Traditional Language With a Flair for Innovation:

Hans Florian Zimmer's Compositional Process

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Hans Florian Zimmer is one of the best known and most prolific film composers in the world nowadays. His work defines the characteristics of present-day film music and is regarded as one of the most efficient practices in the field. Zimmer has expressed himself in different styles, making his language one of the greatest examples of musical eclecticism. His efficiency is equally evident in the field of production. Since his arrival in Hollywood in 1989, Zimmer has changed the entire production process that had been standardised since the 1930s. He has succeeded in bending an entire system to his own needs without any opportunism. He has optimised and rationalised musical productivity through the use of computer technology. Zimmer's work demonstrates a fundamental connection between production innovation and compositional eclecticism. Despite this, he frequently employs a traditional narrative method: thematism. However, his stylistic evolution and reinterpretation have distanced him considerably from concepts such as "theme" and "thematic development" of the classical tradition. Zimmer's traditionalism and keen sense for innovation merge to create a new result that also allows us to understand the latest evolution in the history of film music.

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"Don't worry about what anybody else is going to do.
The best way to predict the future is to invent it".
[Kay in Wessner 2011, 87]

Hans Florian Zimmer is one of the most acclaimed and prolific movie score composers in the entire cinema industry. His work is widely known and used in both audiovisual field and in concerts.[1] It reveals various of the characteristics of contemporary movie scores, and his creative process is considered one of the most effective in his field. Like other film music composers, Zimmer has expressed himself and continues to do so in a variety of styles that make his language one of the greatest examples of musical eclecticism, an essential

1 Bear in mind that since 2015 Zimmer has been giving live performances accompanied by trusted orchestral musicians and sound technicians. The Hans Zimmer Live Tour is now a media event of international breadth that has basically transformed Zimmer's role from movie score composer to performing musician and frontman (See https://www.hanszimmerlive.com/, last accessed February 25, 2024).

virtue that is required by any media composer today. Different phases and methods of composition can be discerned along a path of plurilingualism that began in the 1980s and led to Zimmer's results. Among others, Zimmer is distinguished by the anti-academism that has always characterised him: initially working in popular music without scholastic preparation, he was long defined a "lightweight" composer, and only in recent years he has been acknowledged as one of the most influential composers together with Ennio Morricone and John Towner Williams. This is true as far as aesthetics are concerned, even more so in regard to his production method: since he first arrived in Hollywood in 1989, Zimmer began changing the entire chain of production system that had been consolidating since the 1930s when the first sound films were made. Zimmer succeeded in skewing an entire system to his needs, less for reasons of opportunism than the need to accelerate and optimise musical productivity through the use of computer technology.[2]

Zimmer's practices of composition and production are intrinsically interwoven and interdependent, altering the creative process work by work as the case requires. More and more today's scores for movies and other audiovisual media are defined by the use of technology in support —and often supplement—of organic-acoustic material. The Daw—digital audio workstations—, invariably present in the recording studios of today's audiovisual composers, make passages smoother and easier in both the compositional process on paper and its complement on the sequencer, the reference software installed on the computer, the heart and fulcrum of the composer's work, the extension of his or her creative ability.[3]

The high-tech environment has served as a unifier for Zimmer, one of the first composers to attach so much importance to electronics with the integration of timbres and sounds so naturally in an acoustic ensemble. However, Zimmer's role as composer leads him to a compositional process and to a purely musical creation of rhythms, melodies, harmonies. This links Zimmer also to a traditional narrative method and the use of thematic writing that makes the music both more defining and easier to memorise in the film's context case by case. The thematic music was used in silent films, and with the advent of sound it became

2 Owing to its importance and scope, Zimmer's scores for cinema should certainly be examined from different points of view. For more details on the genre and Zimmer's training in aesthetics and production in regard, see Stopar (2015–2016).

3 The computer and its sequencer, which require connection to a MIDI keyboard and—when desired by the user—an external hardware for memory implementation and consequently faster Daw control, often features two or more screens for the simultaneous management of the musical material and a rough synchronization of digital cues. Music tracks are created within the moving images provided by the rough cut of the movie being made. Details regarding musical technology and its components go beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless, is important to always bearing in mind that Zimmer's compositional practice is interwoven with the use of technology, the different libraries of acoustic instruments and electroacoustic sounds, mixing, sound design, and soundscaping. For more details on these topics and their use by Zimmer, see Corbella (2010), Kompanek (2004), Meandri (2012).

a key part of a film's musical layout, especially in Hollywood. This method of writing characterises the language of many past and contemporary composers; a language determined by themes, "referable to a melody [...] formed of symmetrical or asymmetrical motifs or phrases, hence divisible, dynamic in nature, and generally with a complete musical sense of its own" (Miceli 2009, 613).

The musical theme applied to moving images—particularly in Zimmer—serves as a leitmotif associated with a specific situation or character at symbolic, referential, or direct level. Also widely employed by Richard Wagner, this function has been progressively simplified by cinema's new media. As Roberto Calabretto writes:

> *Associating a character with a motif or theme has always been an effective tool for aesthetically connoting protagonists and situations in a story and organising the cinematic narrative from a temporal point of view at the same time, thanks to the immediate intelligibility that a musical theme offers. [...] Cinema has wielded [the leitmotif function] by mediating its complexity in various ways and attitudes, many times in simplistic and reductive manner. [...] Such use can clearly not be related to the original purpose assigned to it by Wagner (Calabretto 2010, 103).*

Nevertheless, the leitmotif function or thematic association (Bribitzer-Stull 2015) lends itself handily to the audiovisual because it furthers the comprehension of the story "recalling to the spectator's memory not only people or things through identifier procedures but rather situations, so by means of which facts rise above the normal passage of time" (Calabretto 2010, 105). In similar words, Zofia Lissa believes that the Leitmotif fills a need for the continuity, structural unity, and integration of the information characterising a character, thus insinuating certain psychological details to the observer that visual images alone cannot provide (Lissa 1965, 84).

