

Beyond the Song: Analysing the Leitmotifs in Ilaiyaraaja's Background Scores

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Abstract—This paper examines the use and significance of leitmotif as a compositional technique in the background music of Ilaiyaraaja— one of the most prolific and celebrated composers of South Indian cinema—through four films: *Mouna Ragam* (1986) by Mani Ratnam, *Guna* (1991) by Santhana Bharathi, *Pithamagan* (2003) by Bala, and *Viduthalai Part 1* (2023) by Vetrimaaran. The study explores how recurring musical motifs are constructed, developed, and transformed across narrative contexts to develop characters, evoke emotions, and establish themes. Musicological approaches rooted in Wagnerian leitmotivic tradition are applied to the realm of Indian film music through close textual analysis, while attending to the cultural and aesthetic specificities of Ilaiyaraaja's practice—particularly how Western symphonic techniques interact with Carnatic classical music, Tamil folklore, and South Indian film traditions. Analysis across nearly four decades of his career demonstrates that leitmotif in Ilaiyaraaja's scores functions beyond emotional expression: as a structuring device that articulates the psychology of the interior self in *Mouna Ragam*, mythic obsession in *Guna*, the search for identity in *Pithamagan*, and political struggle in *Viduthalai Part 1*.

Index Terms—Leitmotif, Background Score, Ilaiyaraaja, Tamil Cinema, Musical Narrative

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between music and narration in film has been explored in academic literature ever since the advent of sound, yet academic discussion surrounding film music has been dominated by theories developed within the Western sphere. Within this context, the background score – the instrumental musical accompaniment which complements and

augments the narrative of a film – is a key object of study for its status as an independent narrative entity, with the ability to create its own meaning and elicit emotions while portraying aspects of personality and situation that would otherwise be difficult to express through dialogue or visual cues.

In the context of this larger theoretical and analytical landscape, it is against the background of this tradition that this current research examines the background scoring approach of Ilaiyaraaja, one of the most prominent composers in the history of Tamil and South Indian cinema. Although he has composed hundreds of films and created some of the most complex scores in the genre, it is surprising that there has been no musicological examination of Ilaiyaraaja's background scoring approach.

This study investigates the use of leitmotif as a compositional and narrative device in Ilaiyaraaja's background scores, and how recurring musical themes are introduced, transformed, developed, and managed strategically across the dramatic structure of selected Tamil films to create meaning that runs parallel to and sometimes precedes the visual and verbal narrative. The study draws on a corpus of four films - *Mouna Raagam* (1986), *Guna* (1991), *Pithamagan* (2003) and *Viduthalai Part 1* (2023) - selected to represent a range of decades in Ilaiyaraaja's compositional career, different directorial partnerships, and different dramatic and generic contexts, as well as to demonstrate a consistent and evolving interest in motivic composition in the underscore.

1.1 Background of Study

The relationship between music and narration in film

has been explored in academic literature since the advent of sound, yet academic discussion surrounding film music has been dominated by theories developed within the Western sphere. Within this context, the background score—the instrumental accompaniment that complements and augments the narrative of a film—is a key object of study for its status as an independent narrative entity with the ability to create its own meaning and elicit emotions. Among the various means of composition a film composer may utilise, the leitmotif—the repeated presentation of a musical theme associated with a specific character, emotion, relationship, or idea—is among the most architecturally intricate and powerful methods, capable of creating elaborate networks of musical meaning throughout the course of a film. Film music studies have long focused on Western traditions. Adorno, Eisler, Kalinak—their dominant theories lean heavily on Hollywood and European cinema. In India, film music scholarship has consistently privileged the song, with the background score treated as interstitial filler. That historical tendency means the underscore, especially in South Indian cinema, has received little scholarly attention. This study attempts to redress that imbalance by establishing that Ilaiyaraaja's background scores are an achievement of independent significance deserving their own analysis.

1.2 Research Questions

- (i) What recurring musical motifs can be identified and catalogued in Ilaiyaraaja's background scores across the selected films?
- (ii) What compositional techniques does Ilaiyaraaja employ in constructing and evolving his background scores?
- (iii) How does the leitmotif function as a narrative and emotional device within the selected films?

1.3 Objectives

- (i) To identify and catalogue recurring musical motifs in Ilaiyaraaja's background scores
- (ii) To analyse the compositional techniques displayed by Ilaiyaraaja
- (iii) To evaluate the function of leitmotif in the films chosen

1.4 Scope of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to examine the use of leitmotif as a compositional and narrative

device in the background scores of Ilaiyaraaja, analysing how recurring musical themes function to generate meaning, emotional continuity, and dramatic coherence across four selected Tamil films spanning his career: *Mouna Raagam* (1986), *Guna* (1991), *Pithamagan* (2003), and *Viduthalai Part 1* (2023). These films represent different directorial partnerships, dramatic contexts, and generic registers, yet consistently reflect a sophisticated interest in motivic composition.

