Use of **Leitmotif** in *Les Miserables*

(all quotes and references taken from the school’s edition)

A *leitmotif* is a a musical theme or snippet of theme (even just a chord) which identifies a person, situation, item etc. It is first used when discussing the operas of Richard Wagner in the 19th Century. More up to date usage is in film music where the Darth Vader leitmotif is very recognisable.

*Les Miserables* has several leitmotifs which recur at important points in the drama. The Prologue alone contains *at least* 7 themes which come back in the show. In this sense it acts like an overture to a broadway musical which is usually just a mishmash of songs which will shortly be heard in their entirety. Here though, these early pre-echoes don’t just give the audience a snippet of what’s to come but invests some of the dramatic and emotional importance of the theme.

Here are some examples from the Prologue:

1. **“Look Down” & March theme**

   ![Music notation image](image)

   This is the very opening of the show in short score. The bass them is based on “Look Down, Look Down” sung by the chain gang, and itself a theme which returns again and again whenever down trodden folk are on stage or alluded to eg in no 10 The Beggars. The urchin, Gavroche, has a countermelody to the “Look Down” theme much in the way that Valjean and Javert have a dialogue over the harmony of “Look Down”. Marius and Eponine also have a dialogue using this theme, rising sequentially, during the Robbery, no 11.
The martial treble theme is similar to French military band music - the use of dotted rhythms in French Baroque music is very notable - and Berlioz uses similar rhythms in his music eg look back at Symphonie Fantastique. This martial theme recurs in no. 19 Building the Barricade as the barricade is brought on stage, no 20, Javert at the Barricade, just after Eponine dies when it is turned into a quiet funeral march and no 24 Final Battle at the beginning of the scene, in this case it is a stilted march in 5/4.

2  “On My Own”

The song On My Own occurs in the first number of Act 2, Building the Barricade. In it, Eponine is speaking of her love for Marius, a student who, though fond of her as a friend does not love her as he loves Cosette (who he has met once, very briefly. Suspend disbelief and remember that many great love stories are built on this eg West Side Story which is itself based on Romeo and Juliet). This theme is first heard in the Prologue when Valjean declares “Freedom is mine” and the wistful nature of Valjean’s musings echo those of Eponine at the start of Act 2.

The lyrics have similarities eg Valjean sings “The day begins and now let’s see what this world will do for me” while Eponine sings “I love him but every day I’m learning. All my life I’ve only been pretending. Without me his world will go on turning”. The difference is that Valjean feels positive but Eponine feels negative. It comes back again in the Epilogue when Valjean lies on his death bed and is confessing all to Cosette and the ghost of Fantine (and, eventually Eponine) comes back to draw him peacefully to death. Valjean here sings of writing his confession much as Eponine, at the start of Act 2, is publicly expressing (or confessing) her love for Marius.
3  **Secco recitative**

The use of *secco recitative* in *Les Miserables* is notable. This form of dialogue was found in nearly all Baroque and early Classical operas but fell out of fashion in the mid 19th century when fully orchestrated thematic development replaced dry dialogue. There are many examples of secco recitative in *Le Mis* and the motto theme shown below (rising and falling tritone followed by a fourth) is particularly important.

![Motto Theme](image)

The tritone is also known as “diavolus in musica” (the Devil in Music) and has been mentioned at length when looking at *West Side Story*.

4  **“Empty Chairs”**

The Bishop first announces the “Empty Chairs and Empty Tables” motif in the Prologue when showing kindness to Valjean.

![Prologue - Bishop](image)

There is a similar mood of desperation and desolation as in the song in Act 2 and both times there is a prayer like quality to the words and music (eg Bishop “By the witness of the martyrs, by the Passion and the blood”...Marius in “Cafe Song” sings “The very words that they sung became their last communion on the lonely barricade at dawn”).
5  The “Law” theme
Two constables who arrest Valjean following his theft from the Bishop of Digne introduce a staccato E minor theme which is associated with Javert later in the piece eg in no 4 The Docks when Javert enters.

The vocal theme is also transformed at the point in the prologue when Valjean decides to change his name and reinvent himself and when Javert commits suicide in Act 2.

Interestingly, the “stars” by which Javert swore to capture Valjean in Act 1 are now black and cold and offer no solace to him.

There are a few other themes which come back but the following are more obvious and therefore easier to remember (and write about...)

Here are some other motifs which are of importance.