In order for the leitmotif function to be effective, the musical theme itself must first of all be effective. Calabretto (2010, 106) adds: "It is obvious that the thematic typologies that punctuate the history of film music are very diverse and respect compositional needs [...] of different kind". Many movie score composers have employed the musical theme in a variety of styles throughout musical history: from Max Steiner, Bernard Herrmann and Henry Mancini to the more recent Elmer Bernstein, Jerry Goldsmith, Williams and Morricone. Each of these composers used their own language and method of thematic writing. Throughout his career, Zimmer as well developed his own compositional method with the creation of a theme as the basis for the work. This is why his composition demands such considerable attention: without a theme, in fact, especially in Zimmer's case, the score lacks its most distinctive, original and recognisable feature. From time to time the composers face a difficult situation: the considerable amount of good or mediocre, superlative or discreet music inevitably leads to a saturation of rhythmic, harmonic and melodic material.

In light of these elements, creating innovation becomes complex. Zimmer ranks among best thematic composers in Hollywood especially for his great sensitivity in adhering to the filmic narrative without ever renouncing coherence at structural level, whether it be harmonic, melodic or merely tonal. Such concepts were also always very important to Morricone:

> *[The composer] must invent structures of his or her own that take the film's form and the director's style into account. For example, the repetition of a thematic idea (even if only in timbre) assumes value precisely due to its reiteration. Although the form of the piece cannot be predetermined, it must assume that of the director's shooting and editing: form that becomes form through image (Miceli and Morricone 2001, 63).*

Continuing, Morricone considers the editing and length of the different scenes to be fundamental in composing the score with an identifying thematic core. The same is true of Zimmer, even if he does not always consider aspects of editing or scene length in the process of creation. In other words, he frees his thematic creation from the pace of cinematic narrative. Zimmer composes one or more carrier themes through which the entire score can later be developed before reflecting on the respective cues agreed with the director and music editor at an earlier stage in the process. This method implies the development of a concept, a thematic and stylistic core around which the entire score is created. The concept may consist of several themes, which must always be united by at least one musical parameter, whether this be rhythmic, melodic or instrumental. Morricone explains:

> *In order to work well in a film, music must have and preserve its formal characteristics—tonal ratios, melodic ratios, if you will, rhythmic ratios, ratios between instruments—in short, a correct internal dialectic. Whenever this formal (and previously, technical) correctness of the music is applied to the image, the result will certainly be much better (Miceli and Morricone 2001, 63).*

This scheme is used by most thematic composers and the conceptualization for each of them is from time to time quite similar. Jerry Goldsmith explains: "What I really try to do is to take one simple motif of the material for the picture, and a broad theme, and construct it so they always can work in concert with each other or separately" (Goldsmith in Cooke 2010, 229). From a different perspective, Karlin and Wright explain the thematic development that lead to the core concept:

> *You can't conceptualize the central character unless you understand him. Your musical impression of that character can become the concept. At its simplest, this can be superficial, but if the character has any psychologically interesting reactions or feelings, the music can function most effectively for the film by characterizing these internal attitudes (Karlin and Wright 2004, 115).*

Such criterion is applied in all Zimmer's work. Violinist and composer Michael A. Levine, a longtime Zimmer associate, explains: "I have never met anyone better at getting inside the heart of the story than Hans. That ability, to me, is the essence of film scoring" (Stopar 2014). Music editor Adam Smalley sheds further light on Zimmer's style of writing and the score's conceptualisation:

> *[Hans] writes 15–20 minutes of music and it can encapsulate all the themes he did. It could be the bad guy, a good guy, the love theme, the adventure theme. And he does it without pictures because the early days the pictures are always in flux. So Hans will write what we've coined '1m1x' and he'll sit there without any kind of visuals and just start his impression. And he'll do a proper suite without being chained to the visuals (Sundance Institute 2014).*

This method implies a total understanding of the film project, the central topic of the film narrative and what the film aims to communicate on an emotional level. In most cases, the inspiration for a good concept comes from the main character. Sometimes this idea is so central to the concept that it coincides with the filmic idea entirely to perfection.[4] In any case, however, assimilating the entire filmic story is the fundamental requisite for developing a score and a concept that are as coherent as possible. Before composing, Zimmer reflects on the characteristics and communication capacity of the film and its characters by studying the script or rough cut. The vision of the images and the leading actors can provide inspiration in creating the main thematic ideas. In 2013, Zimmer explained: "When I write the score, I only think about the characters and the story. [...] You have to fall in love with the characters, and at the same time, you always have to put a part of yourself into the character" (Amatranscripts 2013). What counts is to be able to take impressions directly from the characters and the filmic narration and make them your own, because "what a film should do is to tell you a story. Music can really help that process, but unless you're careful, it can also undermine it" (Zimmer in Seger and Whetmore 2004, 204). In order to avoid this kind of mistakes, he always confers with the director, his prime source of inspiration:

> *Most of the time it comes out of conversations with the director, though we don't talk about music — we talk about whatever it is*

4 Zimmer is certainly not the only one in this regard. Consider just a few examples: in his score for *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallström, 2000, music by Rachel Portman), Portman developed a theme for the protagonist Vianne (Juliette Binoche), a wandering gypsy who settles with her daughter in a small French village. The same theme is varied throughout the filmic narrative and takes on a central, identifying role in the entire score. In *Big Fish* (Tim Burton, 2003, music by Danny Elfman), the entire score is inspired by the theme for the main character Edward Bloom, an old man in the custom of telling fantastic and absurd stories about his life somewhere between reality and fiction. Here again, the concept is developed from the theme devised for the narration's protagonist but then characterises the entire work. The same can be said of *Superman* (1978) or *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (Robert Redford, 2000, music by Rachel Portman), and of other examples as well.

> *we're talking about and the notes are very much secondary. That's the problem, you see, because I always go 'Oh, the notes are secondary!' And then I sit there forever not coming up with them—I find it immensely difficult to write anything (Zimmer in Wherry 2002).*

Exchanging ideas and conversations with directors often leads Zimmer to postpone his writing —not a very common occurrence in the industry—as he meditates on aspects entirely marginal to the composition itself. "I don't touch the piano until I have a point of view, until I know what I want to write. I just don't know the notes, but I know what I'm trying to make them mean!", he explains (Hans Zimmer interview 2006). This is because he is seeking a direction, a thematic idea that describes the unfolding of the film as engagingly as he can. In a recent interview, the late James Horner stated: "the music has to be emotional, you still have to touch people's hearts" (Horner in The Guardian 2015). And that is precisely the point for Zimmer and many other past and contemporary composers as well.