1.5 Significance of the Study

In Indian cinema studies, it repositions the background score as the primary focus of scholarly attention, arguing that background music creates its own narrative and emotional logic rather than merely supplementing songs. Culturally, the study brings to light an aspect of Ilaiyaraaja's music often overlooked even by his most ardent admirers: the architectural structure of his background scores, which this analysis reveals to be among the most intricately crafted music in the Indian film industry.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Research Gap

Ilaiyaraaja produces a highly sophisticated corpus of background scores, yet none of them got thorough musicological treatment of any kind. The application of leitmotif technique by Ilaiyaraaja was not explored either. Any attempts to analyze his compositions tend to provide biographical data or celebrate the talent of Ilaiyaraaja; there are very few scholarly attempts at a deeper analysis of his composing techniques.

III. METHODOLOGY

The current study uses an interpretive qualitative method incorporating thematic analysis and musicological analysis as its key instruments. Each film is analysed through a consistent procedure: first observed and listened to in its entirety for overall narrative and emotional impression; second, the background music is isolated and scored with timestamps; third, recurring patterns are identified as potential leitmotifs; and fourth, thematic analysis investigates the correlation between motifs and dramatic themes.

3.1 Qualitative Narrative Analysis

What is more important, in these films, his music was not just background but the driving force for the dramatic plot and emotional atmosphere of the movie. Secondly, these films cover about four decades in the career of this composer, which makes it possible to trace if and how his work on using motifs changed and evolved over the years. Besides, there is a great difference between the styles of their directors – Mani Ratnam and his romantic and realistic Mouna Raagam, Kamal Hassan and his psychological and energetic Guna, Bala and his organic Pithamagan, and Vetrimaaran and his political Viduthalai Part 1.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The analytical model draws on four key theoretical resources: Richard Wagner's leitmotif theory, which

provides the compositional concept at the study's core; Michel Chion's audio-vision theory, which accounts for how music and image interact to produce meaning neither can create alone; Leonard Meyer's theory of emotion and meaning in music, which explains how musical expectation and deviation generate emotional responses; and François Truffaut's auteur theory, which frames Ilaiyaraaja's compositional choices as expressions of a consistent artistic sensibility.

3.3 Coded-Scene Analysis of Selected Films

The following table presents a comparative coded-scene analysis of all four films across twelve narrative segments. Each cell summarises how the leitmotif appears, its narrative function, and its moral valence score within that scene.

Scene	Mouna Ragam (1986)	Guna (1991)	Pithamagan (2003)	Viduthalai Pt. 1 (2023)
1	Full leitmotif in minor scale, piano, violin, mild flute. Establishes narrative. Score: 0	Low strings, uneasy flute; Guna's delusional world. Score: -1	Low drone, tribal percussion, distant flute. Chithan's primal isolation. Score: -2	Cello drone, tense percussion, folk flute; atmosphere of fear. Score: -3
2	Subtle violin phrase, lower dynamic. Latent emotional depth beneath cheerfulness. Score: +1	Soft solo flute/harp romanticised melody; Guna's idealised vision of Abhirami. Score: -2	Sparse reed melody; Chithan's first contact with social world. Score: -1	Percussive pulse, nadaswaram-like phrase; Kumaresan's innocent entry into system. Score: -1
3	Pattern of 3, sitar and tabla. Emotional peak and memory association. Score: -1	Full lyrical orchestral strings/flute; genuine tenderness within delusion. Score: -1	Warm strings mixed with flute; hidden innocence beneath rough exterior. Score: 0	Warm flute, softer strings; Kumaresan's empathy and moral hesitation. Score: +1
4	Slowed piano with mild bass. Emotional conflict, reveals past love. Score: -2	Broken melodic fragments, dissonant strings, irregular percussion; crisis. Score: -4	Broken rhythmic fragments, harsher percussion; Chithan struggling. Score: -3	Broken rhythmic phrases, rising strings; ethical collapse of police brutality. Score: -4
5	Fast instruments, full orchestration. Establishes Chandru's jovial nature. Score: +1	Echoed flute, reverb, suspended chords; delusional scene. Score: -3	Folk-rhythmic woodwinds; Chithan's emotional awakening via friendship. Score: +1	Folk-inflected melodic line; emotional legitimacy of oppressed community. Score:

