

“Featuring Music From”: Song, Sound, and Remix

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Although Hollywood cinema has always had a close relationship with popular music, the last fifty years have seen the context, characteristics and impact of that relationship significantly change. With the rise of music videos, ipods, youtube and new media forms, the interconnections between popular music and visual media have transformed the marketing, culture, reception, aesthetics and form of audiovisual media. And yet, for all of this transformative change, the role of compilation soundtracks and popular music in film, television, video games and other visual media has been approached in more or less the same way as conventional orchestral scoring in the studio era. Music is seen to connect audiences, intensify, direct and cue emotional response, offer narrative information about time, character and context, unify disparate narrative strands or events and bring the audience into the diegesis in a visceral way conducive to the story (stimulating fear, pleasure, sentiment for example). But as recent scholars and viewers have begun to note, music in visual media moves beyond these functions and operates in a multitude of ways that demand our attention and active engagement.

In order to query this issue I want to briefly consider two interrelated examples: music in television and the relation between popular pre-existing music and musical composition (scoring). Taking up the first point allows us to bring to the foreground the necessity of considering the distinctions among visual media. Although music and sound in television have received some attention in recent years, the scholarly discourse is scant and almost totally reliant on theoretical and methodological models borrowed from analyses of film sound and music. While these approaches are clearly relevant and significant, it must also be recognized that television is not film and television sound is distinct in terms of production, aesthetics and reception. For instance, post-production schedules and budgets for television are a fraction of those for feature films and aspects of the soundtrack like foley generally receive far less coverage, a reduction that both assumes and promotes the increased attention to dialogue and the greater use of background music. Indeed, with the proliferation of music montages as well as isolated musical moments in many television series, music cannot be said to be a background element at all. Rather, music comes in to cover those moments where the focus is not on dialogue – voice and music pervade television and silence is almost completely eradicated.

This foregrounding of music, especially when it is popular contemporary music known to the audience, pervades television shows and series as well as the streaming seriality of television as a whole. For instance, during a recent night of television viewing and listening, I noted the extent to which televisual commercial advertisements increasingly share acoustic aesthetics with the series and shows themselves. Although the prominence of the voice-over in television commercials shifts the acoustic characteristics of vocality, the sonic texture of music had a certain consistency across the entire three hours of viewing: brief, catchy music cues (either taken from popular culture or resonant of it) that rise to the foreground with a rapidity and pervasiveness that almost defies concentrated attention. The recognition of this kind of consistent musicality is just one of many

examples that illustrate the fact that treating television music as film music does not go far enough in addressing the sonic particularities of the medium.

This extends as well to other media forms such as video gaming, in which music cues have a repetition and formal structure unlike any other media form. Indeed, in a recent discussion with a composer for film music who had recently been hired to score a game, I was surprised to learn the extent to which the scoring itself had to be approached completely differently. The length, texture and interrelationship of musical cues work in a totally distinct way, a fact we should keep in mind when considering all of the sonic elements that go into different media forms. This brings me to my second point, which is that as the compilation score of pre-existing music moves to the forefront, original composition takes on other forms, functions and characteristics. For instance, an original score for film or television does not necessarily distinguish it from popular music, as recent scores by Nick Cave, RZA, Brian Eno, Karen O and Yo La Tengo prove. Moreover, the function and form of pre-existing compilation and original scores are converging as composers are increasingly asked to score films according to the models of compilation soundtracks -- that is providing music for distinct scenes or moments rather than composing for a film as a whole.

As these points suggest, original and compilation scores are not always distinct entities (as Jonny Greenwood's controversial exclusion from Oscar consideration for his *There Will Be Blood* score proves) and frequently the two modes combine, interpolate and crossover. In combination with the remixing, mash-ups, trade-ups (switching songs from different television series' opening title credits) and intermedial musical engagements (for example, on their website HBO features Snoop Dog singing a song about *True Blood*'s main character), these mixed scores suggest a challenging and complex landscape for music in audiovisual media. By interrogating the assumptions governing the distinctions between popular and classical, original and compiled, and song and score and investigating the modes, effects and functions of audiovisual music in all of its manifestations more thoroughly, we can begin to approach this complexity with the sonic attention it requires.