In order to involve the audience as directly as possible, Zimmer and other thematic composers make extensive use of melodies in a tonal or modal language, thus making the music pleasing to the average ear and, above all, easier to distinguish while watching the film. Finding the right concatenation of rhythms, values, and pitches that is original, characteristic and recognisable may conceal more than a few difficulties, however. David Raksin, one of the most important composers of the Hollywood Golden Age, explains:

> *You know, melody has practically disappeared from the world; every so often you get a guy who knows how to write one, but most guys are afraid because, as Oscar Wilde once said, to be understood is to be found out. And the biggest way to risk that is to write a melody (Raksin in Morgan 2000, 12–13).*

In these terms, the melody is the way in which the public receives and understands you. At the same time, it is the most risky and difficult result to pursue. When the theme is recognisable and it works, in some cases it achieves great acceptance however: many times, the cinema has offered themes whose melodies have remained imprinted in the memory of the audience even years after the first film release.[5] In order to aspire to results of depth, a composer have to open herself of himself completely to the personal compositional

5 Consider in this sense *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989, music by Danny Elfman), *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985, music by Alan Silvestri) and *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994, music by Alan Silvestri), the collaboration between Steven Spielberg and John Williams: *Star Wars* (1977), *Indiana Jones* (1981–2023), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997, music by James Horner) or going back much further in time, *Gone With The Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939, music by Max Steiner). To understand the immanence of a melody, consider also the short fanfare theme composed by Alfred Newman in 1933 that still accompanies the 20th Century Fox logo today.

process, but first of all she or he always have to remember certain fundamental aspects that make the theme effective: recognisability, evocative immediacy, pleasantness, and above all, simplicity. The effectiveness of a theme lies in its simplification and the reduction of the musical material.[6] Zimmer himself explains that "a tune doesn't have to be a lot of notes, but you have to have purpose, you have to know what you're saying". He continues: "One of the things Stanley [Myers] told me is 'you got to have the tune: if you don't have a tune, you have nothing'" (Karalis 2012).[7] The composer himself has emphasised in many interviews that his melodic writing is "stupid and elementary" (Zimmer in Wright 2014). Almost in reply, Morricone said: "I have often simplified themes with two notes, with three notes, [...] giving up the theme to create a musical and instrumental fact around it" (Morricone in Calabretto 2010, 114). This idea takes form particularly in Zimmer's latest productive period, albeit through an aesthetic that differs from the conventional narrative thematic development: the theme is transformed and evolves in timbre and into a fragment that can be recognised by a given rhythmic sequence and the frequent use of a characteristic rhythmic-melodic *ostinato*, by a given instrument or even by association with a simple interval.[8]

Building from this firm foundation, Zimmer began to compose. Despite his plurilingualism, constant use of technology and timbral invention, owing to his desire to simplify his characteristics, his thematic writing is often in just one key and diatonic with a propensity for D minor, which in his opinion is the most assuring and expressive[9]—whereas in romantic comedies he shifts to major keys,

6 Miceli clarifies in this sense: "the fact that a theme can/should be easily memorised implies a drastic reduction of stylistic-formal solutions in the modal and tonal realm" (Miceli 2009, 613).

7 Myers was a British composer, the man behind an aesthetic and dramaturgical revival through his relations with directors John Mackenzie and Stephen Frears in the decade 1980–1990. Myers chose a young Zimmer as his assistant and electronic programmer, initially assigning him small and insubstantial additions of synthetic sounds to his scores. Zimmer often likens his apprenticeship with Myers to a training school in the field for his future career of movie score composer. For more detail, see Stopar (2015–2016).

8 Beginning especially with *Interstellar*, Zimmer's works present a structure in which harmony assumes a central role to the detriment of melody, which is basic to the development of a theme. Calabretto explains: "Sometimes [...] the renunciation of the theme is complete and the composer drafts motionless chords within which sound events happen. [...] Going beyond theme makes the presence of the melodic parameter irrelevant" (Calabretto 2010, 114).

9 Zimmer's opinion is linked to personal perception: each tonality can be comforting according to the composer's abilities and lead to an expressive musical development. Goglio and Setti write: "A piece based on one key rather than another assumes a particular expressive quality to the extent that the music cannot be performed differently without changing in its substance the sentiment it communicates. The composer's choice of key is therefore never random because each one has its own particular resonance field and a consequent affinity with the inner tone, which at that precise moment characterises the musician's experience" (Goglio and Setti 2011, 79). Piana develops the same concept: "Tonal language is presented as being grafted as much into the physics of sound as much as into our cerebral reception capacities. It

especially C and F major—adding accent to degrees of subdominant, dominant and submediant in long values. He then develops these techniques in different musical styles: jazz, classical, pop, rock, folk music, symphonic-orchestral, and in the latest period in minimalist reiteration of different rhythmic patterns. In any case, because as a composer he is very attached to the dynamics and gradations of the instrumental mass intensity, during his thematic composition Zimmer often opts for *crescendos*, enabled by modulating from one key to another nearby and even by adopting different acoustic and/or electro-acoustic instrumentation, accelerating the texture through rhythmic-melodic *ostinatos*. In most cases, a final coda in *diminuendo* leads to a conclusion with a return to the principal key and the final exposition of the main theme's phrase through solo instruments in *mf/mp*.

Similar developments in dynamics are often present in Zimmer's orchestral themes, composed through melodic-narrative language with common phrasing—usually eight bars, in which the theme is bipartite (*Backdraft*, Ron Howard, 1991; *The Rock*, Michael Bay, 1996; *Rush*, Ron Howard, 2013) —or through minimalistic language (*The Da Vinci Code*, Ron Howard, 2006; *The Thin Red Line*, Terrence Malick, 1998; *Inception*, Christopher Nolan, 2010; *The Dark Knight*, Christopher Nolan, 2008; *Interstellar*, Christopher Nolan, 2014).

The theme's carrier phrase is often developed from a rhythmic-melodic *ostinato* or inspired by a precise intervallic nucleus. "Everything I write comes from an idea, from a certain interval, a minor third for example", the composer clarified (Zimmer in Hans Zimmer interview 2006). This provides insight into other well-known achievements related to minimalist language such as *12 Years A Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013) and the abovementioned *The Da Vinci Code*, *Inception*, and *The Dark Knight*.

