



MUSECA MONOGRAPH SERIES

Chord Progressions in Film Music

*A Comprehensive Guide
from Silent Cinema to the Modern Era*

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CHORD PROGRESSIONS IN FILM MUSIC

A Comprehensive Guide from Silent Cinema to the Modern Era

From the silent film accompaniment of the 1900s through the experimental scores of the 21st century, this guide catalogs the harmonic language of cinema.

Covering: Silent Era • Golden Age • New Hollywood • Contemporary Film

Chord Progressions in Film Music

A Comprehensive Guide from Silent Cinema to the Modern Era

Museca Monograph Series

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Introduction

Film music is one of the most powerful tools in a storyteller's arsenal. The harmonic language of cinema — the specific chord progressions that composers choose — has evolved dramatically over more than a century of filmmaking, from the improvisatory piano accompaniments of silent films to the minimalist electronic-orchestral hybrid scores of today.

This document provides a comprehensive catalog of chord progressions used across all major eras of film scoring, organized both chronologically and by emotional effect. Whether you are a composer seeking harmonic inspiration, a film student analyzing the language of cinema, or a music lover curious about the 'why' behind the emotional impact of your favorite scores, this guide offers deep insight into one of music's most fascinating applied disciplines.

Each chord progression is presented in standard Roman numeral notation (e.g., I–V–vi–IV), which allows the progressions to be transposed to any key while preserving their harmonic character. Lowercase numerals (i, iv, v) indicate minor chords; uppercase (I, IV, V) indicate major chords. Flat signs (b) before a numeral indicate chords borrowed from a parallel key.

Part One: Historical Survey by Era

Chapter 1: The Silent Film Era (1900s–1920s)

Before synchronized sound arrived with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, films were accompanied by live musicians — solo pianists, organists, or full orchestras, depending on the venue. The harmonic language of silent film accompaniment was drawn primarily from the classical and popular traditions of the late nineteenth century.

Harmonic Characteristics

Music for silent films relied heavily on the common-practice tonal tradition that had dominated European art music for two centuries. Accompanists worked from cue sheets — published collections of

mood pieces organized by dramatic function — or improvised against the action on screen.

Primary chords (I, IV, V): The backbone of most accompaniment, used for action, movement, and dramatic resolution.

Diminished seventh chords (vii°7): The go-to chord for tension, danger, and melodrama. Its symmetrical construction allowed it to be resolved in multiple directions, making it highly versatile.

Secondary dominants (V7/ii, V7/IV, etc.): Used to move between sections and add harmonic color without leaving the key.

Chromatic harmony: Modal mixture and chromatic voice leading borrowed from Romantic-era composers such as Wagner and Liszt added emotional depth.

Landmark Score: *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise* (1908)

Composed by Camille Saint-Saëns, this score for a short French historical drama is widely regarded as the first original film score by a major classical composer for a purpose-made theatrical film release. (The *Fairylogue and Radio-Plays*, a multimedia stage production with filmed sequences composed by Nathan Barker for L. Frank Baum's Oz stories, predated it by approximately two months in September 1908 — though as a live stage show with projected film segments, it is not considered a standalone film release in the modern sense.) Saint-Saëns employed late Romantic harmonic language — rich chromatic progressions, modal mixture, and carefully controlled dissonance — establishing a precedent for sophisticated harmonic treatment in cinema.

The Cue Sheet Era and Stereotyped Progressions

Publishers such as Sam Fox and Carl Fischer produced extensive cue sheet libraries with music organized by mood: 'agitato' (fast, dramatic), 'andante cantabile' (slow, lyrical), 'mysterioso,' and so on. These pieces used standardized harmonic conventions that audiences quickly learned to interpret emotionally — an early example of the conditioned harmonic responses that film composers would continue to exploit throughout the twentieth century.

Chapter 2: The Golden Age of Hollywood (1930s–1960s)

The arrival of synchronized sound transformed film music from live accompaniment to composed scores integrated into the film itself. The Golden Age produced some of the most influential film composers in history, and their harmonic innovations continue to shape film scoring today.

Max Steiner (1888–1971) — The Father of Film Music

Key films: *King Kong* (1933), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Casablanca* (1942)

Steiner pioneered the use of continuous orchestral underscore for Hollywood films and popularized the technique of 'mickey mousing' — synchronizing musical gestures precisely to on-screen action. His harmonic language was rooted in the late Romantic tradition of his Vienna training.

Signature progressions: Strong cadential movement (V7–I); extensive secondary dominants for harmonic variety; modal mixture (borrowing $\flat VI$, $\flat VII$ from the parallel minor) for emotional color.

Leitmotif technique: Each major character and location received a distinctive theme, harmonically anchored to convey emotional associations. The reappearance and harmonic transformation of these themes across a film created a continuous emotional narrative.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897–1957)

Key films: *Captain Blood* (1935), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Kings Row* (1942)

Korngold brought a genuine operatic sensibility to Hollywood. His scoring — directly descended from Wagner and Richard Strauss — featured richer, more harmonically adventurous writing than was typical for commercial cinema.

Harmonic innovations: Chromatic voice leading; extended chords (9ths, 11ths, 13ths); modal mixture; jazz-influenced harmonic color unusual for the era. His adventurous harmonic language directly influenced later composers including John Williams.

Bernard Herrmann (1911–1975)

Key films: *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), *Taxi Driver* (1976, released posthumously)

Herrmann was the most harmonically daring of the Golden Age composers. His music frequently destabilized tonal expectations to generate psychological unease.

Tritone and dissonance: Herrmann made frequent structural use of the tritone interval — the most dissonant interval in the Western harmonic system — to generate tension and ambiguity.

Bitonality: The simultaneous use of two different tonal centers creates unresolvable harmonic conflict, generating a sense of psychological fragmentation particularly suited to thrillers and horror films.

String writing: The famous *Psycho* 'shower scene' string ostinato exploits dissonant semitone clusters and angular, chromatic motion rather than conventional harmonic progressions.

