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## "It was Real to Me Too": Emotional Storytelling and Character Development through Motivic Relationships in the Black Widow Soundtrack

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**“It was Real to Me Too”:  
Emotional Storytelling and Character Development through  
Motivic Relationships in the *Black Widow* Soundtrack**

Gwyneth John

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**Abstract:**

Since her introduction into the Marvel Cinematic Universe in the 2010 film *Iron Man 2*, Natasha Romanoff has not had a strong musical identity. The 2021 film *Black Widow* changes this trend as Natasha assumes the role of the titular character rather than that of a supporting character. *Black Widow*'s soundtrack allows the absurd superhero film to tell a personal story of familial bonds, struggles with individual identity, and childhood trauma through motivic relationships and the changes in various iterations of themes and motifs as they appear in the film.

## Introduction

Through her story arc in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (hereafter MCU) from *Iron Man 2* (2010) to *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) Natasha Romanoff remains a rather two-dimensional character. Several instances of dialogue drop hints about her past, and she slowly develops into a more well-rounded and realistic character, but never to the extent of her male counterparts. In many ways, she exists to support the story arcs of the men around her. *Iron Man 2* introduces Natasha into the MCU as a potentially “very expensive sexual harassment lawsuit” for Tony Stark, she becomes Bruce Banner’s rather forced love interest in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and in *Avengers: Endgame* she falls to her death so Clint Barton will have the chance to reunite with the family that he lost to Thanos’ snap.<sup>1</sup> However, *Black Widow* (2021) retroactively suggests that Natasha takes on an intentional secondary role in men’s stories, rather than her lack of character development being the result of stories written by men, about men, and for men. In *Black Widow*, Natasha answers Yelena’s question of “What is your story?” with “I never let myself be alone long enough to think about it.” This seems to imply that her poor character development in the previous films is a result of Natasha hiding her past from others as well as from herself rather than the result of negligence; she doesn’t seem to want to process her trauma and grief.

*Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) introduces Natasha’s fear of her past before her obvious reluctance to face it in *Black Widow*. In *Age of Ultron*, Wanda Maximoff subjects four of the Avengers to images of their worst fears. Tony Stark, Thor, and Steve Rogers all see hypothetical situations in which they lose the people important to them, but only Natasha experiences a memory. She finds herself back in the Red Room and relives moments of her combat training, and the “graduation ceremony” that is a front for her forced hysterectomy. Unlike the other

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<sup>1</sup> In *Avengers: Infinity War*, Thanos acquires all six infinity stones, and uses them to instantly obliterate half of all living things in the universe with a snapping motion.

Avengers, she has already experienced what she fears the most. Because her lived experience in the Red Room manifests itself as her worst fear, it seems reasonable that she has not processed the trauma she experienced as a child in the Red Room.

Although Natasha claims, “I never let myself be alone long enough to think about it” doesn’t hold true for the duration of *Black Widow*. This change in Natasha’s understanding of her own identity does not happen when she spends time by herself (when she is “alone,” such as in her trailer and car in Norway, she fills the space with media – films, music, radio – so as not to leave herself alone with her thoughts), but rather Natasha interacts with people that played an important part of her childhood and experience going through the Red Room. Unlike the Avengers, Yelena, Melina, and Alexei force Natasha to confront the reality of her past, namely, her experiences and relationships that defined her childhood and, later, her adult life.

Natasha’s musical identity through the soundtrack of *Black Widow*, composed by Lorne Balfe, mirrors her journey to an understanding of her own identity and narrative agency. Natasha’s motif first explicitly occurs at 0:23:53 within the track “You Don’t Know Me,” which plays when Nat first enters her trailer in Norway, and continues through her conversation with Rick Mason, the independent contractor who sets her up with the trailer. However, the most significant example of the motif plays during the scene in which Natasha confronts Dreykov, at 1:43:36. This is much farther into the film than is typical for a composer to fully establish the meaning of a motif, but it reflects that not until this scene does Natasha really feel that she has full control over her actions and has come to terms with her identity outside of the Avengers. Natasha finally begins to recognize herself as a victim, rather than simply a perpetrator of violence, or a “monster” as she describes herself in *Age of Ultron*. She comes to terms with her identity and her past, and therefore finally has a strong musical identity.

Over the course of this essay, I will first take inventory of Natasha's motifs from her previous films in the MCU while comparing their interval content. Then, I will discuss Natasha's motif from the *Black Widow* soundtrack and its uses throughout the film. After that, I examine Yelena's, Alexei's, and Dreykov's motifs, specifically their roles in *Black Widow*'s soundtrack, and their intervallic relationship with Natasha's motif. Finally, I will look at the theme "Fireflies" and its role in the emotional storytelling and character development as it pertains to the soundtrack despite not being a character-oriented motif. All musical transcriptions are my own, and the timestamps cited for *Black Widow* are from the 2021 release of the DVD as cited in the Filmography. Timestamps cited for other Marvel films are from streaming on Disney+. It is perhaps also prudent to note that I will not discuss the soundtrack only with regards to the musical content. Claudia Gorbman states that "ultimately it is the narrative context, the interrelations between music and the rest of the film's system, that determines the effectiveness of film music," (1987, 12). To ignore the visual context in which the music appears would strip it of its meaning and purpose. As such, while I will discuss the motifs within *Black Widow* as they relate to each other, the primary focus is the meaning they suggest in connection with the events occurring on screen.

### **Natasha's Musical Identity from *Iron Man 2* (2010) to *Avengers: Endgame* (2019)**







Though the MCU is connected in terms of characters and events allowing for a decade of visual storytelling to come together in *Avengers: Endgame*, its all-important connectedness does not extend to the music.<sup>2</sup> Through their respective trilogies, Steve Rogers/Captain America,

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<sup>2</sup> This is well-established by a series of video essays on YouTube discussing why the music of the MCU is not as memorable as other franchises. See <https://youtu.be/7vfqkvwW2fs>, <https://youtu.be/UcXsH88XIKM>, <https://youtu.be/QVRiofzRErc>

Tony Stark/Iron Man, and Thor all have different themes in their sequels rather than the composers using and developing the pre-existing themes for these characters (Biffle 2016, 4). Perhaps this occurred because the directors and composers changed from film to film, but regardless, it seems that the franchise made no effort to maintain musical continuity; the lack of musical continuity extended as far as to what accompanied the Marvel logo at the beginning of the films. Before Disney's acquisition of Marvel, the image sequence did not have consistent music to accompany it instead changing the sound from film to film, thus creating a complete lack of sonic consistency even with regards to their own branding (Buhler 2017, 18). It therefore comes as no surprise that Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow has had multiple musical identities across the nine films in which she appears. Furthermore, given that until *Black Widow* (2021), she played the role of a supporting character or part of an ensemble cast in the *Avengers* films. However, despite the motifs for Natasha/Black Widow differing across the MCU, the various motifs do not entirely differ from each other, especially in terms of interval content, allowing for some consistency in Natasha's musical representation. Table 1 summarizes all Natasha motifs in the MCU.

