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FROM BLADDER STONES TO BRAND SOUND

How an eighteenth century viol piece relates to twenty-first century research on television viewing habits

The gruelling experience

Between 1676 and 1725, the French composer and virtuoso player of the bass viol, Marin Marais, was in court service with the Royal Orchestra of Versailles. Viols (stringed instruments played with a bow) were favoured for chamber music until the early eighteenth century. They came in three sizes; treble, tenor and bass and were played with the smaller ones resting on the thigh and the larger held between the knees. They were given the name *viole de gamba* (or leg viols) to distinguish them from the emerging violin family, which were played supported by the arms and thus called *viole de braccia* (arm viols).

Marais' prowess with the bass *viole de gamba* led him to experiment widely with subjects outside the musical themes of the day, and a group of compositions titled collectively *Les pièces de caractères* includes a descriptive piece of historic, medical interest with particular relevance to modern studies in audio.

The piece in question is *Le tableau de l'opération de la taille*, written in 1720, in which Marais evokes the agonising procedure of lithotomy, the removal of stones from the bladder, which at the time was performed without anesthetic. It was a brutal operation in which speed was a key element to the patient's survival. At three and a half minutes in length, Marais' composition is approximately three times as long as the duration of the operation (Selcon, 2003).

In the musical structure of the piece, Marais uses onomatopoeia to great effect in order to conjure up visions of extreme agony. There is tremolo for shaking and nervousness as the patient confronts the medical equipment, a rising scale when mounting the operating chair. Descending parallel thirds mimic the dread and discomfort of the insertion of the first instrument into the patient, and fast high-pitched chords depict the frenzied activity of the surgeon as the operation peaks. After the climactic removal of the stone, there is a moment of terrible silence, when the viol is stilled by the anguish of the experience, as the patient slips out of consciousness. As the blood flow is staunched, relief comes when the patient is untied from the table and taken to bed.

Marais' playing technique means that through unusual harmonies and dissonances, the viol becomes inextricably identified with the narrative viewpoint of the observer, while simultaneously expressing the emotion of the subject. There is also a spoken accompaniment, which describes the action and situates the reader alongside the musicians in the manner of a narrator. The piece would have been heard as an intimate performance in a relatively small room, the viol being acoustically unsuited to the larger concert halls that were becoming fashionable by the mid-eighteenth century. As an unnamed contemporary of Marais wrote, 'the sound of a viol heard in a bigger space filled with people is like a wine's bouquet thrown into the air and dissipated' (Thompson, 1960). Thus the context of the performance has an impact on the audience's sense of immersion in the action, conveyed both in music and speech. This was a ritualised collective listening experience – termed 'direct listening' by Chion (1994) – in which the sound sources are present and visible even when the images they are producing are within the imagination.

How music affects the listener

From a phenomenological perspective, music is grounded in sound's essential separability from its conditions of production and external sources. Thus as an art form, music relies on the immanent properties of sound as a conduit to emotion. In Marais' piece, there is a calm and measured tone to the viol; it speaks as if it is a trusted physician doing what must be done with dignified regret and kind, steady hands. Marais clearly understands the process and it is likely to be more than artistic speculation because he himself underwent the operation in 1720, at the age of 64. The work has a potent mix of aural, emotional and cognitive impact that leaves images in the mind long after the echoes of the performance have died away. It is this, which makes the work so relevant to research today in the field of auditory imagination, of sound in the modern arts such as film and television and to ideas emerging in advertising about how brand audio relates to consumer engagement.

The context of the performance has an impact on the audience's sense of immersion in the action, conveyed both in music and speech – a ritualised collective listening experience – termed 'direct listening' by Chion

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According to Kane (2014), visuality overwhelms aurality in the cultural balance of the senses, and yet it can be spatially limited as an experience. Generally speaking, Kane suggests that for something to be seen, it needs to be in the subject's field of vision and in front of them. In contrast, the auditory field (subject to hearing ability) is much greater. Sound can come from behind, or to one side, with no visual cue and the listener will still be able to pinpoint the location (Ihde, 2011). People hear with their whole bodies, surrounded by vibrations. All sound, and music in particular, has the potential to profoundly affect people's mood and physiology as they impact on heart rate and hormones, although very often people will remain unaware of the changes. Behaviourally, sound affects what people do and how they do it. There is a natural tendency to move away from unpleasant sound (such as, for example, pneumatic drills or fire alarms), as they prompt a shot of cortisol (a stress hormone) through the body (Treasure, 2011). Treasure argues that human beings process listening in a way that is as unique as their fingerprints; they listen through filters that include language, values, beliefs, experience and expectations.

