

# East of Eden: Climactic Scene

## George Burt

Generally, the climax of a film involves a sequence requiring music. In many cases, music is needed to bring out the explosive potential of the sequence and to help build on those elements central to the dramatic line. A perfect example of this occurs toward the end of *East of Eden*.

In the climactic scene of *Eden*, Cal (James Dean) drags his brother Aaron to a nearby bordello to introduce him to the establishment's owner/madam—their mother—whom Aaron has thought to be dead. The sequence strips the main characters of any lingering pretensions and exposes their raw inner fears and predilections.

The score, written by Leonard Rosenman, contains many significant aspects, not the least of which is the musical language employed for the more intense scenes. The language is highly chromatic and expressionistic, which in 1955 was considered to be relatively unorthodox in the film medium. When Rosenman brought this style to film, many were excited about how well this direction in the score pointed up the film.

Numerous factors entered in: Rosenman's own concert music style at the time, which reflected his studies with Arnold Schoenberg and Roger Sessions; the nature of the *Eden* film which, because of

its psychological content, lent itself to an intensified musical treatment; and, perhaps equally important, the openness of its director, Elia Kazan, to a different musical approach. However, to be fair, the expressionistic musical point of view or style had found its way into isolated moments of many film scores before *Eden* such as scores by Hanns Eisler, David Raskin, and others. Still, I believe that it is in *Eden* that this style came into full view.

It is important to know what immediately preceded the sequence in question: Cal has just suffered what he feels is the ultimate rejection from his father. After having laboriously raised beans to earn money which Cal could offer his father as a birthday present, the father refuses the gift saying he won't benefit from something which had cost the lives of young men. (The money was to win Cal affection and respect by making up for a disastrous investment his father had made a few years earlier. Because of the war's advent, Cal's bean crop had sold at a great profit.) The father demanded Cal try to be more like his brother Aaron, the son for whom the father has always shown preference. The rejection of the gift brings Cal to the breaking point and, sobbing, he runs out of the house.

In the scene which begins the sequence, Cal, in the backyard, has disappeared behind a tree. It is night time. No music as yet. Abra, Aaron's girlfriend, runs after Cal to console him and Aaron follows her. Aaron, a spiteful and vindictive sort, calls Cal "bad and vicious" and demands that Cal stay away from Abra. Silence. The music begins at the precise moment in which Cal moves out from behind the tree toward Aaron. Later, Cal says his first line: "You want to go some place with me, Aaron?"

Rosenman opens the cue with a repeated chord idea followed by an arpeggiated figure in the muted brass. As the brass "hold" on the accumulated notes, the repeated chord idea is allowed to continue. The nature of the complex harmonies involved and the thudding chordal figure instantly fuse the scene with impending explosiveness and foreboding. The music gives fair warning that the time for confrontation has come (see Example 1).

Example 1.

*Under the tree  
outside house*

*Cal approaches  
Aaron*

**:00**

**:03**

**:06**

**ANDANTE**

**♩ = 80**

Musical score for Example 1, measures 1-4. The score is in 3/4 time with a tempo of **ANDANTE** and a metronome marking of **♩ = 80**. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score consists of four systems of staves. The first system includes a string staff with circled measure numbers 1 and 2, and a woodwind staff with circled measure numbers 3 and 4. The second system includes a brass staff with circled measure numbers 3 and 4, and a piano staff with circled measure numbers 3 and 4. The piano staff has the instruction **HNS: BSSNS: P ARP: (Piano, Cued)**. The woodwind staff has the instruction **Cuo: (VIBRA)**. The brass staff has the instruction **TRMBS.**. The piano staff has the instruction **p sub smile**. There are various performance markings such as **sfz**, **sub**, and **smile**.

