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Music and meaning in the commercials[1]

NICHOLAS COOK

I

What does music mean, if anything? The question is one of the hardy perennials of musical aesthetics, and there is no shortage of answers to it. Indeed, there is a plethora of seemingly unrelated answers. We can talk about music's internal structure, about its symmetries and directional motions, about patterns of implication and their realisation or lack of realisation; moving from 'the music itself ' to listeners' reponses, approaches like this offer a psychological approach to meaning (and the work of Leonard Meyer and Eugene Narmour provide the best known examples). Or we can approach the music from the opposite direction, talking about the context of its creation, the context of its performance, and the context of its reception; here the assumption is that music acquires meaning through its mediation of society. Or again, we can oscillate between these two viewpoints, on the assumption that meaning arises from the mutual mediation of music and society. That is the central assumption of musical hermeneutics, whether we are applying this term to the work of Hermann Kretzschmar in the 1880s or that of Lawrence Kramer in the 1980s.

The hermeneutic programme might be described as one of wrenching meaning out of music; as Kramer puts it 'The text . . . does not give itself to understanding; it must be made to yield to understanding' (1990, p. 6). (He goes on to provide what is in effect a protocol for achieving this.) I think the coerciveness of Kramer's vocabulary tells us something important about musical meaning. In itself, in the relatively autonomous environment of the concert hall or the home, music rarely poses clearly articulated questions of meaning. Such questions arise not so much from the music as from the interpretive approaches that are brought to bear upon it. And this explains the plethora of answers to questions of musical meaning to which I referred: each answer is to a different question, or more precisely, each answer follows as the consequence of posing the question of musical meaning in a different manner.

But if there is one thing that underlies this cacophony of divergent answers, it is the lack of consensus as to what kind of communication music is, or indeed whether it can properly be called communication at all. It is helpful at this point to contrast the concept of meaning with that of effect. Nobody could reasonably deny that music has effects, and in principle it is perfectly possible to discover what those effects are. With meaning, however, it is quite different; not only are there widely divergent explanations of musical meaning, but whole systems of musical aesthetics have been built on the premise that music simply does not have

meaning. Now what distinguishes the concepts of meaning and effect is that the former is predicated on communication, on human agency, whereas the latter is not (that is why we talk about the effects of sunlight, not its meaning). It follows that any analysis of musical meaning needs to begin with a clear grasp of the communicative context within which this meaning is realised. But musical meaning is all too often discussed in the abstract rather than in terms of specific contexts, as if it were somehow inherent in 'the music itself' regardless of the context of its production and reception. My purpose in this article is to redress the balance by examining the role that music plays within a contemporary multi-media context whose overall communicative function is rather well-defined. In this way the analysis can proceed from communicative function – from meaning – to the part played by music in the realisation of that meaning.

Example 1 shows the opening of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* overture. What does the music mean? Of course it is possible to find answers along the lines mentioned above. But, to borrow Kramer's words, the music has to be *made* to

Example 1

yield them; in fact, the very question seems curiously unmotivated. But this is not at all the case of the music in a recent commercial[2] for the Citroen ZX 16v, a compact hatchback with sporting pretensions; this time, answers to the question 'what does the music mean?' leap out as if of their own accord, and there is no longer any temptation to ask if it means anything at all. And yet the music itself is the same; Citroen's advertisers have based the commercial round the opening of Mozart's overture. In musical terms, the only changes are that the dynamic range of the music has been compressed, and that pauses of about three seconds each have been inserted between bars 1 and 2, and again between bars 3 and 4, detaching the initial motifs from one another.

The commercial begins with a long shot of a spectacular French landscape, with the camera slowly zooming in on a picturesque rock formation crowned with ruined fortifications. There is silence, broken only by the twittering of birds and the tolling of a church bell in the distance. These sounds continue as the camera cuts to a Sunday artist; he is painting the picturesque rock formation (we can see the painting), and as he lifts a glass to his lips the camera follows his motion, panning up and to the right. Suddenly there is a cut to a close-up of a red ZX 16v racing along a country lane; the beginning and ending of the shot are synchronised with the first motif (bar 1) of Mozart's music. But this is nothing more than a brief interpolation; returning to the previous scene with the birdsong and bells, the camera continues its diagonal motion, following the line of the rising ground and passing over two more Sunday artists. Again there is a sudden cut to the ZX 16v, and again the shot is synchronised with Mozart's music (bars 2-3), though this time the music continues for a second or two after the scene returns to the landscape.

