

TV Music: quick fixes, semiotics and the demo- cratic right to know

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Recognition and embarrassment

I will start with a short video example that I have used in teaching for the best part of twenty years.

VHS tape. *Emmerdale Farm*, 2 versions, each 30 seconds

[1] **Visuals:** a smooth helicopter pan, from a few hundred feet in the air looking right and diagonally downwards, takes the camera from right to left over rolling green hills (Yorkshire Dales), over irregularly and 'organically' shaped fields bordered with stone walls, and over a small village nestling in the valley, its houses built in grey stone, its churchyard flanked by large round leafy trees. At this point the text 'Emmerdale Farm' is superimposed in a large yellow font occupying half the screen and continues while, in the mid distance, a small car moves slowly, also left to right, past the village green. As the visuals soft-fade into a head-on view of grey-stone farmhouse and farmyard set against a green hillside, the text 'Written by Kevin Laffan' appears in a smaller yellow font, followed by a quick fade-out. **Music:** 20 6/8 bars at $\downarrow . = 72$, legato oboe tune with short suspensions in D minor over legato circle-of-fifths progressions played by strings.¹

[2] **Visuals:** same as [1]. **Music:** ten-second loop, played three times, in irregular rhythm and metre and consisting of (a) high-pitched held dissonance in strings and (b) low-pitched brass punctuations using chromatic intervals and irregular note values.²

This comparison example is an old trick I have yet to tire of. Its usual effect on those who haven't seen and heard it before is one of instant recognition touched with a hint of embarrassment.

Instantly recognisable to anyone in our culture is the fact that two completely different narratives can be derived from the same visual sequence. Narrative one is that of a pastoral idyll. It draws our visual and affective attention to smooth movement over rolling hills past a pretty stone village in the valley. Nature tamed by humans is supposed to come across as a source of relaxation and we will probably interpret the lack of people on screen as a positive sign of rest and recreation: 'far from the madding crowd', so to speak. Even the car being driven at a leisurely pace past the village green to the idyllic farmhouse cross-faded into the hill at the end of the footage comes across as a pleasant and relaxed activity.

Narrative two is that of a horror story. This time the slow pace of the heli-

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1. Tony Hatch: Theme for 'Emmerdale Farm' (Yorkshire TV, 1972). *Hit the Road to Themedland*. Pye NSPL 41029 (1974).
 2. John Cacavas: 'Psychotic Transients (5)'. *Recorded Music for Film, Radio & TV — Drama themes, links and bridges (2)*. Boosey & Hawkes SBH 2986 (n.d.).

copter sweep, the absence of movement from people, animals or other foreground figures usually comes across as threat, not as pleasant relaxation. Typical comments from seminar discussion of the second narrative have been 'Has there been a terrible plague or an atomic holocaust?', 'I bet it's Jack Nicholson, a diabolical grin on his face, driving that old car with such grim determination' and 'There's bound to be a stack of dismembered bodies in the cellar'.

Most people in our culture are thoroughly competent at decoding the sounds of the music: they recognise difference of narrative character on the basis of music alone. So, what about the embarrassment I mentioned earlier?

The embarrassment seems to derive from the fact that, in our culture at least, most people's degree of everyday musical ability to react in a codally competent fashion, as with the *Emmerdale Farm* example, is not matched by commensurate competence in terms of understanding how and why such reactions are brought about. This incongruence between high ability in musical response and low ability in understanding the mechanisms underpinning such response is particularly embarrassing when highlighted in the context of education or research, because these are contexts where 'understanding mechanisms', rather than 'responding emotionally', are generally accepted as the order of the day.

The usual objection at this point is expressed in terms like 'what does it matter?', 'Isn't TV music supposed to just entertain?', the subtext being that entertainment is not a serious issue. Well, one reason for the importance of analysing TV music relates to the popular definition of 'manipulation', in the sense of

'to manage (a person, situation, etc.) to one's own advantage, esp. unfairly or unscrupulously' (*Oxford Concise Dictionary*, 1995).

There is an obvious ethical aspect to this sense of the word: *manipulation* involves undue and unjust coercion which in its turn implies a relation of power, the stronger party manipulating the weaker of the two.³ Now, since ignorance constitutes a particular form of human weakness, it could be argued that the *unwanted* modification of our behaviour as listeners — our manipulation by music, so to speak — is far more likely to occur if we remain *unaware*, not just of the mere fact *that* we respond competently to music on an everyday basis but also of how that competence is used to influence our emotional judgement of phenomena associated with the music, as in the *Emmerdale Farm* example. In other words, the embarrassment caused by conflict between familiarity of musical response and unfamiliarity of reflecting on that response raises the question of manipulation. We feel a bit cheated, like being caught with our epistemological pants down on an academic episode of *Candid Camera*. At the same time we know that music by its very nature affects listeners at non-verbal, non-analytical levels of cognition, in terms of movement or emotion, etc. It would therefore be absurd to think of musical communication as intrinsically manipulative in the sense of managing listener behaviour unfairly or unscrupulously. It is only the *potential* for unfair influence through music which increases if listeners are unaware of music's semiotic mechanisms. For example, it is easier to accept what you

