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# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE MUSICAL STYLES OF ANIRUDH RAVICHANDER, SAM C. S. AND GHIBRAN IN TAMIL THRILLER FILMS

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**Abstract**

This paper compares the musical approaches of Anirudh Ravichander, Sam C. S. and Ghibran in selected Tamil thriller-oriented films. It examines how background score, recurring musical motifs, rhythm, orchestration, electronic timbres, silence and sound effects contribute to suspense, anticipation and emotional intensity. The study uses a qualitative, comparative method based on close listening and scene analysis of six films: Kaththi (2014) and Vikram (2022), associated with Anirudh Ravichander; Vikram Vedha (2017) and Kaithi (2019), associated with Sam C. S.; and Arima Nambi (2014) and Ratsasan (2018), associated with Ghibran. The analysis is guided by film-sound scholarship which treats sound as an active part of cinematic narration rather than as decoration. The paper proposes that the three composers can be compared through their handling of rhythmic drive, thematic repetition, sonic atmosphere and the relationship between score and image. It does not claim that one composer is objectively superior; instead, it identifies different expressive strategies suited to different thriller situations. The findings are interpretive and arise from textual analysis, not from audience experiments or quantitative measurement.

**Keywords:** Tamil cinema; thriller films; background score; film music; Anirudh Ravichander; Sam C. S.; Ghibran; sound design.

## Research Focus

The central concern is how musical choices shape a viewer's experience of suspense: what is withheld, repeated, intensified or suddenly interrupted, and how these choices interact with editing, performance, dialogue and visual information.

## Introduction

Music is a major expressive resource in cinema. It can guide attention, establish atmosphere, suggest danger, reveal a character's inner state and shape the pace at

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which information is received. In thriller films, these functions become especially important because suspense depends on uncertainty: viewers anticipate an event but do not know exactly when, how or to whom it will happen. Background music can intensify this uncertainty through rhythmic patterns, dissonant textures, low-frequency sounds, recurring motifs and carefully placed silence.

Tamil cinema has developed a wide range of musical practices, from song-led storytelling to highly designed background scores. Contemporary thrillers often use music and sound in close coordination with rapid editing, restricted points of view, action choreography and plot revelations. The composer's work is therefore not limited to producing memorable songs. It also includes shaping transitions, sustaining tension between major events and creating sonic identities for characters, locations or recurring threats.

This paper focuses on three prominent composers whose work offers a useful basis for comparison: Anirudh Ravichander, Sam C. S. and Ghibran. Their selected films provide different narrative situations. Kaththi and Vikram combine action with suspense and large-scale dramatic momentum. Vikram Vedha uses a crime-thriller structure built around moral ambiguity and shifting perspectives, while Kaithi uses a compressed night-long narrative in which pursuit and survival generate continuous tension. Arima Nambi and Ratsasan offer further examples of action and psychological-crime suspense.

**Statement of the Problem**

Although film music is frequently discussed through songs, composer popularity or soundtrack reception, the detailed narrative work of background scoring can receive less attention. A comparative study can clarify how distinct musical techniques contribute to suspense and how those techniques vary according to narrative style.

**Objectives**

- To identify the principal musical and sonic techniques used in the selected thriller films.
- To compare the use of rhythm, instrumentation, motifs, silence and atmospheric sound across the three composers.
- To examine how background score supports characterisation, pacing, threat and narrative revelation.

**Research Questions**

- How do the selected composers use musical texture and rhythm to create suspense?
- What similarities and differences emerge in their use of motifs, orchestration and silence?
- How does the score interact with editing, dialogue and sound effects in key thriller sequences?

The study treats the film sequence as the main unit of analysis and understands suspense as an audiovisual effect. Music is

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considered alongside the image and other sound layers, rather than in isolation.

## Literature Review

### Film Music as Narrative Communication

Claudia Gorbman's (1987) work on classical film music explains how scores can support narrative continuity, establish mood and guide interpretation while often remaining less noticeable than dialogue or action. Her framework is useful for examining how thriller scores influence a viewer's expectations without always becoming the centre of attention. In a suspense sequence, a recurring musical idea may prepare the audience for danger before the image confirms it.

Michel Chion's (1994) writing on audiovisual relations demonstrates that sound changes how images are perceived. Sound can add movement, weight, urgency or emotional meaning to a visual event. His concept of synchresis - the perceptual joining of sound and image when they occur together - helps explain why a sharp impact, musical accent or sudden drop in sound can make an onscreen action feel more forceful. This is relevant to action-thriller sequences in which score and effects are carefully coordinated.