Up to this point the commercial's strategy is clear enough: it is establishing an opposition between the serenity of the countryside and the Sunday painters on the one hand, and the technological dynamism and verve of the Citroen ZX 16v on the other. Through its association with the car, the music communicates the liveliness of its engine, the precision of its roadholding. That is, the attributes of the music are transferred to the car; the liveliness and precision of Mozart's score (and these are two of its outstanding qualities) become the liveliness and precision of the ZX 16v. But this is only one of the roles that the music plays. At a more basic level, its very presence or absence sharpens the contrast of car and countryside. And here we come to an apparent paradox. The commercial associates the countryside with painting, with artistic and human values. Yet it aligns Mozart's music, one of the most enduring and universal symbols of high art, with technology rather than with artistic and human values. What is the explanation of this unexpected inversion of values?

The remainder of the advertisement provides the answer; its overall message is that the ZX 16v represents an ideal synthesis of art and technology, and the music plays an essential role in this dialectic. After the car's second brief appearance, the camera continues its diagonal motion, passing another painter, and yet again there is a cut to a shot of the ZX 16v hurtling along the lane, to the accompaniment of Mozart's music (bar 4). But this time the music continues as the camera cuts back to the landscape scene, panning over another painter – this time an attractive young woman – before coming to rest on an equally attractive young man. He is painting, too, but unlike all the other painters he does not have his back to the camera; in fact he is looking straight at it. He is not painting the picturesque rock. What, then, is he painting? At the exact moment of the *tutti*

entry in the music (bar 12), the camera cuts to a new angle and the answer is revealed: the Citroen ZX 16v, silhouetted against the sky.

Everything that happens subsequently in the commercial is designed to reinforce this association of art and technology. We see the '16v' badge on the car, followed by the decisive gesture of the artist as he paints it. Then we see the whole car, followed by its portrait. As the artist packs the painting and his easel into the car, a voice-over announces that 'The new Citroen ZX 16v turns heads even when it's standing still'. (The pretty woman, now seen in close-up, looks on admiringly.) As the artist drives off, we are told that 'On the road, the new ZX will show you a new perspective on performance'. (The word 'perspective' is synchronised with a final shot of the painting, in case anyone should miss the connection.) And as the Citroen logo and product name appear on the screen, the voice-over concludes: 'The new Citroen ZX 16 valve: everything about it says quality'.

The final slogan is an accurate summary of what the commercial, as a whole, is saying. It also summarises what Mozart's music is being used to say. Heard continuously through to the end of the commercial (it fades out at bar 38), the music quickly re-establishes its natural association with the artistic and human values represented by the painters; in this way it mediates the linkage of those values and the car with which it was associated at the beginning of the commercial. At the same time, the music imbues the product with the prestige that attaches to classical music in general and (for people who recognise it) to opera in particular. That, in short, is what the music *means*. Or rather, it is what the music means *here*; after all, nobody would claim that it means the same thing in its original role as the overture to the *Marriage of Figaro*.

Talking about 'what the music means here' is an improvement on simply asking 'what the music means', because it makes allowance for the context in which musical meaning emerges. But, as my use of the word 'emerges' may suggest, even asking 'what the music means here' is problematic. Consider the grammar of the sentence: 'means' is a transitive verb, with 'what' as its object. To pose the question this way is to suggest that meaning is something that music *has*. But that is not what the Citroen commercial seems to show. To be sure, the music in the commercial – Mozart's music – brings various attributes or qualities with it, attributes or qualities that enter into the discursive structure of the commercial and become associated with the product. But the particular significance of these attributes or qualities – their meaning in terms of the commercial – emerges from their interaction with the story line, the voice-over, and the pictures. If the music gives meaning to the images, then equally the images give meaning to the music.