**:12**

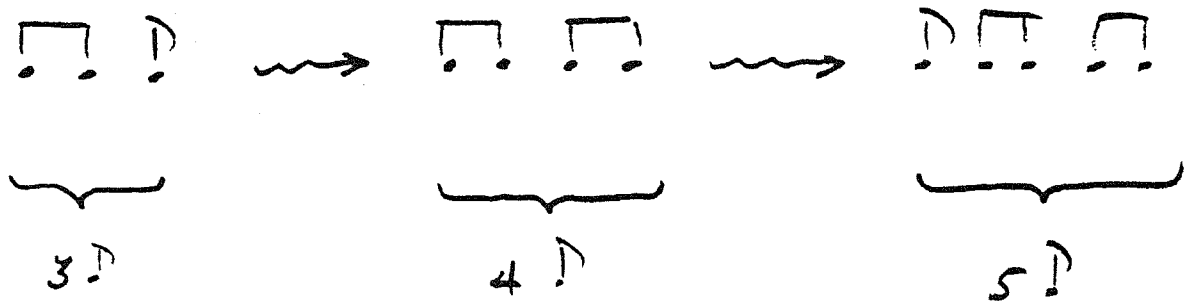
**:18** *Cal: "you want to go  
some place with me Aaron?"*

Musical score for Example 1, measures 5-8. The score continues from the previous system. The first system includes a string staff with circled measure numbers 5 and 6, and a woodwind staff with circled measure numbers 7 and 8. The second system includes a brass staff with circled measure numbers 7 and 8, and a piano staff with circled measure numbers 7 and 8. The piano staff has the instruction **pp**. The woodwind staff has the instruction **STGS.**. The brass staff has the instruction **TRMBS.**. The piano staff has the instruction **TAM TAM.**. The woodwind staff has the instruction **VLNS**. The piano staff has the instruction **STAY PIANO**. There are various performance markings such as **pp**, **sfz**, **sub**, and **smile**. At the bottom, there is a note: **(ascending Tri/Tones)**.

Significantly, 18 seconds pass before Cal's first line—a formidably long time on film unless, of course, there is something there to carry the shot. Here, Cal's anguish is in the forefront. His sudden silence and slow, deliberate movement out from under the tree has treacherous implications. We might ask whether all this is sufficiently apparent to rule out the need for music. I don't think so. An important consideration—the lighting—must be taken into account. The shot, of necessity, is low-lit and the characters, as well as their facial expressions, are barely discernible. The shot does not make Cal's change of attitude or resolve as clear as perhaps it should. His abrupt change from frustration to deep-set anger is basic to the whole sequence. Thus the music and particularly this music makes a valuable contribution.

From the outset the music has a telling quality. The repeated chord idea quickly gathers momentum by rhythmically additive means (see Example 2).

Example 2.



The chord itself has a questioning, ambivalent quality which can only be analyzed in the context of how it is followed. For instance, the top note of the chord, C, clearly gives way to the C-sharp in m. 3, the beginning pitch of the arpeggiated figure. The remaining notes of the chord are treated in a much more complex

manner. Notice that the pitches of an F-sharp minor triad are embedded in the chord, and that these pitches are restated in the opening of the arpeggiation. This connection, subtly stated by means of octave transferral, suggests an affirmation of the F-sharp minor triad, in which case the remaining notes of the chord can then be heard as appoggiaturas, subtly resolved in the arpeggiation (see Example 3).

### Example 3.

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled "meas 1-3" and contains a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. It shows a sequence of notes: a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The middle staff is a bass clef staff showing a sequence of notes: a quarter note F#3, a quarter note A3, a quarter note B3, and a quarter note C4. The bottom staff is a lower staff (likely a grand staff's lower part) showing a sequence of notes: a quarter note F#2, a quarter note A2, a quarter note B2, and a quarter note C3. Arrows and dashed lines connect notes between staves, indicating pitch relationships and arpeggiation. Specifically, arrows point from the notes in the top staff down to the notes in the middle staff, and from the notes in the middle staff down to the notes in the bottom staff. Dashed lines also connect notes between staves, suggesting octave transferrals or other harmonic relationships.

The passage becomes more complex as linear and harmonic relationships mentioned in the above are detached from their origins and redirected. In m. 5, for instance, the upper four notes of the repeated chord have been transposed up a step while the lower two notes, A and F-sharp, are preserved. The effect is that of a wedge being driven into the chord complex itself, forcing one segment (X) away from its initial position, creating an auxiliary function (Y) and an expectation for a return (X), which takes place in m. 8 (see Example 4).

