

Music Matters. Part 1: Theory



For most of us music is an inescapable facet of everyday life. We all listen to it. In fact, on average, most of us spend around 18 hours each week actively doing so and many more hours passively consuming it in our living environment.

Extensive research has shown how important a role music can play in influencing our emotions, our mood and even our purchase decisions.

So how exactly does music affect us?

Music makes us feel better

Certain types of music can stimulate the release of the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine in the brain—which can make us feel happy and contented while regulating anxiety and stress. It also releases noradrenaline, which is a hormone that invokes feelings of euphoria

Rhythm and tone affect our emotions. More specifically, our hearts sync to the rhythms we listen to. Slow, reflective music, for instance, slows down our heartbeat and causes us to relax. Conversely, when we listen to fast-paced music it stimulates more energetic neural activity, invoking feelings of excitement.

Similarly, if we are experiencing a stressful time, listening to angry-sounding music with an aggressive tone can actually help us release any internalised emotions. When we feel sad or contemplative, listening to soft, melancholic music can have a cathartic effect by helping to draw-out and express what we are feeling.

The power of suggestion

Humankind is remarkably good at recognising, and subconsciously responding to, information that follows recognisable patterns. We intuitively connect familiar motifs and sensual cues to make quick, instinctive judgements. Music provides some of the most powerful and evocative sensual cues of all and can trigger remarkably potent inferences based on unconsciously-learned associations.

Here are some examples:

- The first few bars of a particular march from Mendelssohn's opera 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' immediately evokes a wedding ceremony
- A short extract of Leroy Anderson's 'Sleigh Ride', or a few seconds of a seasonal favourite by Wizard or Slade, immediately suggests Christmas
- The sound of bright (slightly distorted) musical chimes playing a traditional tune will, for many, immediately evoke an ice cream van (and Mr Whippy?)

Congruence

When several sensual cues are in harmony they become mutually reinforcing and collectively point, with greater certainty, towards the same conclusion. Such sensory clues are deemed to be 'congruent' and as more such cues are gathered our subconscious mind tends to expect new information to follow the same pattern. If, for example, you invite someone out for a romantic dinner they will take-in the soft lighting, the candles on the table and perhaps the alluring scent you're wearing; in the corner a harpist is gently playing 'Claire de Lune' by Debussy. These cues are all seamlessly congruent, each reinforcing and in harmony with the others.

Incongruence is caused when a new cue fails to fit the expected pattern. If for example, your romantic evening is suddenly interrupted by a heavy metal band tuning-up in the next room, the arrival of a loud party of diners on the next table, or by an unpleasant smell wafting in through the window, the spell is broken and the conscious mind kicks-in to challenge and correct the subconscious assumptions. Incongruity makes situations harder and slower to comprehend because it forces us to actively process information, which demands conscious effort, rather than accepting it subconsciously.

Congruence of sensory cues create fluent, instinctive understanding:

- We see a particular colour, design, style, shape or logo we recognise
- We taste or smell something familiar and evocative
- We hear a particular sound, voice, accent, mood, or piece of music...

Music can reinforce fluent behavioural associations

Restaurateurs have long known that classical music can influence customers to choose more expensive food and wine and to savour it for longer; whereas up-beat pop or rock music can encourage people to eat more quickly and move-on.

A recent US study found that music can be even more directive. Diners in the study were given a



menu offering a choice between an Italian pasta dish and a Spanish paella dish. Traditional Italian music was played on the first night and traditional Spanish music was played on the



second night. Although the Italian dish remained the preferred choice on both nights, the number choosing the Spanish paella doubled on the second night (from 17% to 34%). Of the 300 diners participating in the study only two had consciously noticed the effect that the music might have had in making their decision.



A similarly designed UK study observed the effect that background music had on customers choosing wine in a retail store. A shelf was arranged with French and German wine carefully matched for price and quality. Traditional French (accordion) music or traditional German (Bierkeller band) music was played as customers chose their wine. On French music days 77% of the wine sold was French, while



on German music days 73% was German. In other words, customers were three or four times more likely to choose wine that matched the music than wine that did not.

Once again, only 1 out of the 44 customers questioned at the checkout mentioned music having been a factor in their decision-making. Nine out of ten of those asked specifically whether the music had affected their choice said that it definitely had not. The behavioural influence of the music in both cases was enormous, but customers neither noticed, nor even believed, that it had any effect on them

Congruity is more important than likability

Do you ever go into a restaurant, bar, hotel or retail store and wonder how or why the background music was chosen? In many cases it seems to have been randomly selected according to the taste of the manager, rather than for its fit with the environment.

