Main Themes Of Schindler's List: Critical Analysis

Music has been used for centuries as one of the primary tools manipulated to educe emotion in listeners. Applied to plays, television shows, and many other live or digital artforms, emotion-evoking music is an ever-prevalent part of the creative aspect of society, especially in regards to films. One of the most emotionally entrancing melodies in film history is the main theme from Schindler's List. This score is an excellent interpretation of such a controversial and explicit film, with the manipulation of the musical elements painting the melody and rhythm in such a way that the bloody tragedy of human nature is captured perfectly through the combination of cinematography and the compositional elements of the score. It is through the harmonious marriage of orchestral and compositional elements that the theme from Schindler's List evokes such a strong emotional response in the audience.

The true effectiveness of the theme from Schindler's List lies in the structure of the score, known more correctly as the compositional features. The application of four different directional features personifies the score in a way that gives it its own identity. They can be separated as the following: writing the score so that the cinematography and music move simultaneously, doing the opposite so that the music and action on screen are going in different emotional directions, manipulating the score in an antidromic way, and then stretching it with a free-drift structure. In the first four bars of the score, the melody revolves around one repeated idea that occurs five times, that being the two repeated downward intervals at the beginning of every other bar, starting with bar one. This repetition acts as an anchor to the melody. It doesn’t come across as wandering or confusing, but at the same time it doesn’t feel repetitive

When examined very closely, it can be observed that each of the odd measures is quite similar in nature; it’s the even bars in between that fluctuate and change, giving rise to the tension and feeling of growth and decay. The B? and C on beats three of the first and third bars serve as appoggiaturas of sorts, and the inclusion of these grace notes have been proven to have some of the most emotional effects on listeners. The C specifically has a particularly strong effect because it’s the highest note of the whole melody meaning that its resolution is one half-step further than the one coming off of the B?. This means that the drop from the B? to A in the first measure is a semitone, however the drop from C to B? in the third bar is twice as large being a tone. These characteristics sound small on paper, but when coupled with the orchestral features of the theme from Schindler's List, they set up the strong, heartfelt emotions evoked in the audience.

While the compositional features set the foundations for a potentially truly tear-jerking piece, the orchestral elements are what ties it all together. First, before the main melody even begins, the introductory line is played by an oboe. This is often a go-to choice in film scoring for emotionally weighted moments. The oboe has strong overtones which is the same frequency range that the human voice produces consonants in. This gives the oboe a distinctive quality, personifying any melodies it plays; the audience is able to truly connect with an oboe, thus making it a strategic opener for the main theme to a score intended to evoke raw emotions in listeners. During the melody itself, the choice of the violin is key. String instruments are another favourite for composers looking to achieve an emotional reaction in listeners as they have a very large range. In this case, choosing a violin to play the melody means that it can be stretched and

grown over the whole piece with ease, from its starting register to the very last note; it should be noted that the last note of the melody is a high A which is just over three octaves higher than the lowest note, a low G, of the initial melody. The low G that occurs in the second and ninth bars is the lowest note on the violin, and the violinist has no choice but to play it as an open G, meaning that they don't put any fingers down on the fretboard. Open strings on stringed instruments have a distinctive raw sound, firstly because a violinist is unable to use any vibrato on the pitch as his finger is not on the string. Open notes that are featured prominently in a score are generally avoided in classical-type string playing, however the few instances of playing the open G provide a brief feeling of humanity. When examined closely, it become apparent that the violinist plays the D and the A- the first two notes of the main melody- open as well, for the same reason of providing that earthy, authentic tone. For these reasons, the violin is the perfect instrument to use in this setting and provides just the right amount of emotion to the score.

The key that the theme of Schindler's List is composed in sets the violin up perfectly for its range and open strings, however a score that featured a full violin section as opposed to a soloist could easily be written in another key as the open notes could be substituted for something else. The composer of this score evidently considered the cinematic nature of orchestration when writing this theme, as it soon becomes apparent as to exactly why he chose to feature a soloist playing the main melody as opposed to a whole strings section. A soloist in a film score is always a deliberate decision, especially in regards to the main theme. While music is often written to allow for personal interpretation, a highlighted solo instrument in film scoring tends to represent a singularly isolated character. Likewise, two different soloists might represent a pair of characters, and so on. The full violin section playing this melody throughout the piece would simply not have the same gravitas in this setting, as it would cause a certain degree of emotional and cognitive removal from the music, detaching the personal feel slightly more than hearing one musician perform individually. In some instances, a personal connection with the audience is not the goal when a main theme is being written, but to fit with the idea of the film, the main theme of Schindler's List was certainly written with the intention of connecting to the audience on an interpersonal level. A full section playing would not allow for the lamenting, weeping violin tone to fully come through; rather, a lush, fully resonant section sound would replace it. This is not something that all composers aim to avoid, but in this case in particular, it wasn’t what was sought after. Another clearly deliberate decision, the choice to have a violin soloist play the main melody to the theme of Schindler's List was a very successful move.

It is clear that without the inclusion of such a compositionally well-written score, the theme of Schindler's List would not have had such an emotional effect on the audience. However, without the orchestral decisions that were made, the emotions evoked by this score would have been completely different and would not have tied in so well with the cinematography. The skilful manipulation of a variety of musical elements have turned a simple musical score into an essential part of the film, one that captures both the fragility and horrors of human nature in a way that is rarely achieved so well. The emotional response evoked through this theme makes it one of the most well-known film scores to date, a hauntingly beautiful piece that has encapsulated the very essence of the film in a way that could not be done with cinematography alone.