I've always been passionately interested in storytelling with music. So it's natural that one would want to tell stories through singing. And it turns out "The Little Prince" is a fantastic subject for an opera.

**JC:**Are there similarities between scoring a film and writing an opera? Both are dramatic situations; both give the composer 'absolutes' that are extra-musical.

**RP:**I found it was a very natural transition. In particular in dramaturgy and in pacing, they are alike – because a lot of what I do on a film has to do with pacing. It really helps to have that experience. I think I realized very young that as a composer if I had a gift at all it was for telling stories, at least laying behind stories and providing an ambiance and a disposition that underlies the whole thing. And as I was writing the "Prince", I had the book open beside me and I was thinking, 'Do I feel the same inside this music as I did when I read the book?' That was my test. Is it ringing completely true all the time? That's my interest.

In the opera, there's a lot of the Prince asking questions of the Pilot. One of the thoughts I really wanted to get across in the kind of music I wrote was that the Little Prince is a child and he just says things – so a lot of it is very matter-of-fact and his music needs to have that simplicity and practicality – except where the story turns in the end and except where he's talking about missing his favorite rose or missing his home planet: those are little moments where you feel his pain and loneliness. But the rest of the time he's a child and it's very important not to put our perceptions onto him but to let him be himself. And also it's been very interesting for me – the whole learning curve in writing for him because, at the beginning, I was developing it with the director Francesca Zambello, who Philip Glass introduced me to, who he's worked with, and Nicholas Wright – the fantastic librettist – but there was a discussion about how could a small child as the lead of the whole opera take such a big role? Should it rather be done by a young female soprano? And I always thought that would be such a big turn-off for any child that you take to see it. If you do that, they won't be connected to the story anymore.

And we also had to think about ways to take the pressure off him (the boy soprano in the lead role). So one of the things we did was we brought the Pilot more into the part-writing (and, thinking it through, that was a good musical idea anyway). And the critical thing is that the boys who have performed the opera so far (alternating Graham Phillips and Jeffrey Allison, during the New York City Opera production) have had no problem and they're just as professional as the adults that they're playing with – and no strain in learning the piece, either. I had to keep it simple; not to have too much of a vocal strain, not to keep their lines too long – in fact, there are hardly any places where the boy has an extended line to sing. Although he's on all the time, they're quite quick, his little songs. He might sing about how he likes to look at the sunset but it's a brief *arioso* and well within his comfortable range.

**JC:**What about other operas with major youth-oriented roles? Did you consciously try to avoid those examples?: Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors" or Ravel's "L'Enfant et les Sortileges"...? Or even Richard Rodney Bennett's "All the King's Men?"

**RP:**I love those first two; don't know the Bennett. No, I wasn't avoiding... I just was following my own path with regard to the book.

**JC:**Your personal sound in film scores has so often been in the British tradition...

**RP:**I think all the music I write is very similar. Although, if you take a film like "The Manchurian Candidate" (2004), I was trying to write literally very frightening music. That was fun to do because it was out of my normal. And I don't know – I would say that I approach each project freshly. I don't have a conscious sense of self in what I'm writing – I guess I'm always serving the material.

**JC:**So would your personal music for an adult opera tend to be more astringent?

**RP:**Yes, I think it probably would. I think it certainly would, but at the same time I'm always going to want to write with clarity and I'm always distilling it and wanting to write things that are simple and clear. It's a tough question to answer. I think it will be... the music I write will always be... hopefully communicative and not hard for people to understand. And that is in a world where the musical establishment expects very intellectual modern music from people who're writing modern operas but I know that I'm not part of that.

**JC:**So what's been the critical reaction to your prince?

**RP:**Very good. Incredibly positive. Occasionally there'll be a comment about, "Well, Rachel Portman is a film composer so there's a lot of sweeping film melody here..." as though I'm borrowing a lot of techniques from film composing. I mean, maybe I am, to somebody else, but I don't know where they're hearing that or where it comes from. It's certainly not conscious. And, goodness knows, that's an old cliché that ought to be gone by now: the idea that film composers are anything less than real composers. I hope to be able to pop back and forth for the foreseeable future between screen music and the stage. It's all, in its own way, storytelling and it's certainly all real music.

1. **Now, turning to the music of the film ‘The Duchess’, use the following link to listen initially to the tracks that are included in the A Level, this will give you a feel for the music and prepare for analysing the music more closely. Make general notes on your first musical impressions – especially in light of your work last week on ‘Batman Returns’**

 <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLn4pF7lIZ5nmF3QP0oD9q2MAuwW4PEvCi>

***You are now going to complete extended work on all of the musical cues you are required to study* - Read the information below and answer the questions below for each of the musical cues using your deductions from listening to the musical score to help you.**

**Opening:** The scene is set with this opening music. Portman’s use of homophonic textures as well as the clearly modal feel to the music all help to take our minds back into history. Although modality isn’t strictly a Classical feature, we nevertheless get a feeling of the past from this music. Similar techniques are used in John Lunn’s music for Downton Abbey and also another Portman score, Belle. Portman’s melodic approach is very much to create melodies using small units or motifs. This opening music has three melodic ideas that are used throughout the score.