6  Valjean’s “Who am I?” motif
This almost pentatonic melody is played by high violins, wind and percussion. In a major key, it lends brightness to the hitherto dark, brooding atmosphere and, while in the first number it soon gives way to another theme, it does lift the gloom briefly. Notably the underlying harmonic movement is that of Fantine’s “I Dreamed a Dream”, thus emphasising the connection between these two characters and the way in which their fates are intertwined.
A very important occurrence is when Valjean reappears as the mayor and factory owner in the middle of no 2 At The End of the Day.

Here it is in a minor key and in augmentation. Note the rising third at the end of the line, a motif associated with Fantine (eg in “I Dreamed a Dream” and “Fantin’s Death”)

Another important occurrence is in The Robbery at he point when Marius and Cosette set eyes upon each other for the first time. Here it is very obviously combined with Fantine’s “I Dreamed a Dream” demonstrating how important this is for Marius and Cosette - a dream romance, a new beginning - but also how everything Fantine had hoped for herself might be fulfilled for her daughter.

A major reoccurrence is in the middle of no 5 Cart Crash when Valjean decides to confess in order to save an innocent man before going on the run once again.
We also hear this theme at the start of no 19 “Who Am I” when the various plot strands in Act 1 are drawn together in a typically operatic finale manner. One subtle reprise of it comes in :Rue Plummet” at the point where Valjean says that Cosette is “such a lonely child”.

The “End of the Day” compound time theme

This is used in many ways in the show eg in the Act 2 battles where this syncopated theme is combined with the stirring melody of “Do You Hear the People Sing” (no 14). A version is also used for no 5 Cart Crash. The use of this theme is characterised by its excitement, time changes and the instrumental colours used eg woodwind stabs, bass syncopation and so on.

And Fantine’s theme

Fantine’s theme

This theme (first heard at letter R in no 4 The Docks) is one of the most moving of the melodies in Les Miserables. Valjean recognises Fantine from somewhere before she tells him how he let her foreman sack her from the factory, forcing her to end up working as a prostitute. It contains a rising third which is an interval hugely associated with Fantine, eg in “I Dreamed a Dream” at the climax of each line in the verse. Fantine’s Death uses this theme in a very, very flat key (7 flats...).

We hear it again at the start of the Epilogue when Valjean is contemplating his own demise.

Note here the sort of quote from “At the End of the Day” in Valjean’s line, the triplets giving the feeling of compound time in his part and the text - “at the end of my days”. Little touches like this in the libretto and music help to create a sense of unity in the whole piece.
Vocal Characterisation in *Les Miserables*

**The Thénardiers**
Despite being set in post-revolutionary France, several characters are straight out of the London of *Oliver!* The “lovely ladies” of the Docks are the first instance of this but more noticeable are the Thénardiers, the owners of the inn where Cosette lodges. Both use the “Cock-er-nee” put on accent to great comic effect and their big number, “Master of the House” inevitably brings down the house. In Victor Hugo’s original they anything but amusing, rather they are very sinister but here they are employed as unpleasant “buffo” characters. A “buffo” character is a comic character in Grand Opera who relieves the pressure of an often tense plot eg the smugglers in *Carmen* or Ping, Pang and Pong in *Turandot*. The humorous one liners from Madame, particularly when complaining about Messieurs lack of sexual potency and all round unpleasantness are similar in their acidity to those of Joanne in Sondheim’s *Company*. A good example is the following:

**Chorus & Thenardier**  
Master of the House  
**Madame**  
Master and a half  
**Chorus & Thenardier**  
Comforter, philosopher  
**Madame**  
Don’t make me laugh  
**Chorus & Thenardier**  
Servant of the poor, butler to the great  
**Madame**  
Hypocrite and toady and inebriate  
**Chorus & Thenardier**  
Everybody bless the landlord, everybody bless his spouse  
**Thenardier**  
Everybody raise a glass  
**Madame**  
Raise it up the master’s arse!

Compare these with Joanne’s interjections in “The Little Things” in *Company*.