What transpires from Zimmer's rather simple compositional techniques is the immediacy of his thematic writing. He explains: "I try in all these scores, within the first second or two something evocative, to fit the DNA of whole thing inside it" (Zimmer in Bond and Kendall 1997, 18). This idea frequently returns in Zimmer to the extent of providing a historical reference model: the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67, *Allegro con Brio*. His extreme preference for this work comes from the immediacy of its brief opening phrases. "The Beethoven 5th: any kid can go ta-ta-ta-taaaa...how did you know something so simplistic could become this cathedral of sound and so evocative?", Zimmer observes (Zimmer in Golden Age Media 2010). Almost fifteen years later, albeit more generically, he explained the same concept concisely: "The thing I love about music is that you can move people within a second" (Zimmer in Spice 2024).

What determines the theme's sonic impact is the choice of instrumentation: pitch concatenations, intervals, rhythms and *portamento* are linked to the

is both a reinforcement and a burden that seems alien to the naturalism of classical theory" (Piana 2005, 140). The perception of pitch, tonality and harmony is also explored in depth by Borio and Garda (1989).

ensemble that creates the melodic line. In this regard, every composer makes use of her or his favourite instrument or orchestral section: when Williams was composing *Star Wars*, he could count on a collaboration with the London Symphony Orchestra, and has indeed collaborated with them many times from then on. This has led to a predilection for the brass section as well as the piano, which is more suited to accompanying dramatic or autobiographical films. Choices of this kind are also linked to the composer's first experiences as a jazz pianist that lent him a natural approach to writing for the piano. The same can be said for Alexandre Desplat, who turned to writing for the woodwind section because of his youthful experiences. In many of their works, Alan Silvestri and John Debney develop melodic and harmonic material through the technique and mechanics of the guitar as the performers they are. In this way, they both reach similar harmonic and melodic solutions. Also the younger Ramin Djawadi and Heitor Pereira are good guitarists and their language is based on the technique of the instrument for the same reason. In cases like these, although the inspiration for melodic development comes from previous experience in instrumental practice, it does not impose writing for only one instrument: the film composer must therefore necessarily be able to develop themes for different instrumentation, in this way aspiring also to commissions of various kind. This is the Zimmer's case, linked to piano and guitar practice since adolescence but nevertheless capable over the years to compose themes and melodies for brass, clarinet, ethnic wind instruments, strings and cello—the latter his favourite instrument because in his words is one of the most expressive in terms of timbre and melody—right up to electronic and electro-acoustic instrumentation and the reinvention of the timbre of classical instruments, Zimmer's first and ultimate characteristic. In this sense he describes his work for the recent *Dune: Part Two* (Denis Villeneuve, 2024):

> *I need five resonators because I have this vision of how things are supposed to sound! When [I'm] not haranguing [my] synth man, [I'm] sending [my] virtuoso woodwind player Pedro Eustache to the hardware store to buy lengths of PVC piping or demanding something ungodly from a heap of stolen sheet metal. "Do you bow it? Do you hit it? What do you do with it??" I was driving people crazy! (Zimmer in Spice 2024).*

The composer is not always driven to thematic-melodic writing by previous experience at practical level but rather by inspiration and imagination at the aesthetic level and aided by a staff of orchestrators and arrangers who enable his compositional ideas and make them coherent. Equally important in this creative process are the performing musicians: figures from whom Zimmer draws inspiration and with whom he shares his thematic ideas; the latter are not involved passively, but actively right from the preliminary stage in which they discuss possible developments or arrangements with the composer. Such has been the case with cellist Martin Tillman, soloist in *The Dark Knight*, violinist Aleksey Igudesman (*Sherlock Holmes*, Guy Ritchie, 2009), guitarists Pete

Haycock (*Thelma&Louise*, Ridley Scott, 1991), Heitor Pereira (*It's Complicated*, Nancy Meyers, 2009) and Johnny Marr (*Inception*), singer Lisa Gerrard (*Gladiator*, Ridley Scott, 2000), and American music therapist and singer Loire Cotler (*Dune: Part One*, Denis Villeneuve, 2021).[10]

Zimmer's range of choices—both instrumental and stylistic—for melodic thematic development may now be considered vast, and therein lies his great success: being able to employ innovative language in timbre and colours, always remaining linked to traditional thematic-leitmotif use.

At the composition level, an initial achievement for Zimmer in any given film project nearly always lies in the main theme and the development of the score concept, in his case called the *"1M1X Suite"* presented by Smalley (Sundance Institute 2014) and shared by other composers, including James Newton Howard, Howard Shore, Jerry Goldsmith and John Williams. For as much as these achievements are fundamental to the score, they are merely building blocks in a larger picture: themes must be appropriately assembled and combined with moving images. These thematic expositions may differ from the commercial soundtracks and find a different but at the same time standardised method of application in certain moments of the filmic narrative.

To begin with, inserting themes throughout the filmic narrative is a frequent practice because it permits natural evolution linked to temporal linearity. Their use is determined by the editing and length of scenes and sequences that mostly do not consent the presentation of the entire melodic theme phrase. In this sense, many composers develop the thematic material through the sensations produced by motifs. As Brown writes:

> *Even the most toneful of composers rarely allow their melodic creation to remain intact throughout an entire score. Among other reason, the cinematic situation often affords only enough time for a motif taken from a melody (Brown 1994, 42).*

The length of the scenes and the manner of audiovisual editing often preclude the development of the theme in its entirety. It is simpler to include only one part of the melody at the base of the theme: the motif. Although only briefly, this motif must convey feelings and emotions that are often associated with the main characters or certain situations, and this determines the use of the leitmotif function. Most of Zimmer's works feature this type of function, facilitated by the use of the important technique of variation, which allows the same theme to be progressively articulated in different ways and heterogeneous musical developments in favour of the narrative to be created. Variations in film music are simple, immediate and easily understood:[11] Zimmer composes

10 Both parts sung offer all the prerogatives of a good melodic theme: they are recognisable, pleasurable, and evocative. Although incomprehensible, their sapient use of melisma communicates underlying emotions and pleasures well-suited to cinematographic language.

