

Lecture 7: arrangement and perspective in music

When we hear the sounds around us in our everyday life we hear some things much closer than others. We sit at our computer and hear the radio in the foreground and the traffic in the distance. Occasionally we hear a dog barking next door. We can think about this foregrounding and backgrounding, as constructing our point of view. This idea is used in sound mixing in radio and in film. Some sounds are there to be heard while more immediate ones are to be listened to (Schafer, 1977). Some of these sounds simply set the scene while others provide a more direct point of attention and effect. When we listen to any movie soundtrack, radio-play, ambient music, or pop song we can attend to the different layers. In the case of pop music 'perspective' is created by different instruments or groups of instruments playing at different levels, or by the number of instruments playing a part. Which instruments and sounds are given prominence in the music may not necessarily be the same as those given prominence visually. While a band might be thought of as a 'guitar band' for example, listening to the arrangement will reveal very different levels of foregrounding of the guitar. The British Boy band Busted often used guitars in their videos, yet on their records this was always backgrounded to the bass and vocals. Visually the low slung guitars suggested a punk style, while the music was arranged more like dance music.

Schafer uses different terms for the same kinds of level, '*figure*' for the 'focus of interest', the sound 'signal'; '*ground*' for the 'setting or context', the 'keynote sound'; and '*field*' for the place where observation takes place, the soundscape. We can use these three for thinking about the way that music creates perspective and its communicative functions (Van Leeuwen, 1999). When listening to popular music it allows us to think more carefully about the hierarchy of instruments and voices we will also be able to use this to think about how music is used in movies later in the book:

Figure: This is a sound, or groups of sounds, which is has been made louder than the other sounds that can be heard simultaneously. This sound is therefore indicated as most relevant to the listener and the one with which they must identify or react in the first place. In popular music this might be the vocals, guitar or keyboard, for example.

Ground: This sound or sounds have been made louder than other sounds in the immediate environment, but not to the extent of the figure. It is therefore to be treated as part of the listener's environment. In a piece of music there might be backing vocals that appear at this level. As we will see shortly this is important in terms of the extent to which the music connote individuality or collective.

Field: This sound or sounds have been made softer than other sounds. These sounds are treated as being part of the listeners physical world but not their social world as in

figure and field. The listener does not pay any particular attention to them. Pop music is often used in supermarkets as field, so that our background physical world is not the tedious stressful one of shopping but one of relaxation and informality.

In a piece of music perspective and foregrounding can change throughout as backing voices are brought forward or a particular instrument comes to the ground or fades back into the field. We can use this to think about the way that instruments are given salience in the hierarchy of the song. When we analyse images we can look for the way that certain elements are given salience through foregrounding. This can be used to help us select the elements the image maker wishes to draw our attention to. We can do the same in music. In a pop song such as David Gray's *Babylon* the figure at the start is a high pitched guitar riff using major notes played on an acoustic guitar. As the song progresses this fades into field. But at the start the guitar brings the iconography of the acoustic guitar and sets the expectations of the listener with a high pitched and therefore positive and light mood. Once the singer begins the voice takes the figure position. In a heavy metal tune a distorted guitar riff might take figure.

Van Leeuwen (1999) suggested that the way that voices and instruments are positioned as closer or more distant from us in a sound mix has important associations with social distance. When we are close to people both physically and emotionally we speak softly. This soft speech can also exclude others in the case of whispering. As social distance increases grows the voice not only becomes louder but also higher and sharper, and is therefore more easily overheard, or even intended to be heard by everyone in range. Therefore in music social distance can be realised by both degrees of loudness and timbral quality. In *Anarchy in the UK* the vocal is high pitched and loud. While in terms of the melody and pitch the song has stasis and lack of emotional outpouring, the words are broadcast out for everyone to hear. In David Gray's *Babylon* in contrast the vocal on the verse is more at a soft conversational level. Here greater intimacy is created. Often female jazz singers such as Julie London can be heard almost whispering lyrics. This increases the sense of intimacy and therefore the level of personal contact. In turn this can connote greater depth of emotional communication.

Also of course loudness relates to power. In society those who have more power are allowed to have themselves heard and make more noise. It is important to think about which singers shout and which singers do not, or which instruments or songs appear to be loud and which are not. Since we have had microphone technology there is really no need to shout. You can turn your mike up and still talk, without the need to raise your voice. But shouting as a singer is clearly associated with passion, emotional outburst, and high energy. Although emotion can also be conveyed, as we have seen, through quieter voices which sing in restricted pitch ranges.

