# Alex Ludwig, *Hearing Death at the Movies. Film Music and the Long History of the Dies Irae*

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025

Dan White

1   A car winds its way through a mountainous landscape, dwarfed by the scale of its surroundings. The camera drifts over a lake under a clear blue sky, tilting to follow the car, and a melody emerges that sounds at once ancient, modern, and ominously out of place. The slow regularity and minor modality of these single throbbing synth notes pair with subtle ambiences and metallic sounds to undermine what could be the opening to a summer road trip movie, instead conjuring a deeply ominous sense of foreboding with remarkable efficiency. Here, in the opening sequence of *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), Wendy Carlos's reworking of the *Dies irae* (a Gregorian chant from at least the 13th century if not earlier) does not announce itself as quotation so much as insinuation: stretched, transposed, electronically revoiced, and stripped of any liturgical context, it nevertheless carries with it a weight of historical and cultural association that shapes the scene before any other context is given to the car, its passengers and their journey. Death is not shown, named, or even foreshadowed explicitly, yet it is already present.

2   Moments like this have become so deeply embedded in the sonic language of cinema that at times they may go mostly unnoticed. The same melodic incipit appears elsewhere in strikingly different guises: half-hidden in the tolling of bells in *No Time to Die* (Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2021), woven subtly into compiled scoring in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), or refracted through a pre-existing carol in *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990), where the
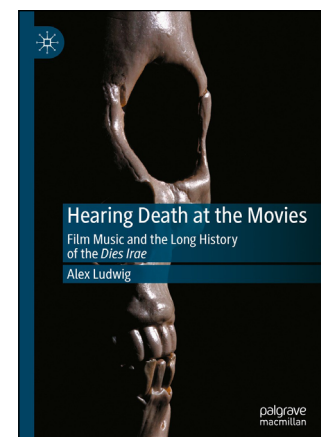
motif shifts from striking fear into the hearts of children at the sight of their mysterious elderly neighbour to become an energising signifier of action as the narrative unfolds. In each case, the *Dies irae* operates not simply as a musical topic or historical reference, but as a mechanism of memory, recognition, and implication.

3   It is this peculiar capacity of the *Dies irae* to operate simultaneously as quotation, allusion, and ghostly trace that lies at the heart of *Hearing Death at the Movies*. Alex Ludwig's book takes seriously the idea that film music communicates not only through what is explicitly stated, but through what is half-heard, culturally remembered, or retrospectively recognised. Rather than treating the *Dies irae* as a fixed melodic object, Ludwig approaches it as a historically mobile and semantically flexible figure. Placing it at the centre of his project, he traces the *Dies irae* through Berlioz and Rachmaninoff into silent film cue sheets and through more than a century of Western (and to some extent non-Western) film and television history with a deftness and authority that reflects the significant time and effort dedicated to this project. Methodologically he demonstrates the power of public-facing scholarship and of crowd-sourcing examples, which is evidenced in the impressively broad corpus of instances presented and analysed throughout. And yet, the work never claims to be exhaustive, instead proffering a number of highly useful and adaptable frameworks for the analysis and categorisation of the *Dies irae* in a range of media.

4   The book is structured in two parts that helpfully cover history and theory in turn, with the latter section building on the more historical and contextual examples of the former. Chapter 1 introduces the *Dies irae* as a cinematic phenomenon with a long and evolving afterlife, situating the study within a tradition of musical signification while explicitly rejecting any claim to exhaustiveness. Ludwig frames his approach as open-ended and generative, informed by extensive crowdsourcing (thanks in no small part to his scholarly network and YouTube channel), and emphasises the chant's persistence across media. The chapter's discussion of Wendy Carlos's work for *The Shining* is particularly effective, demonstrating how the *Dies irae* is transformed, dispersed, and structurally embedded across both finished and unused cues (the archival work here being notably insightful), and how the music of this film has exerted significant influence on a range of subsequent media such as *Westworld* (HBO, 2016–2022) and *Ready Player One* (Steven Spielberg, 2018) through what is described as *The Shining*'s "long tail." Chapter 2 develops this focus through detailed analysis of Carlos's compositional methods, making a persuasive case for her use of the *Dies irae* as a formal and tonal organising principle rather than a surface-level quotation, and positioning Carlos as a pivotal figure in its modern cinematic afterlife. Chapter 3 then broadens the