Another way of putting this, to which I shall return, is that meaning is constructed or negotiated within the context of the commercial. In which case, instead of talking about meaning as something that the music *has*, we shall be talking about it as something that the music *does* (and has done to it) within a given context. And as one of the most highly compressed (and highly resourced) forms of multi-media production, television commercials constitute an exceptionally fertile arena for investigating the negotiation of musical meaning.

II

Apart from a little editing, Citroen's advertisers have simply taken Mozart's music as it comes, inserting their message within its existing framework. The music

makes sense when heard by itself; concert music has to. But music for the commercials need not. Music that is custom-written for a commercial frequently makes little or no sense when heard by itself, away from the context of words and pictures. Typically it is far too fragmentary to make sense in its own terms. Its logic is not the logic of concert music.

A good example of this is a commercial for Walker's crisps, with a story line that falls into three parts. It begins in a school playground; a group of boys are eating crisps[3] and looking at a magazine. 'It's all about what type of job you want when you leave school,' says one. 'I haven't got a clue,' says another. 'Nor have I,' says a third. 'I have,' says the remaining boy. Waving a crisp to emphasise his words, he announces 'I *know* what I want to do'. And as he continues, a fantasy sequence begins; it is a parody of corporate soap opera, full of glass skyscrapers, stretch limousines, and nubile personal assistants. 'I want a job,' he says, 'where you face a fresh challenge every day – where only the best is good enough . . . . A job where, when it comes to the crunch, I won't be found wanting'. The other boys clap facetiously, and the scene returns to the school playground. The final section consists of the other boys trying to guess what the mystery job is. 'What's it, then?,' they ask, 'Brain surgeon? Prime minister? Archbishop of Canterbury?' 'No,' replies our hero, 'chief taster for Walker's crisps'. And as the other boys elbow him mockingly, a voice-over asks: 'Why *do* Walker's crisps taste so good?'

The music falls into three discrete sections separated by silences, and these sections are fully aligned with the story line. The fantasy sequence is set throughout to up-tempo music with a driving rock beat; it sounds like American television theme music, and its assertive quality is heightened by a constant insistence on the tonic, D♭ (Example 2).[4] The two playground sequences have music that is quite different from this. It is in D major, in effect an unrelated key. The tempo is slower, and the instrumentation is classical in style, using acoustic instruments. The first time we hear it, at the beginning of the first playground sequence, the music consists of a single melodic phrase that rises and then falls back; it goes nowhere (Example 3). Moreover, is too brief and too soft to make any real impact, and the lack of any bass line gives it a quality of remoteness. In itself, then, the music of the first playground sequence does not really make sense; you might suspect the composer or at least the sound engineers of incompetence.

But it *does* make sense in relation to the music of the final playground sequence, which begins at the end of the dialogue (Example 4). As the examples show, this is essentially the same music, except that it cadences much more con-

Example 2

Example 3

Example 4

clusively on the upper fifth (in the first section it cadenced an octave lower). But there are important changes that are not shown. For one thing, the music in the final sequence is introduced by a harp glissando, synchronised with the words 'Walker's crisps'; decades of Hollywood film scores established the harp glissando as a symbol of changing consciousness, of the transition from reality to fantasy or (as in this case) back again. Again, it is played louder than before, with a prominent backing in high strings (the same backing is there in the music for the first playground sequence, but it is practically inaudible). Perhaps most importantly, a rhythmic bass line is added, and this gives the music a fullness of sound, a presence, that it altogether lacked first time round. In all these ways, the music of the first and last sequences draw meaning from one another: each can be defined in terms of what the other is not.

But that is not all. The music of the fantasy sequence has the same fullness and presence as the music of the final playground sequence. And this means that the final music represents a synthesis of what was previously opposed: it combines the classical style and melody of the opening music with the sonorous qualities of the fantasy music. Just as in the case of the Citroen commercial, then, the music contributes to a dialectical process whose goal is the establishment of the advertiser's message. But the alignment of music and story line is rather different this time. The Walker's commercial takes the form of a quest narrative: it poses a problem (what do I want to be?) and eventually reveals the solution (chief taster for Walker's crisps). The principal function of the music is to heighten the narrative structure by creating a sense of denouement. Both the cadential quality of the final music, and its synthesis of previously opposed elements, contribute to this. It provides a coherence, a sense of meaningful progression, that is absent from the story line considered by itself. In fact it is hardly exaggerating to say that, in this commercial, purely musical relationships are being used to assert a message that only has to be expressed in words for its absurdity to be obvious: eating Walker's crisps enables you to be what you want to be.