The chord returns many times throughout the sequence and indeed, becomes a key element in preparation for the climactic ending. Technically, in each instance the chord functions as a special kind of pedal point (where the transposed form exists as

## Example 4.

Handwritten musical notation for Example 4, showing three measures of music. The first measure is labeled "m 1-3 (x)", the second "m 5-6 (y)", and the third "m 8 (z)". Below the staff, there are three chordal figures labeled "(aux)" with curved lines underneath them.

auxiliary to the original form), and as a springboard from which pitches in the upper register are derived. More importantly, it is in dramatic contrast to the melodic material introduced in m. 7. This material, combined with the chordal idea, helps force the issue.

The melodic material is especially drawn to bring out the lyrical quality and feeling of resolve implicit in the dramatic situation. Notice how in m. 8 the violin line, which has been holding a high B (taken from the sustained brass chord), suddenly rebounds off Cal's first line. This motive (a), taken from an earlier cue (R11 P3) is the source of successive variant statements throughout the first half of the sequence (see Example 5).

## Example 5.

Handwritten musical notation for Example 5, showing a single line of music. The first part is labeled "R11 P3" and the second part is labeled "R13 P1". The notation includes various notes, rests, and a triplet at the end.

At this point (m. 9), Rosenman brings back the thudding chordal figure that effectively prepares for Cal's next line: "I got something to show you." The word "something" is a euphemism, of course, because what Cal has in mind will take Aaron's world

apart. A variant of the motive (a) interjects (m. 10) and this is followed by a third motivic idea stated by the bass clarinet, harp, and piano (m. 11). This motive in rapid sixteenth-note triplets provides an additional impetus to the sequence and brings both the melodic and chordal ideas into sharp relief. In m. 11, the music dramatically energizes both Cal's action and his next line. Leaping up alongside a tree, Cal says: "Maybe our mother didn't die and go to heaven after all, Aaron." A complex arpeggiated dyadic figure in the harp sustains the thought (m. 13). The pitches which are employed frame the moment in preparation for Cal's next line, a blockbuster: "Maybe she's alive some place" (see Example 6).

For the rest of this first scene (up to the dissolve to the bordello), Cal recounts an instance pointing out their mother's "goodness"—a quality with which Aaron himself identifies—and, Cal's "badness." This sudden rush of dialogue created a problem for the music and it is a problem which occurs quite frequently in film scoring. Rosenman was confronted with the task of backing off somewhat to allow space for the dialogue while still having to maintain the already-established level of intensity. Any drop in intensity here would compromise the evolving climactic arch of the entire sequence. Rosenman solves the problem discretely, drawing on established material.

Beginning with m. 17, Rosenman recalls the repeated chord motif to punctuate Cal's recollections of he and Aaron's childhood stories. Strings and muted horns hold on a chord as Cal, bounding away from a tree, begins talking hurriedly. In m. 20, the repeated chord idea is stated once again but, this time, by muted brass in the middle register which lightens the musical texture. The next five measures (mm. 21-25) consist mainly of lyrical extension of motive (a) in the violins accompanied by a series of rising fourth chords in the bassoons and clarinets. The texture is more transparent here than in preceding measures and it is in this manner that Rosenman is able to provide musical space for the dialogue. The music functions as a kind of pervasive chorale and perpetuates the primitive, religious idea that the mother has gone to heaven.

Example 6.

Cal: "I got something to show you."      M.S.: Cal and Aaron      Cal hops alongside tree      Cal: "Maybe our Mother didn't die and go to Heaven after all, Aaron"

**:24**      **:30**

FL. *mp*      *acc.*      *acc.*      *acc.*

9      10      11      12

*STGS.*      *Pizz.*      *Pizz.*      *acc.*

(HNS: W.W: PIANO)      *3*      *3*      *3*

*Bs. cl.*      *MP.*      *PIANO*      *(tritone)*

*(prepares for Cal's motion)*

Cal: "Maybe she's alive someplace."