				+1
6	Switch slow/fast	Tender melody vs	Tender flute	Tender melody
	piano. Romance	harsh	interrupted by dark	undercut by low
	between Chandru	percussion/brass;	bass; innocence vs	brass/drums; human
	and Divya	love and destruction	looming violence.	feeling vs state
	blossoming. Score:	coexist. Score: -5	Score: -3	violence. Score: -4
	+3			
7	String orchestration	Hesitant piano,	Rhythmic instability,	Hesitant woodwinds
	shifts to main theme.	unstable rhythm;	hesitant melody;	with pauses;
	Sadness and death.	psychological	Chithan between	Kumaresan doubting
	Score: -2	suspension. Score: -3	instinct and emotion.	official narratives.
			Score: -1	Score: 0
8	Slow acoustic guitar	Warm strings/flute	Full orchestral	Expansive orchestral
	to slow violin.	reprise; tragic	reprise, earthy	reprise, folk texture;
	Internal conflict,	authenticity of	percussion; Chithan's	human dignity amid
	amending things.	Guna's emotion.	emotional	oppression. Score:
	Score: 0	Score: -2	transformation.	+2
			Score: +2	
9	Tempo shift, mild	Jagged orchestral	Jagged brass,	Aggressive
	flute. Early	fragments, rising	aggressive drums,	percussion, brass
	emotional transition	brass; psychological	motif distorted;	surges, distorted
	softening. Score: +2	coherence breaks.	Chithan's vengeance.	fragments; moral
		Score: -5	Score: -5	boundaries vanish.
				Score: -5
10	Leitmotif in altered	Sudden silence	Silence with only	Sudden silence,
	orchestration.	replaces theme; only	ambient sound	ambient forest
	Emotional crisis,	ambient sound	before violent	sounds; unseen
	Manohar realises	remains. Score: -4	release; dread. Score:	danger dominates.
	love. Score: -2		-4	Score: -4
11	Leitmotif distorted,	Distant flute echo,	Slow flute echo over	Distant flute echo
	fragmented with	sparse string drone;	low drone; grief-	over low drone;
	dissonance. Shifting	final echo before	stricken residue of	unresolved guilt and
	emotional reality.	closure. Score: -4	awakening. Score: -3	fear. Score: -3
	Score: -4			
12	Leitmotif fully	Slow elegiac full-	Final elegiac	Slow elegiac reprise,
	transformed into	theme reprise, strings	strings/flute fades	strings and folk flute
	resolved	and choir-like	unresolved; Chithan	fades unresolved;
	major/minor hybrid.	harmony; elegy.	as tragic product.	unfinished tragedy.
	Emotional	Score: -3	Score: -4	Score: -4
	resolution. Score: +5			

Across all four films, Ilaiyaraaja uses leitmotif as a time-evolving narrative system, not a static identifier. Three patterns emerge: in Mouna Ragam, leitmotif undergoes progressive harmonic evolution that tracks

the protagonist's emotional arc to resolution; in Pithamagan and Viduthalai, leitmotif undergoes intensified transformation tied to loss, radicalism, and political awakening; and in Guna, leitmotif is

deliberately held in stasis—a structural choice reflecting the protagonist's psychological inability to develop.

Crucially, the Western leitmotif tradition expects development, but Ilaiyaraaja's approach treats development, disruption, and refusal as equally meaningful compositional choices. Across all four films, the leitmotif operates as an 'invisible timeline' marking emotional, psychological, and ideological changes, making the musical score capable of acting independently from—and sometimes in advance of—

the visual and verbal narrative.

3.4 Musicological Analysis

The following table provides a comparative musicological analysis of the leitmotif in all four films across five parameters: melodic structure, harmonic language, instrumentation, rhythm and metre, and textural layering. Each parameter is examined for the compositional choices Ilaiyaraaja makes and their dramatic and cultural implications.

Parameter	Mouna Ragam (1986)	Guna (1991)	Pithamagan (2003)	Viduthalai Pt. 1 (2023)
Melodic	5–6 note descending	Larger intervallic leaps;	Highly minimalistic;	Derived from
Structure	phrase; stepwise	ascending climax,	narrow pitch range;	Kaatumalli; renders
	movement;	descending non-	no melodic	variously by strings
	melancholy/resignation;	resolution; 'haunting'	embellishment;	(lyrical), horn/trumpet
	implies incompleteness	quality encoding	gradually expands	(dramatic); every
	from the outset.	obsessive fixation.	with friendship,	recurrence a variation,
		Uses Sarangatarangini	contracts again at	never a repeat.
		and Paavani ragas.	tragedy.	
Harmonic	Gentle consonant	Tonally unstable;	Open intervals	Opens in stable tonal
Language	progressions;	multiple simultaneous	(perfect 4ths/5ths);	framework;
	subdominant–dominant	harmonic structures;	minimal harmonic	reharmonised with
	tension without	dissonance during	movement; folk/ritual	suspended/dissonant
	resolution mirrors	crisis, brief consonance	modal character;	chords as conflict
	Divya's unresolved	in lucid moments;	briefly warmer at	escalates;
	grief; moves toward full	hybrid Western/South-	peak friendship,	reharmonisation itself
	resolution in Act 3.	Indian modal space.	otherwise static.	becomes storytelling
				tool.
Instrumentation	Piano as primary voice	Diverse combos:	Folk percussion	Instrument hand-offs
	(Western/middle-class	flute+harp (lyrical), full	(parai, ritual drums)	carry emotional
	cultural marker); sustain	orchestra (crisis);	as core; sparse	transitions:
	pedal for memory	fragmented/distorted	Western strings added	strings=intimacy,
	quality; strings added	textures for trauma;	as Chithan bonds;	flute=delicacy,
	progressively as Divya	flute+tabla+bells	timbral choices	brass/trumpet=assertion;
	opens emotionally.	maintain	politically	bass provides motif
		beauty–violence	meaningful—dignity	identity across all
		coexistence.	for folk traditions.	versions.
Rhythm &	Flexible 4/8; wave-like	Flexible 5/8 hemiola in	Based on Tamil ritual	Stable 4/8 for state
Metre	compound duple mirrors	stable moments; shifts	percussion cycles	authority scenes;
	unresolved longing;	to asymmetrical	(4+5+3+4);	free/unmetered in
	sitar/tabla triplets for	irregular rhythms	inherently	mountain/resistance
	resentment; metre	during psychosis; 4s	asymmetrical; not	sequences; rhythmic
	tightens as Divya heals.	when first encountering	chaotic but folk-	order vs irregularity