My interpretation of this commercial may seem rather heavy-handed. That is because, like many British commercials, it is deliberately overblown. It incorporates elements of self-parody and hyperbole. The advertisers do not *really* expect you to believe that eating Walker's crisps will enable you to be what you want to be. But the strategies they employ are also to be found in any number of commercials whose messages *are* intended to be believed. A commercial for Prudential pension plans[5] provides an excellent illustration of this, because it has a message that is very close to the Walker's crisps one, and makes use of the same opposition of fantasy and reality to create it.

The commercial opens with a young man slouched in a chair, listening to music on headphones; we can see him moving to its rhythm, though we cannot hear it. We hear his voice (but it is in his mind, not out loud): 'I want to be . . . a musician'. The commercial is based round the young man's dreams. He tells us 'I

want to cut my first album', and then 'I want to be packing them in at Wembley'. Thereafter there is extended visual sequence showing him playing with his band, while a voice-over (a different voice) explains that 'You'll probably work your way through more than one job before you can be what you want to be. That's why Prudential pension plans are designed to change from job to job with you'. As the voice-over finishes, the visuals return to reality: the young man is playing in a shopping mall, and an old woman asks him, 'Do you know 'I want to be Bobby's girl'?' As he mutters, 'Oh, no', the Prudential logo appears and the voice-over concludes: 'Whatever you want to be you'll need the flexibility of a new Prudential pension'.

In the Walker's commercial, the opposition between fantasy and reality is expressed diachronically: reality is followed by fantasy, and fantasy by reality. To some extent this applies to the Prudential commercial; the fantasy of the band sequence (which is emphasised by its bluish monochrome) gives way to the full-colour reality of the shopping mall. But the opposition between fantasy and reality is also realised synchronically. This happens in a number of ways. Words are opposed to images; when the would-be pop star speaks of cutting his first album we see him cutting grass, and when he dreams of 'packing them in at Wembley' we see him packing cereals in the supermarket. (The puns on 'cut' and 'pack' serve to heighten the opposition.) But what is most striking about this commercial is the consistent use of music in opposition to both words and images.

Apart from a few notes on the harmonica at the very end (of which more below), the music consists of a single slow melody in four balancing phrases; each except the last has an arch-shaped contour (Example 5). There is no co-ordination between the beginnings and endings of the phrases and the visuals, except that the final note coincides with the Prudential logo. The phrases group themselves in pairs, with a half cadence in bar 4 answered by the full cadence at the end. The melody is supported by a strong, functional bass line, and the harmony is wholly diatonic (only chords I, II, V, VI are used). Both melody and bass are played by strings, with an off-beat arpeggio pattern in the clarinets, resulting in a warm, reassuring sonority (Example 6).

The music, in short, is in a simplified classical style. But the story line is all about pop music. The disjunction between what we see and what we hear starts right at the beginning, where we see the protagonist grooving to his Walkman in a rhythm totally unrelated to the sound track. It reaches a climax when we see

Example 5

♪ = 76

mp I V II VI I V 6–5 4–3

II VI I II V7 I

Example 6

the rock band performing, but continue to hear classical music. And this throws great weight onto the one place in the commercial where there is what film buffs call diegetic music (that is, music that is present within the represented scene). This is the final shot, a kind of coda following the Prudential logo, in which we see the young man straightening his tie (he is looking into the camera as if it were a wall mirror); then he plays a few notes on a harmonica, spins it in the air, catches it, and walks briskly away. This is a complex moment in terms of the construction of meaning, and it warrants close analysis.