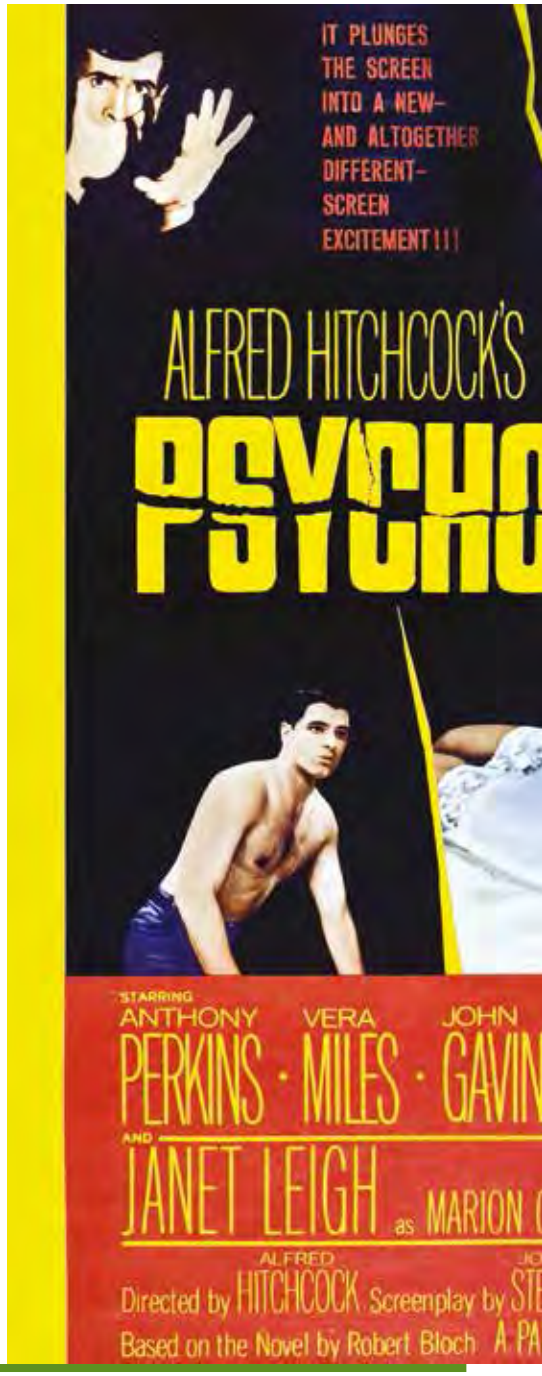
Using auditory imagination in branding

Music and sound have played a key role in the horror film genre. Imagine the theme to *Psycho* – even if you've never seen the film, you can probably identify the screeching murder scene motif, with its plunging, stabbing, atonal chord clusters. An alternative example is John Carpenter's theme for his 1978 film *Halloween*, which takes a relentless, synth-based tempo, adding subtle drone textures and haunted sound effects to create an unsettling sonic landscape of pursuit and flight. More recently, the series of popular *Saw* horror films spelt out their grotesque imagery with deep wound keyboard stabs. This is 'sound design' at its most visceral and Marin Marais was 250 years ahead of his time in conjuring images of tearing flesh in the auditory imagination.