		Abhirami; metric	logical; speeds up in	enacts the political
		dissolution at climax.	violence while	binary visually.
			keeping cyclic	
			essence.	
Textural	Solo piano = maximum	Sparse textures in lucid	Sparse from the	Stripped flute/strings for
Layering	isolation; chamber	moments encode	outset; progressively	romance (even silence
	ensemble = emotional	psychological fragility;	fills as friendship	enters the texture); full
	richness; non-linear	full	grows; peaks at	orchestral weight for
	density mirrors human	orchestra+percussion	emotional centre;	war/confrontation; same
	emotion; total silence at	for crisis; reserves	brutally stripped back	melody, radically
	marriage ceremony is	densest textures for	to original barrenness	different orchestration.
	the score's boldest	maximum intensity for	after Sakthi's death.	
	statement.	dramatic impact.		

Several patterns emerge from the comparative musicological analysis. First, Ilaiyaraaja's leitmotifs are never melodically inert: each film's motif is designed from the outset with a structural 'flaw' or incompleteness (descending non-resolution in Mouna Ragam, non-resolving loop in Guna, narrow pentatonic ceiling in Pithamagan, song-based repetition in Viduthalai) that is precisely calibrated to the protagonist's psychological or ideological condition. Second, harmonic language serves as the primary vehicle of transformation in all four cases—the melody may remain recognisable while the chord environment radically shifts its emotional meaning, allowing Ilaiyaraaja to narrate inner states without altering the identifying surface of the motif. Third, instrumentation consistently carries cultural and political meaning rather than functioning purely as colour: the piano in Mouna Ragam signals an educated urban milieu, the folk percussion in

Pithamagan signals marginalised ritual culture, and the parai-inflected rhythms in Viduthalai carry the historical associations of Dalit resistance. Fourth, textural layering is used non-linearly in all four films, with density not tracking dramatic intensity in a simple upward curve but rather used strategically, sometimes stripped back at the most intense moments (Guna's cliff silence, Pithamagan's graveyard) for greater emotional impact than any orchestral peak could achieve.

3.5 Metric Analysis

The following table presents a comparative metric analysis of the four films across seven parameters, evaluating how Ilaiyaraaja deploys the leitmotif as an emotional and narrative tool in each film's specific dramatic context.

Parameter	Mouna Ragam	Guna	Pithamagan	Viduthalai
Leitmotif Frequency	High – consistent emotional continuity	High – returns in multiple emotional forms	Medium – selective at significant moments	Medium –selected moments of conflict/revelation
Emotional Intensity	Medium – restrained, personal	High – obsession, tenderness, fear, tragedy	High – loneliness, attachment, grief, rage	High – dread, sorrow, urgency, compassion
Ambiguity	Medium – multiple emotional viewpoints without moral winners	High – creates sympathy for a troubling protagonist	Medium – violence contextualised through sympathy	Very High –resists hero/villain binaries

Characterisation	Very High – deeply fused with protagonist's inner state	Very High – music as the protagonist's subconscious	High – emotional language for a socially alien hero	Medium –personal perspective within collective conflict
Narrative Dependence on Score	High – music uncovers hidden emotions behind surface action	Very High –several scenes rely on music for true meaning	High – music decodes a minimally communicating protagonist	Very High –guides viewers through tension and contested truth
Transformation Arc	Very High – cold→mournful→warm mirrors Divya's full arc	High – yearning romance→fractured tragedy	Very High – isolation→warmth→dark loss	Medium – awakening more than completed resolution
Silence as Narrative Tool	Very High – silence equals emotional distance, unsaid communication	Medium – selective for tension/emotional shock	Low – music dominates over silence	High – forest silence, hesitation, creates realism/dread

The metric analysis reveals that characterisation through music consistently rates highest across all four films—underscoring the study's core argument that Ilaiyaraaja's background scores function not as accompaniment but as primary character voice.