The final shot refers back to another that came much earlier in the commercial, after the young man's initial words 'I want to be . . . a musician'. In this earlier shot it is his father who is straightening his tie, again treating the camera as a mirror; we hear him say 'You want to be earning your keep, my son'. This response to his son's aspirations, turning on the different senses of the word 'want', establishes an archetypal opposition of youth and age, freedom and authority, idealism and pragmatism. And the opposition of (unheard) pop music and (heard) classical music is aligned with these values in the most obvious, not to say cliché-ridden, manner. For the would-be pop star, the music his father cannot hear is a symbol of personal integrity and fulfilment, everything that his father denigrates. We are invited to identify with the son, not the father, whose pedestrian aspirations are made clear in the final shot; as his son looks into the mirror, the father tells us what *he* wants to be – 'I want to be in the office at eight on the dot'. The diegetic harmonica at this point – which adds a bluesy flattened seventh to the final cadence, and is the only music in a popular style heard during the entire commercial – underlines what the symmetry of these two shots hints at: the reversal of the father/son relationship as the son makes his own way in the world.

And yet, although popular music is being used as a symbol of youth, freedom, and idealism, it would not be correct to say that classical music is used to symbolise age, authority, and pragmatism. Because it is remote from the action – because it is non-diegetic – the classical music of the soundtrack is not directly associated with the father at all. Rather, it is associated with the voice-over, which is projected as a kind of authorial persona transcending the characters in the commercial. Prudential, it says, enables you to 'be what you want to be'; unlike the authoritarian father of the story line, Prudential combines authority with understanding. In fact the commercial seems to annex to Prudential the paternal qualities that the flesh-and-blood father lacks. And the music contributes emphat-

ically to this message. Rising above the petty squabbles of the story line, its classical but at the same time warm style brings with it a sense of genuinely concerned understanding, the authority of experience, and so aligns itself *with* Prudential rather than (as might have been expected) *against* the would-be pop star.

We might call this oppositional structure a discourse of genre. And it is allied to a discourse of process. From around the point where the woman asks 'Do you know "I want to be Bobby's girl"?' (the first moment of diegetic dialogue in the commercial), there is a massive cadential process, a massive targetting of the final point of musical resolution. The tempo gets slower and slower; the harmony outlines a classic II-V-I progression, and the melody rises towards the upper tonic, cadencing an octave higher than it began. As I mentioned, the final phrase is the only one that is not arch-shaped, and its ascent to the upper tonic coincides with the appearance of the Prudential logo on the screen. In this way, a purely musical process is being used not just to highlight the product name, but to assert what is really the fundamental message of the commercial – a message that is not spoken (and indeed cannot quite be spoken), but to which everything in the commercial seems to lead with the force of inevitability: *Prudential is the [re]solution of all your problems*.

That message, of course, could hardly get past the Advertising Standards Authority. But then the Advertising Standards Authority is not concerned with musical messages. It is concerned with verbal messages, and at the verbal level the Prudential commercial is making a perfectly verifiable factual statement: Prudential pension plans can be transferred from one job to another. The verbal message, however, is effectively subordinated to a series of far more comprehensive attitudinal messages that are communicated by means of music.

III

Traditionally, musicians compose with notes, rhythms, and perhaps timbres. Only with postmodernism has the idea of 'composing with styles' or 'composing with genres' emerged, at least as a consciously adopted procedure. But composing with styles or genres is one of the most basic musical techniques found in television commercials. The reason is easy to see. As I mentioned, the commercials are just about the most temporally constrained form of artistic production in existence; the cost of air time sees to that. Except in the case of occasional blockbusters (usually, in Britain at least, from nationalised industries or financial institutions), the advertisers have only a few seconds to communicate their message. Musical styles and genres offer unsurpassed opportunities for communicating complex social or attitudinal messages practically instantaneously. One or two notes in a distinctive musical style are sufficient to target a specific social and demographic group, and to associate a whole nexus of social and cultural values with the product.[6] Commercials often contain music that almost completely lacks 'content' as a music theorist would generally define it – that is, distinctive melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic shaping – but incorporates a discernible musical logic based on style. Another car commercial, this time for the Volvo 440 saloon, provides an example.

