

Telling a story

MUSIC IN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

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After introducing current results from music sociology and television studies, the author analyses the use of music and instruments on the basis of 96 finalists from Prix Jeunesse INTERNATIONAL 2020 and discusses the quality of music in children's television.

From their childhoods, many adults remember at least a couple of hit singles from children's programmes, either in the form of a vignette or other songs from such programmes. Indulging in these memories makes them remember the sentiments of childhood, of their close relatives and of playing and listening to music from television with friends. It brings out fond memories. The intensity of these experiences tells us that the music of children's television has an impact far beyond the audience's childhood. Children's television is aimed at educating, entertaining and telling good stories in excellent ways. Some composers and producers express quite clearly that they have a responsibility to set standards for children's relationships with music and of musical quality, that is, to provide standards which children will measure their later experiences up against (Vestad, 2013). Moreover, research has concluded that "television is one of the main ways in which children are introduced to popular music culture" (Lury, 2002, p. 291). Although this was established a couple of decades ago, it remains safe to say that popular music and other music genres are frequently presented in children's television programmes. However, although music plays essential

roles in such programmes, television music has received little attention from researchers (Deaville, 2011). The research presented in this article is part of a larger research project,¹ which is aimed at raising awareness of the role of television music in children's musical upbringing and in their musical cultures.

This investigation takes a musicological approach and includes aspects of music sociology and television studies. Its aim is to present results regarding the use of music and musical instruments in the form of emerging patterns and to spur discussions regarding the quality of music in children's television. The data comprise the 96 finalists selected for the Prix Jeunesse 2020. Before exploring the finalists' details, we will consider how music works and why it matters.

MUSIC IN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Music plays a vital role in the audiovisual expression of children's television. Music appears in children's television programmes in various ways; for instance, it may be performed by the characters and presenters or used as a musical interruption, filler or a plug (Lury, 2002, p. 291). Strategies for the uses of music range from what one may describe as musical wall-to-wall-carpeting, where there are almost no moments of silence, to extremely constrained and strategic uses of music, where music fills only a few seconds here and there in a programme but nevertheless contributes immensely to telling the story. Music functions to move

the script forward for the audience, to narrate stories about people and places and to guide and support audiences' moods and emotions. Moreover, music may be the topic and theme of programmes, and it may appear when the protagonists engage in musical practices, such as singing and playing alone or with friends or engaging in multimodal artistic practices, such as dancing ballet and performing other types of dancing. This is what Gorbman (1980) referred to as "diegetic music" – that is, "music that (apparently) issues from a source within the narrative" (p. 197). Music may be part of the narrative in the form of artefacts such as a musical instrument, a radio, a loudspeaker or a pair of headphones, and it may be integrated as musical practices, such as parents singing a lullaby for their children or children spontaneously singing when playing skipping games, playing with toys or contemplating (see also vom Orde in this issue). Moreover, music may be part of cultural rituals and religious practices. In some programmes, there is even an evident music educational purpose; that is, there is an intention to teach children about music. Understanding particular songs, music theory or how sound works in various respects appears as a learning objective. Programmes of this kind are still written about as forms of edutainment. Most of the time, however, the music of children's television seems to have the function of supporting the narrative as background music, and neither musical instruments, singing and playing actors nor artefacts of music are visible. Nevertheless, the music is closely connected to what is going

on visually and serves the purpose of supporting and guiding the audience's interpretations. Television is described as a "transmitter of values and cultural ideas" (Rodman, 2010, p. 4) that include values and ideas involving music. There is no doubt that the quality of children's television music is based on intuitive strength and craftsmanship in applying music to various narratives. It seems safe to argue that the quality of children's television music depends on the skills, ideas and resources of producers, composers, performers, sound designers and other contributors. Moreover, there is no doubt that the craftsmanship's quality involves skills in music as well as understanding cultural connotations and applying these to narratives strategically.

HOW DOES MUSIC WORK, AND WHY DOES MUSIC MATTER?