Narrative dependence on score is also consistently high, confirming that these films cannot be fully understood without attending to the musical text. Silence as narrative tool varies by film in a revealing way: it is highest in Mouna Ragam (where Mani Ratnam's visual restraint demands that music and silence share equal narrative weight) and lowest in Pithamagan (where Bala favours musical articulation over withheld sound during key emotional passages). The 'transformation arc through music' dimension rates highest in Mouna Ragam and Pithamagan—

films with full-resolution and full-tragedy arcs respectively—and is deliberately restrained in Viduthalai, where the unfinished narrative of Part 1 is itself a political statement about the incompleteness of the struggle being depicted.

IV. FILM-WISE FRAME ANALYSIS

Frame analysis in the framework of this research, is used for identifying the particular conditions under which the repeated musical motif gains meaning, not as an autonomous element, but within the visual frame, the narrative moment, and the emotional mode in which it occurs.

4.1 Mouna Ragam (1986)

4.1.1 Companionship



In the train journey scene where Divya and Chandrakumar meet as a husband and wife and Ilaiyaraaja chooses not to give them the love theme, he shows that out of love, one has to sacrifice the theme. The three-note descending piano cell takes the place: Incomplete, unresolved. Both characters share the same physical space but exist in different "sonic worlds. The motif is not announcing a companionship, it is stating a lack of companionship. The cell drops a semitone when Chandrakumar tries to speak to Divya but she doesn't listen, a microharmonic signal which the camera barely registers but the score makes clear — a rejection signal. The visual silence is achieved by Mani Ratnam through static shots, distance between actors and very little dialogue, which are filled by the music.

4.1.2 Character Development

Every time the film appears in Divya's mind of

Manohar, the piano cell reappears, but now in harmony with strings and tuning to a higher pitch. Melodic contour carries a different emotional meaning, depending on the harmony. This is very important: Ilaiyaraaja doesn't write a "grief theme" separately. He re-contextualises the same theme, so that the listener's ear is prepared to hear that Divya is now numb, but used to be warm. Her character arc is literally expressed through the motif's harmonic progression throughout the movie: Ratnam's cross cutting between past and present is a good way to emphasize the contrast, and the motif is a temporal indicator. The director lets music pass from one time to the next, making the viewers see the transition rather than feel it.



4.1.3 Feeling

On the roof of the house, Chandrakumar formally proposes to Divya for the first time, and Mani Ratnam cuts across to her face, and Ilaiyaraaja plays the Manohar motif, not the present. The score puts

the audience in Divya's emotional place, hears what Chandrakumar says, but feels Manohar. The emotion evoked is not sadness but inner confusion that Divya has, constantly questioning herself and being conflicted.



4.1.4 Transformation & Resolution

The climax of the story is a dramatic confrontation on the train. Divya knows Chandrakumar is sincere, so she lets herself relax for a second. The piano part, which of course is the key component, instead resolves from an unresolved leading tone, now Ilaiyaraaja has a modal change, as the piano part resolves. It is not melodic, but tonal. The identity of

the motif is retained but the harmonic destination is altered. This is the pivotal moment in the movie's emotional arc, which's entirely music, no dialogue match. The sparse leitmotif provided by Ilaiyaraaja complements Mani Ratnam's visual approach to give meaning to the sound that enhances the emotional reading of the image.



4.2 Guna

4.2.1 Companionship

Ilaiyaraaja brings back the film's main theme in the sequence of cave scenes in which Guna sleeps under the assumption that Rohini is the goddess Abhirami, which is a minor third figure that never ends. Traverses in a circle like a thought that doesn't reach its end. This motif represents “companionship” not warmth, but fixation – proximity without reciprocity.

Rohini doesn't know, Guna is mesmerized. The dynamic of the motif is the same both awake and asleep, suggesting that the relationship is entirely Guna's psychic realm. Director Santhana Bharathi does this through spatial isolation, and the framing, which compartmentalize Abhirami and Guna on the emotional level, even in their presence in the same space. The gap is filled by the music, but the music is repeated, allowing the illusion to be exposed.



4.2.2 Character Development

The obsession motif is pure, unembellished, like a single instrument in the backdrop of an asylum flashback in the film, when Guna's back story is revealed. The unaltered motif prior to trauma. The story progresses, and Guna's psychosis worsens, and Ilaiyaraaja gradually introduces a semitone dissonance to the loop – a flattened second enters,

making the innocuous phrase more agitated. The same theme is repeated with three more chromatic tones at the end of the third of the film. Character development is in harmonic accumulation. The direction does not use conventional arcs, but rather shows Guna in repetitive actions and in small spaces. The music and direction are against progress; stagnation is the main condition of the narrative.



4.2.3 Feeling

The forest chase sequence is musically outstanding. The lyrical open interval theme (which is where she fits in as a real living soul) is set in counterpoint with Guna's obsession loop. Both play simultaneously. Effective collision: the viewer is brought into two contradictory emotional worlds simultaneously:

this is her fear, and this is his love, and they are both equally "true" and "false" at the same time. Themes do not "win" the mix; they act in dissonance, yielding an emotional quality which cannot be named. This is further enhanced by the use of low lighting and confusing imagery, which place the viewer into Guna's unstable emotional state.



