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Selling War: Television News Music and the Shaping of American Public Opinion*

Striking images.¹ One might perversely call them ›spectacular‹. But they are not purely visual: a whole sonic realm works with the images to produce their impact. We as musicians may have observed the role of music in creating affect in that montage, but how many members of the American public-at-large, the consumers of such media representations, know that the music is selling us a certain take on the news? In the context of television, this political application of music, ›the ultimate hidden persuader‹ to quote Nicholas Cook,² is all the more powerful not only by virtue of the size of its audience, but also because it seems natural.

Indeed, a multi-million dollar industry is devoted to providing music for the broadcast media. Normally, local radio and television stations and even national networks do not possess the resources to have a composer on staff, and thus they turn to production companies that sell licensed packages or libraries of musical material, called elements, for insertion at appropriate moments within the broadcast. The most popular of such production elements in television news³ include:

1. Opens and closes, also known as titles or themes, which identify the newscast and provide musical material for the rest of the broadcast. Through fanfare-like, wide-ranging, quick, syncopated themes in brass and strings over a driving beat, they create the impression of a dynamic newsroom, while at the same time establishing an authority in the eyes and ears of the viewer.⁴

2. Stingers or teases are very brief musical and visual markers for an important news item – occurring just before specific coverage begins, they serve the dual purpose of notifying the public about the importance of the reports to follow and – subliminally – helping to create an attitude within the viewership that will not only accept but also adopt the broadcast's position. These are the most original and free production elements of the newscast.⁵

3. Beds, often called ›promo beds‹, provide framing and background music for extensions of opens or longer previews of upcoming items, under voices and images. Beds at the beginning of broadcasts often take the opening theme and loop several of its measures in the middle, so that a highly variable length is possible.⁶

* See the internet version of this paper and video and audio examples at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper 27.8.2007>.

1 See video ex. 1 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/video1.mov>.

2 Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2000, p. 122.

3 For a listing see Appendix at page 741.

4 See audio ex. 1 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/audio1.aiff>.

5 See audio ex. 2 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/audio2.aiff>.

6 See audio ex. 3 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/audio3.aiff>.

4. Bumpers are the musical lead-ins to and lead-outs from commercials, which like stingers create a mood for the news items to which they refer. Unlike openers/closers and beds, bumpers within one newscast may widely differ, depending on the topic of the referenced news item.⁷

Thus standard signifying practices in this music industry have created designations that describe either the placement of the music or its affect, which foregrounds the role and importance of music as ›hidden persuader‹. And here we encounter the underbelly of the multi-million dollar beast. While the production companies publicly claim that their music creates an identity for the station, they are also creating attitudes, perspectives among its audience. As Randy Thom observes in ›Designing a Movie for Sound‹, ›sound may be the most powerful tool in the filmmaker's arsenal in terms of its ability to seduce‹⁸. Lawrence Grossman, former president of NBC News, put it this way with regard to the in-your-face news music of CNN and Fox: ›The music on the cable channels [...] tells you what to think.‹⁹ The industry relies upon musical signifying practices that are readily understood, and yet seem natural to the recipient. Such practices are nothing new to music, whether embodied in theories explaining ›the doctrine of affections‹ of the Baroque Era or the affectively organized anthologies of music for silent films from the beginning of this century.

Production companies of today fully subscribe to music as bearer of messages, and if there is any question, we can just look to their own, often disturbing rhetoric. Thus the British firm Mokal Music advertises its broadcast package called *Shuffle* with the words ›mean and pushy, strong and persuasive‹. These themes cover a lot of beefy styles, all up-tempo and up attitude. And the track entitled *This Evening* is described as ›persuasive theme‹ with sax and horns.¹⁰