Miklós Rózsa (1907–1995)

Key films: *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *El Cid* (1961)

Rózsa was known for his uncompromising harmonic sophistication. He resisted the sentimentalism of Steiner's 'mickey mousing' approach in favor of a more complex emotional honesty, using dissonance and modal harmony where other composers might have reached for simple consonance.

Dimitri Tiomkin (c. 1894–1979)

Key films: *High Noon* (1952), *The Big Country* (1958), *The Guns of Navarone* (1961)

Tiomkin brought a distinctly Russian musical sensibility to the Hollywood Western and epic genres. His scores feature grand, sweeping melodic lines supported by bold harmonic movements, dramatic key changes, and folk-influenced modal progressions that evoke the American frontier and wide-open spaces. (Note: Tiomkin's birth year is sometimes listed as 1894 or 1895 depending on the source, reflecting differences between the Old Style Julian and New Style Gregorian calendars; 1894 is the most commonly cited date.)

Chapter 3: New Hollywood and the Transitional Era (1970s–1990s)

The dissolution of the studio system and the influence of European art cinema opened Hollywood to a new generation of composers who brought greater harmonic sophistication, modernist influence, and genre-awareness to film scoring.

John Williams (b. 1932)

Key films: *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E.T.* (1982), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Harry Potter* series (2001–2004)

John Williams is the dominant figure in American film scoring. His music synthesizes Golden Age orchestral lushness with modernist harmonic techniques, drawing on impressionism, jazz, and folk music to create a distinctive harmonic language.

Modal interchange: Williams' most characteristic technique. He borrows freely from parallel major and minor keys, introducing unexpected chord colors that deepen emotional resonance without abandoning the tonal center.

The \flat VII chord: The subtonic major triad, borrowed from the parallel natural minor, appears constantly in Williams' heroic and Americana-themed writing, lending a folk-like modal quality to otherwise diatonic progressions. Used prominently in themes from *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and many others.

Quartal harmony: Chords built on fourths rather than conventional thirds. Williams uses quartal voicings in the *Superman* March to suggest heroic power and otherworldliness beyond the merely human.

Pandiatonicism: Free use of all seven diatonic scale tones without strict functional hierarchy, allowing extended chords and tonal clusters that create a sense of wonder and expansiveness.

Polytonality in *Star Wars*: Williams uses parallel major chords for the Rebel Alliance and parallel minor chords for the Galactic Empire, creating a harmonic dualism that reinforces the moral polarity of the narrative.

Princess Leia's Theme (D major): I–iv–I–iv–II–vi–i–VI–iv–V–II dom7. The repeated borrowing of the minor iv chord into a major-key melody creates a bittersweet, romantic emotional quality.

Jerry Goldsmith (1929–2004)

Key films: *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Chinatown* (1974), *Alien* (1979), *Poltergeist* (1982), *Total Recall* (1990)

Goldsmith was arguably the most harmonically adventurous mainstream Hollywood composer of his generation. Deeply influenced by modernist art music — including Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique and the works of Berio, Boulez, and Varèse — he consistently found ways to introduce contemporary harmonic language into commercial film scores.

Twelve-tone technique: By organizing melodic and harmonic material through a tone row rather than functional harmony, Goldsmith could maintain perpetual tension without traditional resolution, suited to science fiction and horror.

$\flat VI-\flat VII-I$: A signature cadential formula Goldsmith used for epic, triumphant moments, moving through the two major chords borrowed from the parallel minor before reaching the tonic. This progression appears in several versions of the Universal Pictures fanfare (notably Jerry Goldsmith's 1997 arrangement) and in films like *Capricorn One*.

Subtonic half cadences: Ending phrases on the $\flat VII$ chord rather than the dominant V creates an open, unresolved quality well-suited to frontier and adventure narratives.

Ennio Morricone (1928–2020)

Key films: *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), *The Mission* (1986), *Cinema Paradiso* (1988)

Morricone redefined the sound of the Western film and produced some of the most harmonically inventive film scores in history. His approach combined spare, unusual instrumentation with sophisticated harmonic efficiency.

Three-note chord extraction: Morricone's melodic lines function as harmonic extensions — the melody itself implies the full chord while the harmonic accompaniment shifts underneath, creating new harmonic colors through the relationship between melody and accompaniment.

Modal harmony: Morricone's use of Aeolian, Dorian, and Mixolydian modes gave his music a distinctly archaic, timeless quality that transcended specific genre.

James Horner (1953–2015)

Key films: *Aliens* (1986), *Glory* (1989), *Braveheart* (1995), *Titanic* (1997), *Avatar* (2009)

Horner combined Romantic harmonic language with a talent for emotional directness. His scores use modal interchange, pentatonic melody, and rich orchestral harmony to create immediately accessible emotional impact. The $\flat VI-\flat VII-I$ cadence appears frequently in his heroic and epic writing.

Danny Elfman (b. 1953)

Key films: *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985), *Batman* (1989), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993)

Elfman developed a uniquely theatrical harmonic voice strongly influenced by Nino Rota and Ennio Morricone. His characteristic sound blends whimsical major-key melody with underlying minor-key harmonies and augmented/diminished chord colors to create a sense of childlike wonder tinged with darkness — perfectly suited to Tim Burton's aesthetic.

Harmonic signature: Elfman characteristically moves between I and $\flat VI$ (major chord on the lowered sixth scale degree) to create a sense of magic and unreality. His use of augmented and diminished chords adds a slightly off-kilter, carnival quality.

Chapter 4: Contemporary and Modern Film Scoring (2000s–Present)

The twenty-first century brought seismic changes to film scoring. The rise of digital audio workstations, hybrid orchestral-electronic production techniques, the influence of minimalism, and growing interest in cultural specificity have all fundamentally altered the harmonic language of film music.

Hans Zimmer (b. 1957)

Key films: *Gladiator* (2000), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014), *Dunkirk* (2017), *Dune* (2021)

Hans Zimmer transformed the production aesthetics of film scoring. Collaborators including Christopher Nolan have noted his ability to achieve overwhelming emotional impact through deceptively simple harmonic material — a minimalist harmonic vocabulary deployed with maximalist production force, using texture, repetition, and dynamics rather than harmonic complexity to generate emotion.