11 Kalinak claims: "The leitmotivic score achieved an integral structure through

them personally, even if assistance from additional composers and arrangers is evident. Levine explains: "During my collaboration with Hans, my job was whatever was needed—mostly arranging" (Author's personal interview with Levine 2014). This important testimony is enriched by that of Jackman, who has long been a composer of additional music for important scores by Zimmer and is now an independent composer in his own freelance infrastructure: "Hans gives you a cue map. He's written a 2'30" piano piece, with loads of key changes, the mood of the movement. So, you've pretty much got all the ammunition, emotionally" (Jackman in Hurwitz 2007). Zimmer makes a first draft of the material, then checks the work done by collaborators who must often choose the most suitable instrumentation for the variation or arrangement. This lets him concentrate more on writing the original theme. "It is not uncommon for Zimmer to call on additional composers to 'flesh out' his ideas after he has composed the principal motifs and themes for a particular cue, especially on large film projects with tight schedules", Wright claims (Wright 2015, 321).[12]

Throughout his career, Zimmer has mainly made use of two types of variation: agogic tempo and instrumental variation. The agogic tempo variation is, in fact, the most widely used and the "most elementary" (Miceli 2009, 623): it is based on the contraction or dilation of the melody of the theme or of a part of it, implying also a change in rhythmic values. Variation of this kind may underlie instrumental variation, which consists of a knowing use of the expressiveness and timbre of a given instrument to convey emotions and sensations. These techniques, adopted by all the most famous composers, facilitate the thematic evolution in scores with multiple themes, whereas they are indispensable in scores with a single theme because they obviate an otherwise unavoidable rhythmic-melodic repetitiveness.

It is understandable, therefore, that every score can have several variations for several themes. Based on a comprehensive audiovisual analysis of Zimmer's filmography, it was possible to identified six case histories of score at thematic level:[13]

- Monothematic without variations: very rare.
- Monothematic with short secondary insertions and variations: usual.
- Monothematic with variations: usual.
- Bithematic with variations: usual.

repetition and variation. This structure was tightened through relationships constructed among the various motifs" (Kalinak 1992, 108).

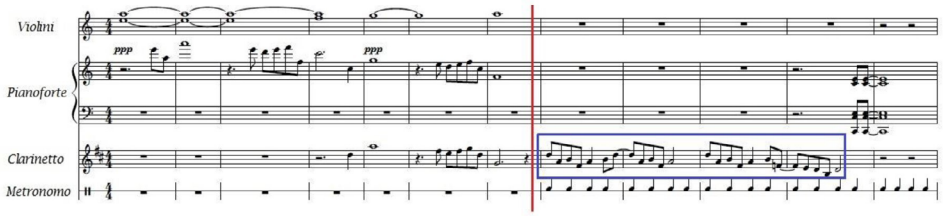
12 Such is the case in *Dune: Part One*, in which Zimmer uses a minor key motif for a female voice (Cotler) then varied for cello, with cellist Tina Guo as performer. Similarly to as in *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017), Zimmer's latest minimalist language is clearly evident in Dune, in which he uses a vast number of collaborators to create a unique sound universe that is indispensable in making the film and its narrative even more effective and engaging.

13 Each type of score below is accompanied by the frequency with which Zimmer has used it.

- Bithematic with secondary themes: frequent.
- Plurithematic: very rare.[14]

Regardless of the number of themes and variations used, what nearly all Zimmer's works and many others in the mainstream share is the presentation of the main theme in the opening scene of the filmic narrative: this method clearly serves narrative functions. In many cases the opening scene is one of the film's most important and carefully crafted moments. Miceli writes: "The presence of a theme placed [...] over the opening and/or closing credits reinforces the hypothesis of all-encompassing meaning the creators intend to attribute to it" (Miceli 2009, 613), in a practice highly reminiscent of the *Overture* in opera. Zimmer displays a flair for this vaunted by very few mainstream composers, often giving a coherent, meaningful and comprehensive idea that allows the theme to explaining the meaning of the entire film.[15]

Four thematic achievements that clarify the main theme's evolution and plurilingualism can be selected here, starting with the opening scene in *Driving Miss Daisy* (Bruce Beresford, 1989). Presented in the opening sequence, this main theme addresses the protagonist Daisy (Jessica Tandy), an autonomous and self-sufficient woman bent by old age and a human need for sensitivity. The film's first scene shows us Daisy in a fixed shot in her own room, preparing herself for usual morning outing. After an initial fragment of violins and piano in a minor key, the melodic clarinet phrase in C major —with the quite simple classical harmony I-IV-V-I for each phrase in period, determinated by downwards motion in intervals of perfect fourth with the third degree lowered by a semitone in the period cadence, typical of blues and swing—begins in synchrony with the cut and the vision of Daisy walking out of the room. The music describes the woman's autonomy and her strong, assertive character despite her age, and her intent on going out in her car alone.



Img 1: carrier theme from the opening scene of *Driving Miss Daisy*.[16]

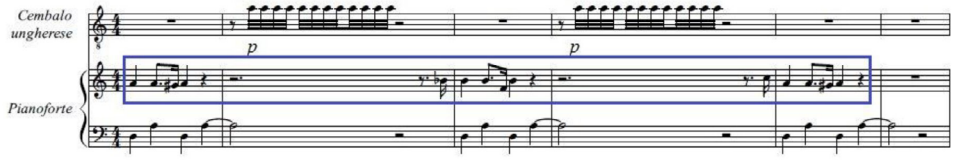
14 Personal subdivision based on a comprehensive audiovisual analysis of Zimmer's filmography (Stopar 2015–2016). This list contains another subdivision into three groups: monothematic, bithematic, and plurithematic scores. It can help to explain Zimmer's compositional method even further. It is certainly impossible to present the works of each case in detail here. For further details in this regard and others, see Stopar (2015–2016).

15 As regards the creation of the main theme, in 2000 Zimmer expressed himself in these terms: "We all have craft, we all have technique. But the moments of inspiration, that's where it really happens for composers" (Zimmer in Black 2000).

16 Personal transcription. The vertical red marker indicates explicit

After starting the engine, Daisy is unable to control the vehicle and causes an accident in the driveway from which she emerges unharmed. The music falls silent during this event, a crucial stop because it leads to the hiring of the co-star, driver Hoke (Morgan Freeman). The clarinet phrase is repeated equally in sync with the title, as if to imply that the theme is expressly dedicated to Daisy's main character around whom the entire film revolves.