Shelly Palmer Productions, Inc. of New York City sells to radio and television stations news music packages that are guaranteed to have an effect upon listeners and viewers. Let's look at the significantly named *Brave New World*: the production's elements are alternately described as ›majestic‹, ›hard-hitting‹, ›jazz-oriented‹ and ›timeless‹, which suggest a full range of musical expression and moods.¹¹ Designations like ›Crime‹ and ›Coping‹ make the signification of specific 4 ½ second cuts clear.¹²

These examples prove that the networks have come to recognize for their news broadcasts what television advertising agencies and indeed, the film industry, have long known: music is unsurpassed in its ability to tap into the personal narrative of the viewer and to suture her or him into the diegesis. As Claudia Gorbman observes in her landmark book

7 See audio ex. 4 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~admvp/paper/audio4.aiff>.

8 See <http://web.mac.com/kevinseaman/iWeb/Field%20Sound/What%20is%20Sound%20Design.html>.

9 Cited in: Nicholas Engstrom, ›The Soundtrack for War‹, in: *Columbia Journalism Review* 42/1 (2003), p. 45–47, here: p. 45.

10 See <http://www.mokalmusic.com/prodmusmall/products/mokals/mokalindex.html>.

11 See <http://www.shellypalmer.com/pages/bnw.htm>.

12 See ›Crime #3‹ (audio ex. 5) and ›Coping #2‹ (audio ex. 6), which musically correspond to our expectations from the descriptive titles at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~admvp/paper/audio5.aiff> and <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~admvp/paper/audio6.aiff>.

Unheard Melodies, »Music may act as a ›suturing‹ device, aiding the process of turning enunciation into fiction, lessening awareness of the technological nature of film discourse. Music gives a ›for-me-ness‹ to the soundtrack [... And] Music [...] increases the spectator's susceptibility to suggestion.«¹³ Put in slightly different terms, if music is an important component in the construction of personal narrative, and the newscast is geared to convince the viewer that its purpose coincides with his or her narrative (»following the stories that are important to you« or »keeping an eye on your city«), then this can create a commonality so that the viewer regards the music chosen for a particular production element as natural and his or her own choice.

It is not really any jump at all to the use of music to sell not only one particular network's coverage of the war, but also an attitude about that war, whereby American media empires seem to be marching in lockstep with the government. As media personality Danny Schechter writes, »it started with the Gulf War – the packaging of news, the graphics, the music, the classification of stories. [...] If you can get a sedated public hooked [...], you have a winner in terms of building audience.«¹⁴ War may »leash devastation and death on people, but it also delivers ratings and brings life to television. War is often the ›big story‹ (when sex isn't) and a defining moment for many journalists.«¹⁵ And for the American public, it is one's patriotic duty to support a just war against terrorists who have heinously attacked the homeland.

Indeed, in the media since 9/11, we can observe almost a continuous beating of war drums and sounding of martial trumpets, after the initial sounds of grief and mourning gave way in late September to the bellicose tone in broadcast media coverage of the War on Terrorism. As noted media researcher Shoma Munshi observes, »from the days and weeks following 9/11, till the United States attacked Afghanistan in October 2002, and most recently Iraq in March 2003, US broadcast media have managed to maintain a sustained level of patriotism fanning the public mood to keep the United States safe by whatever means possible.«¹⁶ Already shortly after 9/11, NPR asked its composer Jeffrey Freymann-Weyr for special coverage music, »either for another crisis in the States, or, as it happened, an attack on Afghanistan«¹⁷. The music he composed for the events of October, 2001 found use again in March of 2003, albeit with ›subtle changes‹ dictated by the network. We shall return to this specific music, but we should note that even a politically liberal news provider like NPR, which was no uncritical supporter of the war on terrorism, recognized the value of creating a ›war music‹ that would engage the public.

13 Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, Bloomington, IN 1987, p. 5.

14 Cited in: Matthew A. Baum, »Sex, Lies, and War: How Soft News Brings Foreign Policy to the Inattentive Public«, in: *American Political Science Review* 92/1 (2002), p. 91–109, here: p. 105.