Table 1: Natasha/Black Widow Motifs through the MCU

<b>Film:</b>	<b>Timestamp</b>	<b>Transcription:</b>	<b>Prime Form:</b>	<b>ic Vector</b>
<i>Iron Man 2</i> 2010 John Debney	1:41:20		(027)	010020
<i>The Avengers</i> 2012 Alan Silvestri	1:04:33		(015)	100110
<i>Captain America: The Winter Soldier</i> 2014 Henry Jackman	1:10:41		(0158)	101220
<i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> 2015 Bryan Tyler, Danny Elfman	0:08:25		(02479)	032140
<i>Captain America: Civil War</i> 2016 Henry Jackman	N/A	No significant motif	N/A	N/A
<i>Avengers: Infinity War</i> 2018 Alan Silvestri	N/A	No significant motif	N/A	N/A
<i>Avengers: Endgame</i> 2019 Alan Silvestri	1:55:42		(015)	100110
<i>Black Widow</i> 2021 Lorne Balfe	0:23:53		(015)	100110



The first motif for Natasha appears in *Iron Man 2* (2010); the first MCU film that features Natasha in any way. The motif is brief, and only plays a couple of times. Figure 1 transcribes the motif, specifically as heard in the track “Black Widow Kicks Ass”<sup>3</sup> from the soundtrack, and at 1:41:20 in the film. The set class of this motif is (027), with a P4 and a P5 as the most significant intervals.

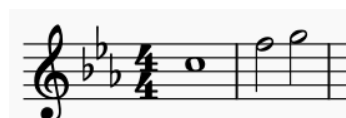


Figure 1: Natasha's motif in *Iron Man 2* (2010)

Natasha's next musical motif occurs in *The Avengers* (2012), and the same motif eventually appears in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), likely because the same composer, Alan Silvestri, wrote both film soundtracks. However, regardless of the reason why, the recurring nature of this motif makes it the most significant for Natasha's character from *Iron Man 2* to *Avengers: Endgame*. The motif clearly appears as the Natasha/Black Widow motif in *The Avengers* and transcribed in Figure 2. The first clear occurrence of this motif in *The Avengers* is at 1:04:33, and in *Avengers: Endgame* it plays at 1:55:42. This motif from *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Endgame* has the prime form (015) rather than the (027) prime form of the *Iron Man 2* motif, but once again features a P4 as a significant interval.



Figure 2: Natasha's motif in *The Avengers* (2012) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019)

In his score for *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), Henry Jackman gives Natasha yet another motif, and as with the other films, Natasha exists as a supporting character

<sup>3</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/7jXzXQ17gPavpq05f2KDK6?si=ed88710c7a464ad5>, Accessed March

so her motif does not play very often in the soundtrack compared to other musical motifs in the film. Unlike the previous motifs for Natasha/Black Widow, four distinct notes form the Natasha motif from the *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* soundtrack rather than just three as demonstrated in Figure 3. This motif's set class is (0158), a superset of the set class (015) from Natasha's motif in *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Endgame*, thus sharing its interval content.



Figure 3: Natasha's motif in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014)

In their soundtrack for *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) Brian Tyler and Danny Elfman give Natasha yet another motif, despite also using Alan Silvestri's motif for the Avengers from *The Avengers*. Tyler and Elfman's motif for Natasha differs from the previous ones using the set class (02479), a new set class though it is possible to interpret it as a superset of the (027) set class of the *Iron Man 2* motif. This motif has a P4 and a P5 as significant intervals and so the motif shares similarities with the other motifs discussed in this section with regards to interval content. Unlike the previous motifs for Natasha/Black Widow, this one does not only refer to her character. Instead, the motif musically represents the relationship between Natasha and Bruce Banner that starts and exists only in this film. As such, Tyler and Elfman leave Natasha without her own musical identity, and only musically represents her in the context of another character. She exists largely as an extension of Banner's character arc, and not as an independent character.



Figure 4: Natasha's motif in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*

Natasha does not have an easily identifiable musical identity in either *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), or *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). In both films Natasha is a minor, supporting character, but not significantly more than she is in *Iron Man 2*, *The Avengers*, or *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Furthermore, in *Avengers: Endgame*, Natasha's motif appears only once, and only after she has died. It does not indicate the importance of any of her decisions or actions throughout the film, not even as she jumps off the cliff on Vormir to save Clint Barton, and to give the Avengers the soul stone and the chance to defeat Thanos. Instead, music that plays during Natasha's final scene is the same music from *Avengers: Infinity War* when Thanos throws Gamora off the same cliff on Vormir for the soul stone. Rather than this musical cue having any significance to Natasha herself, it instead musically represents Vormir and the acquisition of the soul stone. The one time that Natasha's motif plays in *Endgame*, it occurs during the scene in which other Avengers learn that she has died, and as such only represents how the other Avengers view her.

The various Natasha motifs all feature a P4 as a significant interval. The motifs from *The Avengers*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, and *Avengers: Endgame* all have the set class (015) or have a set class that is a superset of the (015) set class. The two motifs that do not have the (015) set class still share the significant intervals of a P4 and a P5. Therefore, though the motifs differ, the intervals that they share allow for some cohesion across the motifs from the different films.

### **Natasha's Motif in *Black Widow***

The motif that represents Natasha in *Black Widow* (2021) is rather odd in that compared to other themes in the film's soundtrack, it appears often and yet the motif is not particularly

noticeable or identifiable until rather late in the film. Figure 5 shows a transcription of Natasha's motif in its most basic form. As a motif, it does not necessarily always appear in the notated key, nor are the note values always the same. However, the first two notes usually have the same duration, and the third lasts note longer than the previous two. The motif also begins on scale-degree 5, and throughout the many iterations in the film, it does not resolve to scale-degree 1, musically representing Natasha's uncertainty. A table containing the timestamps of all occurrences of Natasha's motif in the *Black Widow* soundtrack appears at the end of this paper in Appendix A.



Figure 5: Natasha's motif in *Black Widow*<sup>4</sup>

The lack of resolution is highlighted by the Original Soundtrack Recording (hereafter OST) track "Natasha's Lullaby." The piece is mostly in A minor, except the during B theme (1:20-2:05) which is in E minor. The melody stays focused on dominant, made more prominent by the harmonies that shift between the V and iv chords, never resolving to tonic in A minor. The E minor section (1:20-2:05) initially sounds like a v chord in A minor before confirming E minor as tonic. Therefore, even though the harmony resolves to a tonic chord, the desired resolution to tonic in A minor remains absent. The lack of resolution and general lingering on the dominant perhaps reflect aspects of Natasha's identity and character arc through *Black Widow*.

Throughout the course of *Black Widow*, Natasha struggles with her identity outside of the Avengers, particularly with how other characters perceive her as just a member of the Avengers.

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<sup>4</sup> As it is heard in the track "Natasha's Lullaby" from the Original Soundtrack Recording. (<https://open.spotify.com/track/7DXVDRuzfxi6Qoo1hH0G0I?si=99dac047915c4e87>, Accessed November 21, 2021)

In the beginning of the film, Secretary Ross, the government agent attempting to arrest Natasha, informs her that she has “no friends” and nowhere to go with half of the Avengers against her, and the others in prison; in Norway, Rick Mason asks her if she’s okay after the breakup of the Avengers, both of which imply that her existence and well-being depend on the Avengers being together. In Budapest, her sister, Yelena suggests that Natasha take the antidote serum to one of her “super-scientist friends” and later explains that Dreykov never came after Natasha because one of the “big ones” would avenge her. It is obvious that despite her childhood experiences with Natasha, Yelena still views her as intrinsically tied to the Avengers, though not a particularly important member because of her lack of superpowers or technology. This trend of viewing Natasha as merely part of the Avengers and not as an individual continues as Alexei, Natasha’s childhood father figure, comments that she “should have brought the Avengers’ super-jet,” and Dreykov expresses his desire to control Natasha purely because of her connection to the Avengers and her position of power in that role. *Black Widow* is the first film in the MCU in which the audience sees Natasha function as an individual and not just a member of a team, and yet she cannot seem to distance herself from her Avengers identity because of constant reminders and associations made by other people. As a result, it seems that Natasha remains uncertain about her own identity and role in her story. Her motif’s lack of resolution as discussed earlier mimics this uncertainty. She and others around her do not know who she is outside of the Avengers, and her musical identity fails to have a concrete resolution.