**Cosette**
Little Cosette’s tune, “Castle on a Cloud” has a deliberately childlike, nursery rhyme quality to it. the use of a recorder sound on keyboard (or recorder in some interpretations) emphasises this. The theme returns during Attack Plummet (no 17) when Cosette tells of hearing sounds in the dark when Thenardier and his gang plan their attack. At this point her old fear of the dark woods comes back to haunt her. Adult Cosette’s music is quite operatic. The triplets and time changes of “In My Life” help to emphasise the whirlwind of emotions welling inside her having only met Marius once and fallen head over heels in love. Some of the climaxes to her ensembles with Marius and Eponine go extremely high eg “A Heart Full of Love” ends of a high B♭. Compare this to Maria’s music in the “Tonight Ensemble” from *West Side Story*.
Marius
Marius is a close to a “romantic hero” as we get in *Les Mis*. His music is in a tenor range most of the time though “Empty Chairs and Empty Tables” is in more of a baritone tessitura, reflecting the emotional depth of the song. There is an interesting dramatic parallel between Marius and Tony in *West Side Story* as both have conflicts of passion - to fight with friends or stay with the woman they love. Different circumstances and outcomes but similar emotions.

Valjean
Valjean is in some respects an anti-hero. An ex-convict and a thief he gains redemption by the way in which he turns his life around and puts right some of the wrongs perpetrated in his name ie the sacking of Fontine which leads to her prostitution, death and Cosette being cruelly abused by the Thenardiers. This duality is reflected in his music. On the one hand we have the rapid, angry introspection of some of his Act 1 soliloquies eg in the Prologue and then there is the prayer like “God on High”. Valjean needs to be a good actor to portray a complex and ever changing character (remember that he reinvents himself during the plot) and a very good singer to cope with the vocal demands of the role. Valjean’s range is mainly in the tenor tessitura but occasionally goes below the stave. He needs to blast out a top A easily and hold a ppp top A in falsetto. Unlike Tony in *West Side Story*, Valjean needs to be a trained singer.

Javert
Javert has two distinct sides to his musical profile. On the one hand we have the strict, militaristic “law” motif which accompanies much of his singing. Then we have the aria “Stars” which has altogether more lilting feel to it. Javert is a law man through and through who believes that what he does is correct and this is why he commits suicide. He cannot live with the thought that following the letter on the law has turned him into a villain himself as he has pursued the innocent and victimised those who needed support most eg Fantine. Interestingly, at the point of his suicide, he takes on the theme sung by Valjean when he decides to reject his old life and reinvent himself. Some commentators (eg in the Cambridge Guide to Musicals) suggest that Javert and Valjean have very similar material throughout, this showing them to be two sides of “everyman”.

*Les Miserables* in the context of opera
*Les Miserables* builds on the foundation of French operatic tradition. The use of spectacular effects and scenery has been well documented in French opera since the Baroque era and the spectacular revolving barricade in the West End/Broadway production is a modern reinterpretation of this. The creators of the show are able to have very clean, quick changes of scene between different locations eg the barricade and the sewers allowing the music and therefore the story and plot to flow onwards without needing music for scene changes. Many Grand Operas of the French tradition have similar themes to *Les Miserables* such as social injustice and so on. Bizet’s *Carmen* has some similarities for example - Carmen is a factory worker who is despised by her co-workers, there are a band of outlaws, the main characters die at the end and so on. As a through-composed piece of musical theatre *Les Miserables* has more in common with opera than typical Broadway musicals. Musicals such as *Les Miserables*, *Phantom of the Opera* and so on are sometimes referred to as “megamusicals”.
The following websites have some useful information on the musical version of *Les Miserables* as well as Victor Hugo’s original novel:

www.lesmis.com

http://www.geocities.com/stuartfernie/mismusical.htm

http://www.bookrags.com/history/popculture/les-miserables-sjpc-03/

Follow up work

i  Try to read Victor Hugo’s novel - it is huge, however. Maybe read an online synopsis of the plot to get a feel for the bit Boublil and Schoenberg left out.

ii  The same creative team also wrote *Miss Saigon* and *Martin Guerre*. Try to listen to some bits of these and find out a little about the music and the creative process behind them. Are there similarities with *Les Misérables* in terms of subject matter, musical ideas and so on

Essay questions

1  Discuss a scene from two different stage works in which you feel drama, text and music are unified creatively and effectively. Use the “Tonight Ensemble” from *West Side Story* and “One Day More” from *Les Miserables* as your sources

2  Discuss some of the ways in which music has links with one other art form

   Literature - Victor Hugo with *Les Mis*, Romeo and Juliet with *West Side Story*,

3  Discuss ways in which music is used to characterise a particular role in at least two stage works with which you are familiar. *The Thenardiers* in *Les Mis*, Joanne in *Company*, Roger in *Rent*, The Madwoman in *Curlew River*, the King in *8 Songs for a Mad King*