

stories2music Media Grammar Podcast – 10/08/18

Welcome to the stories2music podcast. I'm your host, Kathy Matthes. Today's topic is media grammar—and more specifically—music grammar.

Let's try an experiment.

What feeling did you get from that music excerpt? I heard lighthearted, joyful, playful, child-like. Is that what you heard?

Now try this one.

This one has a different feel. It is dark, menacing, and dangerous. Is that what you heard?

It's obvious that this one is nautical, majestic, powerful, seafaring. Is that what you heard?

Finally, this one is romantic, pastoral, gentle, tender. Is that what you heard?

More than likely, we all got the same “message” from the music.

This is because we've been exposed to film music for many years, so we all recognize the same ideas in the music.

The same thing happens when we read a story. Although we will all see different images in our imaginations, we basically understand the story because we understand English grammar. The words and sentences are put together in a sequence that we understand, and the choice of descriptive words helps us see the characters, feel the emotions and receive the message. This works the same way for all of the media arts. This concept is called media grammar.

Pavik and McIntosh explain that media grammar is “the underlying rules, structures, and patterns by which a medium presents itself and is used and understood by the audience.” Essentially, all media—especially the arts—communicate their messages in specific structures that we learn to recognize through exposure and education. According to **Meyrowitz**, we must “have some understanding of specific workings of individual media” to have media grammar literacy.

Music Grammar Literacy

If we have been exposed to a variety of film music, we probably have developed music grammar literacy. We know when music sounds like a Western, a sci fi scene, a romance, a mystery, a spy thriller, a horror scene or an adventure. We have all learned that the “duh dud, duh duh” notes from *Jaws* mean the shark is coming, and the screeching sound in the shower scene of *Psycho* means horror. We know which themes in *Star Wars* means Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker. **Kassabian** claims that musical “competence is based on decipherable codes learned through experience. As with language and visual images, we learn through exposure what a given tempo, series of notes, key, time signature, rhythm, volume, and orchestration are

meant to signify.” According to **Carolyn Fortuna**, “the audience instinctively understands the feelings the filmmaker wants to evoke with a certain style of music.”

Pavlik and McIntosh claim that “radio and recorded music have their own grammar, one based only on sound . . . which can be used to convey information, capture attention, or evoke a mood or scene.” According to **Jessica Green**, “instead of stringing together words to communicate, music creates meaning through a multitude of varying factors such as instrumentation, tonality, key, and phrasing that work together to create a mood or feeling that suggests or emphasizes something that the audience might not have paid attention to or realized.” These factors are the “grammar” of music.

Although music is used in various ways in films, narrative music is composed to deliberately tell a story. In **Score: A Film Music Documentary**, Leonard Matlin said, “Music has tremendous driving power within the narrative of any film.” **Robert Elliot** said, “Narrative music is like another actor in the movie . . . like the announcer for a movie. Narrative music tells the audience what mood they should feel.”

Robert Elliot said, “Often narrative music will be linked together to make a single, long piece of music with many different moods, one mood after another.” This “linking of different moods” characterizes the short, orchestral film music used in stories2music. The film music is an integral part of the storytelling. The music and words are symbiotic; they depend entirely on each other to tell the story. The music is not simply orchestral background music; it is synchronized with the words.

For example, the music in the stories2music story, “Reckless Grief” demonstrates the “linking of different moods, one after another.” This excerpt is taken from the opening scene in my children’s fantasy book: “The Adventures of Katie Browne.” Katie’s parents had been killed in the tragic train accident in Manhattan on January 9, 1902. Katie has inherited her father’s estate in England and the Duchess title, and she is on the S.S. Louis steam liner on her way to England. Her grief is still raw, and the music captures the scene and her emotions accurately.

The opening music sets the tone; it is dark and ominous.

When Katie looks down at the swirling water, the music sounds like swirling water.

As she thinks about jumping, the music adds dissonant horns, which reflects her conflicted emotions. The strings add an ethereal feeling as she contemplates sinking into death.

When Katie lets out a wail of grief and her emotions start to build, the music starts to build in urgency. When Katie sees the governess running to stop her from jumping, she feels the pressure to jump before the governess can stop her.

The music then starts to move up the scale, which mirrors Katie’s rising, determined courage to climb up the railing, which she starts to do. At the crucial moment, the steward grabs her and pulls her back. The music swells with joy and relief.

The music continues with this rich, emotional moment as Katie expresses her grief to the steward. As she starts to calm down and the steward swirls her in a waltz, the music calms down as well.

Finally, as Katie realizes the error of her ways in her cabin, the flute plays a gentle and soothing melody. As Katie listens to the lullaby of the sea, the cymbals provide a feel of the ocean waves and then calm as she drifts off to sleep.

More than likely, you have recognized these messages in the music because you are using music grammar to decipher the music's meaning. The music makes you feel the story and, therefore, provides a richer emotional and imaginative experience. Essentially, the film music is narrative music for the story. They are mutually dependent upon each other.

Now, let's put it all together and listen to "Reckless Grief."

Next time you listen to a stories2music audio story, see if you can hear how the music is telling the story and affecting your imagination and emotions. Can you hear how the music links together "different moods, one mood after another"? The music is functioning like narrative film music. You recognize this because you are using media grammar.

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To read the articles mentioned in this podcast, read the blog post "Can you hear it" on the stories2music blog site.

See you next time!

Credits

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Theme Music: "Follow Your Path" by James Copperwaithe. Courtesy of West One Music.

Music excerpt 1: "Strange Days" by Richard Allen Harvey. Courtesy of APM Music.

Music excerpt 2: "Dolphins in the Blue" by Sharron Farber. Courtesy of West One Music.

Music excerpt 3: "Ancient Heroes" by Richard Allen Harvey. Courtesy of APM Music.

Music excerpt 4: "A Small Romance" by Richard Allen Harvey. Courtesy of APM Music.

