

Ron Rodman, *Tuning In: American Narrative Television Music*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2010 [x, 356 pp. ISBN 978-0195340242. £93.00 (hardback)]. *Oxford Music/Media Series*. Music examples, photos, figures, index, appendices, and bibliography.

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In his pioneering book, *TV's Biggest Hits: The Story of Television Themes from "Dragnet" to "Friends,"* Jon Burlingame argued for television music as "the soundtrack of our lives."¹ We might add to that formulation the word "hidden," for the average media consumer is probably unaware of the staggering amount of music that underlies her television experience,² primarily consisting of theme songs and musical cues within programming but also commercial jingles and even network and station idents. Because of the ubiquity, popularity, and commercialism of television and its music, the academy has historically tended to degrade or ignore television music in favor of the cinematic soundtrack, enacting a high/low culture divide. As a result, those of us who care about this music could only most enthusiastically greet the appearance of a book with the words "American Narrative Television Music" in the title. That author Ron Rodman did not adopt a conventional purely historical approach was not a problem for those specialists already familiar with Burlingame's book, which chronicles the art, craft, and practice of composition for television from its early days in the 1950s through the mid-1990s. Instead, Rodman's pathfinding study provides the reader with something rather different, even if the chapters do fall into a rough chronological sequence. Through a deft alliance of critical theory, musical analysis, and archival

research, Rodman affords the reader valuable insights into how television music communicates meaning in a variety of generic contexts, primarily from the perspective of semiotics. By his own admission, Rodman aims for nothing less than to "convey a theory of how meaning and mediation occurred in television music . . . from 1949 to 1999" (p. 17), an ambitious plan made all the more challenging by the absence of prior scholarship in the area.

In covering this territory, *Tuning In* adopts more of a topical/methodological arrangement, which allows Rodman greater freedom to select his genres and programs than a primarily chronicling approach would. And he has judiciously chosen the types and styles of television programming for closer examination: Westerns (*The Rifleman*), early anthology dramas (*Philco Television Playhouse* and *Twilight Zone*), early commercials (jingles, music for vehicle commercials), science fiction (*Star Trek*, *The X-Files*), the police drama (multiple examples of themes), and the hybrid *Twin Peaks*.

Still, despite the logical restriction of the volume to narrative television, it would have been interesting for Rodman to extend his critical gaze to non-narrative genres, which—despite the format's cinematization—still draw a sizeable audience to broadcast/cable television: sporting events, game shows, and reality TV programs, just to name the most popular genres. Along with news programming, these shows count among the core components of live television, according to principles of liveness

1 Jon Burlingame, *TV's Biggest Hits: The Story of Television Themes from "Dragnet" to "Friends"* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), 1.

2 James Deaville, "Introduction: The 'Problem' of Music in Television," in *Music in Television: Channels of Listening*, ed. James Deaville (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.

established by Philip Auslander,³ which would add perspective and context for television's narrative elements including music. Also, the book might have profited from a more extended discussion of the extradiegetic realm before Chapter 1, for in traditional broadcast television—Rodman's site for analysis—the extradiegetic is crucial for audiovisually establishing and regulating the flow of televisual programming at any given point in the broadcast day.

Each chapter begins with an extended discussion of theoretical and aesthetic principles for the genre under consideration, which both provides the reader with the tools for understanding a specific subset of television programming and progressively builds upon the framework of preceding chapters. The author organizes the chapters into three large sections: the first introduces semiotic theory as a vehicle for understanding musical meaning in relation to moving images, the second looks more closely at how television music functions both on a narrative and televisual level, and the third considers questions of musical style and its evolution in television of the last forty years. While Rodman's overarching perspective can be designated as semiotic and narratological at heart, the wide range of analytical approaches and interpretive strategies behind the chapter topics betrays the author's encompassing knowledge and skill in dealing with this repertoire. Indeed, Rodman has clearly thought long and hard about this music, which he thoroughly knows and deeply cares about, although he is careful to avoid falling into the roles of naïve enthusiast on the one hand, or omniscient judge on the other. His is an insightful, informative, intelligent book that explores a multitude of analytic approaches in the quest for a theory of how television music functions.