Another study, this time conducted in Germany, has shown that, after being 'at the right volume', the most important consideration when judging the music for a particular environment (e.g. retail space, bar or restaurant) is its perceived aptness, or 'congruity' with the environmental experience. In fact this was found to be four times as important as having music that was 'liked' or 'popular' (even by the manager). In practical terms this is best illustrated by an expressed preference for traditional Indian music by diners in Indian restaurants across London—none of whom had such music on their smart phones, nor would any of them ever choose to listen to listen to it any other context.

Music and brands

A brand is the perception of a promise that lives in the minds of its audiences. The strength of these perceptions is a function of the number of 'congruent' clues that coalesce into a promise with clearly defined expectations. One of the most important sources for such clues is any music associated with



the brand. The emotional response to such music shapes our perceptions of the brand and, when it is congruent with the brand values, serves to reinforce the brand promise. Over time the brand may even become synonymous with the music—take, for example, the 'Flower Duet' (from the opera *Lakmé* by Delibes) and British Airways, or '1,2,3,4' by Feist which still evokes the launch of the Apple iPod Nano from 2007, while the

drum solo from 'In the Air Tonight' by Phil Collins is inextricably linked with Cadbury's chocolate.

Those with longer memories may still recall the image of a Peugeot 405 driving through burning cane fields when they hear 'Take My Breath Away' by Berlin, or the line "Happiness is a cigar called Hamlet" when they hear Bach's 'Air on a G String' even though neither has been seen on TV or cinema screens for over 25—the music for each having been remembered for considerably longer than any other aspect of either brand.



How the right music can help build your brand

As we have seen, the right music can be used to provide additional clues about a brand, giving it a stronger and more enduring appeal without audiences even consciously realising. It deepens emotional connections and underpins core values by reinforcing the brand experience customers have instinctively come to know and trust.

If, however, we contradict or rupture what is currently assembled in their mind they may consciously reconsider their understanding of the brand and maybe even reject it.

Brands are like people...

Imagine, if you will, that your rather conservative grandmother hated jazz music. She had never seen the point of it and frankly could not understand anyone who did. For as long as you can remember, she had always hated jazz music.

Then one day you find her listening to Jazz, nodding her head in pleasure and tapping her foot in rhythm... you ask her what she is doing and she looks up and replies:



"Hey, I'm just getting into the groove with my favourite music. You have to hear this trumpet solo, I've always loved this number..."

You would have every right to feel confused. Perhaps a little annoyed—even cheated. The person who you thought you knew so well is behaving in a manner that defies your understanding, because it is incongruent with your expectations. Now substitute the figure of your mother with a brand with which you feel a particular empathy and with whose values particularly resonate with your own.

That is how it feels when a known and familiar brand behaves out of character, for example by being identified with the 'wrong' music!

Incongruity damages trust in brands, just as it does with people.

They capture your audience's emotions

Neurologist, Donald Calne has observed that:

"The essential difference between reason and emotion is that reason leads to conclusions, but emotion leads to actions"

Rational arguments, therefore, may be a vital component in convincing your audience to make the right decision, but emotional responses are the essential component that enable them to believe that they have made the right decision. Music can play a vital role in generating the emotional appeal your brand needs by reinforcing its distinctiveness, creating empathy with its target audience and maintaining a consistent and familiar experience.

In the second part of Music Matters we will look at some practical considerations when choosing the right music for a particular brand.



The essential difference between reason and emotion is that reason leads to conclusions, but emotion leads to actions

Dr. Donald Calne, Neurologist



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Founder and Managing Director of Lucasbrand, a UK-based strategic brand consultancy with a diverse international client base. Lucasbrand typically connects at a senior level with firms looking for a fresh perspective on reputation, corporate personality or brand strategy. Its professional expertise and proprietary skills have added significant value to the businesses of many clients.

Brands with which Keith Lucas has personally been engaged include: BBC, Rolex, BAA, Discovery Channel, Firmenich, Farrer & Company, Reed Elsevier, BP, Ford, Jaguar, Citroën, McKinsey & Company, Goldman Sachs, Towers Watson, BT Global Services, Hitachi, Samsung and Motorola.

Lucasbrand has created, developed and repositioned brands across many sectors including broadcast, publishing, airlines, airports, luxury goods, perfumery, telecoms, cars, energy, consumer electronics, professional services and banking.

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