A second iconic result Zimmer achieved was the main theme for *Sherlock Holmes*. On this occasion, an agogic tempo variation in *Adagio* accompanies the locations and immediately draws the audience into the atmosphere of the filmic tale. The short fragments[17] are harmonically stable with tonic on the base (D-A) while the melodic line is characterised by semitones between first and second note of each fragment and by an 'up and down' progression which gives the impression of constant moving and flurry. These brief moments present the protagonist, his intelligence and neuronal hyperactivity, and will be occasionally varied throughout the filmic tale. They can be heard for the first time right at the beginning when viewing the *Warner Bros*. logos, customised for the occasion, and placed over a cobbled street with a very specific purpose: to make the spectator understand the film's location and historical setting.



Img 2: opening cue in *Sherlock Holmes*.[18]

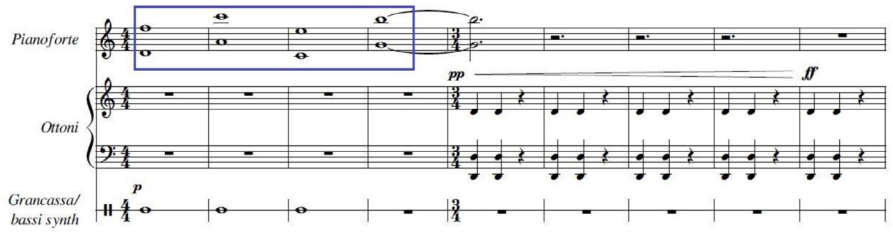
Inception provides a third example that nicely exemplifies Zimmer's thematic-compositional practice, even if there's no fragments or melodies but rather a chordal succession that proceeds by intervals of a perfect fifth and descending semitone (F - C - E - B), a typical expedient of Zimmer's minimalist language that offers the harmonic basis for the orchestral exposition at the end of the filmic

synchronisation with the editing cut and the vision of the main character's walk; the blue marker highlights the carrier phrase.

17 Motifs, fragments, and progressions are all short forms with a reduced succession of notes that allow the theme to be introduced or interspersed. Miceli writes: "Motifs are understood as a reduced succession of sounds with an accomplished melodic character buy unlike the theme, cannot be subdivided. The lower the number of its composite sounds—two may suffice—, the greater the chances that in repetition it will work as an ostinato" (Miceli 2009, 613). Adopting these short forms leads to so-called semi-themes and thematic bridges: "A semi-theme [...] is a melodic segment capable of manifesting itself either autonomously, generally relying on the technique of variations or as an integral part of a theme and without excluding cases in which a semi-theme is juxtaposed to a theme from which it is not directly derived, even if it has elements in common" (Miceli 2009, 619).

18 Personal transcription. The blue marker shows the melodic fragments that make up the theme.

tale.[19] This introduction is followed by brass in *sf* and *crescendo* to coincide with the appearance of the *Legendary Pictures* logo. When the waves come into view, the music ceases and the soundscape fills with live noise.



Img 3: incipit from the opening cue in *Inception*.[20]

Finally, the best-known examples of Zimmer's recent filmography include the opening scene for *The Dark Knight* and the related exposition of the "theme" for the Joker (Heath Ledger), which is also characterised by cinematic minimalism, constant reiteration of the melodic material, and the almost impressionistic attention to musical timbre at the expense of melodic-narrative evolution.[21] In *The Dark Knight* and in recent works, Zimmer increasingly composes themes and scores aimed at the continuous auditory discovery of the same musical material. Similar language, of which Zimmer is certainly the major initiator and representative, is now a new standard of composing for the cinema and media: it facilitates emotional involvement thanks to a "relevant function of sense-motor induction with pleasurable effects [...] for the viewer" (Cano and Potì 2004, 52).

In *The Dark Knight*, as also in *Inception*, melodic-narrative and thematic writing fades even more. It becomes idiomatic of the late Zimmer, which is evident in *Interstellar*, *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017), *Dune: Part One* and finally *Dune: Part Two*.[22] The *glissato* of the cello, performed by Tillman and accompanied by

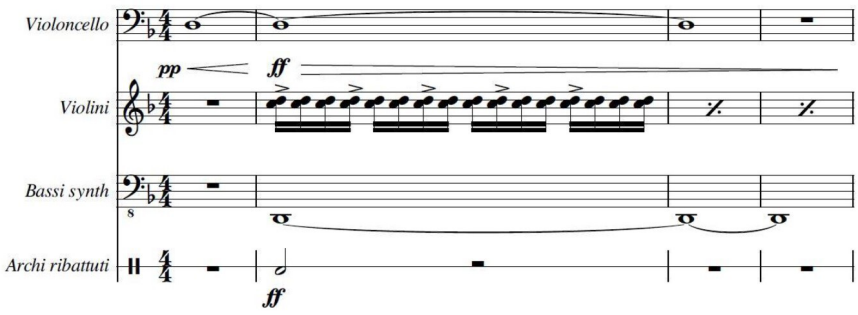
19 After constructing the theme for the latter part of the filmic tale, Zimmer used the track for the release of the commercial soundtrack, the now well-known and overused *Time*.

20 Personal transcription. The blue marker highlights the chordal succession of the carrier phrase.

21 In 2010 Demers explained: "Minimalist music has become synonymous with predominantly American music featuring rhythmic and melodic repetition, tonal harmonies, and textural transformations that unfold slowly through a process of accretion" (Demers 2010, 69). The *Minimalist* music used in audiovisuals loses the characteristics of the historical current of the 1960s completely. Musical minimalism developed in a way that was not exactly univocal. Its language was heir to different schools of thought: from that of John Cage, which combined cyclicity, the use of sounds, noises and silence to that of the East and India, and even Buddhism, hypnosis and Zen philosophy. It spread throughout the United States from the 1960s thanks to four authors of almost the same age: La Monte Young (1935), Terry Riley (1935), Steve Reich (1936) and Philip Glass (1937). For an in-depth look at musical minimalism, among many texts and monographs, Philip Glass's autobiography (2015) would be a good place to start.

22 Despite the fact that situations of this kind no longer involve actual themes, many composers including Zimmer continue to call these developments "themes" out

the minimal rhythmic *ostinato* by the violins and strings repeated for various audiovisual synchronies during the filmic narrative, provides a sonic identifier for Batman's antagonist, the Joker, without melodic-narrative texture but an unambiguous, clear, and extremely emotionally involving agglomeration of timbres instead.