Inception progression (A minor): i–v–VII–IV–i–ii°7–VII–IV. A circular minor-key progression that creates hypnotic momentum through repetition and layering. The avoidance of traditional V–i cadential resolution contributes to the score’s dreamlike ambiguity.

Minimalist harmonic vocabulary: Zimmer often restricts himself to two or three chords, allowing texture, orchestration, and dynamics to create emotional variety. The harmonic content matters less than how it is deployed.

bVI chord: Zimmer, like Williams before him, frequently uses the major bVI triad as a point of harmonic arrival — it provides an unexpected lift, suggesting both hope and unresolvable tension simultaneously.

Jonny Greenwood (b. 1971)

Key films: *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *The Master* (2012), *Phantom Thread* (2017), *Spencer* (2021), *The Power of the Dog* (2021)

Greenwood represents the experimental avant-garde wing of contemporary film scoring. Drawing on Penderecki, Messiaen, and Ligeti, he uses techniques deliberately outside the Romantic film-scoring tradition.

Modes of limited transposition: Messiaen’s symmetrical scales create a harmonic language that seems simultaneously familiar and alien.

Microtonal harmony: Small pitch inflections that lie between standard chromatic pitches destabilize tonal expectations and create physical unease.

Aleatory clusters: Groups of notes played with varying degrees of randomness in their pitch and timing, creating textural rather than functional harmonic events.

Hildur Guðnadóttir (b. 1982)

Key films: *Joker* (2019), *Tár* (2022), *Women Talking* (2022)

Guðnadóttir made history as the first solo female composer to win the Academy Award, BAFTA, and Golden Globe for Best Original Score in the same awards season for *Joker* (2019–20) — and the first woman to win in the Academy’s combined Best Original Score category (introduced in 2000, following the merger of the dramatic and musical/comedy score categories). Three women had previously won in the earlier separate categories: Marilyn Bergman (*Yentl*, 1984), Rachel Portman (*Emma*, 1997), and Anne Dudley (*The Full Monty*, 1998). Her work melts the boundary between art music and film scoring.

Harmonic approach: Guðnadóttir uses sparse, emotionally raw cello-centered writing with extended techniques and experimental harmony to create scores of extraordinary intimacy and psychological depth.

Ludwig Göransson (b. 1984)

Key films: *Black Panther* (2018), *Tenet* (2020), *Oppenheimer* (2023), *Sinners* (2025)

Göransson exemplifies the twenty-first century approach of research-based cultural integration in film scoring. For *Black Panther*, he traveled to West and South Africa — including Senegal, Ghana, and South Africa — to study traditional African musical traditions before composing, integrating those harmonic systems directly into his score.

Cultural harmony: Non-Western harmonic systems, pentatonic and modal African scales, and traditional rhythmic frameworks integrated with Western film scoring conventions.

Sinners (2025): Göransson’s score for Ryan Coogler’s supernatural period drama earned him the Academy Award for Best Original Score at the 2026 ceremony, extending his culturally immersive approach into the American South of the 1930s. The score weaves Delta blues, gospel harmonic language, and West African musical traditions into a cohesive sonic world, drawing on the blues’ characteristic use of flattened thirds and sevenths — the “blue notes” that sit between the major and minor scale degrees — to create a harmonic vocabulary

that is simultaneously archaic and visceral, rooted in the African diaspora musical continuum.

Part Two: Chord Progressions by Mood and Emotion

The following sections catalog specific chord progressions organized by their primary emotional character. These are not rigid categories — context, orchestration, tempo, and performance all affect emotional meaning — but they represent the dominant associations that these progressions have developed through decades of use in cinema and popular music.

★ Triumph and Heroism

Triumphant and heroic music in film tends to favor major keys, strong root-position chord movements, and harmonic language that avoids ambiguity. The listener should feel certainty, power, and upward momentum.

I – V – IV – I (or I – IV – V – I)

Emotional character: Unambiguous triumph, completion, resolution.

Film/composer examples: *Used broadly in action and adventure scoring; closing themes suggesting mission accomplished.*

The simplest and most direct triumphant progression. All diatonic major chords, strong stepwise root movement, and a clear return to tonic. The absence of borrowed or chromatic harmony keeps the emotional statement clean and unambiguous.

♭VII – IV – I (Heroic Cadence / Goldsmith Formula)

Emotional character: Epic heroism, grandeur, the sense of something larger than the individual.

Film/composer examples: *Jerry Goldsmith (Universal fanfare, Capricorn One); Elmer Bernstein; James Horner (Braveheart, Glory).*

The two chords borrowed from the parallel minor (♭VI and ♭VII) lend an archaic, modal quality to this cadence, suggesting heroism rooted in folk tradition rather than courtly sophistication. This progression is among the most recognizable sounds in Hollywood adventure scoring.

bVI – bVII – I (Three-Chord Epic)

Emotional character: Soaring, epic, climactic arrival.

Film/composer examples: *Goldsmith, Williams (Star Wars), Horner.*

An extension of the above, adding the bVI chord at the start for a longer harmonic runway to the triumphant tonic arrival. The three-chord sequence creates a sense of inevitable, building momentum.

I – bVI – bVII – I (Williams Loop)

Emotional character: Heroic wonder, Americana, grandeur.

Film/composer examples: *John Williams (Star Wars, Indiana Jones, Superman).*

Williams' characteristic use of the bVII chord as a point of departure before returning to I creates a loop that can repeat indefinitely, sustaining heroic feeling over extended cues. The bVI adds color and a slightly modal flavor.