**:36**      **:42**      **:48**

*(Picc.)*      *Fl.*      *acc.*      *acc.*

VlNS.      *p*      *p*      *p*

13      14      15      16

*HARP: CELESTA*

*(sounds off Cal's line)*      *5-note motive*



There remains, however, the question of intensity and how it is maintained. Notice the violin line (mm. 21-25). It consists of several leaps, large and small, nearly encompassing a two-octave range. A high level of expressivity is especially contained within the line; this is totally in keeping with the dramatic intent of the scene, which serves as a prologue in giving lie to Aaron's conception of their mother as "heaven's youngest angel." As Cal urges Aaron forward, the scene ends with a wide-spread chord consisting of all notes of the chromatic scale (except D). The chord shrieks for resolution (see Example 7).

The problem described in the last several paragraphs is a common one for film composers and originates with the nature of film itself. A critical sequence can, and often does begin with little or no dialogue. Close-ups and cuts from one angle to another visually reveal or introduce pertinent meanings and levels of emotionality. Film is unique in this sense. In such sequences, music is often required to heighten what is suggested on screen or to counter with veiled dramatic meaning. In either case, the problem for the composer arises when the dialogue or action suddenly takes off and forces the music to go into a different gear as was the case in *Eden*. If the on-screen change is to be accommodated by the music without any loss to the overall level of emotionality, a solution must be found. I have seen many pictures where inattention to such a detail has been detrimental to the dramatic line.

On the dissolve to the hallway in the bordello, Rosenman brings back the repeated chord figure which is doubly punctuated in the strings by means of thirty-second note values (m. 33). The effect is extremely forceful, especially when one considers what follows in the next measure (m. 34). Winds and trumpets in unison are given the five-note motive introduced in the first cue of the film. "Cal's motive," as Rosenman labels it, has been used throughout the film in association with Cal's scenes with or about his mother. By reel 13, the motive has acquired a meaning and a power which is developed and realized over time (see Example 8).

One additional musical idea enters at m. 36 and this is first stated by the trombones. Notice that the outer voices of this

Example 7.

Cal hops away from tree

:54

Handwritten musical score for Example 7, measures 17-20. The score includes staves for XYLO, WINDS, BRASS, TRIAN., GUS., and PIANO. Measure numbers 17, 18, 19, and 20 are circled. Performance instructions include "PIANO STES. (Ply.) deliberate TRASord." and "BRASS. Sord."

Cal: "I just want to show you something"

:60

1:06

Handwritten musical score for Example 7, measures 21-24. The score includes staves for CLRS., TRPTS., TRBS., and CAVCO (CELLI/BASS). Measure numbers 21, 22, 23, and 24 are circled. Performance instructions include "mp (BSSNS)" and "CAVCO (CELLI/BASS)".

Example 7. (cont'd.)

Cal: "Can you look at the Truth?"

Arnon faces cam., Cal comes up from behind to grab Arnon's arm.

1:12

1:18

(CELESTA) (HARP.) f  
FLS.

(SORD.) TRPTS. f

VLS. p

(SORD.) TRPTS. f

(Sul pont.)

(Sul pont.)

PIZZ.

PIANO

(Sul pont.)

(P) HARP

HNS.

(bounds off Cal's line)

Cal puts hand on Arnon's shoulder and urges him forward.

1:24

1:30

1:36

poco a poco modo ordinario . . . . (ORD.)

VLS. cresc.

VLS. sul pont.

HARP. gliss.

BASSES

R.Y.M.B. (HAND STICK)

molto cresc.

Example 8.

Cal and Aaron in hallway  
leading to Kate's room

1:36 (5-note motive) 1:42

STAS. 33 34 35

OB. CL. TRPT. FL. Picc.

HNS. HRP DIA. (cue)

BSSNS. (Bs. + Tuba)

1:48 (5-note motive) 1:54

Cam. tightens on Cal and Aaron as they approach Kate's door

STAS. 36 37 38

TRBS. SENZA SORD.

HNS.

BSSNS. Timb. (Bs.)

Burt, *East of Eden: Climactic Scene*  
Example 8. (cont'd.)

