

Unit Five: Underlining Subtext

Subtext is a term used to signify the actual action of a scene. It may remain completely unspoken throughout the entire exchange of dialogue, but still be driving the things that are said.

One example might be where two characters meet to discuss parting from each other. During the scene one convinces the other that he or she should stay. When the character finally consents, the body language, tone of voice, and delivery of line might clearly indicate that staying will crush that character's hopes and dreams so that the audience knows clearly what the decision costs. However, the conflict between emotion and dialogue remains unspoken.

Another example might be a comedy scene where two characters are putting on a third. While they spin a tale for the third character, their actions, body language, and tone of voice might reveal the actual facts which differ completely from what they are saying.

In these two examples, the subtext is the unspoken truth of the interaction, not the verbal exchange. When developing underscoring a composer needs to understand the subtext of a scene so he or she might decide to emphasize it or counter it.

In the first example, the character who wants to leave to pursue his or her dreams may have sung a want song earlier in the show. During the scene mentioned above, that melody — potentially reharmonized — may be played softly by the reeds (a more hollow sound) to both evoke the earlier moment when so much seemed possible and in the present moment to remind the audience the what the character must give up in order to stay.

In the second example, facts of the situation may have been stated in a comedic (or other kind of) song earlier in the play and that music — likely without reharmonization — could play as they spin the tale for the third. This use of underscoring would allow the audience to bear in mind both the actual facts while enjoying the entertainment of a “made-up” story.

In each circumstance, the underscoring would likely be stated with a simpler orchestration than when the music was first heard and potentially be at an altered tempo. In the first example, the tempo would likely be slower to match the dawning realization of a crushed dream and in the second example, the tempo would likely be faster as the tale becomes wilder and wilder.

In each case, it is important for the composer to be aware of the subtext of the scene. To simply support the spinning of a wild tale in our second example would be to miss the wonderful opportunity to heighten the comedy by setting the facts to counter the tale. In the first example, the dramatic moment is more heart wrenching with the use of subtextual underscoring to balance leaving and staying in the same moment.