Practical Progressions: Triumphant

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#43 A – F – A – F — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: M –4 M +4 M –4 M

#44 Dm – F – C – Dm – Bb – F – Am — James Newton Howard

Semitone movement: m +3 M –5 M +2 m –4 M –5 M +4 m

#45 Am – F – G – Em – F – Am – Fmaj7 – Am — Rupert Gregson-Williams

Semitone movement: m –4 M +2 M –3 m +1 M +4 m –4 M +4 m

Practical Progressions: Superhero

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#14 Dm – Ab – Am – Ab/C – F – A – Dm — *Danny Elfman*

Semitone movement: m –6 M +1 m –1 M1st –3 M +4 M +5 m

#15 C#m – G – E – B — *Danny Elfman*

Semitone movement: m +6 M –3 M –5 M

#16 Am – F – D – E — *Hans Zimmer / James Newton Howard*

Semitone movement: m –4 M –3 M +2 M

#17 Cm – F/C — *Henry Jackman*

Semitone movement: m +5 M2nd

#18 Bm – G – E – D — *Brian Tyler & Danny Elfman*

Semitone movement: m –4 M –3 M –2 M

#19 C – Bb/C – Ab/C – Bb/C – C — *Pinar Toprak*

Semitone movement: M –2 M –2 M1st +2 M +2 M

#20 D5 – Bb — *James Newton Howard*

Semitone movement: M –4 M

**Listening Examples****John Williams — Star Wars Main Title (1977)***Disney Music VEVO* — Search: *Star Wars Main Title John Williams*<https://www.youtube.com/@DisneyMusicVEVO>**Jerry Goldsmith — Universal Fanfare / Capricorn One (1977)***Sony Music Classical* — Search: *Jerry Goldsmith fanfare*<https://www.youtube.com/@SonyMusicClassical>

Links go to official composer and label YouTube channels for longevity. Search the track name on the channel page.

♥ Romance and Love

Romantic film music tends toward harmonic warmth and smoothness — progressions that move gently between points of harmonic stability, suggesting closeness, vulnerability, and emotional openness.

I – V – vi – IV

Emotional character: Uplift, hope, emotional warmth.

Film/composer examples: *Ubiquitous in romantic film scoring; also the most common progression in popular music.*

The most widespread harmonic sequence in Western music. Its gentle descending motion through the circle of fifths (I to V) followed by the surprising turn to the relative minor (vi) and the grounding on IV creates a sense of emotional completeness that feels simultaneously uplifting and stable.

vi – IV – I – V ('Sensitive' Progression)

Emotional character: Poignant, reflective, bittersweet.

Film/composer examples: *Romance and reunion scenes; moments of emotional catharsis.*

Beginning on the submediant (vi) rather than the tonic introduces a note of melancholy from the outset, making this progression more complex emotionally than I–V–vi–IV. The resolution to V at the end creates forward momentum and anticipation, suggesting longing as much as fulfillment.

I – iii – IV – I (Ascending Mediant)

Emotional character: Warmth, intimacy, gentle love.

Film/composer examples: *Slow romantic scenes; intimate chamber scoring.*

The mediant (iii) chord — sharing two notes with I but providing harmonic movement — creates a sense of sustained warmth without dramatic contrast. The return to IV and I grounds the progression in stability.

Listening Examples

Ennio Morricone — Cinema Paradiso Love Theme (1988)

Ennio Morricone Official — Search: Cinema Paradiso love theme Morricone

<https://www.youtube.com/@EnnioMorriconeOfficial>

James Horner — Titanic: Rose Theme (1997)

Sony Music Classical — Search: Titanic score Horner Rose theme

<https://www.youtube.com/@SonyMusicClassical>

Links go to official composer and label YouTube channels for longevity. Search the track name on the channel page.

i – bVI – bIII – bVII (Dark Romance)

Emotional character: Tragic love, doomed romance, passion.

Film/composer examples: *Bernard Herrmann (Vertigo); tragic and operatic love scenes.*

A minor-key progression using borrowed major chords creates a paradox — the major chords suggest aspiration and beauty while the minor tonic undercuts them with fatalism. Characteristic of film noir and tragic romance scoring.

Practical Progressions: Love/Romantic

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#46 D – A – Em – G – D – G – Asus4 – A — *Thomas Bergersen*

Semitone movement: M +7 M –5 m +3 M –5 M +5 M +2 M M

#47 Fm – Db – Fm – Eb – Db – Fm – Bb — *James Newton Howard*

Semitone movement: m –4 M +4 m –2 M –2 M +4 m +5 M

#48 Gm – F7 – Ebmaj7 – Cm – Bb/D — *Chris Haigh (Gothic Storm)*

Semitone movement: m –2 M –2 M –3 m –2 M1st

#49 Am – G – Fmaj7 – Em7 – Dm – Em7 – F/Bb — *James Newton Howard*

Semitone movement: m –2 M –2 M –1 m –2 m +2 m +1 M

#50 Em – C – G – Dsus4 – D – Am – Em – C – Dsus4 – D — *Harry Gregson-Williams*

Semitone movement: m –4 M +7 M –5 M M +7 m –5 m –4 M +2 M M

#51 Fmaj7 – Am – F – C – G — *James Newton Howard*

Semitone movement: M +4 m –4 M +7 M –5 M

#52 Cmaj7 – Dsus4 – D – Cmaj7 – Dsus4 — *James Newton Howard*

Semitone movement: M +2 M M –2 M +2 M

#53 F – Ab – F – Ab – Db – Ab/C – Bb — *James Newton Howard*

Semitone movement: M +3 M –3 M +3 M +5 M –5 M1st +2 M

#54 G – C/G – G – Bm – C – G – C/G – Em – F – C – D — *Rachel Portman*

Semitone movement: M +5 M –5 M +4 m +1 M –5 M +5 M +4 m +1 M –5 M +2 M

#55 Em – Cmaj7 – D – Em – Bm/D – C – D — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m -4 M +2 M +2 m -5 m1st +1 M +2 M

#56 Em – Dsus4/A – D/A – Bm – Em – C – Em — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m -2 M2nd M -3 m +5 m -4 M +4 m

 **Listening Examples****Bernard Herrmann — Psycho: Prelude Suite (1960)**

Sony Music Classical — Search: Herrmann Psycho prelude string orchestra

<https://www.youtube.com/@SonyMusicClassical>**Ennio Morricone — The Good, the Bad and the Ugly Main Theme (1966)**

Ennio Morricone Official — Search: Good Bad Ugly main theme Morricone

<https://www.youtube.com/@EnnioMorriconeOfficial>

Links go to official composer and label YouTube channels for longevity. Search the track name on the channel page.