### Sound Design, Silence and Suspense

Rick Altman's (1992) collection on sound theory emphasises that film sound is layered and socially constructed. Dialogue, music, ambience and effects work together, and their relative prominence can change from moment to moment. David Sonnenschein (2001) similarly discusses sound as an expressive storytelling resource, including the use of sonic perspective, contrast and silence. In thrillers, silence does not necessarily mean the complete absence of sound; it may involve the removal of music while room tone, breath, footsteps or distant ambience remain audible. Such reduction can make a small sound seem threatening.

### Listening, Identification and Musical Style

Anahid Kassabian's (2001) study of film music considers how musical cues can shape identification and emotional alignment. This approach is useful when analysing whether a score positions the audience close to a protagonist, aligns them with a pursuer, or keeps them uncertain about a character's motives. Mervyn Cooke's (2008) historical account of film music provides a broader context for the changing relationship between orchestral traditions, technology and cinematic storytelling. These works offer concepts for analysing musical function without assuming that a single style is required for suspense.

### Research Gap and Analytical Framework

The above scholarship provides strong concepts for understanding film sound, but it does not by itself compare the selected contemporary Tamil thriller scores. This paper addresses that focused gap through a small comparative case study. It examines five connected dimensions: (1) rhythmic pulse and tempo; (2) timbre and instrumentation; (3)

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recurring motifs and thematic identity; (4) silence, ambience and sound-effect interaction; and (5) the relationship between musical change and narrative tension. The framework allows similarities and differences to be described without reducing musical meaning to a simple ranking.

The study also distinguishes a composer's score from the complete soundtrack. Sound design and final mixing may involve other specialists and production decisions. Therefore, a sonic effect heard in a film is not automatically attributed to the composer unless the available credits support that attribution.

**Methodology**:

**Research Design**

The research adopts a qualitative, comparative film-and-sound analysis. It interprets selected sequences in their narrative context and compares the musical strategies audible in each film. The approach is appropriate because the research questions concern expressive function, mood, timing and the relationship between sound and image rather than numerical measurement of audience response.

**Sampling and Selected Films**

A purposive sample of six Tamil films was selected to provide two case studies for each composer. The films are thriller-oriented works and include action, crime and psychological-thriller elements. Selection was based on their usefulness for comparing suspense-building sequences and on the credited musical association with the composer under study.

| Composer | Selected films | Analytical emphasis |
|---|---|---|
| Anirudh Ravichander | Kaththi (2014); Vikram (2022) | Action-driven momentum, recurring themes and large-scale dramatic build-up |
| Sam C. S. | Vikram Vedha (2017); Kaithi (2019) | Crime-thriller tension, rhythmic propulsion and narrative uncertainty |
| Ghibran | Arima Nambi (2014); Ratsasan (2018) | Atmospheric suspense, psychological unease and threat-oriented textures |

**Data Collection**

The primary material consists of the films themselves, with attention to selected suspense, pursuit, confrontation, revelation and transition sequences. Film credits and soundtrack material are used to identify the credited composer. For each sequence, listening notes record the entry and exit of music, changes in tempo or intensity, prominent instruments or electronic textures, recurring motifs, moments of musical reduction, and interaction with dialogue, ambience and effects.

**Procedure of Analysis**

- View each selected sequence in its full narrative context and note the dramatic situation.

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- Listen again with attention to the score, rhythmic pattern, timbre, motif and dynamic changes.
- Describe how the music relates to editing, camera perspective, performance and sound effects.
- Compare sequences across films and identify recurring stylistic tendencies, while noting exceptions.

**Reliability, Ethics and Limitations**

To maintain consistency, the same listening dimensions are applied to all six films. Interpretations are checked against the scene context rather than based on isolated audio alone. The study uses publicly released films and does not involve human participants. Its small purposive sample cannot represent every work by the composers, and subjective listening remains part of qualitative interpretation. It does not measure audience fear or prove that one score is more effective for all viewers.

**Results and Thematic Findings**

The qualitative comparison suggests that all three composers use music as a narrative force, but their selected films foreground different combinations of rhythmic energy, thematic repetition and atmospheric detail. The observations below describe tendencies in the selected case studies; they should not be treated as fixed signatures across each composer's entire career.

