Soundtracks on Demand: Engaging with Music and Sound in Science Fiction Television Series in the Streaming Era

Abstract

Television – and by extension its music – has often been denigrated as a time-wasting guilty pleasure. This has historically discouraged musicological scholarship on this rich and diverse medium in which a copious amount of music is consumed alongside moving images. Concomitant with the "sonic turn" in television studies and the "media moment" in musicology, scholarship on television music across diverse programs has been on the rise since the 1990s, with a notable surge from the 2010s onward. My PhD dissertation on American television series soundtracks contributes to the growing body of scholarship that strengthens television music studies as a legitimate subfield of enquiry characterized by its interdisciplinary nature. I share the hope of many scholars that television music will escape the towering shadow cast by film music both hierarchically and methodologically. Despite television and film's shared audiovisual nature, television music studies must continue to develop its own medium-specific methodology and lines of inquiry in order to secure its autonomy while acknowledging the commonalities with other audiovisual media. Drawing on approaches in screen music studies as well as synthesizing methodologies from musicology, media and cultural studies, I put forth that the "serial listening" that defines the reception of television soundtracks in the streaming age entails what I call "investive engagement" – cognitive effort is invested over an extended period of time with the anticipation of gaining returns later on.

The rise of subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) and the penetration of streaming services into markets globally have drastically changed the way series are produced, distributed, and consumed. Complex television series abound; their soundtracks demand close attention and further analysis from the audience, who rise up to the challenge and in turn demand more from the producers. Soundtracks *on* demand are very much *in* demand. As SVOD's continuities with and divergences from older, linear broadcasting practices require us to reframe traditional extra- and intradiegetic functions of television music (Rodman 2010), I propose that soundtracks in the streaming era can be productively studied through the twin lenses of drillability (Mittell 2015) and spreadability (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013).[1] Complex television series soundtracks serve as "drillable" repositories of narrative information, which encourage viewers to re-watch and crucially *re-listen*, to scrutinize and analyze the series and their sonic storytelling strategies. The soundtracks may also inspire "spreadable" offshoots that can be

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[1] For full bibliographic references, kindly refer to my submitted doctoral thesis.

shared widely, often even beyond a dedicated fanbase. In order to ensure adequate contextualization, I focus on drama series of US-American origin from 2016 up until the present (2024). I zone in on series of the science fiction genre with an outlook study into the fantasy genre as a meaningful comparative strategy for series originating from the four largest producers and distributors of original programming worldwide: HBO, Netflix, Disney+, and Amazon Prime Video. My four case studies explore distinct sonic storytelling strategies and illuminate a different facet of drillable and spreadable ("sprillable") engagement with television series soundtracks.

In my case study on HBO's *Westworld*, I first highlight the contrast between the soundtrack's highly spreadable instrumental arrangements of pre-existing music and the highly drillable original score. Applying digital ethnographic methods, I pore over Reddit posts to demonstrate how the spreadable instrumental covers inspire drillable engagement – fans detect multiple layers of poetic depth and referential richness by considering not only the unverbalized lyrics but also the cultural significance of the artists and the genres. Next, subjecting Ramin Djawadi's original compositions to the musicological analytical apparatus, I drill beneath the surface spreadability of the popular main title theme as well as fan-favorite character and location themes to unearth how musical themes expand the interpretive possibilities of pivotal scenes, thus elucidating how they participate in the narrative's complex negotiation of free will, agency, and control over *Westworld*'s four seasons.

Next, I turn my attention to Netflix's *Stranger Things*, where I theorize how the binge-watching experience encouraged by Netflix's bulk-release format impacts engagement with the soundtrack. First, I draw parallels in experiential intensity between binge-watching and tourism. Adapting theories from spatial information science (Sorrows and Hirtle 1999), I systematically characterize "landmark sequences," from which "audiovisual souvenirs" are derived based on the cultural phenomenon sparked by the series' use of Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill." I subsequently cross-fertilize paratextual studies (Gray 2010) with material culture studies of tourism (Hume 2014) in order to build a comparative framework for analyzing audiovisual souvenirs ranging from original clips to TikTok recreations and YouTube covers with the goal of understanding the different ways they hold value for fans of the series.

Bridging my case studies on *Stranger Things* and Disney+'s *The Mandalorian* are two considerations of a particularly significant but heretofore under-researched paratext: behind-the-score featurettes. The two representative featurettes by *Vanity Fair* and *Variety* showcase the trend of spotlighting physical musical instruments despite the prevalence of virtual

instruments and DAW-based soundtrack production environments. Drawing on current organological approaches that regard musical instruments as sites of meaning construction (Dawe 2012), I illuminate the role of musical instruments in soundtrack featurettes in guiding the reception of both these series. By tracing television series music back to its instrumental elements, I highlight how a soundtrack's aesthetic and narrative impact is contingent upon the technology utilized as much as upon the inspired cognition of the composers, thus drawing attention to the material and practical conditions of soundtrack production and reception.

In my chapter on *The Mandalorian*, I investigate how Ludwig Göransson balances paying homage to John Williams's *Star Wars* scoring legacy with charting new sonic territories – and crucially, how he communicates this delicate balancing act to the fans. Göransson's highly spreadable main title theme for *The Mandalorian* best encapsulates his old-meets-new blended compositional approach – the "old" meaning well-established tropes or well-known references not only to *Star Wars* but to the franchise's spiritual ancestor: the Western, specifically the Italian Western for *The Mandalorian*. Subsequently, I examine how the musical construction of the titular Mandalorian, Mando, draws heavily (and also diverges) from the iconic Man with No Name in Sergio Leone's Dollars film trilogy. Because Mando's visage is obscured for the majority of the series, the drillable score plays exceptionally important roles in constructing a compelling character for viewers both intratextually and intertextually.

My final (bonus) case study on Prime Video's *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (hereafter *LotR: RoP*) serves to demonstrate the applicability of my findings to genres beyond science fiction hybrids. I test my approaches on science fiction's closest neighbor: fantasy. The centrality of music to *LotR* sparked lively engagement with *RoP*'s original soundtrack composed by Bear McCreary, who fosters what I call "accessible drillability" by actively interacting with fans on Twitter/X as well as entertainingly parsing the intricacies of his original score in detailed yet accessible blogposts.

To conclude, I stress the importance of timely research in the area of contemporary television series soundtracks in view of the rapidly evolving streaming landscape, coupled with the ephemerality of social media posts and the impermanency of streaming services' libraries. Looking ahead, I advocate for sustained explorations into soundtracks of series hailing from non-Anglo-American nations and non-English cultural traditions in order to better capture the richness of sonic strategies existing in television's international arena at present, where transnational flows have been significantly catalyzed by streaming services.