

The symbolic and material presence of music in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

This brief article appeared as the Foreword to *Music, Sound and Silence in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Paul Attinello, Janet K Halfyard, and Vanessa Knights (Farnham; Ashgate, 2010, pp xv-xviii).

Music has been integral to television programming since the first public broadcasts were transmitted from London in 1936 and in the New York metropolitan area during 1939. In those early days, with broadcasting hours limited and signals in need of constant retuning, television immediately provided a portal in the home from which emerged performing musicians, singers and dancers. It also created a box full of opportunities for using music without the musicians visible. After the Second World War, as television became an integral part of domestic family life, the small screen facilitated the widespread appreciation of big band jazz, a new type of solo singer, country, r'n'b, rock'n'roll and soul, to name the most obvious genres. The pop icons of the North Atlantic – from Little Richard to Madonna, from The Beatles to Beyoncé – have all made it in the marketplace in no small part due to the way television has delivered them into the homes of millions of people. At the same time, television has increasingly incorporated pre-existing songs, instrumentals or commissions, integrating the music into interludes, theme tunes, drama, sport, news, documentary and, in recent years, a wave of 'reality' programmes.

Despite the continual flow of music from the television set, for many years it was conspicuously absent in textbooks and research studies of television. Histories of twentieth-century music almost completely ignored television. Even histories of rock, which came to prominence with the aid of television, have told us surprisingly little about the importance of the small screen in the making, mediating and enjoyment of the genre. When music has been mentioned it has usually been in passing, often to register a particularly controversial appearance by Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, The Sex Pistols, Madonna, Public Enemy or Björk. Little attention has been paid to those pop sounds transmitted without the musicians visible, and integral to the rhetorics and representations in drama, soap, sport and documentary. The test card and interludes that featured so much during the early years of television provided an opportunity for composers such as Eric Coates who have now been recognised for their contribution to light music. During the latter part of the twentieth century, a type of ambient light music, associated with artists such as Brian Eno, Moby and Air, began to feature extensively on television. It has been included to enhance or add sonic momentum to visually predictable programmes featuring gardening, holidays, cooking, home makeovers, and so on. Not only has this music been easily incorporated, the sounds coming out of television have also influenced a number of genres of popular music – if you listen carefully you might catch clues and intimations of the influence of television in jazz and rock during the 1960s. You will certainly hear it in electronic dance music and, perhaps most explicitly, in much hip-hop that has been made since the 1980s and 1990s.

No doubt the respective holes in the histories of television and music have come about due to the disciplinary division of labour within the academy. While scholars of classical music ignored television, assuming it to be an insignificant and rather vulgar mass medium, the early pioneers in the study popular music were concerned with the subcultures on the street rather than the kids on the sofa. Scholars of television were, and to a degree, still are preoccupied with talk and vision, assuming that the hard factual study of 'information' is more valuable than the soft, slippery sounds of 'entertainment' – even though many of our most profound insights into the world have come from the pleasures of popular art. This collection is not only one more book that challenges the spurious information/ entertainment dichotomy, it should provoke mainstream scholars of television to think a bit more about the medium's musicality,

and encourage those studying music (art and popular) to think about the way it has become well and truly interwoven with television. The book that follows signals a significant turning point – it's packed with the arguments of scholars who are uninhibited about exploring and speculating across the disciplinary boundaries that have kept music and television separate for so long.

More specifically, this book illuminates how the study of music on television can provide numerous insights into the significance of music as both a cultural form (connecting with subjects and collectivities, values and beliefs), and as a medium of communication (encoding and conveying meaning in quite specific ways). A study of sound in the moving image media can provide insights into how music works as both a representational and a non-representational form of knowledge and human understanding. By representational I mean the way that music can refer to something other than itself, which we understand via our socially conditioned knowledge of semiotic codes and culturally mediated systems of meaning. Hence, we understand how music can be used as a means of emotional coding – letting us know how the characters are feeling; the sonic conventions that tell us that a character is angry, sad, falling in love, drugged, terrified or plain bewildered. We grow up acquiring a knowledge of how music can convey cultural codes, often through the use of sonic clichés that enable us to recognise that the action is taking place in an imaginary Scotland, China or medieval Europe, or the Bronx in the 1950s. Or the music lets us know that we are entering a science fiction story, a haunted house, a tale from the Wild West, or we are about to hear the evening news. Even with eyes closed we might recognise the use of music to convey drama – the chase scene, the lone individual running down the street, the victim being stabbed in the shower. Music has brought us marching armies, chugging trains, ricocheting gunshots and waves crashing down on the beach. The audiences for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* know this, and so too do the directors and producers. As the authors in this collection highlight, a range of recognisable musical and visual codes have been cleverly integrated into the unfolding tale; the significations range from the frivolous to profound, and are at once ironic and highly mannered. The programme exhibits a type of knowing intertextuality that seems to play with the very conventions of intertextuality as a device. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has fun with a whole series of genre conventions whilst seeming to set itself the task of inventing its own genre (or transcending genre) - all the while taking advantage of the spectator's love of being manipulated by familiar musical codes; never really forgetting that, in the long run, art often grows out of fun (more often than not it's only furrowed brows and scratched chins that are produced by 'Art').