Img 4: opening cue and Joker's theme for *The Dark Knight*.[23]

Many other examples could be taken from Zimmer's filmography. What the four examples above have in common, i.e. the presentation of the theme or one of its phrases or fragments in the opening scene, is certainly not innovative or exclusive to Zimmer's work: many films with music by other composers, from blockbusters to adventure or comedy genres, feature similar methods of application. Consider, among others, *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997, music by James Horner), *The Book Thief* (Brian Percival, 2013, music by John Williams), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, (Tim Burton, 2005, music by Danny Elfman), *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard, 2001, music by James Horner) or even *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994, music Alan Silvestri). What is clear in both Zimmer and these other authors, in addition to presenting the central core, the concept, the thematic-melodic idea around which the entire score will gravitate from the start, is the intention to emotionally involve the viewer and make the intervention recognisable. The concept is important for the comprehension of the filmic narrative, and if it is developed with coherence and sufficient clarity, "then [...] it will give it strength and unity, [...] a unified approach that helps maintain the film's dramatic integrity" (Karlin and Wright 2004, 107).

The concept enables the development of a variable number of themes: this means that throughout the film, in addition to the main theme, several thematic developments, fragments or phrases, addressed to different characters or certain sequences will be presented. This allows Zimmer to diversify his scores by number of themes, from monothematic to plurithematic.

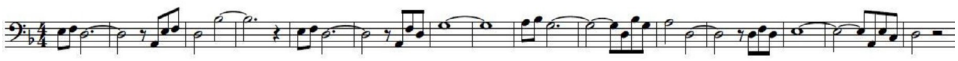
Even if a score can contain a variable number of themes, over the years cinema has offered standardisation by developing works with a limited number of themes. After presenting the main theme, in some projects Zimmer also

of convention and due to their use in the narrative.

23 Personal transcription. Overlapping electric guitar parts must be added to the cello.

develops the score around the same main theme, and whenever variations are lacking, the entire work becomes repetitive.[24] To remedy situations like these, at the start of his career Zimmer tended to expand the theme presentation through the entire film by adopting the principle of a "sub-dynamic arch" within the narrative.[25] In many other examples, he relies on instrumental or agogic tempo variations, brief fragments, harmonic progressions, motifs and rhythmic figures for bridging. In agreement with the director, he may also choose to intersperse the original score with pre-existing songs of different genres. Fairly standardised Zimmer thematic use can be heard in *Rush* (Ron Howard, 2013), a monothematic score to which songs are added to contextualise the historical period of the 1970s in which the film inspired by true events and the rivalry between Formula One drivers Niki Lauda (Daniel Brühl) and James Hunt (Chris Hemsworth) takes place.

The concept of the original score composed by Zimmer lies in the main theme. The main theme from the respective track in the commercial soundtrack *Lost But Won* begins with a solo cello part that exposes the main phrase: the instrument evokes drama, melancholy, and pride, all emotions that give insight into the events narrated. As usually, Zimmers composes in D minor natural and insists on the tonic, submediant, and subdominant degrees that are so frequent in his melodic writing.



Img 5: cello solo phrase in the main theme for *Rush*.[26]

This intervention is inserted in the film's first sequence: a flash forward accompanied by the voice over by Lauda's character[27] brings us to the moments

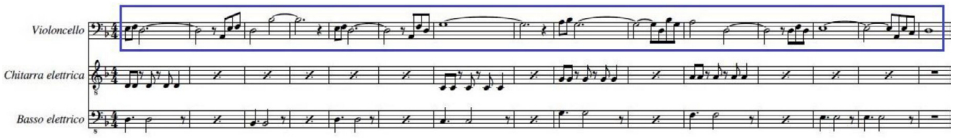
24 This is also the case in *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001), where the same theme is repeated sixteen times, as well as in *Crimson Tide* (Tony Scott, 1995) and *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013).

25 During his first period, the decade from 1985-1995, Zimmer developed a clearly defined method of matching music to moving images. Most of the films were accompanied by musical development that ran parallel to the visual images with a climax and relatively long closing cues. In this method, the score was not written based on single sequences but on the entire narrative instead. In 1994, Zimmer explained that his scores were based on a development in which editing plays little part in making a coherent musical flow: "Everything is doing little moments as opposed to building this big subdynamic arch" (Zimmer in Shivers 1994, 13). He drew his inspiration freely from the film without considering dialogues, editing cuts or other aspects linked to the film's final production: "I get to write about all the thing that interests me about the film. I don't have to be worried about the dialogs or of any of those things because they also already exist" (Zimmer in Elegyscores 2014). Thanks to this method, the musical material was presented in a slow *crescendo* of considerable duration.

26 Personal transcription.

27 Lauda character voice [off-screen]: "Every year 25 drivers take part in the Formula One World Championship. Every year two of us lose our lives. Who would ever choose a job like this? Not normal people, that's for sure. Rebels, madmen, dreamers, people who would do anything to leave a mark and are ready to die doing it... my name is Niki Lauda, and in the racing world I'm famous for two things: the first is my rivalry with him [addressed to Hunt]. I don't know why it became such a big story. [...] The other

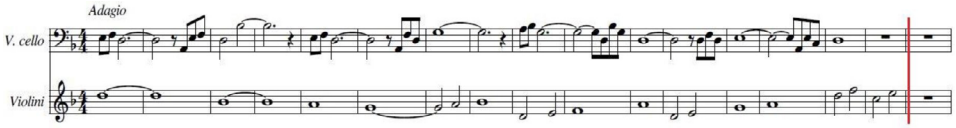
before the German Grand Prix race in which the Austrian driver risked his life in a serious accident. After an introduction by violins in chordal passages of semibreves, the cello solo takes over, accompanied by the *ostinato* of the electric guitar and bass. The music flows without evident synchrony during some abstract images and others, regarding the preparation of cars for the race.



Img 6: first presentation of the theme.[28]

This is followed by a brief but significant theme's variation by the brass section and electric guitar, an ensemble that will be given more space in the film's second half.