* What instruments are used in this opening music?
* How are the instruments used?
* What do they contribute and provide to the opening music?
* How would you describe the tonality of this music, and what gives it this sound?
* How would you describe the main melody?
* Does the texture of the music change at all during this cue?

**Extension questions:**

* How is the harp used in this extract?
* Why is this a suitable piece of music for the opening of this particular movie?

**Mistake of your Life:** Portman continues with the mix of modality and diatonic minor in this cue, and again we start with some lovely atmospheric writing with long, drawn-out chords. This cue brings in the plaintive piano writing that was previously mentioned. Portman often uses piano and likes to juxtapose it with a small string ensemble. In her score for ‘Their Finest’ she provides some lovely piano writing in the second track, ‘I’d Miss You’. Again, this cue uses simple melodic ideas: in this case, two main ideas are used. It’s interesting to listen out for the timpani pedal note in the opening moments of the music, and consider its impact. Pedal notes are common in cinematic music – in fact they’re crucial to the genre. Portman brings together ostinato features and melodic ideas and creates a wonderful canvas of sounds.

* What makes this cue very different to the opening music?
* How would you describe the music for piano?
* If you were going to replicate this piece, what three features would you need to include?
* Do you notice any patterns in the progressions that she uses?
* What different melodic ideas can you hear in this extract?

**Extension Questions:**

* How does Portman use cadences in this cue?

**Six Years Later:** This extract brings together much material that we have now become familiar with, as well as pizzicato strings, and there’s a real sense of rise and fall. Again, Portman is working with a modal version of D major, and the music is built around ostinato features and small melodic cells that make up the whole. We again see the use of the chord progression I-V (dominant minor), which was used in the opening music. There are numerous examples of orchestral, symphonic and programmatic music that use modal ideas to create a certain mood or represent a time or place.

* Why does Portman use pizzicato string techniques in this cue?
* What mood is created here?
* Name three features that contribute to this mood.
* Does this music still link back to the Classical period, and if so, why do you think that is?
* How would you describe the melodic material used in this cue?

**Extension Questions:**

* Sum up Portman’s approach to rhythm and metre in this cue.
* What type of chord is used by Portman in bar 25, and what effect does this have on the music?

**Never see your children again:** This is a classic cinematic opening to a piece of music, or cue. Strings emerge, meander and dominate the landscape. We again see the use of modes, and although the cue is in D minor, it also uses the Aeolian mode. Modality crosses so many borders and genres in music, and it’s well worth students exploring it in their own work. The use of the tonic pedal at the end, as well as the dissonant D flat, all lead to a wonderful close to a rather emotive section of music. In her score for Belle, Portman also incorporates broad, emotion-filled strings as well as pedal notes and a sense of the unresolved. The harp is also used to wonderful effect in this section.

* Why do you think Portman chose to use the harp in this cue?
* How would you describe the melodic writing in this cue?
* How would you describe the quaver movement in this piece?
* What kind of harmonic palette does Portman use in this cue?
* What role is given to the timpani in this piece?
* **Extension questions:**
* Why is this a great example of cinematic underscoring?
* How does this piece fit in with Portman’s style of film composition?

**End Titles:** This material is very similar to the content and structure of the first cue, The Duchess – so why include it in the Anthology? **Can spot the subtle changes that Portman makes to the cue – make notes on what you can hear in terms of subtle differences to the opening.**

**6) To bring this week’s bridging course to a close you are going to complete and essay, similar to the one you completed last week. This is where you will evaluate Portmans’s use of musical features. As with work at GCSE, you should identify a musical feature (AO3) and then evaluate its effect on the listener/audience (AO4) this essay is worth 15 marks.**

**Discuss the use of melody, harmony and instrumentation in the music you have studied from Rachel Portman’s, ‘The Duchess’. Relate your discussion to other relevant works (15)**

This means illustrating your points with musical examples from other works – for the purposes of this essay use music that we looked at last week and the week before by **Korngold** and **Elfman.** For example, a point you make about Harmony in ‘The Duchess’ you could then back up by saying Korngold uses the same technique to highlight action in ‘The New Adventures of Robin Hood or contrast with a point from ‘Batman’.

**Further work you could complete:**

**Wider Listening: Listen to these other works by Portman to further explore her compositional style. There are also other examples of contemporary film music to listen to in order to compliment your work on the genre so far**

**Portman Works:**

Their Finest (2016)

Belle (2013)

 Race (2016)

Chocolat (2000)

 **Other possible wider listening ideas include**:

 The King’s Speech (2010): for use of piano, and another film set in a different time period.

Downton Abbey: for piano writing, period drama and modal influences. It’s also a great example of how a theme can develop throughout a score.