The selective use of Natasha’s motif appears intentional because of discrepancies in the OST and the soundtrack that appears on the film. The most noticeable example of this with regards to Natasha’s motif appears in the track “Last Glimmer”<sup>5</sup> on the OST and when that track

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<sup>5</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/5a2iiUZx4MZ5T7XQbjnQr4?si=e942f91490a447e4>, Accessed November 29, 2021.

appears as a musical cue in the film. “Last Glimmer” plays during the scene in which the family lands their plane in Cuba to meet up with Dreykov and plays almost in its entirety – seemingly only edited to fit within the constraints of the scene. At 1:44 of “Last Glimmer” on the OST, Natasha’s motif clearly sounds. However, at 0:11:08 of the film, Natasha’s motif is absent though the rest of the musical cue remains present. This makes sense given that at this moment in the soundtrack, the scene visually focuses on Alexei and Dreykov talking about themselves, and so it would be musically inappropriate to include Natasha’s motif. Therefore, it is likely that the composer or music editor for the film intentionally removed this motif from the music cue, suggesting that the inclusions of Natasha’s motif are deliberate and meaningful to the soundtrack.

The first occurrence of Natasha’s motif in the soundtrack happens at 0:03:44, as Natasha sits down to eat with her family in Ohio, but it plays faintly. Buried in the otherwise prominent C major chord that makes up the beginning of the track “Hand in Hand,” a more prominent melody quickly overwhelms the motif, as shown in Figure 6. However, it still functions to begin the process of forming an associative memory. Matthew Bribitzer-Stull argues that composers who make use of leitmotifs often “preview” “associative music in advance of the dramatic moment of feeling needed to form the association” (2015, 101). The audience does not necessarily hear the motif, but perhaps it is enough to be recognizable later in the film. The subtle appearance of the Natasha motif in the opening scenes also plants the motif in the viewer’s brain without drawing attention to itself. Furthermore, Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis makes the point that when a piece of music is heard, but not actively listened to, the listener later attributes their enjoyment of the music to the repetition and their familiarity with the music (2014, 114). It is entirely possible that just as the motif is beginning to build an associative memory, this occurrence of Natasha’s motif

later results in the feeling that this motif is appropriate for Natasha’s character because of the repetition, rather than just the characteristics of the motif itself.

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the film "Hand in Hand". The score is in 4/4 time and features a tempo marking of ♩ = 46. It consists of four staves: a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and two individual treble clef staves. The music is in a key with two flats (B-flat major or D minor). A specific melodic motif in the second treble staff is highlighted with a black rectangular box. This motif consists of a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, and a quarter note B4. The time markers 0:03:34 and 0:03:46 are visible at the bottom of the score.

Figure 6: Beginning of “Hand in Hand”<sup>6</sup> with Natasha’s motif highlighted

The first iteration of Natasha’s motif functions to form an associative memory more than first occurrence of motifs that musically define the titular character(s) in other films, because *Black Widow* has no main title. Instead, the opening credits are scored with a cover of Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” The use of a pop song for film credits instead of using original music has become persistent through the film industry (Kalinak 2010, 86), but this trend may be detrimental to expression and development of motifs throughout a film’s soundtrack. Giorgio Biancorosso points out that many motifs often make their first appearance in the opening credits (2013, 209). Bribitzer-Stull further argues that the presentation of motifs in the opening credits “primes the audience’s memory for the later establishment of associations with the thematic material presented,” (2015, 102). The use of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” over the opening credits

<sup>6</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/5wwH9ftsBQDtfOSx2HZXDw?si=8a030cc6bc934fe5>, Accessed November 28, 2021.

deprives *Black Widow* of that space to present themes before it is necessary for the audience to form associations.

The second iteration of Natasha's motif occurs at 0:08:47 during the pursuit scene in which the family escapes from the SHEILD agents in their plane. As with the previous occurrence of the motif, this one is surrounded by the other music from "The Pursuit" track<sup>7</sup>, though this instance has a slightly different resolution. Still beginning on scale-degree 5, the final note (scale-degree #7) pairs with scale-degree 2 to create a minor third. The resolution up to scale-degree 2 is more prominent than its normative resolution down to the leading tone. This iteration is also identical in interval content (though not scale-degree function) to the Black Widow motif from *Iron Man 2* (heard at 1:41:20) as shown below in Figure 7. While this iteration of Natasha's motif in *Black Widow* does not appear again, it is not an arbitrary resolution, instead functioning as a musical easter egg of sorts, while still presenting an iteration of the Natasha motif for *Black Widow*.

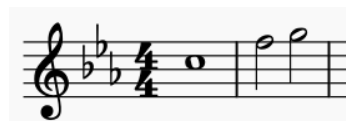


Figure 7: *Black Widow Motif from Iron Man 2 (2010)*

The next cluster of Natasha motifs first appear at 0:17:05, in the scene in which Secretary Ross attempts to arrest Natasha for violating the Sokovia Accords.<sup>8</sup> As Natasha and Ross talk over the phone, Natasha's motif plays at 15 to 30 second intervals, interspersed

<sup>7</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/1cydMZYnkHRQ7aJuRRplYf?si=f6233ac0b56b4fbc>, Accessed February 27, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Named for a small, eastern European country destroyed in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the Sokovia Accords state that the Avengers will no longer be an independent organization but will instead function under the oversight of a UN panel should they deem their involvement necessary. Natasha originally agreed to the accords but violated the agreement when, during *Captain America: Civil War*, she allowed Captain America to escape with the Winter Soldier, both of whom were fugitives by that point. In violating the Sokovia Accords, Natasha too became a fugitive from the US government.



throughout the percussive electronic track that accompanies the scene. As with the previous iterations of the motif, these occurrences still play a part in the association-building process, rather than being of any emotional or narrative significance. The audience hears the motif in direct association with Natasha, but it does not mean anything yet to viewers watching the film for the first time. The absence of meaning is helped by the rather long gaps between the iterations of the motifs, and the different registers and instrumentation in which the motifs appear, which results in each iteration of the motif feeling like a separate entity.

The next Natasha-related motif occurs right after the above scene with Ross, when Natasha steps out of the restroom, and onto the deck of a ferry at 0:18:17. The music that plays here is the B theme from “Natasha’s Lullaby” transcribed in Figure 8, and it is the only time it appears in the film’s soundtrack. To be honest, I only know for certain that this is Natasha-related musical content because it appears in “Natasha’s Lullaby”<sup>9</sup> – a track that functions to present Natasha’s motif as a theme for the released soundtrack recording but does not appear in the film. One could make the argument that it has similarities to the previous track “Hand in Hand”<sup>10</sup> and the later one “Broken Free”<sup>11</sup> because of the pedal of sorts that punctuates the melody. Both musical examples appear in Figure 8, and Figure 9, demonstrating the shared pedal tones on the off beats.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/7DXVDRuzfxi6Qoo1hH0G0I?si=3d5be2f9695142d4> (1:21), Accessed April 1, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/5wwH9ftsbQDtfOSx2HZXDw?si=b2f59920a7bb46a3> (1:25), Accessed February 28, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/2IXRRy5NODQgzsGO4n1Btm?si=c486219653fc4d36> (1:23), Accessed February 28, 2022.



