

## Chapter 4

# Music Behind the Masks: Fans' Reaction to the Sounds of Batman Villains

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Batman villains are a staple fascination within the franchise's fandom, and music is a powerful tool utilized in allowing fans to experience these characters in an emotionally connected way when viewing live adaptations of them. This chapter examines the appeal of Batman villain narratives, explores how composers scored music for ten selected Gotham City antagonists spanning seven live-action Batman films, and discusses fans' reaction to those scores during a survey conducted by the author involving 55 voluntary participants. These explorations contribute to furthering dialogues on the cultural relevance of comic books in contemporary society, fans' fascination with villain narratives, film scores' function as a representation of on-screen personalities, and music's role in establishing relationships between fan audiences and on-screen characters.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Film adaptations of comic books are a fundamental pillar in modern-day cinema architecture, largely due to their massive fandom base. One of the most culturally significant comic book superheroes to headline films is DC Comics' Batman (also known as the aliases Dark Knight and Caped Crusader) (DC Universe, n.d.). As of November 2019, Batman ranks in the top ten highest-grossing film franchises worldwide of all time with a total box office gross of over \$5 billion (Mendelson, 2019; Statista, 2019). With appearances in over 100 combined films, television shows, and video games, it is evident how massive the fandom appeal is of Batman's story (i.e., billionaire Bruce Wayne lives a secret vigilante life in fictional Gotham City fighting for justice after his parents' tragic murder during his childhood) (DC Universe, n.d.).

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One crucial aspect of Batman fandom is the popular film portrayals of Gotham City's notorious villains. As of November 2019, nearly 10,000 voters have participated in an on-going online poll ranking "The Best Batman Villains Ever" (Ranker, n.d.). Out of 85 Gotham City foes listed in the poll, the ranking top ten are all primary antagonists in live-action Batman films (Ranker, n.d.). These voting results assist in validating that live-action film portrayals of villain characters raise their cultural relevance and fandom presence.

Deepening fan audiences' reactions to Batman film villains are the underlying musical scores associated with each villain character. Music is an integral part of fans connecting to on-screen personalities through making meaning of characters and their stories (Green, 2010). Live-action Batman films utilize a consistent narrative pattern of depicting villains' origin stories as central plotlines, making the antagonists' situations and influences well-known to movie audiences; this familiarity allows fans to develop fascination and empathy with their "beloved" villains through parasocial (one-sided) relationships (Keen et al., 2012). Since Gotham City villains are most culturally significant when being portrayed in live-action films, and music is a crucial part of an on-screen character's impact on movie audiences, this chapter aims to explore musical scores composed for selected villains in live-action Batman films and discusses reactions from fan audiences to those scores.

This explorative survey will include musical representations of ten selected antagonists depicted in the seven live-action films that make up the *Batman Motion Picture Anthology* and the *Dark Knight Trilogy*, with the purpose of furthering dialogues on music's impact on fan audiences. The selection process chose villains who are considered prominent antagonists throughout their corresponding films, and whose music explores more creative or unique tactics (this is further elaborated under the Materials and Methods section).

This chapter acknowledges that comic book characters are notorious for having various interpretations and reimaginings through numerous reboots and remakes (Koski, 2015). These multiple interpretations often lead to different histories of characters' expositions, including their identities, origin stories, and abilities. For the purposes of this chapter, all discussions of characters will be solely based on storylines in the surveyed films, since these narratives were the focused inspiration for the composers.

## **The Appeal of Batman Narratives**

Part of film composers' duties while scoring Batman films is the creation of musical representation that correlate with each story's prevalent villain(s). Batman's foes are infamous to fans for their unique personas, which give composers creative licenses in designing musical themes tailored to each menacing adversary. Thus, a quality exploration of film music composed for Gotham City antagonists is deepened through initial deconstruction of villain narratives and the subsequent fascination felt by fan audiences.

In modern pop culture fandom, villains are arguably just as popular as (if not more so than) heroes. For example, the prominent Wiki website *Fandom*—which receives over 200 million monthly unique visitors—gets four to five more daily page views on its 'Villain' community articles than its 'Heroes' community articles ("Fandom 100 Villains," n.d.).

Villains/antagonists and heroes/protagonists are essential to each other's narratives. For a central character to discover and solidify purpose, morals, goals, and strength, an opposing force must be met to warrant the self-discovering journey—this is true for both parties. In *Batman* (1989), Batman says to the Joker, "I made you, you made me first" (Peters et al., 1989). In *The Dark Knight* (2008), Joker tells Batman "you complete me" and "I think you and I are destined to do this forever" (Nolan et al., 2008a).

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