Music offers children an aesthetic, cultural and functional space which is deeply rooted in the humane. It has been said that no culture exists without music, and the very first interactions between parent and child have been compared to musical improvisation, characterised by turn-taking, timing, glissandi and repetitions of short sequences. In the words of Poćwierz-Marciniak and Harciarek (2021), such interaction may be described as "a singing style with higher sound frequencies and an extended range of sounds, extended vowels, and a slow tempo" (p. 6). Dissanayake (2000) believed this relation is the origin of the arts and a basis for rituals, social bonding and cohesion.

As human beings, we have a natural capacity for music, and importantly, it involves not only the auditory senses but also our other bodily senses – receiving and processing through the kinaesthetic system (Bjørkvold, 2014). This means that hearing impairment does not entail an absolute exclusion from enjoying music.

Music is used in everyday life to support energy levels and drive for physical activities, such as aerobic classes and running, and for setting the scene and supporting moods and rituals, such as for dates, birthday celebrations and funerals. Music is used by nearly everyone as part of skilful everyday disc jockeying to support human beings in joy, pleasure and relaxation; to express, explore and cope with emotions, such as grief; and to fuel relations (DeNora, 2000). Concretely, music heard through earbuds helps people create their own spaces amid messy and noisy surroundings. Children also engage in such uses of music, and television music plays an important role (Vestad, 2013; Vestad & Dyndahl, 2017). In addition, an important aspect from a children's point of view is to re-live and further explore the narratives of children's programmes in a play mode, for instance through children's own-initiated role-play, supported by the music of the programmes (Vestad, 2010).

From a philosophical point of view, music has been recognised as a language of emotions (Langer, 1953) and as a way that is deeply rooted in human beings of saying the things that cannot be said with words. Research has also shown that parents strongly believe that music is healthy for children's emotional training and exploration (Vestad & Dyndahl, 2020) and that children initiate role-play derived from children's television programmes and act out and try out various emotions supported by the programmes' music (Vestad, 2010). Strong empirical evidence indicates that children as young as 5 to 6 years of age can identify and mirror their emotions in the music of television programmes, which helps them sort out and come to terms with difficult emotions (Vestad, 2009; 2019). These findings are supported by music sociologist DeNora's description of music as "arguably the cultural material" par excellence "of emotion and the personal" (2000, p. 46). Based on interviews with women about their use

of music in everyday life, she argued that music functions as an aesthetic vehicle that can transport the listener from one mood to another. Her classic example of music providing energy and other positive emotions is that it can "transform" a boring task, such as scrubbing floors, into a more enjoyable one. This is exemplified by edutainment, in which music is designed to help transform the presumably boring task of learning into something fun and pleasurable.

Music speaks to the personal and subjective as well as to the social and collective. Hesmondhalgh (2013) argued that although music feels "intensely and emotionally linked to the private self" (p. 2) and is bound up with the personal and the subjective, music is also often "the basis of collective, public experiences". He stated that it "represents a remarkable meeting point of the intimate and social realms" (p. 2). Music creates the sense of who one is and who we are, working "both ways" – that is, to support individual emotions and identities and collective ones. These modes support each other and often appear simultaneously. Who I am and who we are – as well as who I am not and who we are not – are all aspects of complex identity work undertaken by individuals and groups. This work involves the cultural material presented in children's television, among other things (Vestad & Dyndahl, 2017; Vestad & Dyndahl, 2020). Music supports senses of belonging as well as acts of distinction – the feeling of being and the wish to be different from others. Research into children's everyday lives and musical parenthood shows that children's television music and the various practices in which they are involved serve important functions in bringing young children together in various forms of play. Music carries with it images, narratives and sentiments from the television programmes, and parents apply music, including music from children's television, in middle-class-oriented child rearing, which is

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about “resourcing” their children for their future lives and for becoming “themselves” (Vestad & Dyndahl, 2020; see also Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011). Music gains meaning by connotation. On a personal level, where and when one hears a piece of music or a song oftentimes becomes part of the person’s experience of the music. On a cultural level, classical music more readily connotes the high class, whereas rap and hip-hop often seem to connote outsiders struggling for acceptance or out-groups with their own identities. Musical conventions, such as upward movements indicating happiness and energy and downward movements indicating sadness and a lack of energy, also work to interpret meaning. Professionals working in children’s television are aware of the various ways that music has meaning and can handle these complex matters in a precise way to create high-quality children’s television music. However, intuitive lay knowledge about how music just fits moods, scenes and events is also important for these professionals.