 **Tension and Suspense**

Music for scenes of tension and suspense often deliberately avoids harmonic resolution, leaving listeners in a state of unease and anticipation. Dissonance, unresolved harmonies, and modal ambiguity are key tools.

Tritone-Based Progressions (Diabolus in Musica)

Emotional character: Profound unease, dread, the uncanny.

Film/composer examples: Bernard Herrmann (*Psycho*, *Vertigo*); Ennio Morricone.

The tritone interval — three whole tones, the exact midpoint of the octave — is the most dissonant interval in the Western harmonic system. Its historical association with evil (*diabolus in musica*) and its unresolved acoustic quality make it the primary harmonic tool of horror and thriller scoring. Two major chords a tritone apart sound deliberately foreign and disorienting, since neither chord belongs to a common key.

i – bII (Neapolitan Tension)

Emotional character: Ominous, threatening, impending doom.

Film/composer examples: Horror films; thriller underscore.

The Neapolitan chord (♭II, a major triad on the flattened second scale degree) creates extreme dissonance against the tonic minor. Used as a harmonic shock — a sudden, unexpected harmonic color that signals danger.

Unresolved V7 (Dominant Tension)

Emotional character: Suspended anticipation, unresolved conflict.

Film/composer examples: *Broadly used in suspense scoring.*

The dominant seventh chord creates a powerful pull toward resolution. When that resolution is repeatedly delayed or denied — through modal deflections, interrupted cadences, or unresolved pedal points — listeners are held in sustained tension.

Chromatic Descent (Lamento Bass)

Emotional character: Grief, inevitability, sorrow.

Film/composer examples: *Golden Age composers; Bernard Herrmann.*

A descending chromatic bass line — adapted from the Baroque lamento — creates a sense of gradual, inevitable decline. As the bass descends chromatically, the harmonies above it shift in unexpected ways, combining harmonic richness with a sense of tragic destiny.

Practical Progressions: Mystery

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#1 Cm/G – D/F# – Cm – D — James Newton Howard

Semitone movement: m2nd +2 M1st –2 m +2 M

#2 Dm – F#m – Am — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m +4 m +3 m

#3 Fm – A – Fm – A – Fm – A – Cm – A — James Newton Howard

Semitone movement: m +4 M –4 m +4 M –4 m +4 M +3 m –3 M

#4 Fm – Em – Fm – Em — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m –1 m +1 m –1 m

Practical Progressions: Dark/Thriller

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#5 F#m – Am (x5) then C#m – Em (x5) — Christopher Young

Semitone movement: m +3 m -3 / m +3 m -3

#6 Dm – Bbm – Dm – Bbm – Am – B — Hans Zimmer

Semitone movement: m -4 m +4 m -4 m -1 m +2 M

#7 Am – B/A – Am – B/A — James Newton Howard

Semitone movement: m +2 M -2 m +2 M

#8 Em – Eø7 (Half Diminished) — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m → ø7

#9 Fm – Dbm – Em – Cm – Ebm — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m -4 m +3 m -4 m +3 m

#10 Am – E/G# – Am – C#m – C — James Newton Howard

Semitone movement: m -5 M1st +5 m +4 m -1 M

#11 Cm/Eb – Cm – Em/B – Gm/Bb – Gm — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m1st M +4 m2nd +3 m1st m

#12 Em – Fm – Gm – Am — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m +1 m +2 m +2 m

#13 Dm – Ab/D – Dm – E/D — James Newton Howard

Semitone movement: m -6 M +6 m +2 M

Listening Examples

Hans Zimmer — Time from Inception (2010)

WaterTower Music — Search: Hans Zimmer Time Inception WaterTower
<https://www.youtube.com/@WaterTowerMusic>

Bernard Herrmann — Vertigo: Scene d'Amour (1958)

Sony Music Classical — Search: Herrmann Vertigo Scene d'Amour
<https://www.youtube.com/@SonyMusicClassical>

Links go to official composer and label YouTube channels for longevity. Search the track name on the channel page.

♥ Sadness and Melancholy

Sad film music explores the spectrum from gentle wistfulness to profound grief. Rather than maximizing dissonance, the most effective sad progressions often work through subtle harmonic surprises — a minor chord where a major was expected, or a resolution that never quite arrives.

i – VI – III – VII (Natural Minor Rotation)

Emotional character: Melancholy, introspection, quiet sadness.

Film/composer examples: *Broadly used in dramatic film underscore.*

All four chords are diatonic to the natural minor scale, creating a sense of sad stability — the emotional world is entirely consistent. The lack of the leading tone (the raised seventh of harmonic minor) means there is no strong cadential pull, sustaining a mood of unresolved, persistent sadness.

i – iv – i – v (Closed Minor Loop)

Emotional character: Grief, isolation, inward suffering.

Film/composer examples: *Death scenes; loss and grief sequences.*

Moving only within the minor tonic and its closest minor relatives, this progression creates a sense of harmonic entrapment that mirrors emotional stasis. The repeated return to i prevents any sense of movement or relief.

I – I/3 – IV – iv (Major with Minor Subdominant)

Emotional character: Bittersweet, nostalgic sadness.

Film/composer examples: *Golden Age Hollywood; James Horner; John Williams.*

The single moment of modal mixture — the minor iv borrowed from the parallel minor — introduces a note of shadow into an otherwise bright major-key progression. This device is one of the most emotionally effective in Western tonal music, used by composers from Schubert to Steiner.

Practical Progressions: Sad

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#21 Ab – Eb/G – Fm – Ab/Eb – Db – Fm – Cm – Db/Ab – Ab – Eb —
Alan Silvestri

Semitone movement: M –5 M1st +2 m +3 M2nd +5 M –8 m –5 m +1 M –4 M –5
M

#22 Bm – Gm — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m –4 m

#23 Am – G – Fmaj7 – Em — James Newton Howard

Semitone movement: m –2 M –2 M –1 m

#24 Bbm/Db – Dm – Bbm/Db — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m1st +4 m –4 m1st

Listening Examples

John Williams — Schindler's List: Theme (1993)

Disney Music VEVO — Search: Schindler's List theme John Williams

<https://www.youtube.com/@DisneyMusicVEVO>

Hildur Guðnadóttir — Joker Score: Bathroom Dance (2019)

WaterTower Music — Search: Hildur Gudnadottir Joker score bathroom dance

<https://www.youtube.com/@WaterTowerMusic>

Links go to official composer and label YouTube channels for longevity. Search the track name on the channel page.