15 Danny Schechter, »Warning: Media Management Now in Effect«, in: *ZNet*, <http://www.zmag.org/schechtermediam.htm>.

16 Shoma Munshi, »Television in the United States from 9/11 and the US's Continuing ›War on Terror‹: Single Theme, Multiple Media Issues«, in: *Media, War, and Terrorism: Responses from the Middle East and Asia*, ed. by Peter van der Veer and Shoma Munshi, London 2004, p. 46–60, here: p. 50.

17 Jeffrey Freymann-Weyr, »NPR's Special Coverage Theme Music«, in: <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/iraq2003/theme.html> 24. 1. 2008.

Thus if the evening of March 19, 2003 brought the unannounced, yet not unexpected, onset of the War on Iraq, the networks were well prepared. Five days before the war began, Fox News had its music package entitled *Liberation Iraq Music* ready to go. Bob Israel of Score Productions, the source of the ABC Nightly News theme in 1978, used the same thematic material to make a soundtrack for the ABC war news in advance of March 19.¹⁸ When queried about preparing a soundtrack for a war that was not yet certain, he explained that it »sounds a little crass, but that’s what you have to do in this business to be prepared«¹⁹. Although the dates are unclear, CBS had commissioned Peter Fish, composer of the Evening News theme, and NBC had done the same from Michael Karp, creator of the Dateline NBC sound, to write their War in Iraq music before the conflict began. NBC told Karp, »it looks like there’s going to be a war and we could use a good theme«²⁰. And in anticipation of finding a buyer from some station or network, music production company TM Century had already created the militaristic music package *Juggernaut* in December, 2002, under the assumption – according to Nicholas Engstrom in the *Columbia Journalism Review* – that »within six months there would be either a war or another major terrorist attack on American soil«²¹.

What were network executives looking for when they commissioned this music? *The Philadelphia Inquirer’s* music critic Peter Dobrin summarized the desired effects: »Like quick-firing subliminal messengers, special music is telling TV viewers and radio listeners what to think and how to feel about the war on Iraq.«²² Thus Richard O’Brien, Fox News’s Creative Director, wanted something »with a marching feeling [...]. We wanted the music to say, »Something big is coming this way.« After previewing the package, O’Brien directed the unnamed composer to »put in more tom-tom drums because they had more urgency. I wanted it to sound like, I don’t want to say war drums, but ...«²³ When the director of the CBS Evening News, Eric Shapiro, asked Peter Fish to write music that »tries to take into account as many situations as possible« and »conveys some idea of mood«, the composer responded with war music that – in his words – conveyed a »climate of fear. To me, this is a real live war, and we should be both awed and simultaneously scared [...]. It is just Techno-Ali-vs.-Frasier-IV-we’re-going-to-knock-the-crap-out-of-them, testosterone-driven big-punch music.« Personally, Fish attests to being a strong opponent to the war, »nevertheless, I have my job to do [...]. I believe the general mood of this country at this point in time is »we’re going to go kick some Arab ass.«²⁴ What Fish composed for CBS, as first presented on March 19, 2003 at 6:33 p. m. EST, the onset of the war, is just awful, also by the standards of television news music. It sounds artificial, synthesized, with repetitive rhythm tracks, almost inaudible thematic material and cheap sound effects.²⁵

18 See video ex. 2 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/video2.mov>.

19 Engstrom, »The Soundtrack for War«, p. 46.

20 Carter Burwell, »Music at 6: Scoring the News, Then and Now«, in: *Esopus* 1 (2003), p. 37.

21 Engstrom, »The Soundtrack for War«, p. 45. See also audio ex. 7 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/audio7.aiff>.

22 Peter Dobrin, »Media’s War Music Carries a Message«, in: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 30.3.2003.