historical frame, tracing the chant's use through silent cinema and early sound film and challenging assumptions about its relative modernity. Through case studies including Gottfried Huppertz's *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), Gerald Fried's *The Return of Dracula* (Paul Landres, 1958), and the more ambivalent applications in Dimitri Tiomkin's scored documentaries, Ludwig demonstrates the *Dies irae*'s flexibility as a marker of death, destruction and moral darkness, while raising important questions about intentionality, context, and the gradual semantic evolution of the chant from religious sequence to cinematic trope. The chapter's inclusion of composers' own reflections provides valuable first-hand insight and brings the book's historically oriented first part to a close with a strong sense of anticipation for Part II.

5   The theoretical heart of the book lies in Chapter 4, which introduces Ludwig's typology of *Dies irae* usages, distinguishing between "types" of appearance with the imaginatively but effectively named "prelude to evil," "ominous echo," and "tension engine" types, further subdividing this last type into two categories of "ostinato" and "*fortspinnung*." This framework is one of the book's most significant contributions, offering a flexible and immediately intelligible set of tools that encourages readers to recognise and categorise examples beyond those discussed. The types are generally clearly explained and exemplified through the chapter's rich array of case studies—from *Day of Wrath* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1943) and *The Seventh Seal* (Ingmar Bergman, 1957) to *Mars Attacks!* (Tim Burton, 1996), *Crimson Peak* (Guillermo del Toro, 2015), and *Last Night in Soho* (Edgar Wright, 2021). Type 1 (the "prelude to evil") explicitly quotes at least the first eight notes of the *Dies irae* in their entirety; Type 2 (the "ominous echo") uses just the first four notes, and Type 3 (the "tension engine") applies repetition and/or alteration to these four notes to create more of an ostinato or continuous texture. The division of Type 3 categorises examples that are restricted to the four-note *Dies irae* incipit as "ostinati" and those that "spin forth" or alter, adapt or extend the incipit as "*fortspinnung*." Pleasingly, the textbook example of this "*fortspinnung*" type given, a cue from John Williams's *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) score, came to my mind on description of the type and before the example was even mentioned; testament to the clarity of Ludwig's theorisation. Before the types are fully established and exemplified, though, the chapter includes a striking chronological overview that maps shifts in type usage over time, and indicates a growing popularity in Type 1 that peaks in the 1970s before diminishing, two peaks in Type 2 usage in the 1990s and 2020s and a Type 3 peak in the early 2000s. Although the author may have been limited in terms of space, there is little exploration or accounting for these quite starkly demarcated trends. Although potentially a missed opportunity, it could be that due to the non-exhaustive

nature of the corpus the author did not want to read too much into the trends, but nonetheless there are unanswered questions here that future scholars may well wish to grapple with.

6   Chapter 5 then applies Ludwig's typology to a range of extended case studies, including films scored by Ennio Morricone, the *Friday the 13th* franchise, and *Star Wars*, demonstrating the adaptability of the framework and continuing to clarify the potential applications and modifications of the terms. Here, as elsewhere, the footnotes that feature throughout the book provide significant amounts of useful information and extra detail gleaned from archival work or ethnographic engagement with composers and other stakeholders. The *Friday the 13th* scores prove particularly effective at elucidating the subtle differences between the Type 1 and 2 usages, these being helpfully notated and tabulated. The identification of the *Dies irae* incipit as fused to the Force Theme in *Star Wars: Episode I – A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977) is similarly convincing, though its similarity to an example given at the end of Chapter 4 (which is explicitly argued as not an intentional *Dies irae*) leaves space for ambiguity. This example is the fanfare composed by Jonathan Elias for Columbia Pictures in 1993, and both harmonise the *Dies irae* over the flattened submediant ($\flat$VI) giving it a distinctly Lydian inflection. The narrative connotations of the burning homestead in *Star Wars* may be evidence enough for the categorisation of this musical moment as a Type 1 "prelude to evil," and the likely accidental use of the *Dies irae* in a studio fanfare would seem to preclude it from Ludwig's corpus. Nevertheless, it highlights the importance of narrative connotation to Ludwig's typology, and opens the door for further research on other "accidental" *Dies iraes* (such as the *Alien* example which is nonetheless included), as well as the potential to categorise instances by harmonisation, however rare they may be—that is, instances where the inflection is shifted from minor to Lydian as here, or even Mixolydian (as a $\flat\hat{7}$-$\hat{6}$-$\flat\hat{7}$-$\hat{5}$).[1] One of the Type 2 examples fleetingly cited in the Conclusion is "Into The Unknown" from Disney's *Frozen II* (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2019), but on close listening this song cleverly resets the *Dies irae* incipit in the Dorian mode from the outset (with a sharpened sixth in the piano accompaniment) before playfully shifting through Aeolian, Mixolydian, Ionian and Lydian settings, and this reharmonisation is in my view crucial to the softening of the motif's dark and deathly connotations for a children's film (its repetition as a diegetic plot device notwithstanding).