Figure 8: *Natasha's Lullaby B Theme*



Figure 9: *Melody from "Hand and Hand" and "Broken Free"*

The next occurrence of the Natasha motif appears at 0:23:52 during the conversation between Natasha and Rick Mason, right around Mason's line "People who have friends don't call me." A violin in an upper register first plays the motif, then the motif repeats an octave lower about ten seconds later. The melody begun by the motif then "resolves," though not to tonic. Figure 10 provides a score reduction with Natasha's motif boxed. This is the first time the motif is restated within a relatively short time span, and in which the statements are held together by a musical connective tissue of sorts. Therefore, it is also the first time in which the motif has any narrative or emotional meaning. The timing of the motif ties it to Natasha's identity, though the timbre and pacing suggest a somber and longing tone. It is not much, but finally the beginning of meaning associated with the motif emerges.

Figure 10: Transcription of Natasha's Motif at 0:23:52<sup>12</sup>

At 0:30:19 and 0:30:49, Natasha's motif appears as she makes her way through Budapest, though the music here seems to be purely transitional. The motif indicates Natasha, but with no attached meaning. However, at 0:48:51 the motif plays again as Natasha says to Yelena "My mom abandoned me in the street like garbage." In this scene, Natasha and Yelena talk about their "real families," the ones Dreykov took them from, rather than the constructed family they shared in Ohio. The timing of the motif to correspond with the line about her mother adds a new layer to the connection between Natasha's musical motif and her identity – the events of her early childhood have had a profound effect on how she understands her own identity. Though the motif does not repeat, the conversation between Yelena and Natasha, with Yelena eventually asking, "What is your story?" to which Natasha responds, "I never let myself be alone long enough to think about it." This line hammers home the uncertainty by the motif's lack of resolution. Natasha doesn't feel that she knows who she is, or her role in her own story. Yes, previously in the film, she expresses to Yelena what she wants, "to be more than just a trained killer," but despite seeming to know who she wants to be, Natasha does not have a clear grasp on her identity.

<sup>12</sup> From track "You Don't Know Me."

<https://open.spotify.com/track/79IBstpVBjhwvQ1FRhLwDk?si=45cf7c0e1a5d42a1>, Accessed November 28, 2021.

As discussed earlier, Natasha’s response of “I never let myself be alone long enough to think about it” doesn’t hold true for the duration of *Black Widow*. As she faces the parts of her past that she previously attempted to ignore, her interactions with Yelena, Melina, Alexei, and Dreykov force Natasha to reevaluate her understanding of her identity, often accompanied by iterations of her motif. At 1:19:27, the motif plays again as transcribed below in Figure 11 as Natasha learns from Melina that she was not abandoned by her mother, but forcibly taken by Dreykov. This is an important moment for Natasha’s character development because it is her realization that her mother loved her unconditionally when she was an infant, and later in her life Melina loved her as evidenced by the photo album she kept as a memento of their time in Ohio. Despite what she may have come to believe in the Red Room, and as she and expressed in previous Marvel movies, Natasha was wanted, loved, and deserving of that love.

The image shows a musical score transcription for a piano piece. At the top left, it indicates a tempo of 46 BPM. The score is written in 4/4 time and features a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The notation includes a treble clef for the right hand and a bass clef for the left hand. The right hand part consists of a series of chords and melodic lines, while the left hand provides a harmonic and rhythmic foundation. A specific section of the score, starting at the 1:19:23 mark, is enclosed in a black rectangular box, highlighting the 'Natasha's Motif'. The time markers 1:18:35 and 1:19:23 are placed below the corresponding measures in the score.

Figure 11: Transcription of Natasha’s Motif at 1:19:23<sup>13</sup>

Finally, at 1:43:35, we get the “payoff” for the slow development and rather choice use of Natasha’s motif. Shortly before this moment, Natasha reveals that she has collected the

<sup>13</sup> From the track “Broken Free.”

<https://open.spotify.com/track/2IXRRy5NODOQzsGO4n1Btm?si=c59a55aae4694a3f>, Accessed November 28, 2021.

information from Dreykov that she wanted by turning to him and saying, “Thank you, for your cooperation” in a call back to when she says the same to Loki in *The Avengers*. The scene then cuts to a flashback of Melina and Natasha preparing for their assault on the Red Room. Melina informs her that to physically harm Dreykov, she will have to sever the nerve between her nose and her brain. The motif begins as Natasha responds, “I can handle that,” and continues as the scene cuts back to the confrontation between Natasha and Dreykov. The motif repeats twice and cuts off as Natasha breaks her nose on Dreykov’s desk. The length of the repeated motif is short, particularly in comparison to other motifs in the film that are developed almost to the point of a theme, but it is significant because it is the first time Natasha’s motif is repeated in direct succession. Furthermore, as the motif is played over an ostinato bass line that carries in from earlier in the score, it is the first time that the motif is the primary melodic feature while also clearly harmonized by the other layers of sound. Finally, the motif in this passage is doubled first by a trumpet and cello, and then trumpet and violin on the repetition, rather than the motif remaining a solo. This is the first instance in which a brass instrument plays the motif, and the bright timbre of the trumpet combined with the controlled, almost march-like rhythm of the chords below gives this iteration of the motif a heroic and triumphant sound rather than the somber quality previously associated with it.

To fully develop and attribute meaning to a motif at 1:43:35 is late in a film, but it reflects that not until this moment does Natasha demonstrate her control of the situation and that she has furthermore come to terms with her identity outside of the Avengers. As Alexei says, she has “killed so many people,” her ledger “must be dripping, just gushing red,” but Natasha has finally begun to recognize herself as a victim, rather than simply a perpetrator of violence, or a “monster.” She may be a trained killer, but that is not her fault, nor does it define her. She has

come to terms with her identity and her past, and therefore finally has a strong musical identity. The development of Natasha's theme in this way contrasts what James Buhler and David Neumeyer argue has become the norm for action films. Buhler and Neumeyer claim that the conventional score for an action movie prepares a theme for the hero, often establishes it in the credits, and then does not develop the theme, as the hero's identity is not actually threatened by the action (2016, 503-504). Natasha, the hero and titular character, does not have an established theme in the *Black Widow* soundtrack. Instead, a motif musically identifies her, and it does develop throughout the film. In contrast to the heroes of the action films considered by Buhler and Neumeyer, the plot and action of *Black Widow* alters Natasha's identity and how she perceives herself.

The musical cue at 1:42:34 accentuates Natasha's understanding of Dreykov's role in her identity up to this point. This cue does not contain Natasha's motif, but instead features the vocal line from "Last Glimmer" (previously heard at 0:12:43 during the scene in Cuba as Dreykov's agents sedate Natasha and Yelena and carry them into a helicopter to be taken to the Red Room), and Dreykov's theme played by a solo cello as transcribed in Figure 12. The juxtaposition of these themes is profound, as the vocal line signifies when Natasha's life was turned upside down for the Red Room and Dreykov's theme occurs while Natasha sees the faces of hundreds of girls that have fallen under his control. It recalls the moment that Natasha became part of the Red Room, while pointing the blame at Dreykov. Natasha's violent past is not the result of her doing, but rather because of Dreykov's control over her childhood development.