This commercial falls into three sections, each of which has its own musical style – though the transitions between one style and another are intentionally de-emphasised. First, we see the car stationary, as in a showroom; the camera moves around it, lingering over its nameplate and model badge. The music is

atonal, electronic, hi-tech, space-age, depersonalised; it evokes the qualities of Swedish engineering, underlining a voice-over that speaks of the car's 'stylish good looks' and 'tenacious handling'. Next, we see the car on the open road. As it overtakes slower-moving traffic we hear electronic timbres that underline the quality of 440's acceleration; otherwise the music sounds acoustic, but all that you can hear clearly is the drum-beat, in a kind of stripped-down rock style. (By 'stripped-down' I mean that the music embodies the features necessary for the recognition of genre, but otherwise has little or no distinctive musical content.) At first it is up-tempo, matching the speeding car. But the tempo decreases as the car brakes sharply to allow a family of ducks to cross the road.

This brings us to the third and last section. As the car comes to a stop, the camera cuts to a shot of a little girl asleep on the back seat; restrained by her seat belt, she has not been woken by the emergency stop. And as we see her, we hear music in an again stripped-down classical style; it is melodic, tonal, and played on strings and woodwinds. (Advertisers constantly use woodwind-dominated timbres when they want to evoke domestic, family values.) Finally, as the Volvo logo appears on the screen, the voice-over concludes 'All this for under £10,000. The Volvo 440 . . . . *Think* what you could be saving'. The slogan neatly links ethical and financial considerations.

In this way, the central section of the commercial, when the car is on the move, is flanked by two sections in which it is stationary. This is just the same structure as in the Citroen commercial, except that the moving and stationary sections are inverted. In fact all the commercials I have discussed have a tripartite story-line, as shown in Figure 1. At the same time, this symmetrical structure is in each case complemented by some kind of process that continues throughout the commercial; as I said, in the Citroen commercial this process is essentially dialectical, leading to a synthesis of technology and human values, whereas in the Walker's and Prudential commercials the processive aspect takes the form of the posing and solution of a problem. There are various ways in which music can fit into such a tripartite plan; it can be used to emphasise structure or process, or to combine elements of the two. In the Walker's commercial, the music essentially falls into the same pattern as the story line, A-B-A – although, as I mentioned, the final playground music does incorporate some features from the fantasy music in the central section. That is, it emphasises structure, but not entirely at the expense of process. By contrast, the music in the Citroen and Prudential commercials does not fall into an A-B-A pattern; it is through-composed, continuing and evolving throughout the entire commercial. It is, in other words, primarily aligned with process, moving in a single trajectory towards its conclusion.

How does the music of the Volvo commercial fit into this interpretive framework? The short answer is that it combines structural and processive elements. As I said, there are three styles of music, corresponding to the three sections of the story line, so to that extent the music is aligned with structure. In fact it goes

	A	B	A
Volvo	stationary	moving	stationary
Citroen	moving	stationary	moving
Walker's, Prudential	reality	fantasy	reality

Figure 1

Example 7

a little further than this. Although the music of the first and last sections is quite different in practically every way, they both include a distinctive melodic figure that rises and falls; in each case it appears on the same pitches (E-A-G sharp). But its effect is quite different; whereas it first appears in an atonal context, it is subsequently integrated within the final cadence (Example 7). In this way, what is in itself an element of structure – an aspect of the A-B-A pattern – actually helps to bring out the processive quality of the music. And it is the alignment of the music with process that is most important in terms of creating the message of this commercial, of constructing its meaning. For although there are three separate sections of music in three separate styles, there is a continuous process running through them. The opening music is atonal and electronic. The final music is tonal and uses natural instruments. And the music in the middle lies somewhere between these extremes. Figure 2 represents the way in which this musical process is aligned with the overall message of the commercial.

