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Melomania

Music in Features

- *It's a bit more than you asked for! Do you mind?*
- *Yes I do!*

Words, sound, music, silence. Assuming that these are the four classic components of the medium known as radio, there is of course a temptation to make equal room for music in radio documentaries; even if it's only because we think, either consciously or unconsciously, that music will enhance the grace and attractiveness of our work. And is it not so that we as radio makers wish first and foremost to seduce our listeners? Is music not the most direct and certain way of stirring spirits and heightening the expressive power of stories and testimonies? As it is, the song of the Lorelei often echoes through our documentaries and reports. Nor should we object as long as we remain aware that music is an organic and integral part of the three other components. Let Lorelei go ahead and sing, but only at the right time and place. Moreover, we must be specific about what she sings. The influence of music can indeed be so powerful that a single note can serve as an emotional underscore, or conjure up a specific atmosphere. Music thus demands judicious use if we are to achieve full and accurate control over the synergetic effects between the four ingredients of the medium and optimize its impact.

Even without a single note of music, every documentary is virtually a musical composition in itself. The timbre of voices, regional accents, variations in speech rhythms, extraneous sound, rhythmic changes in editing, the polyphony of several layers of sound, narrative structure and the development of tension, are in themselves all elements of composition that ensure that each documentary constitutes a separate and specific song.

Back to our four ingredients: words, sounds, music and silence. Is it our Western, Cartesian, and consequently rational approach that trips us up? To be frank I don't know. What I do know from experience is that we have a tendency to view these four components as separate elements even during production.

In general the point of departure is the *spoken word*, our *semantic* material: the interviews with the pacemakers of the story. The protagonists, of course - the characters who've had an experience - and then the witnesses, the bystanders, the other persons for whom an incident has had consequences - the experts who can comment on the cultural, political and social implications, and then all the others as well. We follow these up with our linking texts, the stuff we found in the archives. In other words everything that's got something to do with information. All these elements together are supposed to tell the story, or expressed in more modern terms, they are supposed to provide the *content* of the documentary. And then we think, okay, all the rest is supporting material.

We think of *music* chiefly in terms of being only an emotional activator and an element of seduction. We tend to forget, when are involved in the hurly-burly of the production process, that music also has a dramaturgic function and that the music must be chosen at the same as the fragments of speech. We usually choose the music when the production is more or less finished. We forget that music can give structure to our entire story and sometimes even be a compelling guide to the scenario.

Exactly the same applies to *sounds*. All too often we put these in right at the end just to add a bit of local colour. But we frequently forget that purely illustrative sound is really not that interesting. Sound becomes interesting and significant when it is embedded in scenes and episodes that have something to do with the action and the main characters. It's natural - and correct - to attribute two main properties to sounds: suggestive power for use where words fail, and proof of authenticity. The souks of Cairo only really come alive once you put the sound in. In other words the sound is there to prove that you were really there. Even so sound demands a more fundamental role in your documentary. When Aurelie Lierman (RVU Radio Prize), a Belgian student at the RITS) was finally able, after a prolonged and painstaking search, to track down her real father to the factory in Ruanda where he was working, their first and naturally emotional confrontation was disrupted by the devastating noise of a pneumatic drill. As a natural radio talent, Aurelie tries to move her father as far away as possible from the deafening din: a good example of sound used as an exceptionally powerful metaphor for the attempt to achieve a meaningful dialogue. Radio at it's best. To put it briefly, music rises above mere mood-setting and combines semantic, emotional, pictorial, narrative and dramaturgic force.

Back to music. Our motto is economy. To us a minimum of means and maximum of returns seems to be the honest approach both in terms of economy and aesthetics. Our basic assumption therefore is that one way or another music should contribute to the value of the documentary or report. In the following we describe a number of the possibilities. That these can overlap goes without saying.

