



Music Tells The Story Too

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Millions of people around the world have heard of Your Story Hour, an independent interfaith ministry, producing radio programs of dramatized Bible stories, as well as secular stories oriented toward children and young people. Possibly the longest running program of its type, it began as a live program in 1949 after Stanley Hill, of Berrien Springs, Michigan, was encouraged by H.M.S. Richards Sr., founder of the Voice of Prophecy radio program.

From its first stumbling live broadcast on WHFB-FM in Benton Harbor, Michigan, to today's professionally produced programs, distributed to thousands of stations on tapes and CD's, YSH has built an audience that spans generations of listeners in the United States. Countless others in more than thirty other countries listen to the more recently introduced Spanish and Russian language programs.

From Hawaii to Florida, Russia, and other places where I have spoken about Your Story Hour, I encounter both listeners whose children listen to the broadcasts and/or tapes of our programs, and "older" adults who still remember dialogue from favorite stories of long ago. Some of our most devoted current listeners are adults.

Throughout its history, YSH has striven to produce Bible stories,

historical stories and true-to-life fictional stories that present the gospel and powerful but entertaining episodes that teach Christian life principles.

From its beginning, music has played a vital role in these productions. We at YSH are careful about the music we choose for our programs, knowing that it has great power to influence the listeners, often very subtly.

We believe in Ellen White's observations that music "is a precious gift of God, designed to uplift the thoughts to high and noble themes, to inspire and elevate the soul," and that "it is one of the most effective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth."¹ We also believe in the observations made by Adventist church leaders in 1972 that it is "an avenue of communication with God" and that "it is essential that music's tremendous power be kept in mind."²

Another writer, Royal Brown, in his book, *Overtones and Undertones*, calls film music "the invisible art" and deals extensively with "film music's overt mobilization of affect-generating devices."³ While Brown says much about how music can maximize our response to screen images, the same can be said about sound images as well.

Perhaps a few terms would be useful at this point. "Cue" is any

item of recorded music used in a production. "Bridge" is a specific type of cue that our producer Fred Meseraull describes as "a short curtain between scenes." Often a bridge covers a change in time or location, helping to move the listener easily into the next scene. "Stinger" is a very short, punchy note or chord used abruptly to signal a sudden revelation, shock, or surprise.

It is important to note that the music used for broadcast, whether radio or TV, does not come from a local music/electronics store, in other words not from a collection of CD's purchased at the local mall. That would be illegal. What we use is termed "production music," whatever type it may be, whether part of a symphony, or one of the myriad of stingers and bridges that are so necessary. YSH must have a licensing agreement with the producing company for any music we use in a program, an agreement requiring the payment of a significant amount of money for permission to use that music in a given program.

Production music companies have people who constantly assess the music market and pay in-house or other composers to write the music needed to suit their customers. Gene Ort, of Gene Michael Productions in Buchanan, Michigan, which provides music for YSH, points out that "acous-



tic groups,” full orchestras for example, represent the ultra-high end of the market, since it could easily require from \$25,000 to \$50,000 per day to pay a professional orchestra.

On the other hand, a great deal of music is produced by the companies themselves using synthesizers and highly sophisticated equipment known as “samplers,” which reproduce the exact sound of individual instruments, or even entire orchestras, though as Gene Ort says, a sampler is useless if you don’t know how to orchestrate and conduct.

YSH is a typical client in some ways, Gene says, because every company, every production has unique requirements, depending on the creativity of the people, their philosophy and other factors. These elements are “the engine that drives the production music business forward,” according to Ort.

Another important term we use often is “**underscore**,” that is, music that is used “underneath” dialogue, or more commonly, under a narration. In addition to these selections having to match the mood, time period and pacing of the situation, they cannot conflict with the narration. While flutes can produce beautiful sounds, for example, producer Fred Meseraull usually avoids using flute music as an underscore because the tone and sound frequency may conflict with the human voice.

Other underscores may be suggested by what we call “source” music, that is, music that is produced in the scene. At a fair, for example, source music might be that coming from a merry-go-round, at a parade

from a marching band, and so on. Often, when a scene calls for some type of dominant source music such as these, it begins fairly loud and then is taken “under,” so that it is heard only

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at a very low level under dialogue or narration. Of course, there can be exceptions even to this. Imagine two people talking while standing right next to a noisy circus band. If this were to happen in a program, the music would have to be quite dominant

and the actors would have to speak very loudly, perhaps shout, while doing their lines.

In the process of telling the hundreds of stories recorded by YSH over the last fifty years, we have encountered most human emotions, I dare say, and have needed music that would help create those feelings in the minds of our listeners. In one of our Robert E. Lee stories, the death of General “Stonewall” Jackson is accompanied by a soft, thoughtful piano piece. In the Molly Pitcher story, which takes place during the American Revolution, a cheerful version of Yankee Doodle is used as an underscore until the narrator turns to the winter of suffering at Valley Forge, when the same melody is continued by a bassoon playing in a sad minor key.

Browsing through the YSH CD’s one would find titles like City of Fear, Natural Beauties, Blue Poem, Lonely Girl, and Sense of Grandeur. The titles alone suggest how compositions on each of these are used. And, while we have a large variety of music available, there are some types which we try to avoid. Rock is one of these which can cause a problem, though on occasion some sort of “pop” music is required to lend authenticity and credibility to the story. In one of our recent Teenage Tangles stories, for example, there was a scene in a teen hangout/pizza parlor which demanded rock music of some sort. In this situation we used some very “soft” rock that seemed appropriate for the place and age group.