The image shows a musical score transcription for two instruments: Soprano and Violoncello. The tempo is indicated as  $\text{♩} = 80$ . The Soprano part is written in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature, and the Violoncello part is written in bass clef with a 3/4 time signature. The music consists of two staves with various notes and rests.

Figure 12: Transcription of musical cue at 1:42:34.

As expected for a motif that musically identifies the titular character, Natasha's motif appears in the soundtrack after the passage at 1:43:30. That said, it plays only twice more in the twenty minutes before the credits. At 1:53:19 it plays as Natasha drops to the ground and runs away from a fiery explosion. This occurrence of the motif may not be significant to Natasha's character arc and identity, but rather seems to primarily serve to musically identify Natasha in the scene. The final occurrence of Natasha's motif as it connects to the action and plot of the film occurs at 1:59:17 during the aftermath of the Red Room's destruction as Natasha says goodbye to her family and prepares for a confrontation with Ross once again. As with the iteration of the motif at 1:43:35, this iteration of the motif has triumphant quality because of the bass below it. This suggests a solidity and confidence in Natasha's identity that did not exist before but has remained since her confrontation with Dreykov.

### Yelena's Theme

In *Black Widow*, Yelena's musical identity exists both as a motif, and as a reoccurring theme as transcribed in Figure 13, clearly occurring at 0:19:18 of the film. This is in direct contrast to Natasha, who is musically identified by only a motif that does not fully develop into a theme. When the soundtrack musically identifies Yelena, it draws upon various thematic features. The most common Yelena motif is the melody of the first two bars shown in the treble

clef of Figure 13, with the melodic line in the treble clef of mm. 3-4 of Figure 13 also frequently appearing as an embellished version of the previous two bars. Less common but still found within the film, is the use of the theme's harmony, particularly as it is transcribed in mm. 1-4 of Figure 13. Finally, the melodic line from the treble clef of mm. 5-8 of Figure 13 appears only once or twice throughout the film. Appendix B contains a chart summarizing the timestamps for all occurrences of Yelena's motif.

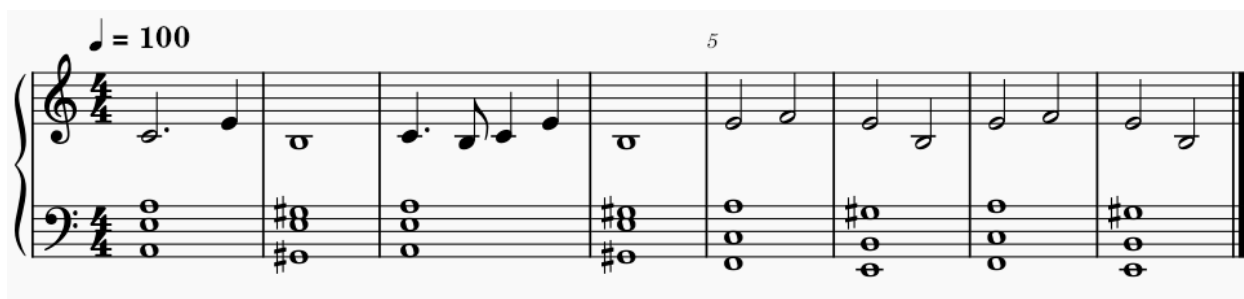


Figure 13: Transcription of Yelena's Theme <sup>14</sup>

The three appearances of Yelena's theme at 0:47:26, 1:15:38, and 1:57:46 play for just over a minute before the soundtrack shifts to other music.<sup>15</sup> A full minute of music elaborating on one theme is almost excessive, particularly when the theme is only eight bars long. Perhaps it is used in this way because it occurs during the emotional moments of the film that are directly about Yelena and her traumatic experiences, but this lengthy span of time for one theme to be developed in a soundtrack allows the theme time to breathe and exist in its own space rather than fighting with other musical content. As a result, Yelena's material does not experience the same developmental process as Natasha's motif but is more easily identifiable.

<sup>14</sup> As heard in the track "Yelena Belova."

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6F1CRKIJ3LIpD6pTGmt3Qb?si=528839446e624acc>, Accessed November 28, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> The music in these segments is directly from the track "A Sister Says Goodbye."

<https://open.spotify.com/track/3QFbTpr8pxvpPNAo78clCg?si=888ed0a3a8bd4515>, Accessed November 29, 2021.



In the same way that the development of Natasha's motif through the film mirrors her character development, the consistency of Yelena's theme demonstrates that though she is unsure of her identity because of her past, she is comfortable with that uncertainty and allows herself to be emotionally vulnerable (to Natasha: "What you experienced was psychological conditioning. I'm talking about chemically altering brain functions. They're two completely different things. You're fully conscious, but you don't know which part is you. I'm still not sure."). Her vulnerability allows the theme to exist consistently within the film rather than just on the soundtrack recording as seen with Natasha's motif.

What I find most interesting about Yelena's theme is its similarity it shares with Natasha's motif with regards to interval content. Natasha's motif appears again in Figure 14, and melody of the first four measures of Yelena's theme appears in Figure 15, though in a higher octave as heard on the track "A Sister Says Goodbye."<sup>16</sup> Natasha's motif and this section of Yelena's theme both feature a m2 and a P4, and therefore share the same (015) set class. However, the placement of the m2 in relation to the P4 differs between Natasha's motif and Yelena's theme. As demonstrated by Figure 16, the m2 interval occurs within the P4, but at the top for Natasha's motif, and at the bottom for Yelena's theme resulting in an inversion of sorts with regards to interval content. This inversion creates a distinction between Natasha's motif and Yelena's theme while still using the same set class, musically establishing their relationship. The musical connection between Natasha and Yelena seems intentional, as Lorne Balfe commented about the relationship between the siblings "you can remove them and separate them, but the bond is there," (Silliman 2021). Because of their shared experiences as children, Natasha and Yelena maintain a bond even after years apart.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/3QFbTpr8pxvpPNAo78clCg?si=888ed0a3a8bd4515>, Accessed November 29, 2021.



Figure 14: Natasha's Motif



Figure 15: Yelena's Motif

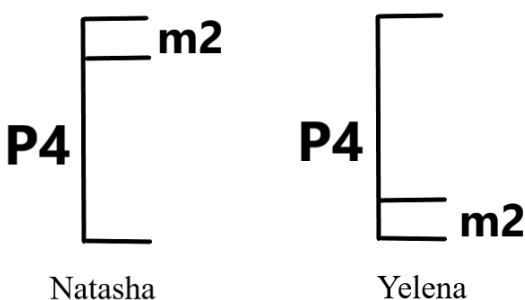


Figure 16: Interval Diagram of Natasha's Motif and Yelena's Theme

The prime form (015) as a musical representation of Natasha and Yelena's relationship exists not only in the score, but also appears as a diegetic melody to the characters. Twice in the film Yelena and Natasha whistle back and forth to each other first as children (0:01:25), and then as adults after destroying the Red Room (2:00:56). Though the order in which they whistle changes, both times Yelena's whistle is a descending M3, and Natasha's an ascending P4 starting a m2 lower than the second note of Yelena's M3. Figure 17 shows a transcription of the whistles. When together, the two whistling intervals have a set class of (015). It is distinct from both the Yelena and Natasha motifs, but directly references their motifs while diegetically establishing their relationship. Yelena does whistle a third time in the film during the post credits scene while visiting Natasha's grave. Of course, there is no response, but she also whistles a descending m3

rather than a M3. The difference in interval destroys the potential for the (015) set class, highlighting Natasha's absence.