In the context of advertising, the visual medium of television has dominated advertising spend for decades, but its position is undermined by the advent of new media. Viewing habits have fundamentally changed, with the advent of personal devices carrying mobile content. This proliferation of devices means that whereas television viewing used to be a social event, with a family gathered around a single screen to watch a specific programme which played out at a set time, it is now becoming a multi-device, solo activity. It may involve viewers in different room locations (even within the same house) watching chosen content in various time-shift modes, for example replay or on demand services, while simultaneously engaging in social media commentary. With this clamour for consumer attention, advertisers need to find ways to engage on a personal level with their audience, and sound is an efficient language to use. It is easier to close one's eyes, than one's ears.

Research by Thinkbox (2014), the marketing body for UK television in all its forms (broadcast, on-demand and interactive), stresses the importance of audio in television commercials as a key factor in capturing the fragmented attention of viewers. As a result of their Screenlife 3 TV Everywhere survey, using fixed cameras and eyecam glasses to track eye movement and collect data, Thinkbox concluded that one particular aspect of output driving attention back to the screen, more than any other creative element of the advertising, was its audio. Music or other sounds during advertisements were responsible for 44% of attention uplifts identified in the video ethnography.

This represents a crossmodal effect, in which a viewer's perception results from the interaction between different sensory modes - for example the experience of seeing and hearing an object at the same time. Most of the time people are receiving data from all their senses simultaneously, and when all senses function together the end result is a heightened experience. This affects the viewer's emotions, referred to by Thinkbox as 'mood congruence', which broadly means advertisers carefully matching the tone of their advertisements to the surrounding programme content. According to Thinkbox, The Institute for Practitioners in Advertising produced a meta-analysis of more than 800 commercials entered in their Effectiveness Awards, and concluded that campaigns which aim to strike an emotional connection with consumers performed much better than those that attempt to impart information about the brand.



Imagine the theme to Psycho with its plunging, stabbing, atonal chord clusters. This is 'sound design' at its most visceral and Marin Marais was 250 years ahead of his time in conjuring images of tearing flesh in the auditory imagination

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The future of branding through sound

Emotional engagement with consumers through audio can take very subtle forms, with a number of advertisers experimenting with ambient brand sound. Harrods, the famous London-based retailer, installed a series of generative soundscapes in its toy department, designed to heighten the visual appeal of the merchandise displays. It is part of a wider brief to express Harrods brand values of British luxury, innovation, service and sensation (Audio Branding Academy, www.audio-branding-academy.org). A related experiment at Glasgow airport, combining birdsong and calming music, ran for eight weeks resulting in positive impact on stress levels among travellers, and an uplift in retail sales.

A confluence of ideas from advertising creative departments and sound artists is leading to some ground-breaking work; the automotive manufacturer Rolls Royce were the first motor manufacturer to launch a model with an audio installation. The British Academy of Film and Television Art (BAFTA) winning sound designer Nick Ryan composed a sweeping track of orchestral music and binaurally recorded (i.e. with two microphones) voices, used in a pre-launch interactive brand experience, showcasing *The Wraith* brand characteristics in a haunting, film noir style. These sounds acquire what Michel Chion refers to as 'a mysterious power from being heard and not seen' (Chion, 1994: 221). Advertisers understand this process well, and use music and vocal textures to harness this power, translating it into a strong associative experience for consumers.

In conclusion, the thread linking Marais to Thinkbox is the vibrational, affective nature of sound. Music, and the practices concerned with it, represents one of the most highly developed parts of our shared auditory culture. Kane argues that sound operates as a node in the tensile mesh of a form of life, gathering music, sound, philosophy, literature, film and psychology studies, with a sublime indifference to disciplinary proprietary (Kane, 2014: 226).

With the increase of digitised voices in our everyday transactions, from automated supermarket checkouts to mobile phone assistants such as Apple's Siri or Nokia's Cortana, it is likely that advertisers and brand owners will continue to research the minute implications of our relationship to sound, music and voice. At the moment, Siri technology can respond to vocal instruction but perhaps in the future Siri will be able to make subtle distinctions in the textures of the command. Today, Siri can play the song that is requested but tomorrow Siri may have sufficient emotion analytic software to map a person's voice and pick the song that fits their mood.

Image © **Glasgow Airport and Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park**

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About the author

Pam Myers is a Radio and Broadcast Lecturer in the London School of Film, Media and Design, at the University of West London

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