★ Wonder and Mystery

Wonder and mystery call for harmonic language that suggests worlds beyond ordinary experience. Unresolved harmonies, modal ambiguity, and extended or quartal chord structures all remove the listener from familiar harmonic territory.

Lydian Progressions (I – II – I in Lydian Mode)

Emotional character: Wonder, magic, otherworldliness, fantasy.

Film/composer examples: John Williams (*E.T.*, *Close Encounters*); Jerry Goldsmith.

The Lydian mode — a major scale with a raised fourth degree — creates a sense of brightness and openness that exceeds even ordinary major-key writing. The characteristic II chord of Lydian (a major triad on the second scale degree) is one of the most characteristic sounds of fantasy and wonder in film music.

Quartal and Quintal Harmony

Emotional character: Alien beauty, transcendence, exotic wonder.

Film/composer examples: *John Williams (Superman March); Jerry Goldsmith (Star Trek: The Motion Picture).*

Chords built on intervals of fourths or fifths rather than conventional thirds create a suspended, floating quality with no strong tonal pull. In a traditional harmonic context, quartal chords sound both ancient (suggesting medieval organum) and futuristic, ideal for depicting the transcendent or the alien.

Pandiatonic Cluster Harmonies

Emotional character: Awe, vastness, cosmic wonder.

Film/composer examples: *John Williams; film music for space and nature sequences.*

Using all seven notes of a diatonic scale simultaneously or in rapid succession, without a clear tonic or functional harmonic direction, creates a shimmering sonic texture associated with the incomprehensible vastness of nature or space.

Practical Progressions: Magical/Awe & Wonder

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#29 Gm – A (x2) then F – C#m – F – G#m – Bm – Ab – Bm – Ebm — *Alexander Desplat*

Semitone movement: m +2 M / M –4 m +4 M +3 m +3 m –3 M +3 m +4 m

#30 Am – C#m – Eb – Bm — *James Horner*

Semitone movement: m +4 m +2 M –4 m

#31 Dm – Db – Dm – Db — *James Horner*

Semitone movement: m -1 M +1 m -1 m

#32 Bb – E – Bb – E — *James Newton Howard*

Semitone movement: M +6 M -6 M +6 M

#33 E – G – C – A — *James Newton Howard*

Semitone movement: M +3 M +5 M -3 M

#34 Cm – D7 – E — *James Newton Howard*

Semitone movement: m +2 M +2 M

#35 Dm/F – G – Dm/F – Am – Am/G – Dm/F – G — *Howard Shore*

Semitone movement: m1st +5 M -5 m1st -5 m m +5 m +5 M

#36 Am – D/A – Em – F# – Am – F# — *Howard Shore*

Semitone movement: m +5 M2nd +2 m +2 M +3 m -3 M

#37 Abm – Ebm – Bbm – Dbm – Abm – Eb – Abm — *John Debney*

Semitone movement: m +7 m -5 m +3 m -5 m +7 M -7 m

Practical Progressions: Outer Space

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#62 E – Bb/F – E – Bb/D

Semitone movement: M +6 M2nd -6 M +6 M1st

Fear and Horror

Horror film music works by attacking the listener's sense of harmonic security — making the familiar strange, sustaining tension without release, and using the physical properties of dissonant intervals to create visceral unease.

Half-Diminished and Fully Diminished Seventh Chords

Emotional character: Dread, horror, menace.

Film/composer examples: *Silent film accompaniment; Bernard Herrmann; horror film scoring broadly.*

The fully diminished seventh chord — stacked minor thirds creating a symmetrical, ungrounded harmony — has been the 'horror chord' of Western music since the Baroque period. Its complete symmetry means it can be resolved in multiple directions, making it both harmonically unstable and emotionally indeterminate.

Cluster Chords and Tone Clusters

Emotional character: Terror, psychological fragmentation, the monstrous.

Film/composer examples: *Bernard Herrmann (Psycho); Jonny Greenwood; contemporary horror scoring.*

Clusters of closely spaced pitches (semitones or tones) create an undifferentiated mass of dissonance that bypasses harmonic comprehension entirely, communicating directly through acoustic discomfort. Herrmann's string scoring in *Psycho* established this as a fundamental horror film technique.

i – bII – i (Phrygian Step)

Emotional character: Ancient dread, the uncanny.

Film/composer examples: *Horror and thriller films; Iberian and Middle Eastern musical associations.*

The Phrygian half-step — the characteristic semitone descent from scale degree 2 to 1 in Phrygian mode — creates a distinctly archaic and menacing harmonic color. Its association with Spanish flamenco and Middle Eastern music gives it an exotic, other quality.

Practical Progressions: Danger

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#38 Gm – Ebm – Gm – Ebm — *Danny Elfman*

Semitone movement: m –4 m +4 m –4 m

#39 Am – Fm — *Howard Shore*

Semitone movement: m –4 m

#40 Dm – Bbm/Db – Dm – F#m – Am – Fm – Am – Cm – Em — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m –4 m^{2nd} +4 m +4 m +3 m –4 m +4 m +3 m +4 m

#41 Bbm – F#m – Bbm – F#m — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: m –4 m +4 m –4 m

#42 Ebm – Cm — David Arnold

Semitone movement: m –3 m

⚡ Action and Excitement

Action film music prioritizes forward momentum, kinetic energy, and harmonic instability. Rather than emphasizing any single emotional color, action scores use rapid harmonic movement, rhythmic drive, and strong dissonances to sustain physical arousal and excitement.

I – bVII – IV (Mixolydian Vamp)

Emotional character: Driving excitement, Americana, rock energy.