**Anirudh Ravichander: Momentum and Thematic Impact**

In Kaththi and Vikram, the score is frequently associated with forward movement and heightened dramatic scale. Rhythmic repetition, emphatic accents and layered electronic-orchestral textures can reinforce the physical energy of action and the arrival of a central character. The music often works by building intensity across an edit or confrontation, making the sequence feel larger and more immediate. A recurring theme or recognisable musical phrase can also create continuity between a character's appearance and later moments of conflict. In this sample, the emphasis is on propulsion and impact: the score helps organise the viewer's expectation of an impending action.

**Sam C. S.: Tension Through Pulse and Narrative Uncertainty**

Vikram Vedha and Kaithi present suspense through different narrative designs. Vikram Vedha relies on moral ambiguity and alternating perspectives; musical cues can underline shifts in control, suspicion or psychological pressure without resolving the conflict too early. Kaithi concentrates much of its action within a continuous night-time survival situation. In such a structure, rhythmic drive and carefully timed musical entrances can sustain urgency across movement, pursuit and confrontation. The comparison highlights the score's ability to maintain tension while the viewer waits for the next development.

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Rather than depending only on sudden loud cues, suspense can be carried by repetition, pace and controlled escalation.

**Ghibran: Atmosphere and Psychological Unease**

Arima Nambi and Ratsasan offer settings in which danger and uncertainty are central to the audience's experience. In thriller contexts of this kind, atmospheric layers, unusual timbral combinations and shifts in musical density can make a location or an unseen threat feel unstable. Ratsasan's psychological-crime narrative particularly invites attention to the relation between sonic atmosphere and the audience's incomplete knowledge. A restrained passage, a disquieting texture or an abrupt change in intensity can heighten anticipation by suggesting that something is wrong before the image explains why. The emphasis in this sample is therefore on atmosphere and unease, alongside moments of more direct dramatic scoring.

**Comparative themes**

| Dimension | Anirudh Ravichander | Sam C. S. | Ghibran |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dominant tendency in this sample | Momentum and impact | Pulse and sustained tension | Atmosphere and unease |
| Narrative use | Character arrival and action escalation | Pursuit, conflict and uncertainty | Threat, mystery and psychological pressure |
| Key listening focus | Rhythmic accents and thematic repetition | Pacing and cue placement | Timbre, texture and sonic space |

Across the sample, three findings stand out. First, suspense is created not only by increasing volume but also by controlling when music appears or withdraws.

Second, repeated motifs and rhythmic patterns can establish expectation, while variation disrupts that expectation. Third, the most effective analysis considers music together with effects, ambience, dialogue and editing. These findings support a comparative description of musical approaches rather than a quantitative or evaluative ranking.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

**Discussion**

The comparison shows that thriller music functions through timing as much as through melody. A cue may prepare the audience for a threat, intensify a chase, mark a change in character perspective or delay emotional release. Anirudh Ravichander's selected films illustrate how rhythmic drive and emphatic themes can magnify action and character presence. Sam C. S.'s selected films demonstrate how pulse, repetition and controlled escalation can sustain tension across crime and survival narratives. Ghibran's selected films invite attention to atmosphere, timbral colour and psychological unease. These are analytical tendencies within the sample, not exclusive qualities or complete descriptions of the composers' output.

The study also underlines the importance of the relationship between score and sound design. A musical cue may blend with environmental sound, while a sudden reduction in score can make breathing, footsteps or a small background noise more prominent.

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Chion's (1994) account of audiovisual relations helps explain why such combinations alter the meaning and force of an image. The score does not operate independently; it participates in a larger sound field shaped by mixing, editing and performance.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to compare the musical styles of Anirudh Ravichander, Sam C. S. and Ghibran in selected Tamil thriller films. Through qualitative analysis of six films, it identified three broad tendencies: momentum and thematic impact in the selected Anirudh films; pulse and sustained narrative tension in the selected Sam C. S. films; and atmospheric unease in the selected Ghibran films. Across all three groups, rhythm, motifs, timbre, silence and cue placement help organise suspense and guide audience expectation.

The study concludes that contemporary Tamil thriller music is best understood as an integrated storytelling practice. The contribution of a score lies not simply in making a scene louder or more exciting, but in shaping what viewers anticipate, what they fear and when they receive emotional information. Future research could expand the sample, examine composer interviews and production credits, compare theatrical and streaming mixes, or conduct audience studies to investigate how different viewers respond to specific sonic techniques.

## Limitations

The findings are based on a small purposive sample and qualitative interpretation. No audience survey, physiological measurement or comprehensive frame-by-frame sound inventory was conducted. Further study is needed before drawing conclusions about audience response or the composers' complete careers.

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