Figure 17: Natasha and Yelena whistling figure

### Alexei's Motif

In the grand scheme of *Black Widow's* soundtrack, Alexei's motif is rather insignificant. However, it has relevance to the discussion thus far because like the (015) prime form of Natasha and Yelena's motifs, Alexei's motif exists diegetically within the film to the extent that Alexei sings it to himself. The motif, transcribed below in Figure 18, makes use of the "heroic" sounding P5 as a callback of sorts to Alexei's time as the Red Guardian before the events of *Black Widow*.

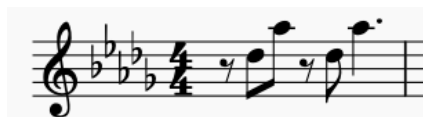


Figure 18: Alexei's motif as heard at 0:55:44

The short motif only appears four times across two scenes. Alexei's motif first occurs during the scene in which Alexei opens his mail in the prison before Natasha and Yelena break him out. The motif plays three times in this scene, and all are diegetic to the film. At 0:55:40 Alexei sings it to himself softly while holding an action figure of himself as the Red Guardian. The motif then plays again at 0:55:44 and at 0:55:56 as a sound made by the action figure. When produced by the action figure, the motif appears in the horn parts suggesting heroism because of

their “link to pageantry, the military, and the hunt,” (Kalinak 1992, 13). As hilarious as it is that Alexei has a motif diegetic to his world, the motif also appears in the non-diegetic soundtrack, though only once. At 1:26:35 as Alexei, Natasha, and Yelena are on board the aircraft transporting them to the Red Room Alexei’s motif plays as he calls out to Melina after becoming aware that she seems to be responsible for bringing them to Dreykov. The horns play the motif as they did it was when produced by the action figure, but the swell of stings behind it results in a mournful and slightly desperate sound contrasting the diegetic heroic call of the Red Guardian. Alexei does not play the hero role in this story that would like to, but rather he plays the part of the sidekick in a story controlled by women.

### **Dreykov’s Theme**

Though two-dimensional in his motivations and character development, as the villain of *Black Widow* it does not come as a surprise that Dreykov assumes a distinct musical identity. Figure 19 provides a transcription of Dreykov’s theme as heard on the track “Dreykov” from the OST.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/1viROkqBM4GyBE2FgcALsi?si=6ee2ea3c65da4224>, Accessed December 5, 2021.

Figure 19: Transcription of Dreykov's Theme (0:16 – 1:05)<sup>18</sup>

Dreykov's theme appears only a few times in the film, and only when Dreykov appears in a scene, or when other characters talk about him. In all these cases, only the melodic line from the theme plays, as shown in Figure 20, and is not accompanied by the bass line in Figure 19. For each of these iterations, a cello plays the motif in its lower register. Dreykov's theme first plays at 0:35:04 as Natasha tells Yelena that she killed Dreykov and as she proceeds to learn that she is mistaken. Later, Dreykov's theme plays again at 1:29:47 as Dreykov talks to Natasha disguised as Melina, and again as Dreykov refers to girls as the only resource the world has too much of at 1:42:35.

Figure 20: Melody from Dreykov's Theme

<sup>18</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/0VnAOfpECDPxEliKjoikIJ?si=b2c6d805bf604ce4>, Accessed January 18, 2022.

As with Natasha's motif and Yelena's theme, the melodic line for Dreykov's theme is intervallically related to the themes or motifs of other characters. Dreykov's theme as transcribed in Figure 20 comprises set class (01568). The (015) set class of Natasha's motif and Yelena's theme, is a subset of Dreykov's theme's set class. This has some rather upsetting implications with regards to Natasha's and Yelena's identities and how they are related to Dreykov. Musically, they are part of Dreykov, and thus the soundtrack intrinsically ties their identities to Dreykov because of their experiences with him and the Red Room.

Beyond the connection to the themes and motifs of other characters, Dreykov's musical presence persists through the film even when the theme from Figure 20 does not occur. Figure 21 provides a transcription of a melody that plays four times throughout the film at 0:04:53, 1:20:08, 1:50:08, and at 2:03:06. The OST tracks "Hand in Hand,"<sup>19</sup> and "Broken Free"<sup>20</sup> also feature this melody and appear largely unedited in the soundtrack. As demonstrated by the first two measures of Figure 21 and the transposed melody from Dreykov's theme in Figure 22, all of the notes in Dreykov's theme are contained within the first two measures of Figure 21, and the melodic line in Figure 21 follows the same contour as Dreykov's theme. As a result, the melodic line from Figure 21 functions as a variation of Dreykov's theme, especially upon repeat viewings of the film.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/5wwH9ftsbQDtfOSx2HZXDw?si=06a1742f60f247f1>, Accessed December 5, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/2IXRRy5NODQgzsGO4n1Btm?si=4186c28e0adf41cf>, Accessed December 5, 2021.



Figure 21: Melody derived from Dreykov's Theme featured in "Hand and Hand" and "Broken Free"



Figure 22: Transposed melody from Dreykov's Theme

This variation of Dreykov's theme occurs at pivotal moments of Natasha's story three of the four times it is heard. At 0:04:53, the theme plays as Natasha and her family leave their home in Ohio and drive to their plane. A nylon-stringed classical guitar plays the melody here as transcribed above in Figure 21 while accompanied by repeated bass drum hits. The timbre of the classical guitar suggests vulnerability, contrasting the urgency created by the bass drum. At 1:20:08 it plays as Natasha relives her fabricated childhood with Melina, and into their discussion of Dreykov's hold on Melina's life up to this point. Once again, a classical guitar plays the melody here, but this time an opposing melodic line accompanies it in the cello part. The urgency is gone, and instead the musical cue demonstrates grief. The occurrence at 1:50:08 plays while the Red Room falls from the sky, as Natasha gets a glimpse of Dreykov running to a helicopter and continues as the scene shifts to Melina and Alexei escaping from the Red Room. Instead of the classical guitar that previously played the motif, it appears in the strings. It is not a particularly important moment in the soundtrack, but the similarity to the cue at 0:04:53 mirrors the earlier point in the film as the family escapes to Dreykov and the Red Room, but this time as they escape from him. The change in instrumentation accentuates the change in meaning. Finally, the variation of Dreykov's theme as transcribed in Figure 21 plays at the end of the film

at 2:03:06, as Natasha talks to Rick Mason about her family and the Avengers, and then as she walks away from the camera towards the Quinjet. A classical guitar once again plays this iteration of the motif, but this time, by the third iteration of the motif, at 2:03:21, the accompanying cello melody is more prominent than the guitar. At the third repetition the cello also plays an augmentation of Yelena's theme as transcribed in the bottom staff in Figure 23. The change in accompaniment of this motif at 2:03:21 musically ties Natasha's family to the scene through Yelena as Natasha talks to Mason about them.