Van Leeuwen sees volume as being connected to social status (1999, p. 133). Noise takes up a

lot of social space. When teenagers open their bedroom windows to blast their music out into the summer air, it might be thought of as occupying space. It is imposing a measure of control on that space, defining it as their own. We can think of the difference in meaning if songs like *Anarchy in the UK* were sung gently. It is hard to imagine British punk music of the 1970s without shouted, snarling vocals. These voices were being heard. They were invading a space, and in your face. In contrast a jazz singer might almost talk. There might even be something slightly private about expression of thoughts. Cooke remarks that volume in music (crescendo, diminuendo) has its roots in the Middle Ages, as composers began to have a growing urge for human realisation. Before this time, music was played at consistent volumes. So volume itself became associated with personal expression.

We can also ask to what extent instruments and voices work in *unison*, where they have the same volume. Van Leeuwen suggests that metaphorically, this can suggest social cohesion. Where instruments all work together, where voices sing in complete harmony, they represent themselves as one unit. He gives the example of men singing in a beer advert, where voices sing in unison but yet can all be heard separately. Therefore they are represented as being together, yet retaining some individuality. A counter-example might come from the Welsh male voice choirs, where a sense of community is emphasised by the tight harmony of the massed vocalists.

Sometimes we find that two or several voices or instruments can work on equal levels. This might happen in a duet where two singers share the foreground or in music where perhaps two well known soloists feature. Sometimes on blues records star saxophonists will guest with a band lead by a pianist/vocalist. In such a case the saxophonists will be given much greater foregrounding than might normally be the case. Importantly in such cases we can think about the equality given to the different voices and instruments. In some bands we can hear that vocals and instruments work tightly in unison, while in others they do not, allowing us to hear them as individual voices, perhaps playing slightly against the rhythm. The vocals of Boy bands often play in harmony whereas a lead rock guitarist will break with pitches and rhythms created by other instruments.

Groups of people singing can of course be hierarchised. In the music written for an advertisement the voice of the male solo singer may have greater volume and therefore foregrounding than the female 'backing' vocalists who are re-recorded at a lower level. Therefore they act as, background, support. These voices are only meaningful as part of the whole.

In other words, different distances, realised by different dynamic levels, create listener positions from which different types of speakers or singers are at different social distances.

Hifi and lofi soundscapes

As regards arrangement and foregrounding Murray Schafer also makes the distinction between hifi and lofi soundscapes. These are important in the recording of popular music and therefore for the way we listen to it – the meanings we put into it.

A lofi soundscape Murray Schafer argues, is typical of our modern cities. There is such a

jumble of sounds that we do not really hear any of them distinctly. We pick out one car moving along the street but the noise of its engine merges with those of all the other cars. The voices of the people on the busy street merge into a unified murmur. So in lofi soundscapes individual sounds are obscured. This kind of soundscape is typical of some rock music. There may be several guitars playing but the sounds merge. Even the vocals are partly absorbed by the other sounds.

A hifi soundscape Schafer suggests is like being in a forest. You hear a branch snap somewhere nearby and a rustle of leaves slightly further away. The same soundscape is present in a church where you can hear a pin drop. In these environments there are much longer reverberation times. Sounds are not competing. But it is also difficult to locate the sounds. This kind of soundscape is typical of ambient music, or of some kinds of folk music that wish to increase sensual effect. Listen to a Clannad song and you can hear every touch of the fingers on the instruments. This is combined with softly delivered lyrics to convey intimacy. This is then combined with other semiotic features that we have already described. The voices of the female vocalist may be high pitched to suggest brightness but also the ethereal. Backing male vocals, much lower in pitch, are backgrounded with the individual voices not distinct suggests a groundedness and a sense of underlying social cohesion. Overall we have an ethereal spiritual feel from both voice and delicate soundscape placed over a sense of community and belonging. This combination realises the kinds of discourses we found realised in both lyrics and visual of Clannad in earlier chapters. There is the authentic spiritual connection to the past, community and tradition.

In *Anarchy in the UK* we find a lofi soundscape. The sounds of the instruments are blurred. You cannot hear fingers on frets nor the breath of the vocalist. But the Sex Pistols wish to connote the chaos of the modern city. Volume and shouting are emphasised to take up space in the soundscape. We find the same kinds of soundscapes in much heavy metal music

Finally different pitches also have a role in the way that a listener can be immersed in a soundscape. Bass sounds carry much further than high pitched sounds and also fill spaces much more completely. It is much more difficult to identify the source of a low pitch sound. Rave music uses deep bass sounds for immersion, along with high pitches suggesting brightness and the ethereal. Of course rhythm is also important for the meaning of this music that we will come onto shortly.

Activity

Listen to two pieces of music. Describe and analyse these in terms of arrangement using the above criteria.

Listen to two short film sequences from two genres of film. Describe what you hear in terms of figure and ground.