Slightly less obvious, the subject of far less critical attention, and maybe more implied than explicitly engaged in this collection, is the way music communicates as a form of non-representational knowledge and understanding of the world. Here I am referring to a more sensual, an embodied, a less easily rationalised experience whereby human beings acquire knowledge of the world and their place in it through sounds, colours, gestures, and movement. Musically, this can be heard in the way certain pitches, timbres, textures (the tactile quality of sound), melodic patterns and rhythms can forcibly and physiologically shape our perception of the world even though they resist attempts to reduce them to easily identifiable cultural codes and social determinants. Silence, a feature of this book and the programme, is perhaps one of the most profound representational and non-representational sounds in our lives. State institutions, world religions and commercial corporations know this, which is why silence is used in all manner of rituals in a way that has a tangible physiological impact on our being – whether it's devotional activity, the sombre appreciation of art in galleries and museums, or the pause for those very long two minutes during which we

remember those who died. Silence is a material and symbolic presence in our everyday lives, art forms and rituals.

The two modalities – the representational and non-representational – work together. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* we may hear a certain kind of music and this may lead us to assume specific cultural codes; it may suggest a particular time and place, a type of person, a repertoire of significations. At the same time, the music may convey more embodied and sensual meaning through any number of parameters or characteristics - changing pitch, shifting timbres, slips between textures, rhythm, gesture, and movement. None of this is easy to identify and analyse according to scholarly methodologies, but it is recognised by or infiltrates the listener nonetheless. Sound has a material presence – and in *Buffy* that materiality allows us a certain visual and sonic experience of death, resurrection, or romance, one that is far more than simply semiotic or representational. The study of music in television, and the issues raised in the chapters in this book, can contribute to an awareness of the quite profound ways that music gives expression to our lone and our shared worlds.

Any consideration of music in television must inevitably acknowledge the domestic contexts of reception and in doing so it will implicitly challenge some of the assumptions about sound-image relations that have been developed from the study of cinema. There has been a tendency in film studies - and as a result it has seeped into media and communication studies - to treat a film or a television drama as a self-contained narrative; a diegesis that develops and coheres within the screen action. Whilst this may be a quite plausible approach when it comes to understanding films originally made to be experienced in darkened cinemas, it is less convincing when it comes to television programmes that are knowingly put together and transmitted to audiences who will be watching within groups of young people or families. This is something that Christine Geraghty highlighted many years ago in her study of soap opera – the diegesis of any soap unfolds as it enfolds the expectations and interpretations of the domestic audience into the development of the story. Television producers know that their public is not going to be sitting in the dark, giving the screen their more or less undivided attention, and they have developed a whole repertoire of subtle or explicit ways of addressing and holding the attention of their domestic audience (they also know how to let you know about something you might not have noticed when you were not paying attention). Just how a particular programme or series addresses its audience is best explored through a case study like this rather than via a route into theoretical generalisations. To get at the details and dynamics of the domestic aesthetic of music and television requires a methodology that can do more than register how meaning is conveyed formally through sounds, words and images: It must seek to embed these within the tangible habitats, interactions and interpretative strategies through which people actively encounter the programme and make it part of their social worlds. Cumulatively this book provides an open non-prescriptive way of doing this, linking text to context, bringing together formalism and hermeneutics.

Apart from all these general conceptual issues, scholarly dilemmas and diversions, the book is important for the insight it provides into this very particular and idiosyncratic piece of television history. The programme was clearly put together by a lot of creative people. It quickly caught the imagination of a young, intelligent, knowing and self-reflexive audience (a very particular demographic that is also explored, or at least lurks on the sofa, throughout this book). And – maybe because of all this, and the obvious overlap in audience profile – it caught the imagination of academics. The contributors to this collection not only cross the boundaries that have separated the study of music and the moving image; they cross the lines, and occasionally play with the codes, that have obliged the scholar to separate her or himself from the fans.