Cal and Aaron  
in front of  
door.

Aaron stands  
aside.

Cal opens door... walks  
in. (Cam. over Cal's shoulder)

1:54

Example 9.

var. of  
5-note motive

36 37 38

Choral prog.

repeated chord

chordal progression form the intervals of a perfect fifth, an augmented fifth, and then a major seventh. Though the idea was introduced several reels prior, it is used here in association with

Cal's ominous intentions and tends to corroborate the slow, deliberate style of his delivery. Note also how it musically prepares for a harmonic variant of the repeated-chord idea (see Example 9).

Given the musical material at hand, Rosenman is in a perfect position to score the rest of the scene up to the climactic end. Each motive serves in the interest of every subsequent need. A variant of the five-note motive is stated vigorously by three horns (m. 37) and corresponds to the frame in which the camera tightens on Cal and Aaron approaching Kate's doorway. The repeated chord motive quickly picks up on the muscular quality of the action. As the two brothers finally stand in front of Kate's (their mother's) door, Rosenman heightens the moment by bringing back the sixteenth-note triplet figure that swoops upward through a chain of tritone-related intervals and leads emphatically to a high B-flat when Cal opens the door and walks in (see Example 10).

Example 10.

Handwritten musical score for Example 10, showing four measures of music. The score is annotated with time markers and descriptive notes:

- Measure 1:** Time marker **2:00**. Annotation: "Cal stands before Kate, she is dozing".
- Measure 2:** Time marker **2:03**. Annotation: "Kate wakes... sees Cal".
- Measure 3:** Time marker **2:09**. Annotations: "C.E.L. STAIR FLS" (Cello, Euphonium, Trombone, Flute, Saxophone) and "C.U. of Kate" (Close-up of Kate).
- Measure 4:** Annotation: "C.U. falling min. 5th" (Close-up of falling minor 5th).

The score includes a guitar part (GTR) with a triplet figure and a "5-note motive" fragment. The notation is dense with accidentals and dynamic markings.

Burt, *East of Eden*: Climactic Scene  
 Example 10. (cont'd.)

*Kate gets up from desk and moves toward Cal, smiling*

*Cal turns Towards Aaron (after smiling)*

2:15

2:21

min. 3rd

5-note motive

CELST: HARP (45) (46) (47) (48)

BRASS (STGS.) (col legno p u Hu)

Su. PONT. pp

OB: CLR. mp

*Aaron appears ----- enters doorway*

2:27

2:33

OB: CLR.

49

50

51

X.YLO (PIANO)

BRASS (PIANO)

Su. BASS

Prepares for Aaron's entrance

Example 10. (cont'd.)

Cal: "Mother, this is your other son, Aaron". (Cam. on Aaron)  
"Aaron is everything that's good, Mother."

2:33 Aaron faces Kate 2:39 2:42 2:45

BRASS

VLNS.

(OV.)

MIND

MIND

MIND

Cal: "Aaron, say hello to your Mother."

C.U. of Kate - looking thru and off balance  
2:51 2:54 2:57

HORNS

3 3 3

3 3 3

p 3 3

(prepares for C.U. of Kate)



Burt, *East of Eden*: Climactic Scene  
 Example 10. (cont'd.)

*c.u. of Kate* 3:03

*C.U. of Cal and Aaron* 3:09 *Cal turns to leave*

61 (HNS.) 62 HN: BSSA. 63 64 *molto*

*Cal suddenly turns back to the room and shouts: "Say hello to your Mother, Aaron!"* 3:13

*Cal pushes Aaron towards Kate. Aaron and Kate fall on couch. Aaron is shouting* 3:16

*Cal slams door leaving Kate and Aaron alone in the room* 3:19 *CUT to Bar-room*

65 (w/WS STG.) 66 67 TREP'S

*Music cuts to piano playing "Smiles".*

Kate, who has been dozing, wakes and sees Cal before her. Smiling pathetically and revealing her vulnerability for the first time, she is visibly uneasy and emotionally stirred. The music here plays on these sensibilities, on the nature of the dramatic situation itself and, more particularly, on the pacing of events. Muted brass in half notes (mm. 42-43) “feel” their way through a short progression, followed by a fragment of the five-note motive in augmentation which corresponds to a close-up of Kate (in m. 44). The falling minor third of the motive has a special pleading characteristic reiterated by the piccolo, celesta, and harp in the upper register (m. 45).