Atonal → diatonic
Electronic → natural
and thus
Technological → human

Figure 2

The bottom line of Figure 2 is what this commercial is all about – a message rather similar to that of Citroen. The Volvo 440, it is saying, offers technological sophistication. It offers all the handling and acceleration you would expect from a prestige manufacturer. But it does not just offer technological sophistication. It offers braking to match its acceleration; it complements performance with safety. When you choose Volvo, you demonstrate your maturity, balancing the allure of high technology with social concern (a message clearly designed to maintain Volvo's characteristic market image). Like Citroen's, then, the Volvo commercial constructs a dialectical process. And, through its predominantly processive orientation, the music plays a major role in creating this message, in rendering it convincing, in mediating it. But I think it also adds an extra message of its own. At the beginning of the commercial, and again at the very end, there is a low, electronic tone. To my ears, at least, it is unmistakably reminiscent of the low, electronic tone that has for some years been a consistent feature of BMW commercials, where it is clearly meant to evoke the values of high technology. In the context of a commercial that stresses human values, the coincidence of this tone with the slogan '*Think* what you could be saving' strongly suggests that Volvo's advertisers are hoping to communicate a sub-verbal, almost subliminal message: *Volvo, the thinking person's BMW.*

IV

It is not just the messages of the commercials that are subliminal. In a sense, the music is too. That is to say, viewers rarely hear the music as such; they are rarely aware of it as an entity in itself. (The exception to this is the jingle, which can take on a life of its own, but there are no jingles in the commercials I have been discussing.) Music transfers its own attributes to the story line and to the product, it creates coherence, making connections that are not there in the words or pictures; it even engenders meanings of its own. But it does all this, so to speak, silently.

This phenomenon is well recognised among theorists of film music. Claudia Gorbman calls her book on film music *Unheard Melodies* in order to stress the way that music disguises its participation in the diegetic illusion; 'Were the subject to be aware . . . of its presence as part of the film's discourse,' she says, 'the game would be all over'. And later she speaks of Hollywood cinema working 'toward the goal of a transparent or invisible discourse'. (Gorbman 1987, pp. 64, 72). In saying this, she is using the vocabulary of deconstruction, and the deceptive translucency of music is a recurrent theme in the deconstructionist literature. As Derrida and de Man have shown, music may give the appearance of going directly from the heart to the heart, to borrow Beethoven's famous words,[7] but in reality no musical style is unmediated. To put it another way, music is the discourse that passes itself off as nature; it participates in the construction of meaning, but disguises its meanings as effects. Here is the source of its singular efficacy as a hidden persuader.

Because of this, unravelling the role of music within the larger discursive structure of a film or a commercial – making it audible, as Gorbman might say – involves taking up a conscious critical stance. To use Gorbman's image, it involves opting out of the game. But in the study of both film and the commercials, and indeed of any multi-media art form, there is a major methodological problem to be surmounted. In my analysis of music and meaning in the commercials, I have had frequent recourse to words such as 'projecting', 'highlighting' and 'underlining'. We use these words a lot when we talk about music. When we talk about performances, we say that they project (or fail to project) the music's structure. When we talk about songs, we say that the composer highlights a poet's choice of words or underlines their meaning. But there is a danger in this terminology, widespread as it may be. When we use such terms to describe song, we imply that the music is supplementary to the meaning that is *already* in the words.[8] And Gorbman makes the same complaint in relation to film music; the terms we use to describe it, she says, 'erroneously assume that the image is autonomous' (1987, p. 15). What does she offer as an alternative? 'If we must summarise music-image and music-narrative relationships in two words or less', she says, '*mutual implication* is more accurate'.

But it is possible to be a little more specific, and think of the relationship between words and pictures on the one hand, and music on the other, in terms of denotation and connotation.[9] What I mean by this is that words and pictures deal primarily with the specific, with the objective, while music deals primarily with responses – that is, with values, emotions, and attitudes. As an illustration of this, consider the first commercial I discussed, Citroen's appropriation of the *Marriage of Figaro* overture. The words and the pictures present a counterpoint of

images of nature and technology, art and science. They tell a story. But, by themselves, they tell it incoherently; what ties the commercial together into a convincing whole is the music, through the associations and values that it brings to the story, and its ability to enforce continuity. That is to say, the connotative qualities of the music complement the denotative qualities of the words and pictures. Or to put it another way, the music interprets the words and pictures. And in doing this it plays the same role that music has played since the earliest days of the cinema, where (in Gorbman's words) it 'masks contradictions, and . . . draws the spectator further into the diegetic illusion' (1987, p. 59).