4.2.4 Transformation & Resolution

This is the place in the cycle when the listener's ear is anticipating the return of the now-familiar motif, and it never arrives until the middle of the phrase. The score isn't a death theme or a farewell by any means; it simply ceases. What replaces it is diegetic sound, wind, space, the physical world asserting itself in the face of the film's entire sonic logic, which has been

constructed around Guna's interior. Not only is the break itself spectacular, but the precision of the form itself is formal. The argument of the motif's incompleteness is that Guna's story failed to be adequately resolved due to his architecture of the psyche, which was encoded in a loop, and was constitutionally unable to resolve it.



4.3 Pithamagan

4.3.1 Companionship

Chitthan has been raised within the boundaries of a cemetery, out of the framework of language and society. The folk flute theme first comes up when he meets Sakthi, who is also an outcast. Not a word is spoken at first by either man, the motif speaks for them. It's simplicity is pentatonic, it's folk, it's pre-civilisational, it's before the grammar of social

relationship. It doesn't speak; it is elemental, the companionship it codes. For two people who have never learned how to belong, playing in the same acoustic space for a moment. The physicality and movement of Bala's direction works in tandem with the leitmotif's rhythmic energy, which slowly starts to bring into the sonic identity of Chitthan a relationship that he couldn't articulate verbally.



4.3.2 Character Development

This motif is revisited in the scene of revenge following Sakthi's death; however, it becomes a much darker one, with more percussions and the incorporation of lower registers. This is the transformation of the motif and the portrayal of how Chithan has transformed from his emotional

awakening to committing violence through pain. At a stage where he is sinking deeper into crime and violence, the motif is transforming into something much more complicated and polyrhythmic. While his innocence remains intact, it is layered with the weight of what he has become, making it more complex than when it was played at the cemetery.



4.3.3 Feeling

Bala and Ilaiyaraaja's selection of elements in the graveyard scenes when Chithan is extraordinary. They opt to present the setting as it is. Most directors would go to ambient to show the gravity of the moment, but here, Ilaiyaraaja's silence is only broken by nature's noises—crickets, wind. The motif is not

released. It's not quite peace, it's just pre-linguistic stillness; the emotional state Chitthan lives in before the world's noise comes crashing through. The motif finally comes back after this interval, and its reappearance is a reversal of the rupture: the sensation of a delicate birth.



4.3.4 Transformation & Resolution

The folk flute theme re-appears in the minor modally equivalent when Sakthi passes away and Chitthan

brings his body back to the graveyard, thus creating a weird circle back. All intervals are the same; the contour of the melody is clearly the same. The mode

is now inverted, from a major pentatonic phrase (open, unsettled, curious) to a minor (inward, closed, final) phrase. This is the most exact musical statement in this film, the theme of Chitthan has told

us that. However, the world he briefly entered and lost has turned the meaning of everything he is upside down.



4.4 Viduthalai – Part 1

4.4.1 Companionship

The two leitmotif systems in Viduthalai are conflicted. The state/police apparatus has a formalized, ordered, cadenced, symmetrical, string-based motif. The marginalized community brings open flutes and strings that won't be solved. It is evident that leitmotif is broken in interaction of

Kumaresan and his colleagues' policemen, and the villagers, because it is a depiction of broken relationships. Realism of Vetrimaaran (handheld camera and unpredictable blocking) intensifies the feeling of chaos

visually, and in addition, it is evident that music does not have stability and does not give an opportunity to feel certain emotions.



4.4.2 Character Development

The rhythm of leitmotif changes as the main character is getting increasingly involved in the struggle, where he suffers from violence and moral conflicts. Thus, it transforms the melodic leitmotif to

rhythmic. It can be viewed as another step on the road to realization for Kumaresan, just like his transition from ignorance to realization. In such a way, the development of Kumaresan's character is harmonic erosion by means of what he hears and sees.



4.4.3 Feeling

During moments of heightened tension such as the search or at the point when it is inevitable, the leitmotif is kept sparse, consisting of only a couple of pulses. As a result, there is consistent tension, which shows the significance of feeling through the subtle use of musical devices. It involves the villagers in

their entirety, and where there was once a thin drone, there is a thick one, complemented by the low string that underscores, along with voices beneath the melody of the villagers' song. Nevertheless, during romantic scenes, the motif becomes more soothing to the ears in terms of orchestration.



4.4.4 Transformation & Resolution

In the scene where Kumaresan sees the brutality of systematic violence perpetuated in the police action, the melodic theme becomes more tense and rhythmic. The alteration is representative of an awakening and conflict inside him, prompting him to take action to protect the villagers as well as fulfill his duties as an

able policeman rather than a constable. In Vetrimaaran's realist style, with its chaotic staging and all-encompassing tension, the altered leitmotif is congruent with the visual intensity and gives the music a sense of extension of this altered perception of the character.