3. If the 'weaker' manipulates the 'stronger' (e.g. traditional wife manipulating traditional husband), then the 'weaker' has become by definition the stronger, at least for the duration of the manipulation in progress.

might otherwise regard as a destructive and claustrophobic relationship as something highly desirable if its appearance on screen is accompanied by suitably lush and romantic music and if you know little or nothing about such love music and its uses. A little more semiotic awareness would at least have allowed the listener to think something like 'Hm! I don't agree with those violins!'

A second reason for taking the issue of television music quite seriously is that a lot of people hear a lot of it. In fact, as a recent undergraduate dissertation has shown, music is present during over one third of all standard terrestrial TV programming between six o'clock and midnight an average evening in the UK.⁴ Bearing in mind [1] that the evening's programming included two complete football matches; [2] that satellite TV includes both movie and music video channels; [3] that the average household leaves the television on for two hours every day, then we are liable to hear almost an hour of music every day from that source alone.

Despite the fact that television programming accounts for over a quarter of all music we hear (and that we hear music for a quarter of our waking life), it has been virtually neglected as an area of serious inquiry. The reasons for such neglect are numerous, the most obvious ones — cultural elitism, educational conservatism, institutional inertia etc. — relating in their turn to deep-seated anomalies in the construction of subjectivity in this socio-economic system. These anomalies, too complex to account for in this context, find expression in the almost watertight conceptual and behavioural divisions made between private and public, individual and collective, psychological and social, leisure and work, fun and serious, body and mind, etc. According to these and similar dualisms, music as popularly disseminated as that heard on TV is much more likely to be generally understood as belonging to the amusing and 'private' sphere of leisure, fun and body than to the serious 'public' sphere of work and the mind. Popularly conceptualised as entertainment or art rather than as science or knowledge, little wonder it has not figured much in 'serious' education or research; and little wonder, too, that many of us are still embarrassed if obliged to reflect at some distance on our own emotional responses, be they elicited by music or by other means.

To cut a long story short, I am for reasons of what I would regard as common sense and cultural democracy claiming that it is frivolous to regard the issue of TV music as frivolous and that any serious attempt to address the problem of musical manipulation in our time will need to take the lives of the majority of the population into serious consideration. But there is a third reason for studying television music. This third reason is methodological.

TV music and musicological method

With more than a little help from colleagues I have previously argued that European musicology evolved in the early nineteenth century as a quasi-intellectual strategy to propagate a basically anti-intellectual view of music.⁵ Put crudely, the mission statement was much the same as that in Pharaonic

4. Third year undergraduate dissertation by Gemma Maull, Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool, May 1999.

5. A full account of this process will appear in Chapter 1 of *Ten Little Title Tunes* (by Tagg and Clarida), to be published shortly. Please consult the 'on-line texts' part of the website www.taggs.freeseerve.co.uk for further details.

Egypt or Imperial China, i.e. that 'good' music, by which was meant music identified with the ruling classes, could be regarded as capable of transcending music's existence in the real world of social and cultural inequality. The 'good' music for this continent was of course the instrumental music of aristocratic and haut-bourgeois Central Europe, a set of practices which were subsequently canonised as number one on the aesthetic top ten of practically every conservatory and musicology department in the Western world. One problem with this remarkable intellectual strategy was that most of the music heard most of the time by most of the people in most of the world could never be imagined as suprasocial, let alone as immaterial. Another problem was of course, as several scholars have noted, that instrumental music in the European classical tradition was clearly rooted in a sense of affect that had taken hundreds of years to evolve in conjunction with, not in spite of, dramatic or verbal narrative.⁶

Film and subsequently TV have continued a long-standing tradition of what Austrian film composer Hans Jelinek termed 'invisible music', i.e. multi-modal or multi-media situations where the occurrence of non-verbal sounds is not necessarily the primary focus of the presentation and where musical performance is no visual issue.⁷ In the historical context of institutionalised music education and research it is unfortunately often still necessary to emphasise that 'invisible' music has always been much more common than its 'visible' counterpart, to explain that over 99% of music heard comes out of loudspeakers or headphones and that most of that music is not primarily envisaged as performed on stage.