Music, then, does not just project meaning in the commercials; it is a source of meaning. As I have tried to show, it generates meanings beyond anything that is said (and sometimes anything that *can* be said) in words. Some of these meanings come as it were ready-made, such as the genre references of the Volvo commercial. But this does not apply to those 'purely musical' relationships of continuity and discontinuity, implication and realisation, that play so crucial a role in the mediation of advertisers' messages. In an attempt to formulate a general theory of musical meaning, Daniel Putnam has described how 'the contour of instrumental music, with its broad yet recognizable strokes, 'fits' the contour of those broad emotions in life which, as feeling-states of the organism, can be independent of particular situations and can be transferred to a variety of diverse objects' (1987, p.59).[10] Now we do not experience emotions in the abstract; we experience them to the extent that (as Putnam puts it) they are transferred to specific objects in specific contexts. And this provides an attractive model of what happens in the commercials, where the broad expressive potential of musical sounds acquires specific meaning by virtue of its relationship to words and pictures – through its transfer, to repeat Putnam's words, to a variety of diverse objects.

If this is valid, then music in the abstract – 'music alone', as Peter Kivy calls it – does not have meaning. What it has is a *potential* for the construction or negotiation of meaning in specific contexts. It is a bundle of generic attributes in search of an object. Or it might be described as a structured semantic space, a privileged site for the negotiation of meaning. And if, in the commercials, meaning arises from the mutual interaction of music, words, and pictures, then at the same time it is meaning that forms the common currency between these elements – that makes the negotiation possible, so to speak. But of course the commercials are just one arena for such negotiation of meaning. Exactly the same applies to the relationship between music and words in song. And perhaps more significantly, it applies equally to the relationship between music and the vast quantity of words that are written *about* music.

There is something extraordinary about the sheer extent of the literature on music. Consider: on the one hand, musicians constantly reinterate that music cannot be captured in words. On the other hand, and just as constantly, they write metaphorical or technical commentaries on music, using words to do what they say cannot be done. The apparent paradox disappears if we see the words not as trying to duplicate or substitute for the music, but as complementing it, resulting in a counterpoint between verbal denotation and musical connotation. By virtue of this counterpoint, the music's potential for meaning is given specific realisation; to use Putnam's term, the words mediate the transfer of music into meaning, into communication, into discourse. And to say that is certainly to blur, and perhaps to erase, the distinction between music and its interpretation. It is to

recognise the constitutive role of interpretation, and more specifically of verbal interpretation, in the play of representations that we call musical culture. It is, in short, to see musical culture as irreducibly multi-media in nature. Or to put it in a nutshell: music is never 'alone'.

If this is correct, then it becomes obvious why the traditional question 'What does music mean?' has resulted in such a cacophony of unsatisfying answers. The question asks about discursive content in the abstract, when such content is negotiated only within specific interpretive contexts. It is an aesthetician's version of 'How long is a piece of string?'

Endnotes

1. A preliminary version of this article was given at the conference 'New Music, Aesthetics, and Ideology', held at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in March 1993.
2. All four commercials discussed in this article were broadcast on British television in late December 1992.
3. In Britain, 'crisps' means the same as 'chips' elsewhere.
4. All transcriptions are the author's.
5. This commercial is one of a series, each featuring a different career; a more comprehensive analysis would include this intertextual dimension.
6. For a discussion of advertisers' use of music for targetting, see David Huron (1989, pp. 566–7).
7. The autograph of the Kyrie from Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* bears the inscription *'Vom Herzen – zu Herzen gehn!'* (From the heart – may it return to the heart). For a discussion of Derrida and de Man on music, with references, see Christopher Norris (1982, p. 34).
8. On the logic of the supplement as applied to song, see Lawrence Kramer (1991, pp. 154 ff.).
9. See John Fiske and John Hartley (1978, pp. 44–5). For a slightly different account see Lawrence Kramer (1984, p. 6).
10. Peter Kivy (1990, p. 176) also cites and discusses this passage.

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Endnotes

[6] **Music in Advertising: An Analytic Paradigm**
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