Fantasy music is a genre that includes some of the iconic scores of recent years from Narnia to Star Wars, Harry Potter to Lord of the Rings. Although it is a broad genre, it does have a definite sound of its own. They tend to be large, full orchestral scores and for the most part, that traditional enormous sweeping sound remains the dominant form. Contemporary scoring techniques have probably made least impact on fantasy. In terms of orchestration, it is a very full orchestral sound including woodwind and often choir, and that is increasingly unusual in other genres. So what we are looking to achieve, is a large scale piece of traditional cinematic orchestration with a strong motif or theme.

**THEMES AND MOTIFS**

Unlike the heroic motif we were talking about before, fantasy themes are often more fully developed. They are more full themes than short motifs. Think of any of those three examples I quoted at the beginning; Harry Gregson-Williams Narnia theme, John William’s Star Wars and Howard Shore’s Lord of the Rings. They are proper tunes and while you can certainly extract a motif from them, the theme, in its full glory, is compelling and
involving. This means you need more development and although a great motif is a good place to start, once you’ve cracked that you aren’t done yet.

3 Quick rules of thumb for writing good tunes.

**Repetition = memorability.** That doesn’t mean simply repeating the same notes and rhythm over and over. It means taking your motif and using the basic movement or rhythmic element in a variety of forms. *Narnia* for example, starts with a three-note motif repeated. It then returns to the same basic motivic shape, but transposed up a 4th.

Rhythmic repetition is often even more effective than melodic. If you find a distinctive rhythmic device, like the beginning of *Happy Birthday*, or *Yesterday* by the Beatles and use that regularly throughout your theme, it will add enormously to the memorability.

**Stepwise movement or leap followed by step movement in the opposite direction.** You can’t just leap around all over the shop and a surprisingly large number of tunes move by step almost exclusively. Where there is a larger leap, almost invariably the theme moves back a step in the opposite direction. Take the beginning of the *ET* theme for example.

**Structure A A B A.** How you rollout your motif is important. A common structure is A motif followed by A motif with slight change to the resolution.
Then a B idea – something completely different, then back to the main A motif again.

HARMONY

This is the richest of all genres harmonically. It is closest to classical writing and requires a good working knowledge of four-part harmony and composition to work well. The depth, richness and complexity of the fantasy music means you need a really good plan before you get going. This includes a really well structured chord progression to complement that killer theme you’re about to write.

One chord progression that comes up often - Narnia and Avatar for example:

Am – F – C – G

WORKFLOW

When writing “Big Music” and fantasy is for the most part, big complex music, you need a good plan. That is to say, if you are using a large number of string lines, woodwind, brass choir and all the rest, you must have worked out in advance the chord progression and the theme. I would encourage you to write it down and even put chord changes in as markers in your DAW. The reason being, that the bigger the arrangement gets, the more chance there is
that you will end up with lines which don’t line up harmonically. So your choir might be on chord of A minor while someone buried deep in the woodwind, has moved onto C major. Now it might not leap out at you as wrong, but wrong it is. And eventually those kinds of mistakes will blur the edges of your epic creation and undermine its impact. This is particularly true when you start creating…

**FAST RUNS AND EFFECTS**

Fantasy is the last bastion of the fast moving run - those 32nd note patterns that John Williams uses at the start of ‘Hedwig’s Theme’ in *Harry Potter* for example. It’s not only strings, but also woodwind and harp as well. These aren’t as difficult to write as they sound if you are really certain of your harmonic orientation, but easy to get wrong if you are not. They are however difficult to do with samples and it remains a major challenge even with specialist libraries like *Orchestral String Runs* at your disposal. If you don’t have a specialist library, try layering tremolando samples with a spiccato. That works pretty well for strings. There are quite a lot of string and woodwind runs as presets where the run has been performed, recorded and sampled in its entirety. This is good but they don’t always fit the time available so you might need to bounce them to audio and adjust them there. Harp glissandi are the same but there are some great libraries which specialize in harp glissandi. My favorite is VSL which has three speeds of glissando in every key.
OK this is a little bit silly but humor me and we’ll see how we get on.

1. Let’s use the clichéd chord progression

Am – F – C – G

2. Repeat that a couple of times in simple middle range strings.

3. Write a lovely haunting memorable theme that doesn’t sound like Narnia. (Good luck with that one)

4. Now go to your B theme and add some brass lines.

5. Build up to a big moment using timpani rolls, cymbal swells and harp glissando and then return to the A theme with the choir brought in for added oomph.

Hey presto! Well not quite hey presto, there’s so much more to it than that, but it’s as good a place as any to start!
SOUNDS AND SAMPLES

**Orchestral String Runs – Orchestral Tools**

A library entirely dedicated to making the impossible possible. Lots of sophisticated tools that really do work to create realistic scoreable string runs. The scripted played runs work better at some tempi than others but this is as close as you'll get with samples. Also a comprehensive section of pre-recorded runs.