- **music as narrative element**

Music allows us to create a moment of rest, the time the listener needs to absorb what has just been said and to create the mental space for what is still to come. In this way the last words just before the musical interval are given added weight. A musical break can also signal the transition between two episodes of a story or draw a line between separate parts. It can also be used to clearly indicate a passage of time between two pieces of action or to heighten tension. Music can also be used to delay the crucial final act of a story. In such cases music plays much the same role as the blank page in a book between two chapters. We suspend the story for a second. The double bass passages in the documentary *Van Maasmechelen to Hondshoote* (VRT) separate the various steps of the collective journey through the dialects of Flanders.

- **music as signpost**

Music can be used to locate the story in space and time and even identify the characters without a word being uttered. Here the music is a useful cliché, an instant identification that has been recognized for years. The sounds of the accordion take us to Paris, the cowbell to Switzerland, bagpipes to Scotland, etc.

- **music as descriptive element**

Here the music is used to summon up mental images and suggestions. It sets the scene and creates the atmosphere. It's rather like the screen of background paper a studio photographer pulls down to set the tone of a portrait: frivolous pink, serious brown, virginal white, dreamy blue, lustful yellow. The classic Hollywood composers were master of this art. You can buy such music ready-to-run on collections of "Library Music". Everything is available, from supermarket to underground cavern, Tibetan monastery to dance club. It is better to avoid using the instantly recognizable programme music of famous composers. Grieg's Peer Gynt suite, Smetana's Die Moldau, and Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony (the 6th) may be full of highly evocative passages but they have been used so often that they are useless for our purposes. Indeed the same also goes for the soundtrack of the Wim Wenders film Paris, Texas. The melody is so rooted in the listener's memory that he or she will have long formed his own ideas and feelings about it. These personal references will only obstruct those images that you want to evoke.

- **music as characterizing element**

Music can be used to highlight certain personal characteristics. A typical example is Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf. Taken to extremes this becomes pure caricature.

- **music as dynamic element**

Music is particularly effective when used to suggest movement and action. It lends kinetic force and suggests movement in time and space. In the documentary about Flemish dialects referred to above, the passages on the double bass are overlaid by the sound of a starting car. In this way the car does not only drive along, it travels. The journey becomes tangible, the melody seems to create a temporal dimension. In another documentary about racing pigeons, the winning birds return to the pigeon loft on the wings of playful music by Debussy. Speed, lightheartedness and poetry seem to go hand in hand.

- **music as lubricant**

When music is used only for this purpose it tends to sound uncalled for and cheap. We often think that the message will be more acceptable if it is borne on a musical carpet. This is perhaps because we suspect that the programme cannot stand on its own two legs and that it needs a musical crutch. A pretty wrapping, however, is not enough to save weak content.

- **music as composition element**

Here things tend to get complicated. In general it will be the spoken fragments (testimony, interviews, narrator, linking texts) that govern the length of each episode. When assembling our documentary we tend to use the message as the *leitmotiv*. We regard the music as a way of supporting and accompanying the whole thing. But the opposite can also be true. A broad musical movement can be used as the platform for an episode. The spoken fragments can then be placed upon it, at the points indicated by the music. Why should we opt for this approach? One good reason might be that a complete, extended musical fragment offers a suitable form, because it confers an almost epic stature on your documentary. A long, flowing musical episode also offers a welcome relief to more concentrated and jittery passages of editing. An equally sensible reason is that it is much easier to cut and paste speech fragments and to move them forwards and backwards than it is to manipulate music, which after all is somebody else's creation. This was our approach in *De IJslandvisser*s. The first scene - the farewells to wives, children and sweethearts, the departing ship, and the relaxed mood of the crew - used a four minute passage from Ravel as the platform, with the narrative elements appearing when the score allowed.

- **music when words fail and as emotional amplifier**

There are moments in stories and testimonies when words are not enough, when you get to a point where everything has been said. The same applies to those moments when emotions take over, moments which need an outlet. Music can provide the solution here.