Impressive is the author's initial examination of leitmotif in television, the substance of Chapter 4. Rodman takes the reader through a comparison of television programming with film, which leads to considerations of how television has adopted the principle of leitmotif, how connotative style topics contribute to narrative, and how television composers can write and deploy stock cues in meaningful ways. The primary example is Gerald Fried's score for the *Star Trek* episode "Shore Leave," which illustrates the shaping role of connotative topics for narrative and affirms that "televisual leitmotifs can signify effectively and efficiently" (p. 131).

His thorough analysis of Hershel Burke Gilbert's cues for *The Rifleman* also merits special attention, for example, for here Rodman demonstrates his abilities as theorist and analyst, expertly and informatively presenting the thematic material as linear narratives in adapted Schenkerian reductions and graphs. Yet this is not music theory for its own sake: Rodman uses the example of the episode "Outlaw's Inheritance" to illustrate the role of leitmotif and other musical elements in establishing narrative. It is heartening to observe this level of scholarly engagement with music for television, belying the customary evaluation of that repertoire as lacking sophistication.

The two fascinating chapters on music for commercials provide a contrast from the surrounding material in the manner of "station breaks"—they elaborate Rodman's notion of music as mediating lyrics and visual images in commercials (p. 16). The first circumstantially establishes how jingles and other short musical forms were crafted to reflect on the product in early commercials. For the later chapter on developments after 1970, he compellingly argues that the focus shifts from the product to the consumer, whether in the hilltop Coke commercial from the early 1970s or socially stratified vehicle ads from the 1990s.

Although both discussions of commercials rely significantly on theory, their subject matter—jingles and tunes for familiar products and product types—renders them foils for the other chapters that heavily theorize the sounds of televisual genres. Rodman is true to his word of developing a theory for the production of meaning through music for narrative television, and he impressively achieves this goal, but at times it seems that the musical yields to the theoretical/aesthetic aspects of the argumentation, to the disadvantage of the former. In Chapter 5 on the Western, for example, the reader must first work through fifteen pages of theoretical argumentation and justification before arriving at the concrete example of music from *The Rifleman*, and that on its own rather than, say, in comparison with thematic material from other popular Westerns like *Gunsmoke* or *Bonanza*. This is not to diminish his accomplishment in *Tuning In*, but rather to recognize that in legitimating television music as a viable subject for academic study, Rodman felt the need to foreground his analytical position and tools, which are drawn from the broadest repertoire of classical critical theory. His consultation of archival materials by Harry

³ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Sosnik and Gilbert, among others, adds another layer of depth to the research and its findings.

All in all, *Tuning In: American Narrative Television Music* is a ground-breaking study of the aesthetics and processes behind the “soundtrack of our lives.” Even though the formats for television may have shifted from analogue to digital, from the TV set to the mobile device and laptop/tablet, televisual content is flourishing and continues in its need for music to perform its historical roles to “enhance/complement/signify/represent whatever we collectively believe it enhances, complements, signifies, or represents” (p. 289). Thus, *Tuning In* remains as relevant and meaningful as ever, affording the researcher the means to penetrate the complex soundscape of television.

James Deaville is a Musicologist specializing in music, composers and musical practices and institutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 2008, his article “Publishing Paraphrases and Creating Collectors: Friedrich Hofmeister, Franz Liszt, and the Technology of Popularity” from *Liszt and His World* (Princeton University Press) received the Richard S. Hill award of the Music Library Association for the best article published in 2006. He has edited or co-edited books about Wagner (Pendragon), Liszt (Pendragon), Peter Cornelius (Schott) and Music and Broadcasting (under review), and guest-edited special issues of the *19th Century Music Review* and *Canadian University Music Review*.