As usual in dramatic action films, Zimmer uses the orchestral sections to give instrumental emphasis and variation to the main theme phrase and celebrate certain events within the narrative. The theme is presented by the string section during the sequence in which Lauda, despite medical advice to the contrary, returns to the track in the Italian Grand Prix after his accident in the race in Germany. Zimmer re-proposes the same melodic cello theme in an *Adagio* agogic tempo variation with harmonic accompaniment by violins. This variation describes the fragility and the protagonist's determination in melancholic and at the same time introspective tones until the violins return in minimum values at intervals of descending thirds (D – F, C – E) interspersed with synths kept in high frequency that give the cue in synchrony with Lauda's closing of the visor in the pit lane after giving a last look at his wife. The synchronisation and subsequent interruption of the music reinforce the main character's concentration and bring us back to the start of the Grand Prix race.



Img 7: variation of the carrier theme.[29]

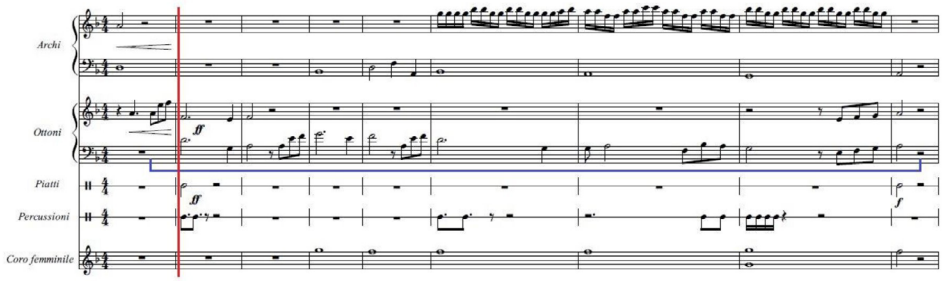
The race is accompanied by background noise, TV commentary, and electric guitar riffs up to the moment Hunt went off the track and gave Lauda a notable advantage. The close-up of Hunt and the montage cut is followed by an aerial view of Lauda's car in synchrony with the exposition of the same theme phrase, this time varied instrumentally through the entire string section and accompanied

thing I'm remembered for is what happened on August 1st, 1976, while I was chasing him … like an idiot."

28 Personal transcription. The blue market highlights the carrier phrase.

29 Personal transcription. The red vertical marker indicates the explicit synchronisation with the protagonist's closing of his visor.

by percussions. This variation foreshadows the subsequent orchestral exposition that celebrates and emphasises the images at an important moment in the narrative: after the accident, the protagonist returns to drive and makes a totally unexpected fourth place finish. After crossing the finish line, Lauda takes another lap before offering himself up to his fans. Similarly to as in *Inception*, this moment is celebrated by the exposition of the brass, the strings *ostinato* and the harmonic accompaniment by the women's choir.



Img 8: exposition by the brass section of the main theme in *Rush*.[30]

This is how Zimmer reaches the climax of his thematic exposition, repeated equally during Hunt's victory of the championship and Lauda's withdrawal from the last Grand Prix race of the season. In the last sequence of the film, however, simultaneously with the main character's off-screen monologue, yet another exposition of the theme enhances the score before the end credits begin rolling with the cello solo followed by the orchestra.

The main theme is exposes on fifteen occasions during the film, nine just in the second half, and is not addressed only to one of the two main characters, but to the entire filmic plot. In agogic tempo and instrumental variations, the same theme serves different functions: whereas the cello solo accompanies the images and adds drama, the orchestral exposition provides celebration and emphasis. Above and beyond the variations, it is worth noting that in *Rush* the theme is always presented entirely, with its alternating motifs or fragments with clear purpose within the filmic narrative. Miceli explains: "Solemnity and the search for epic depth generally lie at the heart of extended themes and motivic-thematic concatenations" (Miceli 2009, 616).

Whether Zimmer's scores are monothematic, bithematic or plurithematic, expounded by melodic-narrative principle or expressly based on minimalism, timbral sensations and the creation of a unique and unambiguous sonic universe, their development along the filmic narrative almost always undergoes continuous evolution, similar to that present in *Rush*: in most cases the main theme, the core of the concept, is inserted in the first film sequence and is then varied throughout the narrative, emphasising the salient moments of the story through the leitmotiv function. By this principle, Zimmer creates moments that

30 Personal transcription. The vertical red marker indicates the explicit synchronisation with Lauda's car as it crosses the finish line. The blue marker highlights the second part of the theme's phrase.

remain clearly defined in the viewer's memory, assuming iconic dimension in the filmic narrative.

Regardless of the number and nature of his themes, the core in Zimmer's work lies in the concept that later branches out to secondary or other primary themes at his discretion or the desire of the director. Thematic writing becomes the most distinctive and renowned part of his work. As other colleagues, this is why he nourishes an honest intellectual attachment to his various thematic creations. His numerous personal statements make it clear with exuberance, sarcasm and sincerity the extent to which the themes of his scores are fundamental to him in his creative and compositional practice. In regard to his creative process and thematic development, Zimmer has openly stated:

> *I digest it, sleep it, dream it. Try to see what it smells like, what the scent of it is. Searching for themes is like hunting animals. You hunt, you hone it down, I have to get all of my rationalizing out of the way first. It's got nothing to do with thinking (Seger and Whetmore 2004, 207–08).*

Zimmer's extensive use of thematic writing, whether melodic-narrative, minimalistic, or more closely related to sound design, emphasises the extent to which although he is an aesthetically innovative composer, he has also aligned himself with the thematic language of tradition. As Wright properly claims:

> *Zimmer creates what he calls minimalist music taken to a romantic level [...] building on Wagnerian codes of dramaturgic unity and classical Hollywood continuity, as well as sampled colors that clarify narrative details (Wright 2015, 325).*

Allusions could therefore be made to a new ramification of thematic composing linked to an aesthetic vision based on timbre and the search for a sonic universe that is both original and characteristic from project to project. This is especially true of his later production and compositional period. These new achievements distance him considerably from the concepts of "theme" and "thematic development" of classical order, placing his work among that of the innovators in the genre with results of notable interest in understanding the evolution of film music. What is remarkable in Zimmer is his ability to develop a language as appropriate as possible for moving images and to understand from time to time different narratives, presented by different directors and played by different actors. Even with some repetition at stylistic level, Zimmer has been, and continues to be, the best example of how maintaining success—in any field—depends on being able to adapt, evolve and improvise when necessary, because, as Charles Robert Darwin wrote, "in the long history of humankind [...] those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed" (Darwin in Campanini and Hutchins 2014, 4).

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