23 Engstrom, »The Soundtrack for War«, p. 46.

24 Burwell, »Music at 6«, p. 37.

Let's compare Fish's package with the music written by Karp for NBC, which wanted »that kind of classy signature sound that NBC seems to have over many of the other networks«²⁶. Karp manages to capture the symphonic sound of John Williams' signature music *The Mission* while enhancing the materials's inherent martial qualities through percussion and brass. This ennobling music can be all the more effective in terms of shaping attitude because it is not in your face like the CBS theme or Fox's war music.

As a brash upstart, Fox News does not have the same image to uphold as do the established networks, so it did not have to employ anything remotely dignified in its war coverage. The aforementioned music with the drums of war has been described by Adam Baer in *Slate* as a »tanked-up shock-and-awe campaign of gung-ho missile »whooshes« and high-pitched electro-shrieks. Inspired by rock »n« roll [...] it sounds youthful, impatient, and reactionary.«²⁷ Engstrom writes that the music »could be Metallica rehearsing Wagner«²⁸. There is nothing subtle about the score for Fox's adaptation of TM Century's *Juggernaut*,²⁹ which John von Rhein of the *Chicago Tribune* describes as »trumpeting an unequivocal, scorched-earth patriotism: Let's feel good about America and beat Saddam!«³⁰

If these networks – whatever their orientation – seemed to march musically in lockstep with the Iraq war politics of the Bush administration, one network resisted the pressure to join the bandwagon. NPR's director for *All Things Considered*, Bob Boilen, commissioned Freymann-Weyr to write »more compassionate music, more thoughtful without being sad, because no matter how you feel about this conflict, I think people feel compassion for the soldiers and the innocents«. As Freymann-Weyr echoed, »the challenge was that it needed to be serious but not gloomy, not overly militaristic or flag-waving«³¹. With its reflective, uncertain tone, the music certainly differs from that of the other networks, which Freymann-Weyr explains in the only interview that details a composer's approach to writing music for the War in Iraq: »One thing I tried to do with the harmony was to introduce the ambiguity that (I hoped) would keep it from going too far in either direction – overly traditionally patriotic or overly morose. Even though the piece is centered around the key of C, I purposely avoided the one note that would make it either major or minor – all of the C chords, instead of E or E-flat, have a D and F natural instead.«³² Still, he felt he needed to connect with broader principles of signification for war music: »Although trumpet, timpani and military snare drums are a bit of a cliché, it didn't feel

25 See what Peter Fish composed, as first presented on March 19, 2003 (video ex. 3) at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/video3.mov>.

26 See video ex. 4 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/video4.mov>.

27 Adam Baer, »The Sounds of War – Rating the New Networks' Theme Music«, in: *Slate*, 17.4.2003. See the article at: <http://slate.msn.com/id/2081608>.

28 Engstrom, »The Soundtrack for War«, p. 45.

29 See video ex. 5 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/video5.mov>.

30 John von Rhein, »U.S.A. Networks' Theme Music Sanitizes Wars' Darkest Realities«, in: *Chicago Tribune*, Saturday, 6.4.2003.

31 Freymann-Weyr, »NPR's Special Coverage Theme Music«. See also audio ex. 8 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/audio8.aiff>.

32 Ibid.

right not to use them, given the history of music in times of war.«³³ The result is a plaintive theme music that signifies the human tragedy of war. Of course, NPR had the advantage of not being saddled with graphics and live images that might dictate or influence the emotional tone of the music.