Film/composer examples: *Action and chase sequences; broadly used in action scoring.*

The Mixolydian mode's characteristic bVII chord replaces the conventional leading-tone seventh (vii°), removing harmonic resolution and replacing it with a modal, driving quality. This progression is a staple of both rock music and action film scoring.

Rapid Secondary Dominant Chains

Emotional character: Relentless forward momentum.

Film/composer examples: *Golden Age action sequences; John Williams.*

Moving through a rapid cycle of secondary dominants — V7/ii → ii → V7/V → V → I, or similar patterns — creates a strong sense of directed, purposeful movement that carries the listener forward without pause.

Tritone Substitution and Chromatic Mediant

Emotional character: Surprise, danger, unpredictability.

Film/composer examples: *Modern action scoring; Hans Zimmer; Zimmer-influenced composers.*

Unexpected chord substitutions that move by chromatic mediant relationship (e.g., I to bIII) create harmonic shocks that can punctuate action sequences with moments of surprise and danger.

Nostalgia and Reflection

Nostalgic film music tends toward warmth, gentleness, and harmonic progressions that suggest memory and the past. Modal mixture, slow harmonic rhythm, and characteristic Golden Age orchestration are all common tools.

IV – I – V – vi (Soft Resolution)

Emotional character: Warm reflection, gentle memory.

Film/composer examples: *Period drama scoring; films set in the past.*

Beginning on IV rather than I creates an immediately retrospective, subdominant-flavored quality. The resolution to vi at the end leaves the progression slightly open, suggesting an incomplete process of remembering.

I – IV – iv – I (Major with Modal Shadow)

Emotional character: Bittersweet nostalgia, the beauty and sadness of memory.

Film/composer examples: *John Williams; Golden Age Hollywood composers.*

The single modal intrusion — iv borrowed from the parallel minor — introduces shadow into warmth without disturbing the overall major-key character. This is the harmonic equivalent of a smile tinged with sadness.

Epic and Grand

Epic scoring aims to overwhelm the listener with scale, grandeur, and a sense of significance beyond the individual. Simple but powerful harmonic progressions, often used modally, are favored over complex harmonic movement.

I – \flat VI – \flat VII – I (Epic Loop)

Emotional character: Vast, grand, historically significant.

Film/composer examples: *Hans Zimmer (Gladiator, The Dark Knight); broadly used in epic scoring.*

By cycling through \flat VI and \flat VII before returning to I, this progression creates a sense of vast harmonic space without leaving the tonal center. Repeated at large orchestral scale, it becomes overwhelming in its grandeur.

Aeolian Plagal (i – \flat VI – i)

Emotional character: Ancient grandeur, mythic scale.

Film/composer examples: *Epic historical films; fantasy scoring.*

The plagal cadence from \flat VI to i has an archaic, hymnic quality that suggests both the sacred and the ancient. In minor key contexts, it creates an atmosphere of mythic grandeur.

Listening Examples

John Williams — E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial: Flying Theme (1982)

Disney Music VEVO — Search: E.T. flying theme John Williams

<https://www.youtube.com/@DisneyMusicVEVO>

John Williams — Close Encounters: Main Theme (1977)

Disney Music VEVO — Search: Close Encounters third kind theme

<https://www.youtube.com/@DisneyMusicVEVO>

Links go to official composer and label YouTube channels for longevity. Search the track name on the channel page.

Practical Progressions: Trailer Music

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#57 D – Bm7 – G – Asus4 – A — *Really Slow Motion (Cesc Vila)*

Semitone movement: M –3 m –4 M +2 M

#58 D – F#m7 – G – D – A/C# – Bm – A – G – A — *Really Slow Motion (Daniel Olsen)*

Semitone movement: M +4 m +1 M -5 M -5 M1st +2 m -2 M -2 M +2 M

#59 Cm – Eb – Bb – Fm — *Audio Machine (Ivan Torrent)*

Semitone movement: m +3 M -5 M -5 m

#60 Dm – C – Bbmaj7 – Gm – Dm – C/E – Bbmaj7 – C — *Gothic Storm (Chris Haigh)*

Semitone movement: m -2 M -2 M -3 m +7 m -2 M1st -2 M +2 M

#61 Cmaj7 – D – Cmaj7 – Am – B — *Elephant Music (Ciaran Birch)*

Semitone movement: M +2 M -2 M -3 m +2 M

★ Whimsy and Playfulness

Playful film music exploits harmonic surprise — the comedy of the unexpected chord, the whimsy of unusual intervals, and the delight of harmonic ambiguity that never stays serious for long.

I – bVI – bVII – bIII (Augmented Whimsy)

Emotional character: Playful, theatrical, slightly surreal.

Film/composer examples: *Danny Elfman (Edward Scissorhands, The Nightmare Before Christmas); Nino Rota.*

Multiple borrowed chords in quick succession create a harmonic environment that is too playful to be threatening and too strange to be straightforward. The bIII chord in a major key is particularly unexpected and toylike.

Augmented Chord Slides

Emotional character: Cartoonish humor, unstable whimsy.

Film/composer examples: *Animated film scoring; comedic cues.*

The augmented triad — two stacked major thirds — is inherently unstable and ambiguous. Resolving it in unexpected directions creates comic harmonic non sequiturs.

Practical Progressions: Happy/Optimistic

The following chord progressions are sourced from film scores and use a semitone-movement notation system. See Appendix A for the notation key.

#25 Bb – Dm – F – G/B – Bb — James Newton Howard

Semitone movement: M +4 m +3 M +2 M1st +3 M

#26 C – G7 – C – F – C – G – E7 – Am – G — John Powell

Semitone movement: M +7 M –7 M +5 M –5 M +7 M –3 M +5 m –2 M

#27 D – G – D/F# – A (x2) — Howard Shore

Semitone movement: M +5 M –5 M1st +7 M

#28 A – C#m – F#m – D – A – E — James Newton Howard

Semitone movement: M +4 m +5 m –4 M –5 M +7 M

Listening Examples

Danny Elfman — Edward Scissorhands Main Theme (1990)

Sony Music Classical — Search: Elfman Edward Scissorhands main theme

<https://www.youtube.com/@SonyMusicClassical>

Nino Rota — Fellini 8½: Main Theme (1963)

CAM Sugar / Rota Official — Search: Nino Rota Fellini 8½ main theme

<https://www.youtube.com/@CAMSugar>

Links go to official composer and label YouTube channels for longevity. Search the track name on the channel page.

