

**Lecture 4: The meaning of sound quality**

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The guitar and vocal sounds produced by the Sex Pistols and by Clannad are very different. Most listeners would point to the difference the roughness of one and the smoothness and softness of the other. There is clearly meaning potential in the sound quality. The Sex Pistols and Metallica might have some similar guitar sounds but there are clearly other differences in sound qualities such as in vocals. How can we carefully describe such differences? This is what we do in this section where drawing on Van Leeuwen (1999) we consider the associations of different kinds of sound qualities. We begin by thinking about the origins of the meanings of sound qualities: provenance and metaphorical association.

**Provenance**

This is simply when a sound comes to have a particular meaning over time due to built up associations. For example, even though the bagpipes were a relatively recent introduction in Scotland they have become identified as a particularly Scottish sound and have been used in movies to connote Scottishness and generic Celtic pasts. A pop band might introduce an instrument such as the sitar to signify eastern spirituality or a violin to connote folk. A synthesiser sound was associated with modernity, the technical and dehumanised in the music of the 1980s. Some of the bands using these sounds such as Bauhaus also associated themselves with modern art and danced in robotic movements. Gary Numan and Tubeway Army accompanied repetitive electronic synthesiser riffs with lyrics about dehumanised androgynous and android futures. Of course the electric guitar has come to be associated with particular meanings in itself.

The same can be true of speech. British singers used American words and pronunciations in order to connote Americanness. Later punk bands used regional British accents to signify authenticity and disrespect for mainstream values.

Tagg was particularly interested the way that sounds, as well as kinds of instruments come to carry particular kinds of meaning. This means in advertising products can be associated with particular times, places and discourses through the different instruments used in ad jingles. How would a beauty product be presented differently if the jingle used pan pipes as opposed to a Spanish guitar? One can mean the space, peace and nature of Indigenous music the other the passion and seduction of Flamenco. So when analysing a piece of music we can consider the associations of different kinds of sounds and the instruments that make them.

**Experiential meaning potential**

The meaning of sound quality may also derive from associations of things in the real world. These can be associations with similar kinds of sounds and tones in speech and that are produced by

movement.

For example, when we speak a tense voice, where the throat is constricted, it results in a tense sound. Here there might be an increase in higher tones. Of course this tension, along with other features can mean simple nervous, or it can mean excited or even aggression, especially if combined with higher volumes and shorter phrasing. If you relax your throat the opposite will happen and your voice will become smoother and lower. If someone is sad or emotional their voice will also become raspy. Here the voice literally sounds constrained by the emotion. Of course the meaning of this will depend on many other factors. These associations can be transferred to other sounds. In horror films high rasping violins are often used in moments of high stress, as used by Hitchcock in the stabbing in the shower scene in *Psycho*.

Any sound will have a range of different features and all have their specific meaning potentials. These can be mixed together to provide many different 'colours'. Here we list some features of sound drawing on discussions of sound quality particularly by Van Leeuwen (1999), and also by Lomax (1968) Tagg and Shepherd.

#### *Degree of tension*

This ranges from the very tense to the more relaxed sound of the wide open throat. We can hear tension in the vocals on *Anarchy in the UK* as compared to *Summertime*. The closed throat of John Lydon suggests pent up tension and perhaps even aggression, although, as we discussed above the melody itself is emotionally contained. The tension in the throat, however, combines with phrasing with its sharp decay creating little emotional lingering with a sense of quick exclamations with little room for contemplation. In contrast the wide throat of a jazz singer on *Summertime* suggests space for contemplation, for musing. This combines with the longer decay of the vocal statements to suggest emotional lingering.

#### *Degree of raspiness*

This ranges from highly raspy, rough and gravelly to very smooth (Raspy here means noise other than the tone itself). Raspiness can suggest contamination of the actual tone, or worn and dirty. It can also mean aggression as in growling. High degrees of raspiness can even obscure the tone itself. We hear this in rock music where guitars are highly distorted. This raspiness and grittiness can be associated with tension, excitement and aggression as opposed to the well oiled warm soft sounds of an acoustic guitar on a folk record, but it can also be associated with contamination of the pure sound. In more spiritual music we do not want to hear contamination. In the romantic tradition we need to hear the pure voice to feel the pure emotion. It would not do to hear distortion on a violin at a concert recitation.

Of course distortion and raspiness can also mean pure emotion where excitement and tension are not suppressed. Distortion can also mean a representation of the modern world as it really is, with dirt, lack of order, chaos. The British Punk music of the 1970s emphasised distortion. Guitar sounds were gritty, as were the vocals and the overall arrangements. There was lack of smoothness, tidiness, and order. This kind of roughness can be associated with wear and tear, so connoting a world that is not pure where clean emotions can be expressed but one that is worn and dirty. As we can see both the smooth and the raspy can connote authenticity, but this will depend on other qualities of the sound.

The electric keyboard music of the 1980s moved away from the distorted guitar of punk to the cleaner sound of the synthesiser, although the earlier Moog type sounds formed instead a warm, non human buzz. This unvarying sound was able to connote technology and modernity, whereas the guitar could signify human expression. The predictable sounds of each note meant either order or restriction. The relative “buzz” and modulation in the note could be increased to represent space-age or alien sounds. A cleaner sound would simply represent modernity, perhaps comparable to the modernist paintings of Mondrian where colours were simple, even, and flat.