The reality of the first days of the war confounded network expectations that the early going would provide spectacular visuals from the shock-and-awe campaign. According to Engstrom, music played a greater role at the beginning, because »the first couple of days were less visually dramatic than anticipated«³⁴. After having studied network coverage from the first week of the war and compared it with similar footage from the Persian Gulf War and the bombing of Baghdad in December of 1998, I can concur that the absence of a sustained bombing campaign in Baghdad made for visually uninteresting television screens in the homes of America, as citizens hoping for spectacular surgical strikes audio-viewed silent, dark skies over Baghdad or heard bomb blasts without the accompanying fireworks. In this clip, Dan Rather of CBS is clearly caught off-guard by the deafening sounds not accompanied by striking visuals, which might lead us to regard this media moment as »auricular« rather than »spectacular«.³⁵

However, Engstrom does not account for the difference between live coverage, which did not offer much to the senses, and the network packaging of the news from the front, which from the start used music and imagery to enhance the message of a justified conflict that we can win. We have already seen how networks put together music, graphics and video footage in stingers and bumpers at 6:30 and other times of breaking news to brand their particular take on the war. (By March 21, every network other than CNN had abandoned its continuous coverage of the war.) The one element added to this television news media mix that exponentially increased the danger for the audio-viewer were the actual sounds of war. When sound editors mixed the sounds of air-raid sirens, weapons fire, and jet take-offs with a music track in the opening bed of the newscast, the result naturalized the violence or – in the words of music critic von Rhein – »sanitized war's darkest realities«³⁶. Sounds and music become one in the soundtrack for war,³⁷ on the one hand bringing the danger, excitement, »liveness« of the armed conflict into our living rooms, on the other presenting the invasion as a media event, a glamourized, »staged spectacle«³⁸. Moreover, as a matter of principle, editors enhance the sounds of war to add to the spectacle (or should I say, auricle). Indeed, sound effects can stand in for music to create dramatic moments in war coverage, which the CBS example illustrated. If one of the purposes of the aural component of television is to suture the audio-viewer into the diegesis, how much

33 Ibid.

34 Engstrom, »The Soundtrack for War«, p. 47.

35 See video ex. 6 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/video6.mov>.

36 von Rhein, »U.S.A. Networks' Theme Music Sanitizes Wars' Darkest Realities«.

37 Observe this situation in video ex. 7 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~adm/paper/video7.mov>.

38 Danny Schechter, *Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception. How the Media Failed to Cover the War on Iraq*, Amherst, NY 2003, p. 22.

more do the digitally enhanced sounds of screaming jets, shrilling sirens and booming explosions make us feel that we are there, that it is our war, that we must support it, that we must win it?

But when the bombs are no longer our own and the reason for the conflict is not clear any more, when public opinion has turned against the conflict, the music and sounds of war disappear. Or do they? For a newscast segment called *Fallen Heroes* that has aired since early May of this year, Fish turned his CBS signature theme into a plaint for the featured military deceased, through the use of solo winds (especially clarinet and oboe), soft dynamics and slow tempo.³⁹ With this music, we return to a world before the War on Terror, seeking solace for acts of violence against Americans. Unlike the Persian Gulf War, there has been no closure to the War in Iraq, no winner and loser – not even a clear sense of good guys and bad guys, at least since the prisoner-abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib. In closing I ask you, where is the greater threat to freedom, in the non-existent weapons of mass destruction, or in the very real yet hidden weapons of mass deception?

Appendix⁴⁰

Terms for Musical Production Elements in Television

Opens, Closes, Titles, Themes, Jingles

Longer theme that identifies the newscast and provides musical material for the rest of the broadcast. Typically fanfare-like, quick, syncopated in brass and strings, over a driving beat. Establishes impression of dynamic newsroom and authority of the newscast.

Singers, Teases

Very brief musical and visual marker for an important, long-term news item. Announces item to follow and helps create attitude about item within viewer. Image and music closely correspond. The most original and freest musical production element.

Beds

Framing and background music for extensions of opens. Loops are used to accommodate texts and images of variable lengths.

Bumpers

Musical lead-ins to and lead-outs from commercials. Create mood and attitude for upcoming news item. Widely differ within one broadcast.

Lazers, sparkles, sweeps, etc.

Descriptive names for special sound effects used in production music elements.

39 See video ex. 8 at <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~admv/paper/video8.mov>.

40 These definitions are by the author, based on practices in the media.