Key observations:

The frame analysis confirms and extends the musicological findings in several important ways. First, the leitmotif in all four films functions as the primary vehicle for companionship—but the nature of the companionship it encodes varies radically: warmth in Pithamagan, fixation in Guna, political solidarity in Viduthalai, and conspicuous emotional absence in Mouna Ragam. This flexibility of signification demonstrates that the motif's meaning is not intrinsic but entirely relational to its narrative frame.

Second, character development in all four films is tracked through harmonic accumulation rather than melodic substitution—Ilayaraaja does not write new themes to signal new emotional states but instead re-harmonises, re-orchestrates, or re-metres existing material, preserving the identity of the musical sign while radically transforming its meaning. Third, the feeling parameter reveals the most distinctive feature of Ilayaraaja's compositional intelligence: his use of the 'wrong' motif at a given moment (the Manohar motif during Chandrakumar's proposal; the obsession loop during the forest chase alongside Rohini's theme) to create emotional complexity that neither image nor dialogue alone could achieve. Fourth, the transformation and resolution analysis demonstrates that Ilayaraaja's most powerful compositional statements are often achieved not through musical abundance but through musical withdrawal: the sudden silence in Guna, the modal inversion in Pithamagan, the rhythmic destabilisation in

Viduthalai.

V. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The analysis of leitmotif across all four films demonstrates that Ilayaraaja's approach to background music is a well-thought-out and philosophically coherent musical language, operating independently of the established conventions of Indian mainstream film music. In the tradition of Tamil film scoring, the song has typically been considered the primary vehicle of emotional communication. These four films show that the leitmotif, understood as a transformable musical idea, can do significantly more in terms of storytelling and emotional communication. What emerges from the frame analysis, the musicological comparison, and the metric evaluation is that Ilayaraaja consistently works through what Gorbman terms 'mutual implication'—music and visuals constructing meaning together that neither can construct alone.

5.1 Key Findings

Finding 1: Leitmotif is Transformative, Not Fixed

The most important finding is that in all four films Ilayaraaja does not use the leitmotif statically as a label or identifier. Every motif analysed goes through stages of transformation that allow it to carry different layers of musical meaning depending on the narrative context. The descending piano figure in Mouna Ragam transforms through new harmonisations until it resolves, tracing Divya's

psychological journey without words. The obsession loop in Guna accumulates chromatic dissonance that describes the musical decay of the protagonist's psyche. The folk flute motif in Pithamagan shifts in rhythm and mode to mark Chithan's passage from curiosity to grief. In Viduthalai, the institutional theme erodes harmonically as Kumaresan's ideological conviction weakens. This consistency of transformation rather than substitution aligns with Jean-Jacques Nattiez's neutral-level theory: the musical sign retains its phonological form but continually alters its signified.

Finding 2: Silence as the Most Powerful Expressive Tool

A recurring and paradoxical feature across all four films is that Ilaiyaraaja's most meaningful scoring decisions are often those in which the motif is withheld. Its absence—conditioned by prior presence—creates an auditory event as significant as any orchestral climax. In Mouna Ragam, the love theme is never played in close-up scenes of Divya and Chandrakumar, signifying emotional distance more powerfully than music could. In Guna, the motif's interruption mid-phrase at the cliff scene is the defining compositional move of the film—the absence of musical resolution is the structural argument of a narrative about a mind constitutionally unable to resolve. In Pithamagan, what Michel Chion calls the 'sonic void' is achieved in the graveyard scenes: a silence so acoustically charged by prior motif use that its emptiness communicates with greater force than any theme. Ilaiyaraaja's relationship with silence is not passive but compositional.

Finding 3: Leitmotif Precedes Narrative

Unlike composers who adopt a reactive approach—setting music to completed visual and dramatic events—Ilaiyaraaja consistently uses the leitmotif to anticipate psychological and narrative progressions before they are revealed in the screenplay or performance. This is what Kathryn Kalinak terms 'scoring the unseen.' The modal pivot in the Mouna Ragam piano cell indicates Divya's inner acceptance of her marriage long before it is established on screen. The initial use of the obsession motif in Guna already contains the potential instability that the narrative reveals only much later. In Viduthalai, the erosion of the institutional theme begins right after Kumaresan's meeting with Perumal, reflecting his

unconscious ideological uncertainty before he is consciously aware of it. This proactivity means the attentive listener experiences the emotional arc twice: first through the music, then through the story.

Finding 4: Leitmotif Gives Voice to Interiority Beyond Language

In all four films, there are extended sequences where the leitmotif assumes responsibility for communicating what cannot be conveyed through dialogue or acting—not as supplement but as substitute. Chithan in Pithamagan has been raised without access to language or social norms; the folk flute ostinato is his only available form of articulation. Guna's psychosis puts him beyond self-narrative; the obsession motif is the sole continuous voice of his interiority. Even in Mouna Ragam, where conversation is possible, Divya's socially acceptable exterior conceals grief that the piano motif alone makes visible. This finding reframes the background score not as an extension of character but as its principal form of expression within Tamil cinema.