1. The author has discussed some of these details in a podcast episode with Crysanthe Tan, see **Star Wars Music Minute 2025**.

7   There may not have been room in the Conclusion for further discussion of instances such as this, but then with such a broad corpus Ludwig was spoilt for choice when it came to highlighting examples. Although the author consciously limits his corpus to film and television media alone, I

would echo his suggestion that the realm of videogame music is indeed teeming with further examples, citing not only Karen Cook's 2017 article as he does but also Walczak (2025) and Mantilla-Wright (2025) as more recent indications of the ludic prevalence of the motif. Lastly, the ghosts of intentionality and over-identification that the author says haunted him throughout the project point towards some of the most interesting questions surrounding apparently accidental use of the motif, as epitomised by Bear McCreary's claim that "truthfully it was 100% accidental" (230). When is a *Dies irae* not a *Dies irae*? Where might we place the borderline cases, where either the melodies or motifs find themselves on the fringes of Ludwig's typology, or the narrative setting is less clear cut or more ambivalent?

8   The book closes with a hope that it may act as a theatrical "ghost light" for researchers, analysts, film buffs and other interested parties, to guide the way, equip them with tools—and hopefully prevent them from falling in the orchestra pit. Although the book leaves some room for questions at times, this is very much a strength as opposed to a weakness. It does not present itself as a closed case, a finished project or a complete corpus, but readily offers itself to analysts as a useful and transferable methodology, and to educators as a remarkably accessible textbook. Not only does it leave readers humming those fateful four notes, but it also leaves them with a curiosity regarding those examples that resist easy categorisation, and a readiness to go on the hunt for more. Suffice it to say, in *Hearing Death at the Movies* the ghost light shines brightly and is sure to light the way for future scholars exploring the darkest and deathliest corners of musical media.

References

Cook, Karen M. "Beyond the Grave. The 'Dies Irae' in Video Game Music." *Sounding Out!*, December 18, 2017. Accessed January 28, 2025, https://soundstudiesblog.com/2017/12/18/beyond-the-grave-the-dies-irae-in-video-game-music.

Mantilla-Wright, Silvia. "'There Is No Escape.' Hades and the Apotheosis of Death in Music." *Journal of Sound and Music in Games* 6, no. 1 (2025): 106–138. DOI: 10.1525/jsmg.2025.6.1.106.

Star Wars Music Minute. "Hearing Death at the Movies. Dies Irae Deep Dive (with Alex Ludwig)." *YouTube*. June 9, 2025. 01:51:37. https://youtu.be/RSXLWWNhQ6A.

Walczak, Radosław Piotr. "*Dies Irae* in a Fantasy World. Gregorian Sequence and Requiem Motifs in *Heroes of Might and Magic* Series," in *Abstract Proceedings of DiGRA 2025. Games at the Crossroads*. 2025. DOI: 10.26503/dl.v2025i3.2562.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dan White is Senior Lecturer of Musicology at the University of Huddersfield, where he teaches on film music, popular music studies, fandom and identity, research skills and performance. His 2024 monograph *The Music of* Harry Potter *and* The Lord of the Rings*: Sounds of Home in the Fantasy Franchise* focused on musical worldbuilding in film as well as in videogame, theme parks and other tour attractions, and fandom. He has published widely on different aspects this research, including in *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*, *Participations* and *InMedia*. Recently publications include a chapter on the music of Amazon's *Rings of Power* in the *Palgrave Handbook of Music and Sound in Peak TV,* and a forthcoming chapter on metamodernist impulses in the Christmas music of Sufjan Stevens.