In the early twentieth century, feature film music developed out of European classical music's vocabulary of cultural connotations and sense of dramatic narrative. Silent film music collections in the USA and elsewhere were produced by conservatory trained musicians with an intimate knowledge of the European classical repertoire. Many prewar sound film scores by such figures as Korngold and Steiner (also work by more recent Hollywood composers like John Williams or James Horner) made extensive use of the expressive vocabulary of nineteenth-century opera, ballet and tone poems to the extent that when music was required almost instantly to provide the right mood for newsreels and animated film, library music collections could rely on an already existing set of codes which had already been used for several generations in various audiovisual contexts (film, opera, ballet, etc.).⁸

Library music's main customers today are in advertising, broadcasting and programme production, not least for TV. The logistics of TV production tend to demand that appropriate music be easily accessible as well as efficient in communicating the intended mood and connotations. Such considerations favour the tendency to use well-established, sometimes archetypal musical 'signifiers' in TV adverts, trailers, underscore and title themes, for example, in terms of male, female, love, threat, urgency, crime and mystery, not to

6. See for example Rosen, Charles: *The Classical Style*. London: Faber and Faber (1976) and Ford, Charles: *Così? Sexual politics in Mozart's operas*. Manchester University Press (1991).

7. Jelinek, H: 'Musik in Film und Fernsehen'. *Österreichisches Musikzeitschrift*, 23.

8. Library music is in simple terms a collection of recorded music categorised according to moods, spheres of connotation and episodic functions. The user can look up the desired connotation, mood or function and find reference to pieces of recorded music registered as expressing the relevant mood or connotation, or fulfilling the desired function.

mention cues for fin-de siècle Paris, imperial Japan, deep space, Celtic mists, eighteenth-century high society, etc., or episodic markers such as openings, endings, stings, bridges and tails. Although neither such categories nor the vast majority of musical traits assumed to act as operative 'signifiers' for those categories remain constant from one cultural context to another, there is nevertheless sufficient practical coherence within one cultural context to study the mechanisms of signification in TV music in some detail.⁹

Studies of TV music's relative coherence of signification have been a useful starting point in the development of a more widely applicable semiotics of music.¹⁰ Indeed, over the past ten years, I have found two methodological procedures, developed from earlier research, to be of particular use in classes explicitly aimed at creating awareness among students of both music and other subjects of music's specificity as a means of communication. One such trick is called *interobjective comparison*, a procedure involving the use of other music and of musical commutation, not of words or images, as primary step in relating the music under analysis to anything outside itself.¹¹ The other trick employs a simple *sign typology* of music developed not from linguistic or from general cultural theory but from consistent relationships, observed in extensive empirical research, between musical structure and paramusical phenomena.¹²

Depending on the grain of analysis, these simple and well-tried analytical procedures allow for varying degrees of awareness into the mechanisms underpinning musical communication in the modern mass media. Such insight can in its turn make all the difference for listeners between manipulation and affect, for example between, on the one hand, just feeling, thanks to some discordant music, that the Native Americans shown on screen are savage villains and, on the other, knowing that what the music has told you to feel about them may not be what you really feel or think. But there are other ways of combating musical manipulation.

Combating musical manipulation

There are, I think, in the arts and social sciences, three main arenas in which we need to confront the problems of musical manipulation. One of these — music semiotics, the understanding of relationships between musical structures and their effects (knowledge *about* music, *savoir*) — has already been mentioned. The other two areas are epistemology and music making (knowledge *in* music, *savoir faire*).

Epistemology

In the area of epistemology we need to aim for a re-integration of human experience and knowledge in relation to music. Like the early days of IASPM

9. See P Tagg: 'Nature as a Musical Mood Category' (1982), 'An Anthropology of Stereotypes in TV Music' (1990), and "'Universal" Music and the Case of Death' (1993), all accessible from online list at <www.tagg.org/texts.html>.

10. See 'Musicology and the Semiotics of Popular Music' (1987), accessible from online list at <www.tagg.org/texts.html>. See also P Tagg: *Kojak - 50 Seconds of TV Music*, 2nd ed., New York, 1999, as well as P Tagg and R Clarida: *Ten Little Title Tunes*, New York, 2000 (both published by The Mass Media Music Scholars' Press <www.mmm-sp.com>).

11. This method is well illustrated in the *Kojak* analysis already mentioned (see footnote 10) and in P Tagg: *Fernando the Flute*, 2nd ed., New York, 1999.

12. See 'Towards a Sign Typology of Music' (1992), accessible from online list at <www.tagg.org/texts.html>.

(International Association for the Study of Popular Music), this conference makes clear that no progress can be made in the understanding of music if institutional and disciplinary boundaries are not radically transgressed. At the same time the necessity of this conference is an eloquent indictment of the 'normality' to which most of us must return on Monday, a normality in which there is little or no dialogue between natural and social scientists, where there are often endemic misunderstandings between social scientists interested in music and musicians or musicologists interested in society, not to mention the mistrust with which musicians often view musicologists or the mutual disdain which seems to exist between the music industry and higher education in music — it can be a real mess, an ideological Tower of Babel. In the context of combating manipulation I can do no more than highlight two interrelated questions calling for particularly urgent attention: the defalsification of our own music history and the anthropological relativisation of our own music culture(s).