Part Three: Evolution Across Film History

Harmonic Timeline: A Summary

The following table provides a condensed overview of how harmonic language in film music has evolved across the major eras, from classical diatonic foundations to the experimental present.

Era	Period	Dominant Harmonic Style	Key Composers	Hallmark Techniques
Silent Era	1900–1927	Late Romantic diatonic; common-practice tonality	Saint-Saëns; theater organists	Diminished 7ths; secondary dominants
Golden Age	1928–1965	Full orchestral; Romantic/Wagnerian; leitmotif	Steiner, Korngold, Herrmann, Rózsa	Modal mixture; bitonality; chromatic voice leading
Transitional	1966–1979	Modernist experiment; pop influence; jazz elements	Goldsmith, Mancini, Schifrin	Twelve-tone; jazz harmony; polytonality
New Hollywood	1980–1999	Neo-Romantic with modal and impressionist elements	Williams, Horner, Elfman, Morricone	Modal interchange; $\flat VII$; pandiatonicism
Contemporary	2000–present	Minimalist; hybrid electronic-orchestral; cultural integration	Zimmer, Greenwood, Guðnadóttir, Göransson	Minimal loops; microtonality; $\flat VI$; non-Western harmony

The Quick Reference Chord Progression Catalog

The table below provides a rapid-reference summary of the most important chord progressions in film music, organized by mood.

Progression	Mood/Emotion	Era / Composer	Film Example
I-V-vi-IV	Romance / Hope	All eras / Universal	Romantic film scoring broadly
vi-IV-I-V	Poignant / Reflective	New Hollywood–Present	Reunion and catharsis scenes
bVI–bVII–I	Triumph / Epic	New Hollywood / Goldsmith, Horner	Braveheart, Glory, Universal fanfare
I–bVII–IV–I	Heroic / Americana	New Hollywood / Williams	Star Wars, Indiana Jones
i–v–VII–IV	Suspense / Drive	Contemporary / Zimmer	Inception (repeated loop)
Tritone pairs	Horror / Uncanny	Golden Age–Present / Herrmann	Psycho, Vertigo
I–II (Lydian)	Wonder / Magic	New Hollywood / Williams	E.T., Close Encounters
Quartal chords	Heroic / Alien	New Hollywood / Williams, Goldsmith	Superman March, Star Trek
i–VI–III–VII	Melancholy	All minor-key eras	Dramatic underscore broadly
I–IV–iv–I	Bittersweet	Golden Age–Present / Williams, Horner	Nostalgic and memory scenes

Progression	Mood/Emotion	Era / Composer	Film Example
vii°7 chains	Terror / Dread	Silent Era– Golden Age	Classic horror accompaniment
I–bVI–bVII–bIII	Whimsy / Playful	Contemporary / Elfman	Edward Scissorhands, Nightmare Before Christmas
bVII–IV–I	Grand / Epic cadence	New Hollywood / Goldsmith	Epic and adventure scores
i–bII–i	Horror / Ancient dread	All eras	Horror and thriller cues
Cluster / tone-row	Psychological terror	Contemporary / Greenwood	There Will Be Blood, The Power of the Dog

Appendix A: Semitone Movement Notation Key

The practical chord progressions integrated throughout Part Two use a semitone-movement coding system from the “62 Chord Progressions for Film Music” collection. This system allows any progression to be easily transposed to a different key by choosing a different starting chord and applying the same numeric and major/minor formula. The notation is as follows:

Symbol	Meaning
m	Minor Chord
M	Major Chord
m1st / M1st	Minor/Major Chord in 1st Inversion
m2nd / M2nd	Minor/Major Chord in 2nd Inversion
+3 / -2	Move up/down by N semitones (half steps)
B/A	B Major with A in the bass
D5	Power chord (omit the 3rd)
ø7	Half-diminished seventh chord

To transpose any progression: choose a different starting chord, then apply the same semitone movements and major/minor qualities indicated by the formula. For example, if a progression starts on Cm and moves +4 m, starting on Dm instead would give you F#m (four semitones up, minor chord).

Note: The styles and feelings attached to each chord progression are interpretive. Other factors such as orchestration, instrumentation, and tempo all play a part in achieving the desired emotional effect. Many of these progressions contain non-diatonic chords, which is why the semitone-movement system is used rather than traditional Roman numeral analysis.

Conclusion

The history of chord progressions in film music is the history of cinema itself — a chronicle of evolving emotional sophistication, cultural exchange, and technical innovation. From the diminished seventh chords of silent film melodrama to Hans Zimmer's hypnotic i–v–VII–IV loops in *Inception*, from Bernard Herrmann's bitonal shocks in *Psycho* to Ludwig Göransson's integration of West and South African musical traditions in *Black Panther*, film composers have continuously expanded the harmonic vocabulary of cinema.

Several patterns emerge from this survey. The core emotional associations of major and minor, consonance and dissonance, resolution and tension remain surprisingly stable across a century of film scoring — these are deep features of Western (and perhaps universal) musical perception. What changes is the sophistication and specificity with which composers exploit these associations.

The Golden Age institutionalized leitmotif and modal mixture; New Hollywood introduced modernist and modal harmonic techniques; the contemporary era has embraced minimalism, hybrid production, and non-Western harmonic systems. Each generation of composers has both inherited and challenged the conventions of their predecessors, creating an extraordinarily rich and diverse harmonic tradition.

For composers, the lesson of this survey is that harmonic choices in film are never neutral — every chord, every progression carries its history with it. The \flat VII chord brings with it decades of heroic Hollywood adventure; the tritone carries the weight of every horror film ever scored. Mastery of film scoring means command of this accumulated harmonic history, and the ability to use, subvert, or transcend it in service of the story at hand.

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