Tension “cues” commonly use dissonant chords and jumps, often

with low strings and tremolos on high instruments. Idyllic, pastoral scenes may employ a soft flute playing a peaceful melody in a major key, while scenes of war and conflict require something with a heavy martial feel, probably a full orchestra with a strong driving rhythm, perhaps snare drums, and commonly in a minor key. We all know how difficult it is to convey the idea of certain types of music by using words, which also underlines how music adds something indefinable but powerful to human language.

Some may be surprised to learn that we also avoid well known songs or melodies, many of which have associations that would be very distracting. Take our national anthem for example. It's a beautiful song, and

when performed by an orchestra without singers, conceivably could be used in one of our productions. However, because it is so widely known and sung, its use would have to be limited to a scene involving American patriotism, or perhaps it could be used for a sporting event.

At the same time, certain types of national music may be used to establish the locale of a story; From Hong Kong to Chinatown, U.S.A. used - you guessed it - some very Chinese-sounding music. Also typical is the beginning of Kamchatka Missionary, where a plaintive Russian melody played on balalaikas transports the listener immediately to Moscow.

Classical music may be a special case. Although it is not a staple

in our programs, we have called on the classical composers several times. For example, we chose a movement from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* for use in *The Emerald Violin*, and a chorale prelude, *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein* as well as the *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, for the story about Johann Sebastian Bach.

Recently, one of Handel's works was also used in a new John Newton story. Incidentally, production music companies can provide newly composed music in the same style as many of the classical composers, so as to sound exactly like Bach, or Haydn, or one of the other greats.

Several interesting music situations have come up during the



Music and sound effects for use in radio broadcasts can be created in a number of ways. While in today's world most are lifted from recordings, produced with synthesizers, or purchased from production music companies, live recording in the studio or on-site are still occasionally done. Lynn Bayley plays a restored parlor reed organ or harmonium and takes a break with her accordion after creating a concertina effect for a recent program by *Your Story Hour*.

production of some of our new stories, like those about Hudson Taylor, and especially John Newton. Hudson Taylor was a 19th century missionary and founder of the China Inland Mission. Though not a trained musician, he loved music, loved to sing, and was able to play the keyboard instruments of his day as well as the concertina, which he dearly loved. In one scene he and a fellow missionary sing a few lines from *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name* as they are bumping along the countryside in Chinese wheelbarrows.

In another scene during worship at a church, we used an electronic keyboard in the studio, on the pipe organ setting, and had fifteen or twenty actors sing *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*. At the end of the second program we have Hudson Taylor playing the melody of his favorite hymn on the concertina. However, we had to use an accordion played so as to sound like a simple concertina.

John Newton, widely known for *Amazing Grace*, provided some other challenges, the chief ones centering around how to incorporate his most famous hymn into the program without distracting from the action. After all, we can't simply have a church scene where the congregation sings the hymn through completely. Furthermore, when John Newton wrote the words back in the 1700's, the melody was slightly different and at that point it was not included in a hymn book. It had a different title, and Newton's church didn't have hymn books anyway. *Amazing Grace*, as we know it today, was just one of many hymns that Newton wrote and presented to his congregation week after week. So what were we to do?

The answer was to do what we suspect Newton did, which we are told is called "lining out." The pastor would sing a line to the congregation, whereupon they would repeat the line after him, line by line until the hymn was finished. In our program, John Newton and the congregation sing only the first few lines before we go on with the story. Then at the end the much-loved *Amazing Grace* melody is played as an underscore with the closing narration.

Another scene found John Newton on his ship off the coast of Africa one evening, listening to distant jungle drums. While drum recordings are plentiful enough, we wanted something authentic. This problem was solved by locating a recording of traditional African drums in the Andrews University music library, thanks to librarian Linda Mack, who also helped with several other questions. The next problem was that the drumming, while performed in traditional African style, was not in a production music library, hence not available for use in a broadcast, so we had to obtain special permission from the copyright holder, the Lyrichord Company in New York, to whom we are very grateful.

From the lowliest of feelings to the most sublime, from the depths of despair to the pinnacles of joy, there is music to reinforce the mood in a non-verbal way. Indeed music seems to reach directly into our hearts, perhaps our souls as well, by drawing on culturally relevant responses, and some would say instinctive responses, as though some types of sounds are innately perceived somehow as "heavy" and "foboding," and others as "light."

Whether the music in question is one of the highest achievements of the human mind, a magnum opus by one of the great composers, or a half-second long stinger dashed off by a production company, music functions extremely well as a sort of aural shorthand that helps tell a story more briefly and effectively.

Music was a part of the first broadcast back in 1949, when everything was done live, and not without rough spots I might add, and it has been a vital element in all the hundreds of programs produced since then, many of them now retired and in repose on the YSH shelf.

It is a privilege to be able to work with music, a major interest of mine on and off the job (though I am now officially retired), and an even greater privilege to be able to serve God by helping to produce wholesome, Christian stories that continue to bring letters from all ages, from people of all ages, far and near, expressing excitement about our programs.

While we frequently hear about baptisms that result from our programs and free Bible lessons, ours is primarily an educational mission, sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and helping young people learn to apply Christian principles in their daily lives. Whatever the story, Jesus Christ is at the center, and the music is close by.

¹ Education, Ellen G. White, pp. 167,168

² Guidelines Toward a Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy in Music, Autumn Council, October, 1972

³ Overtones and Undertones, Royal Brown, p. 48.