Figure 23: Transcription of musical cue at 2:03:21

Of these four occurrences, the third is the least impactful with regards to Natasha's character development as it occurs in a passing moment and amid many explosions, other distracting sound effects, and under no meaningful dialogue. However, the first, second, and fourth occurrences of this variation on Dreykov's theme occur during moments in which Natasha's understanding of her identity turns upside down, or when she acknowledges a change in her understanding of herself. At 0:04:53 Natasha's peaceful, happy childhood is torn away from her, at 1:20:08 Natasha learns that her biological mother did not abandon her, and that her other maternal figure, Melina, failed to protect her as a child not out of apathy, but because she felt trapped by Dreykov and his Red Room. In both instances, Natasha's understanding of her childhood shifts. The final occurrence at 2:03:06 is significant for Natasha because it occurs as she acknowledges the importance of Yelena, Melina, and Alexei in her life and compares them in significance to the Avengers. The scene in which the final occurrence appears is lighter in tone



than the previous ones, in part because of the instrumentation differences noted above, and because Natasha physically smiles as she talks about her two “families.” She has reached some form of acceptance with regards to her childhood and the result that it had on her adult life which signals a change in Natasha’s perception of her identity. Instead of using Natasha’s motif for these moments, the use of a variation on Dreykov’s theme directly associates Dreykov with these fundamental moments in Natasha’s character development. It occurs as he tears her safe childhood from her, as she comes to understand the level to which her childhood was fabricated, and as she acknowledges the importance of her family and the Avengers in her life.

In addition to these thematic uses, Dreykov’s musical presence is marked by the harmony at 0:04:38, 0:10:04, and 1:19:50, when the chords boxed in Figure 24 play.<sup>21</sup>

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Broken Free". It features a grand staff with three staves: a treble clef staff at the top, a middle staff with a treble clef, and a bass clef staff at the bottom. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 46. The score includes dynamic markings such as "rit." (ritardando) and "a tempo". A specific section of the score, starting at 1:19:23 and ending at 1:19:50, is enclosed in a black rectangular box. This boxed section contains a series of chords in the middle staff, with a triplet of eighth notes (marked with a '3' and an accent) in the bass clef staff. The time markers 1:18:35 and 1:19:23 are positioned below the bass clef staff.

Figure 24: Beginning measures of “Broken Free”<sup>22</sup>

These chords are one way to harmonize the bass line from Dreykov’s theme, as demonstrated in Figure 25. As such, when these chords are heard in the film, it references Dreykov without directly playing the bass line from his theme, once again tying Dreykov to important moments of Natasha’s life, particularly with regards to her constructed Ohio family.

<sup>21</sup> This is also in the OST tracks “Hand in Hand,” “Last Glimmer,” and “Broken Free.”

<sup>22</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/2IXRRy5NODQgzsGO4n1Btm?si=e9fe5634b2334d07>, Accessed December 5, 2021.



Figure 25: Bass line of Dreykov's Theme harmonized with boxed chords from Figure 24

Throughout *Black Widow* another prominent motif exists that abstractly connects to Dreykov's theme. The motif transcribed in Figure 26 features three m2 intervals first descending, then ascending, and finally descending again while outlining a major triad. The first prominent occurrence of this motif happens at 0:12:18 during the scene in Cuba as Alexei tells Natasha and Yelena that they will be okay.

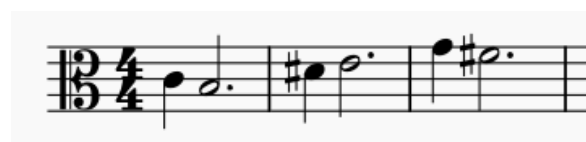


Figure 26: Transcription of musical cue at 0:12:18

This motif relates to the m2s in the bass line of Dreykov's theme. Figure 27 offers a transcription of the bass line from Dreykov's theme with the m2s boxed. Figure 28 has the nonrepeating m2s from Figure 27 in the order that they appear and in the rhythm of the motif from Figure 26. Finally, Figure 29 rearranges the nonrepeating m2s so that they follow the pattern of the motif from Figure 26.



Figure 27: Bass line of Dreykov's Theme with m2s boxed



Figure 28: Nonrepeating m2s from Figure 27



Figure 29: Rearranged m2s from Figure 28

The shuffling of the m2s from the bass line of Dreykov's theme ties Dreykov to the various iterations of this motif in the soundtrack. This is not to say that all m2s in the *Black Widow* soundtrack are a reference to Dreykov. Instead, the persistent m2s in the soundtrack are an *Urmotiv*, or a musical idea that links several disparate themes in opera and film (Bribitzer-Stull 2015, 60). However, when m2s follow each other in the pattern above in Figure 29, descending, then ascending with a M2 between the top first notes of each m2, they musically reference Dreykov. The final m2 (or Eb to D as seen in Figure 29) is often present, though not always, and not necessary to distinguish this pattern of m2s from the many other m2s in the soundtrack.

The incessant, almost constant use of Dreykov's theme in the *Black Widow* soundtrack may seem a bit strange given the lack of Dreykov's character development. However, it makes sense with regards to Natasha's character development and helps to musically represent Natasha's struggle for autonomy and an identity independent from Dreykov's role in her development. This becomes very apparent with the musical cue that plays at 1:42:34 (Figure 12 above). This moment is pivotal for Natasha as she realizes that Dreykov is responsible for much of the violence she caused as an adult and that she is also a victim. Because of this moment's importance to the titular character, the appearance of her motif is perhaps expected, but its

absence emphasizes the control that Dreykov has had over her life until this point and Natasha's acceptance of her role as a victim.

## Fireflies

The theme "Fireflies"<sup>23</sup> from the OST perhaps best demonstrates the extent to which the soundtrack functions to emphasize the emotional aspect of *Black Widow*'s storytelling beyond the character specific motifs. Though not the first track on the OST, the "Fireflies" theme is the first music that plays during the film after the opening Marvel fanfare. Figure 30 transcribes the opening chord progression for "Fireflies" and the beginning of the film. This chord progression dominates the "Fireflies" theme, and is more indicative of theme than a melody, especially given that the melody that appears on the "Fireflies" track does not appear in the film.

Figure 30: Fireflies chord progression (0:00-0:21 of OST track)

Figure 31 shows the chords blocked with roman numeral analysis.

<sup>23</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/6Vv5cih2XP3f5LxNuRUOxz?si=9cc11a9bd68c4da1>, Accessed March 19, 2022.

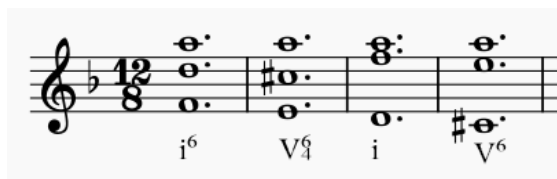


Figure 31: "Fireflies" blocked chord progression with roman numeral analysis

As the "Fireflies" theme plays over the first minute and fifty seconds of *Black Widow*, the scene depicts Natasha and Yelena as children in Ohio. Natasha rides home on her bike and then plays with Yelena in their back yard all while a piano accompanied by higher register stings plays the "Fireflies" theme. Natasha and Yelena have a happy, innocent childhood, demonstrated by Yelena's somewhat extreme reaction when she falls and bumps her knee. The duration that the singular "Fireflies" theme plays for allows for the theme to become attached to and synonymous with the sense of security and innocence expressed in the opening scene.

