

Teacher/Facilitator Guidelines for Audio School

Workshop 3: How to Avoid Breaking Out the Musical Sledge Hammer, or, How to Use Music Most Effectively

III. How to Avoid Breaking Out the Musical Sledge Hammer: Or How to Use Music Most Effectively

Description: Youth radio producer Kiera Feldman reflects on her use of music in the piece, “In a Cornfield in Iowa.” What was her reasoning behind her music selection and the timing of the music? What were her objectives? How did a piece about trying to find oneself make use of a song by the 1980s band, Journey? Kiera takes the listener behind the scenes, giving us insight into all of these things—including how her thinking about audio documentaries has evolved from her initial thought that it was “print journalism with really cool music.”

Length: Approximately five minutes.

Objectives:

- Students will gain a better understanding of how to use music effectively in an audio documentary to better tell a story.
- Students will gain a “behind-the-scenes” look at the thought process involved in choosing when and when not to use music in audio documentaries.
- Students will be better able to understand effective use of music through listening to student examples (versus reading textual advice).

- Students will benefit from hearing tips/samples of audio documentaries from their peers.

Activities:

Objective: To get students to think more critically about the use of music in audio documentaries. What purpose does the music serve? Do they feel manipulated by the music? Or does the music complement the narrative?

1. Listen to Miranda July's short story, "Swim Team" from WNYC's The Next Big Thing (14 minutes):
<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/tnbt/episodes/2004/02/06> (Please note: There is a reference to sex in this story. Please listen to before sharing with your students to make sure it is appropriate for your particular groups of students.) Ask your students to pay close attention to the use of music in this piece and to jot down things they noticed, ways the music amplified the feelings conveyed in the story, etc. When the piece is done, let them finish up writing their thoughts before turning to their neighbor to discuss what they heard. Can they think of other examples from pop culture where the music takes away from the story being told? How are these examples different from Miranda's use of music in her short story?
2. Develop a list of five youth-produced pieces from Generation PRX that use music (generation.prx.org – sign-up is free to listen to streams of pieces) for your students to listen to. Ask them to compare and contrast

how different youth producers use music in their pieces. What worked well? What could be improved upon?

3. Ask students to write a short story about whatever they choose. Tell them they are going to then put their story to music – have them think about when to use music (as punctuation? To highlight a certain phrase or idea? To signal that a particular character/story element is coming into play again?) and what music to choose. Ask them to reflect on their choices through a journal entry. (This activity takes more than one class period—the short story could be written as a homework assignment.)

Additional resources:

- B-side Radio: <http://www.bsideradio.org/>
- Jed Abumrad, “Music: A Force for Good (and Sometimes Evil), session at Third Coast festival 2005:
http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/annual_conference_2005.asp#id15
- *This American Life: Illustrated Guide to Doing Radio*

Legal Issues: Ask ten people this question—what is the appropriate and legal use of music in pieces produced for the radio or podcast—and you will get ten different answers. If the pieces are not going to be broadcast in any form, obviously, you can use whatever music you want. But if you are producing a piece with the hope of broadcasting it or sending it out via podcast, a good rule of thumb is to use less than 10% of the song (this is covered under the Fair Use law). In addition, many musicians make their music

available through various creative commons outlets (meaning, anyone can have the rights to use it in a broadcast, podcast, or streaming audio on the Internet). For more information about this complicated matter, check out these resources:

- A report on the fair use clause by the Free Expression Policy Project of the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law:
<http://www.fepproject.org/policyreports/WillFairUseSurvive.pdf>
- Kids Internet Radio Project:
http://www.projectkir.org/soft_copyright.php?page=soft (Includes general tips and also some links to Creative Commons sights for music and sound effects.)

General tips:

- Music sometimes acts as a highlighter pen—brought in to emphasize something.
- Music frames the experience of listening. All of a sudden we see the frame around the picture – music IS the frame around the picture. It lets the listener know where they are.
- Music makes the characters bigger. Gives them opera status.
- Typically, music runs for 6 secs – before going back under text.
- Music functions almost as a comma – separates chapters of your story.
- When music fades out, that’s typically the thing you pay attention to.
- Musical punctuation – it should not try to manipulate you emotionally.
- Music can wrap bits of words in quotation marks.
- Sound as metaphors – to convey feelings (tension).
- Collector and channeler of *previously created emotion*—music should not create new emotions.
- Music often gives you the cue: “This is important. Pay attention to this.” Not telling you how to feel, but to pay attention, to give people permission to feel something.
- Light motif – assigns music to a character or an idea (ex. The music that accompanied the shark in the movie, Jaws).
- To convey notions of culture.
- Play it for someone who doesn’t share your musical tastes—see if they feel welcomed by the music, if it adds to the piece.
- If the music is overly literal, the piece becomes cartoonish.
- Music with words fights the narration. Should always use music sans words unless it is just playing by itself.

Source: Adapted from Jad Abumrad’s session at Third Coast Festival 2005:

http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/annual_conference_2005.asp#id15

Youth advice from Kiera:

- “Don’t be afraid of subtlety. Also don’t feel like you have to have music to sound professional or legitimate or to keep someone’s attention. I’m hoping I’m starting

to realize that people's voices and their stories are what's most engaging about the story. And it's not the music. Try to resist the urge to fall back on music as an emotional crutch or transitional tool."

- "Never ever use music with lyrics [under narration or talking] unless you're talking about the lyrics in the story. The lyrics compete with the story. They are distracting. Music should be instrumental."