A couple of practical tips

- There is always a temptation to smuggle songs (pop, cabaret, ballads, folk and traditional songs) into your work because they have something to do with the subject. The choice of Eleanor Rigby by the Beatles for a documentary about isolated pensioners is a typical example. First of all you must be on your guard not to make hopelessly predictable choices, and second there is always the danger that the Beatles are going to say exactly the same as you, with all the tautology this entails. Another danger is that the ideas and impressions the listener has formed while listening to your documentary might be revised or altered by playing a song by somebody who can put it all into words so much better than the listener can. Personally I find this slightly self-defeating. A good documentary about lonely pensioners doesn't need the Beatles. Even so this is by no means a general rule, and guides such as these exist to be read carefully and then discarded by the user, who is then supposed to be capable of purposively finding his way while being aware of the main difficulties besetting him. I have heard documentaries in which a song of this kind has been used in such an intense, almost blood-curdling fashion, that it so effectively reproduced the essence of the theme or obsessions of the person concerned, that my theoretical objections were reduced to dust. In these cases, however, the songs never sounded redundant, but rather gave a voice in a more or less subliminal or associative fashion to what had not been said.

- Economy is a virtue when it comes to using musical fragments. Nonetheless bluntness and daring can also succeed. In a documentary about the educational methods of the Jesuits, Piazza sets the sound of a class reciting the Greek alphabet against the background of a tumultuous organ piece by Philip Glass, thereby creating a sublimely funny moment.

- Symphonic orchestras and huge ensembles are often less emotive than smaller groupings. Radio is rarely tolerant of excess.

- If you put a musical backing to speech, you should take care to respect *isorhythmia*. In other words the tempo of the music (beats per minute) should be roughly the same as that of the speech. If they are very different (e.g. slow speech and fast music), a jerky, stuttering effect will be the result and the compelling beat of the music will draw attention away from what is being said.

- Music does not always have to match the text, it can provide a counterpoint. A melancholy tune may serve as backing for a snappish and aggressive testimony. If it serves your purpose the music can even run counter to the words.

- You can also ask a composer to provide specially written music for a production. In that case you should provide him with a preliminary recording giving clear indications of what you want him to do.

Clean Sweep, a documentary about students who work as office cleaners in the evening, used recordings made by Kirski Heikinnen, a young Finnish composer. She invited various musician friends to the studio where they improvised freely

with vacuum cleaners, polishing machines, chamois leathers, and other cleaning equipment. This session resulted in an amusing and highly relevant backing tape. It doesn't even have to be expensive.

- Just as important as the moment when the first note is sounded is the moment when the music stops. The sudden silence can mark a turning point in the story or the start of a new episode.

- If there is any single lesson to be learnt from this story, it is the need to keep things simple. Why should you be concerned about not overloading the story with music? With every note you add the listener receives an emotional message. However powerful and penetrating the effect of the impulse imparted by the music may be, it will not last long. This is why you should be economical with "*leitmotifs*" in your production. After the second or third repetition, a tune tends to lose its expressive power. It goes stale, and may even become banal.

- Not every documentary maker has the talent and knowledge of the musical repertoire needed to handle music successfully. This should not be a problem as long as you can rely on colleagues who do have these abilities, as well as an understanding of the nature and structure of documentaries. Eventually though even the most tone-deaf documentary makers learn how to explain exactly what they want. That's what it ultimately comes down to.

There's another important lesson that I've learnt from years of teaching young radio makers. The perception of music changes over the years. Older documentary makers did not grow up in today's sea of sound. Today's young people bob up and down in a constant ebb and flow of sound, noise and music - on the subway platform, in the lift, in shops - while the earpiece is their most constant companion. They live their lives to a virtually uninterrupted soundtrack. The beat is in their bodies, and often they want to make this musical *flow* heard in their radio work. Indeed this work sometimes tends to resemble a prolonged pop song, with the music providing the driving force. These remarks are not intended criticism but are meant to serve as a reminder that tastes and sensibilities change from generation to generation. And a good thing too.