A return of the repeated chord idea emphatically prepares for a cut to Cal who is saying, in effect, “Hold on Mother, I’ve got something to show you.”

As Cal turns from Kate to Aaron, Rosenman makes one final, almost heart-breaking statement with the five-note motive (oboe and clarinet in unison, m. 48). Suddenly, the music takes off, preparing for the shot of Aaron’s appearance in the doorway (mm. 49-51). For dramatic accents of this nature, it is characteristic of Rosenman’s music to have an overall gesture which pyramids one pitch or motivic idea on top of another encompassing a wide pitch range from extreme low to high. Here the range exceeds six octaves and is followed by a glissando back to the lower register. To allow for and absorb Aaron’s incredulous reaction, the brass sustains an arpeggiated chord which consists of superimposed augmented triads; abruptly, this is replaced by strings alone as Cal introduces Aaron (mm. 52-56).

A chordal progression consisting of descending minor triads over a D pedal (horns and pizzicato strings, mm. 57-59) takes hold of the anguishing silence. Kate, dread in her face, looks on. Finally, Cal says, “Aaron, say hello to your mother.” The line is a cue for the final build-up to the climactic breaking point of the entire sequence. A gradually unfolding chromatic chordal complex quietly reverberates throughout the string section and is joined, significantly, by statements in the woodwinds of the falling minor third idea taken from the five-note motive (mm. 60-64). Cal turns to leave but turns

back and shouts: "Say hello to your mother, Aaron!" A major seventh dyad in the trumpets, C and B, resolving the preceding G-based sonority, punctuates this release of anger as Aaron is pushed toward his mother and the two fall back onto the sofa. The trumpets hold on the dyad as the trombones glissando to a low C-sharp forming a tritone with a high G in woodwinds and strings. The music is cut as Cal slams the door. Kate and Aaron are alone in the room.

One would think the sequence has ended at this point. But Rosenman goes one step further. He ties in with source music from the bar-room as we see Cal running down the hallway and through the bar. The pianist is playing an up-tempo version of *Smiles* to a drunken group. They, naturally, have no interest in what has occurred in the back room. The effect? Stunning. By means of total contrast in spirit and meaning, this transition breaks open the whole dramatic line and makes the confrontation between Aaron and his mother more emphatic as it deepens the sense of Cal's unrestrained relief, resolve, and subsequent action.

A parenthetical note: the pianist in this final shot is Rosenman himself. While perhaps only his friends will recognize him, it is a nice touch. I can think of only one other instance in film in which the composer is shown. In Alfred Hitchcock's *A Man Who Knew Too Much* Bernard Herrmann is conducting a symphony orchestra during an extended sequence in which a murder plot is simultaneously unfolding in the concert hall.

There is one other matter which should be mentioned: the place where the music was brought in. Given the two scenes—the backyard and the bordello—it might have been considered possible to keep the music in reserve for the bordello scene where most of the action takes place and where the highest level of emotionality comes into view. In my judgement, however, and clearly in the composer's estimation, this would have amounted not only to a wasted opportunity but also to a tragically minimized impact on the dramatic line. The music enters at the precise moment in which the direction of the drama shifts in preparation for what is to follow. While this shift is not immediately apparent on the screen, the

introduction of music at that point makes it so. Further, it is a credit to Rosenman's choice of musical style and development of material that he was able to create a deep sense of what brings the scenes together and to build up to the horrendous moment at the end. The sequence takes place in three minutes and nineteen seconds. Given the context of the film which lasts over two hours and a pivotal scene in which so much has to be put forward on experiential or dramatic levels, three-plus minutes is not that long. Rosenman's decision to begin with the backyard scene was crucial to the overall effectiveness and meaning of this extraordinary sequence and, in a broader sense, of the film.