THE STUDY

The analysis of the 96 PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2020 finalists confirms that music’s appearance and functions in children’s programmes are indeed manifold. An obvious question arises: What kinds of music are used? Delving into this as a musicological question of genres, musical instruments and sound raises many questions because the categorisation of sound is indeed a difficult task. Generally, we know what we mean when we say, “classical”, “jazz”, “rock”, “pop” and so on. Moreover, genres are such a powerful means for making distinctions that they can be used to explain why potential lovers are incompatible: “It’s never going to work. You’re Top 40 and I’m rhythm and blues”, Mercedes (who is African American) in the television series *Glee* tells Puck (who is White; quoted from

Brackett, 2016, p. 2). On the other hand, when examining pieces of music, “the more closely one describes a genre in terms of its stylistic components, the fewer examples actually seem to fit” (ibid., p. 3). So, what seems to be an easy task of sorting and categorising genres and sound falls apart, and one ends up with almost as many categories as there are pieces of music, and one might find that many pieces fit into neither one category nor another; for instance, a song may be “too rock for country, too country for rock ‘n’ roll” (ibid., p. 2). Finally, categories of genres are not fixed; they change over time, and what was once considered rock may now be thought of as pop or even easy listening.

Nevertheless, it is possible – despite reservations – to find tendencies across the 96 programmes. Overall, various kinds of popular music appear as the most commonly applied sounds, but there are some significant exceptions, which will be elaborated upon in later paragraphs. For the youngest age group, what appears as children’s songs are presented in popular music wrappings, and the programmes for this age group contain music which illustrates and supports the visuals by drawing auditive pictures of what is on the screen. Jingles and vignettes are common. They inspire singing along and lend themselves readily to

the role of a “container” (cf. DeNora, 2000) which carries the whole sentiment of the series, relations to the main characters and even relations to other people in the children’s home and day care settings (Vestad, 2013; Vestad & Dyndahl, 2017).

Category Up to 6

A series which draws on classical music settings is *Kiri and Lou* (Kiri and Lou Limited, New Zealand, Ill. 1). The music of this series can be interpreted as having similarities with the musical qualities of “motherese” – the conversations between babies and their caretakers. It applies glissandi, rhythmic patterns and repetition, and it involves playful uses of the musical elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre, dynamics, texture, and form. The musical sounds illustrate and support, as well as comment on, the protagonists’ movements – their walking, jumping and so forth. The tight and clever – but nevertheless natural-appearing – relations between the visuals and the music help discover details in the narrative and underpin the – often subtle – humour. Timing is crucial for this association to work. In *Kiri and Lou*, the music and musical sounds are almost as important as the visuals, although the programme is not explicitly about music. In some sense, the balance between the visuals and



Ill. 1: *Kiri and Lou*: The relations between the visuals and the music help discover details in the narrative



Screenshot from *Chika, the dog from the ghetto* © ZDF

Ill. 2: *Chika, the dog from the ghetto* applies music with clear references to the Jewish klezmer tradition

the auditive inspires a comparison to an opera or music theatre, except that the music has an illustrative character rather than that of a coherent musical work.

Category 7-10

In programmes for children 7-10 years old, popular music to a larger extent resembles the music of youth culture. Overall, the music in this category supports and brings out larger emotions, especially in the fiction subcategory, featuring more vivid emotional contrasts than those in the programmes aimed at the youngest age group. Although popular music is the most prominent genre, classical music and other genres are also represented.