#### *Degree of nasality*

Some writers have associated such vocalisation with degrees of repression. Certainly we would be surprised to hear someone in power, say a politician or news reader speaking in a markedly nasal manner. This is often tied in with value judgments about accents. This effect can be produced by simply allowing air to leave through your nose as you speak. Nasal sounds are also associated with tension (Lomax 1968) and we hear nasality in whining and moaning (Van Leeuwen 1999: 136). For Lomax (1968:198) this indicates the opposite of a ‘wide’, ‘open’ relaxed voice. In rock singing according to Shepherd (1991) resonance is all produced in the throat. For him the screaming male voice, about an octave higher than their normal speech signifies a manner of engaging with the social world. Tagg explains this literally shouting at high pitch to make yourself understood, to express yourself as an individual above the noise and masses of the urban society (1990: 108). In contrast if we listen to *Anarchy in the UK* and many other punk songs we find a high degree of nasality. This was common in punk music in the late 70s and early 80s. This gave the impression of reluctance and lack of enthusiasm, and a whining feel. Alternatively a jazz singer may use soft warmer open vocals. Like rock the sound resonates in the throat but there is less volume and roughness.

#### *Register- high/s low*

This is the range from very high to very low sounds. As we have discussed as regards melody these can have associations of high with brightness and energy as opposed to low with gravity and weight.

*Breathy/non-breathy*

We can think of the contexts in which we hear people's breath. This can be when they are out of breath and panting, because of some physical or emotional exertion or strain. It can also be in moments of intimacy and sensuality. When we hear a person's breath when they speak they speak this may even be a moment of confidentiality as they whisper in our ear, or share their thoughts with us when they are in an moment of emotional strain or euphoria. Therefore breathiness can connote delicate intimacy and as well as, sensuality, eroticism and emotional intensity. We may hear delicate breathiness on a Clannad track to connote intimacy and emotional closeness. This is important in the context of the authentic emotional connection to land, tradition and history. In Punk we might be less likely to hear breathiness, although it might be used in openings of songs, perhaps to indicate emotional exasperation.

*Loud/Soft*

Loud sounds can mean weight and size of importance. They can therefore be used to suggest a threat or danger. Loud can also suggest overbearing and unsubtle while soft can mean thoughtful and gentle. Loud/soft can also be about taking up space. If someone is shouting this suggests the need to take up space. If they are soft it suggests intimacy and confidentiality, even secrecy. Of course soft can also mean weak for example if a male singer uses a soft high pitched voice. Some vocalists such as Morrissey of The Smiths have used this to ironic effect.

*Vibrato/plain*

Van Leeuwen (1999) relates vibrato to our physical experience of trembling. Of course the meaning of vibrato will depend on its speed, depth and regularity. High regularity might suggest something mechanical or alien. Flying saucers in old movies used to make such vibrato sounds. Increasing and decreasing vibrato is common in movies to create romantic moods indicating increasing and decreasing levels of emotion. Absence of vibrato can suggest constancy, forward moving and steady or free of emotion. Much synthesizer music of the 1980s used unwavering sounds to suggest the mechanical, technological and modernity.

*Reverb/echo*

Echo suggests space. Echoes are normally experienced in large empty spaces, either in churches, caves or rocky mountain valleys. When we think of the voice of a sermon in a church or temple, or the singing of a choir we hear the reverb. Recordings of Welsh male voice choirs are often given reverb, not because they were performed in large churches as traditionally they were not, but to give them association with a massive landscape. In this way reverb can suggest a sense of the extraordinary or sacredness. In movies God's voice is often given echo which suggests power and

spread but also a sense of space. Rock bands often appear in their videos on mountain tops, also using reverb on voices and guitars. Due to the association of echo and reverb with space it can also be used to suggest isolation and loneliness. A singer can be portrayed as alone and isolated in a pop video and the reverb can realise this effect through sound.

All of these sound qualities can be applied to none vocal sounds. Low pitches in instruments or percussion can suggest gravity whereas high pitches can suggest lightness and energy. In Disney cartoons the instruments used to make the sounds of a character's footsteps is used to communicate much about their character. Deeper pitches can mean clumsiness or threatening. Higher pitches can mean lightness and brightness. So when deer skip around a princess footsteps do not resemble the deeper hooves on forest floor sound but are expressed by small symbols 'tinging' or a flute. In video games the walk of a monster might be represented by a metallic thud suggesting immovability and invulnerability or unearthly. Instruments can be played in a breathy way to suggest emotion. A breathy saxophone suggests intimacy and sensuality whereas a growling solo can suggest high levels raw sexual tension. Guitar strings strummed hard or soft can indicate levels of aggression or thoughtfulness. They can be muted to suggest restraint and confinement. Piano keys can be touched gently or hammered aggressively. Drums can be swept lightly with brushes, played with crashing abandon, or firmly but tidily. All these can bring associations of emotions and attitudes.

### **Activity**

Listen to four singers. Describe their voices using the above criteria and say how these communicate ideas and attitude.

Record two people that you know or from television and describe the way that they speak.

Use the above criteria to analyse music and sounds from two different genre songs. What levels of tension, raspiness, breathiness do you hear in the instrumentation and arrangement?