However, the tone of *Black Widow*'s opening scene does not continue through the movie as the plot begins to have much darker connotations around the five-minute mark. Therefore, when the "Fireflies" theme returns, the meaning changes significantly. This happens twice in the film, both times while Natasha, Yelena, and Alexei are on Melina's farm and in her house. The first reiteration of "Fireflies" occurs at 1:08:50 as Natasha, Yelena, and Alexei approach Melina on the opposite side of the fence, as Alexei says "Honey, we're home," and ending as they enter Melina's house. Figure 32 shows a transcription of this musical cue that once again appears in a piano.

Figure 32: Transcription of musical cue from 1:08:50 to 1:09:34

Though the chords have the same function, if not inversion, in Figure 32 as they do in Figure 30, the emotional significance of the musical cue is not the same as the first iteration of “Fireflies.” This second iteration occurs as the fabricated family unit from Ohio find themselves reunited again, but after twenty years of pain and anger. The top voice of the musical cue functions as a pedal just as it does in Figure 30, but the time between each repetition is augmented. This augmentation combined with the lack of motion in the lower voices between chord changes accentuates the grief exhibited in the scene. The music is familiar even as it acknowledges the loss of their childhoods that Natasha and Yelena experienced.

The third iteration of the “Fireflies” theme appears at 1:10:09 as Yelena sits down at the table in Melina’s house, slowly taking the chair that is in the same position as where she sat for dinner in her home in Ohio and it continues as Alexei sits in the bathroom with his head in his hands, and as Natasha confronts Melina’s maternal role in her life saying, “You didn’t raise us at all.” The characters clearly express grief, which is magnified by this third iteration of the “Fireflies” theme. Unlike the previous iterations, this occurrence of the theme features different instrumentation. Instead of a piano, a classical guitar plays the arpeggiating melody over a soft string section. As with the first iteration of “Fireflies,” the theme is arpeggiated, but rather than playing four arpeggiations before the chord changes, the guitar arpeggiates through the chord only once. Natasha directly expresses her anger and lack of trust towards Melina for dissolution

of her safe childhood, but the music more directly speaks to Yelena's emotional state. She doesn't say anything, and yet as she sits in the chair she occupied as a child, the augmented form of the familiar music from her safe and innocent childhood communicates the pain and grief Yelena feels about the loss of her family. As she says just minutes later in response to Natasha, Melina, and Alexei arguing about the validity of their family unit, "It was real. It was real to me. You are my mother. You were my real mother. The closest thing I ever had to one. The best part of my life was fake, and none you told me." Against the apathy of the other characters, Yelena's sudden outburst of grief and anger does not come as a surprise because of the tone set by the iteration of the "Fireflies" theme at 1:10:09.

Unlike the other motifs and themes discussed earlier, the "Fireflies" theme does not directly correspond to a character, but rather musically refers to Natasha and Yelena's childhood in Ohio before the Red Room. Because this time appears only briefly in the film, the reiterations of the theme later in the film as Natasha, Yelena, Melina, and Alexei reunite for the first time since they left Ohio allow for the soundtrack to demonstrate the various levels of grief and anger felt by the characters even as they remain silent. In an interview with Adam Chitwood for *Collider*, Lorne Balfe stated that in conversations with director Cate Shortland, they "never talked about the fact that it was an action movie. We never talked about the fact that it was a superhero movie. . . It was an intimate family story," (2021) The "Fireflies" theme and its reiterations highlight that the family story within the film and make those scenes feel more important than the action.

## Conclusion

The 2010 film *Iron Man 2* introduced Scarlett Johansson's Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow into the MCU. In the seven films before *Black Widow*, Natasha is merely a supporting character for a continually expanding cast of men. Across nearly a decade of visual storytelling, she does not have significant character development and often her presence or actions are determined by how she affects the men in the scene around her. Through these films her musical representation consists only of brief motifs, if she even has one at all. Marvel has begun to create more projects that center around the stories of women such as *Captain Marvel* (2019), and *WandaVision* (2021)<sup>24</sup>, but arguably, it should not have taken eleven years from the launch of the MCU with *Iron Man* (2008) for the first female-led superhero movie to be released, especially since that film was *Captain Marvel* and not a film about the female character that had already been in the MCU for nine years when some of the male characters of the MCU had had their own trilogies. Perhaps *Black Widow* is too little too late for Natasha Romanoff. The film is a prequel establishing a character that the audience knows will die. However, *Black Widow's* significance as the first film in which Natasha has narrative agency and therefore displays character development, also allows for her motif to develop and become meaningful, something that did not happen in the previous films.

Ultimately, there is nothing about Lorne Balfe's soundtrack for *Black Widow* that is particularly revolutionary for a film score. However, the music demonstrates that even when the major plot points of a film are completely ridiculous (super soldiers, synthetic gas that acts as the counteragent for chemical subjugation, etc.), emotional storytelling and meaningful character development are still possible. Janet Halfyard argues that the advances made in visual

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<sup>24</sup> DC has also recently released *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020), and *Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn* (2020).



storytelling mean that music in a superhero film no longer has to present the action as heroic, and instead can focus more on the emotional drama of the hero's story (2013, 192), which is precisely what happens with the soundtrack for *Black Widow*. This is not to say that emotionally driven storytelling would not occur in *Black Widow* without the soundtrack, but rather that it would not be as impactful. Rather than simply an action movie, Marvel demonstrates that they can create a film that explores an already developed character's struggles with her identity and her relationships to others even when she demonstrates an unwillingness to express those aspects of her life. More than a decade after her introduction into the MCU, *Black Widow* and its soundtrack allows for Natasha Romanoff to finally have the emotional character development she deserved beginning with *Iron Man 2* in 2010.

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**Appendices:***Appendix A*Occurrences of Natasha's motif in *Black Widow*

<b>Time</b>	<b>Line (if applicable)</b>
03:44	
08:47	
17:05	"Natasha Romanoff is in violation of the Sokovia Accords."
17:23	"Don't do this."
17:38	"From my vantage point it looks like you could use some bed rest."
18:01	"Romanoff!"
18:17	
23:52	"People who have friends don't call me"
30:19	
30:49	
48:51	"My mom abandoned me in the street like garbage."
50:48	"Top drawer, green cabinet."
56:19	"Move to the door on the south wall."
1:19:27	"Whether or not I admitted it to myself I did."
1:32:57	"I'll activate my tracker, and Ross will come running."
1:37:12	"You're in trouble."
1:41:30	"You'll need to get to the widows."
1:43:35	"I can handle that."
1:53:19	
1:59:17	"You guys go."
2:04:36	

*Appendix B*Occurrences of Yelena's theme and motifs in *Black Widow*

<b>Time</b>	<b>Line</b>
06:58	"You gotta run!"
07:49	
19:18	"I'm going to ground"
20:27	"Oksana, what did I do?"
30:09	
31:33	"Is that what we are?"
48:02	"He takes more every day"
1:16:22	"We had our orders and we played our roles to perfection."
1:29:14	"This is a much less cool way to die"
1:38:30	"That was disgusting."
1:44:12	"She's got a gun!"
1:48:08	"Hey, are you okay?"
1:53:52	"This was fun!"
1:57:45	"We're both upside down."
2:08:37	
2:11:34	