Finding 5: Cultural Synthesis: Carnatic, Folk, and Western Harmony

Across all four films, Ilaiyaraaja's leitmotif technique is not an imported Wagnerian tool applied wholesale to Tamil cinema, but a genuine synthesis of Western harmonic and thematic development with Carnatic classical music and South Indian folk traditions. The folk flute ostinato in Pithamagan functions structurally as a leitmotif (it recurs, develops, and accumulates meaning) but its pentatonic modal character and connection to Tamil funeral music carry a cultural dimension no Western motif could achieve.

The chromatic dissonance in the Guna obsession theme mirrors the harmonic instability of Wagnerian chromaticism, yet the melodic contour follows the curvature of South Indian ragas. The parai-inflected rhythms in Viduthalai carry historical social associations of Dalit community ritual that give the folk motif a layer of political meaning entirely beyond the resources of Western film scoring. This synthesis constitutes Ilaiyaraaja's greatest contribution to world film music practice.

Finding 6: Leitmotif as Political Instrument

While the technique remains consistent, its scope expands across four decades. In Mouna Ragam and Guna, leitmotifs are fundamentally personal—

tracking the emotions and psychological states of individuals. In Pithamagan, the folk theme becomes part of the social reality of a marginalised subject; its transformations capture the violence of modernity against folk culture as much as they capture the individual tragedy. In Viduthalai, the leitmotif transcends the individual entirely: two competing motif-systems enact a dialectic between social groups, making the score not an emotional annotation of politics but a political act in itself. The trajectory across the corpus suggests that Ilaiyaraaja's compositional thinking has moved progressively toward the notion of leitmotif as a tool of critical political consciousness.

VI. CONCLUSION

In analysing the use of leitmotif in the background scores of Mouna Ragam, Guna, Pithamagan, and Viduthalai Part 1, this study arrives at a conclusion that goes beyond the observation that Ilaiyaraaja is skilled at deploying recurring themes. What the analysis demonstrates, through close examination of four films spanning four decades, is that an Ilaiyaraaja background score is not an adjunct to the film's meaning but an integral, irreducible part of its construction.

In his hands, the leitmotif is not a label or a cue—it is a live debate about character, time, feeling, and the relationship between sound and image. In Mouna Ragam, the piano cell becomes Divya's inner being, accumulating meaning with each recurrence until its final modal resolution enacts a psychological journey. In Guna, the obsession loop is not an external view of an unsettled mind but the mind itself speaking—asking the audience to simultaneously empathise and recoil. In Pithamagan, the folk flute ostinato is Chithan's only voice, and its modal inversion at the film's close is one of the most precise and devastating uses of musical metamorphosis in Tamil film history. In Viduthalai, competing motifs do not merely score a political conflict—they enact it structurally.

What is common to all four films is that the motif's identity and its meaning are two separate entities. The neutral level of the music—the melodic DNA—is never abandoned, but the harmonic layers, orchestration, pitch register, and relation to silence are continually revisited, making the leitmotif a

dynamic signifier whose meaning is constructed anew in each frame through the interaction of musical material with its narrative context.

The broader implication for Tamil film music studies is equally significant. While the songs of Ilaiyaraaja have attracted the most scholarly and popular attention—and justly so, given their formal innovation—the findings of this analysis suggest that the background score is the most advanced musical construction in the composer's oeuvre. It is in the score, unburdened by lyrics or commercial imperatives and not intended to be consciously noticed, that Ilaiyaraaja composes most freely and most profoundly. A vast and largely unexplored canon of music awaits its listeners—not as accompaniment, not as ambient texture, but as meaning itself: carefully crafted, culturally specific, and demanding of attention on its own terms.

6.1 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The corpus is restricted to four films from a composer who has scored over a thousand across multiple Indian languages; while the selection is representative across decades and genres, broader extrapolation should be made cautiously. The study relies on finished films without access to original scores, composition sketches, or recording materials, which limits insight into compositional intent versus instinct. Auditory frame analysis is inherently interpretive, and different listeners may experience the same motif differently. No audience reception data is incorporated, and the experiential claims made about withheld motifs and modal inversions remain theoretically presumed rather than empirically tested. Finally, the analytical tools are largely derived from Western film music scholarship; an equivalent apparatus grounded in Carnatic modal logic and Tamil aesthetic theory—including the framework of the *navarasa*—remains a task for future research.

6.2 Future Scope of Study

Future research could extend this analysis across Ilaiyaraaja's Telugu, Malayalam, and Hindi scores to test whether these compositional patterns hold across languages and industries. A comparative study with other major Indian film composers—M. S. Viswanathan, A. R. Rahman, Santhosh Narayanan—would help situate Ilaiyaraaja's distinctive

contribution within the broader history of Indian film music. Archival and ethnographic approaches incorporating interviews with Ilaiyaraaja and his directorial collaborators could supplement the textual analysis with compositional intent. An analytical model built on Carnatic musicology and Tamil rasas would address the current theoretical gap identified in this study's limitations. Finally, cognitive film music studies examining audience reception would provide empirical grounding for the experiential claims made here.

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