By the defalsification of European music I mean combating such phenomena as its misrepresentation as an ethereal, non-corporeal and suprasocial phenomenon. The tendency to favour notions of the 'autonomous' music aesthetic in many conservatories and departments of musicology has aggravated cultural reductionism according to which other music cultures, notably some from West African and Latin America, are regarded as essentially rhythmical and corporeal in contrast to our own more cerebral and therefore, implicitly, 'more advanced' practices. Of course, such reductionism is both historically false and can easily degenerate into racism.¹³ By the relativisation of our own music cultures I mean the ability to see ourselves anthropologically, and to lay bare the underlying social and ritual functions of our music beneath the veneer of false notions like 'autonomous music' or 'pure entertainment'.¹⁴

Music-making

The final area of activity in which we can combat musical manipulation is that identified by Swedish poet Göran Sonnevi in 1975:

'Musiken | kan inte bortförklaras. | Det går inte ens att säga emot, | annat än | med helt ny musik.' [= Music cannot be explained away. It cannot even be contradicted, except by completely new music].

One way of interpreting this aphorism is that, when it comes to the crunch, the risks of manipulation will be least when everyone has equal power over the means of musical expression and production, the same potential to exert musical influence. I do not envisage here a nostalgic return to live communal music-making, even less the introduction of compulsory violin or classical singing lessons for all. No, I am thinking of recent developments in technology and in some popular music cultures, more specifically of such phenom-

13. See P Tagg: 'Open Letter about "Black Music", "Afro-American Music" and "European Music" (1987) [www.taggs.freeserve.co.uk/html/opelet.htm]. It should, for example, also be remembered that a good music teacher should, according to J.S. Bach pupil Johann Philipp Kirnberger, 'always keep his pupils on various types of dance music so they become rooted in the automatic aspect of the beat' ('Tanzstück'. In *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*. Leipzig, 1771; cited in Gunno Klingfors: *Bach går igen — Källkritiska studier i J S Bachs uppförandepaxis*. 1991, Göteborg: Skrifter från Musikvetenskapliga institutionen, 23, p. 347).

14. See P Tagg 'An Anthropology of Stereotypes in TV Music' (1989) [www.taggs.freeserve.co.uk/pdf/tvanthro.pdf].

ena as sampling and of the various 'composer jukebox' sites to be found on the web or the film music CD-i produced by the British Film Institute. I am suggesting that some new technologies present much more potential for a democratisation of cultural activity than risks for pacification of the great general public.

For example, software using prerecorded archetypal soundbytes as compositional soundbytes does not spell the end of musical creativity. After all, as Mozart, Beethoven, Parker, Zappa and Morricone have shown, it is not the novelty of building materials that constitutes creative innovation but how the building blocks are organised into longer sequences and larger forms, i.e. what is constructed or composed from the building blocks.

Summary

In this paper I have tried to show how TV music is, for methodological as well as democratic reasons, an important area of study. I have referred to ways in which musical structures relate to phenomena which are not necessarily musical at all, even when those phenomena are physically absent. Twenty years of teaching in this field have shown me that there is broad interest among young people in general (not just among music students) in understanding how they are affected by music, both duly and unduly (the latter constituting manipulation). This interest, combined with considerable everyday experience of music and moving image, acquired ever since the TV was first used to baby-sit them, has produced a remarkable competence in distinguishing nuances of connotation brought about by nuances of structural difference in the music they hear and of the context in which that music is heard.

In my day-to-day work I try to provide these young people with some sort of anti-manipulative first-aid kit which will, I hope, at least allow them to understand the basic mechanisms of communicating moods and connotations through music. Together with greater knowledge of musical manipulation from the business side, with the democratic potential of new technologies, with a truly anthropological approach to our own culture (not just to other cultures), with a re-evaluation and defalsification of our own continent's music history, with new insights into matters bioacoustic, etc., etc., I would hold that the semiotic method referred to in this paper will help diminish the risks of musical manipulation. In short, recognition and awareness are essential to the solution of any problem, musical manipulation included.

I am sorry it has taken us so long to start organising our understanding of music to the extent that we can all meet in one place to talk about it (like now), but I am very glad it has finally happened. I really hope that something permanent will become of this, not so much in the interests of people of my age as for all those who will have to live in the unjust and manipulative future that we seem to have prepared for them.