**Hollywood Winds – Cinesamples**

A really good selection of woodwind runs and rips. The latest version includes a clever form of tempo synching that keeps the runs perfectly in synch with your cue.
Harps – Vienna Symphonic Library

There are so many harps to choose from but VSL remains my favorite. Beautifully recorded. The perfect balance between softness and edge. An excellent and very playable selection of glissandi all make this one a winner.
FANTASY EXAMPLES


HGW strikes again with this score typical of the fantasy genre. It may be what is expected, but it is still beautifully executed and a fantastic fantasy score. In this track, HGW cleverly gives you the full theme a couple of times in the first minute, but it still doesn’t feel like you have heard it in all its unabashed glory. The reason for this, is he keeps changing the lead instrument. It is a long theme, which fantasy themes often are. The piccolo, followed by the horn, introduce the theme, but they only play an abbreviated version of it. The main theme really begins with the piano at around 18 seconds. This is then briefly picked up by the high strings before being passed back to the woodwinds to finish. Note the use of chimes, glockenspiel and other high metallic instruments that add magic sparkle in a lot of fantasy scores. We’ve even managed the odd harp glissando already. Its not long before we start to pick up the pace with some rhythmic strings and a rather long 01:17 into the piece, we finally hear the main them played in full by the strings.
Despite being originally intended for Harry’s feathery friend, this became the main theme for the film and is scattered throughout the franchise regardless of who took up the reigns of composer after Williams. The father of modern cinematic music has once again written a theme that is both extremely memorable and contains enough unexpected intervals and twists to keep it interesting and give rise to any number of variations. A very clever trick.

This is possibly the most iconic use of the celesta in modern cinematic music, which isn’t a particularly common instrument anyway so we already have a slightly strange, ethereal sound to play with. To add to this, the sound has actually been manipulated further to sound even stranger.

Hedwig’s Theme is essentially in the key of E minor, but the chord progressions are slightly unusual. The first two bars of the theme outline the E minor chord, and the bass extends the E into bar 5, clearly establishing the key. But in bar 6, we get a very strange chord:
Taken together, the notes of bar 6 are B - D# - F - A#, which is similar to E minor’s dominant 7th chord, B - D# - F# - A, which would have been what one might normally expect to hear. By substituting F# with F, and A with A#, he instead uses a chord that is a lot more interesting, a V7b5 (dominant 7th with a flattened 5th). It suggests a whole tone scale, which again has associations with mystery. If you try playing the tune sticking strictly to the E minor scale you get a much less distinctive tune.

**ALICE IN WONDERLAND** BY DANNY ELFMAN – ‘ALICE’S THEME’

The king of the weird and wonderful reproduced his trademark dark fantasy sound with this rather mysterious score for the 2010 *Alice in Wonderland*. The partnership between Tim Burton and Danny Elfman goes right back to 1989 (*Batman*), so the two know each other pretty well. Burton does love to make things more sinister than they first appear, for example, did you notice the decapitated human
heads Alice used as stepping-stones to get across the castle moat? Looks like Disney forgot to mention to Tim that it was a kid’s film.

It doesn’t take long before we are introduced to Elfman’s signature choir sound of women and boys. However, being a keen lyricist, Elfman does love an opportunity to squeeze some actual words into his scores. There is something incredibly unnerving about a bunch of kids reminding you to be careful not to lose your head…

Again, check out those high metal percussion elements and harp glissandi. Elfman loves to use dark, minor intervals. His scores are littered with minor 3rds, augmented 4ths and minor 6ths. He has made such a career out of manipulating this style that it is hard for anyone to write a creepy fantasy piece without sounding like a poor imitation of him.

**HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON** by John Powell – ‘THIS IS BERK’

This must have been a really fun project to work. A beautifully animated movie about the adventures of a medieval boy and his dragon. Again we have a fairly typical orchestral instrumentation, but this time with the addition of older instruments like the
lute to add to the medieval vibe we’ve got going on.

In “This is Berk” we are presented with two themes. The first is played on the horns and features from time to time throughout the film. Immediately after the horns, Powell was quite clever in his use of what sounds like high bassoon and oboe to introduce the main theme. Double reeds have a distinctly medieval feel. Then the Irish whistle and fiddle are introduced which, with its characteristic rolls and grace notes, gives the tune a very Celtic feel to it. Once the main theme kicks off, there is also a very wild west, ‘yee-haw’ cowboy feel to this opening, entirely appropriate for a boy riding a dragon. The male choir really helps that feeling, redolent of the scores of Ennio Morricone. You could be riding with the Magnificent Seven or any number of other western classics and that is a great idea, linking two period genres, the Celtic medieval and the western in one extremely effective score.