2 programmes that distinguish themselves from the others in terms of their uses of music are *Chika, the dog from the ghetto* (ZDF, Germany, Ill. 2) and *The star of Andra and Tati* (Rai, Italy). To support the programmes narratives of the Jews sufferings during World War II, seen from the point of view of children, they both apply music with clear references to the Jewish klezmer tradition. In *Chika, the dog from the ghetto* the fiddle is prominent. The klezmer tradition is of Eastern European and Jewish origin, and the music was originally used for dancing at weddings and other types of celebrations. The typical musical instruments of the tradition

are woodwinds, strings – the klezmer fiddle is particularly famous –, brass, rhythm instruments and cimbalom. The constellation of instruments lends itself easily to support a variety of sentiments, and contributes profoundly to

telling the story, and not least to display a variety of sentiments connected to the protagonist's life, despite the grave overall situation. The klezmer tradition includes faster, energetic music as well as melancholic parts. The melancholic fiddle, in particular, illustrates grief and sadness of the boy losing his dog to the German soldiers. As the German soldiers knock on the protagonists' door, the music ends abruptly in a deep brass tone, which enhances the experience of danger. In *The star of Andra and Tati* (Ill. 3) the use of musical layers is extensive, so that the music draws an auditive picture of the simultaneously appearing marching soldiers and the Jews' suffering: The decisive, insisting and forceful snare drums form a layer underneath

the melancholic violin. Moreover, for a grown-up audience the violin and the other instruments in some parts connotes the sentiment of a requiem – music in remembrance of the dead – and also the main musical theme of the Oscar winning soundtrack of *Schindler's list* (1993) including the principal theme of the movie: *I could have done more*. The experience of the music of these children's programmes is for a grow-up influenced by the narrative and the visuals of each programme, but inadvertently also by knowing about the history and the sufferings of the Jews. This is an example of an intimate meeting point (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2013) between individual narrative and the story of a whole people.

Category 11-15

The category for children aged 11-15 years provides a broader variety of distinct genres, including subgenres within the popular music genre, but features less variety in musical instruments. However, this finding must be taken with some caution because there are far fewer programmes in this category than in the other categories. Although the kinds of music which appear most often across the programmes are popular music genres and electronic music of various kinds, orchestral music and music involv-



Screenshot from *The star of Andra and Tati* © Rai

Ill. 3: In *The star of Andra and Tati* the music draws an auditive picture of the simultaneously appearing marching soldiers and the Jews' suffering

ing woodwinds, brass, various kinds of percussion, classical piano and guitar appear throughout the finalist programmes. Orchestral music is included in approximately 60% of the programmes in the fiction category for children up to 6 years old. In the non-fiction category for the same age group, strings are found in more than 75% of the programmes. Strings are also often used in the fiction category for children aged 7-10 years (in about 65% of the programmes) and are less frequently used in non-fiction programmes for the same age group (in a little more than 40% of the programmes). In the fiction and non-fiction categories for the age group of 11-15 years, strings appear in slightly less than 60% of the programmes.

Musicologist Franco Fabbri (2004) explored children's music and concluded that vocal music in the form of the "canzone" was the most prominent. Although the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2020 finalists feature instrumental music to a larger extent than in Fabbri's research, vocal music is nevertheless present to a large degree across various genres. Vocal music appears in almost 65% of the programmes for children up to 6 years of age and in slightly more than 50% of the non-fiction programmes. Vocal music appears in 35% of the fiction programmes for children aged 7-10 years. Here, the most commonly used instruments are piano, percussion and woodwinds, each of which appears in about 75% of the programmes. Brass instruments appear in a little more than 50% of the programmes. Vocal music appears in a little more than 55% of the non-fiction programmes for children aged 7-10 years old. In this category, guitars appear in a little more than 50% of the programmes, and percussion appears in 90%. Moving on to the programmes produced for children aged 11-15 years, vocal music is included in slightly less than 60% of the fiction programmes and in a little more than 40% of the non-fiction programmes.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

The overall pattern found tells a story of implicit and explicit conventions regarding what kinds of music that are suitable for children of different ages. The programmes present a variety of genres and musical instruments, although styles and derivatives of popular music are the most common. Against this backdrop, in the sample of the 96 finalists for PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2020 some programmes stand out in terms of originality when it comes to the uses of music – more programmes than the 3 presented here. The programmes mentioned apply music in skilful ways, for musical-visual humour and to present strong and dramatic stories about children for children. The investigation calls for further discussions about the necessity of variation, the aesthetic impact of television music on children and how to use the semiotic powers of music to support stories. ■

NOTE

¹ DYNAMUS - *The social dynamics of musical upbringing and schooling in the Norwegian welfare state.* <https://eng.inn.no/project/sites/dynamus>

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