SOUND ACROSS SERIES
Theme tunes as leitmotif in Chris Lilley’s television series

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Abstract

Australian writer/performer/composer Chris Lilley has developed a distinctive style of satirical screen storytelling. So far he has written, produced, appeared in and composed music for five series, *We Can Be Heroes* (2005), *Summer Heights High* (2007), *Angry Boys* (2011), *Ja’mie Private School Girl* (2013) and *Jonah From Tonga* (2014), and while much has been written about his comedic use of dialogue and visual characterizations, to date there has been no analysis of Lilley’s distinctive use of sound to brand his work within and across his series. This paper looks at Lilley as a character comedian and composer, focusing on his use of sound to comment on urban Australia and its cultural sensibilities. We argue that his use of sound, particularly original music, has helped him brand individual series as well as create a cross-series form of sonic identification.

Keywords

Television, theme tunes, music, comedy, genre

Introducing the musical character of Chris Lilley

Chris Lilley is one of Australia’s most successful contemporary comedians, having gained local and international critical acclaim. Specialising in the creation of character-based television series, since 2005 he has developed five series for the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) in Australia, with some of these also funded in part by HBO in America and the BBC in the UK. Working with local Melbourne-based production company Princess Pictures, Lilley’s work has helped build a strong foundation for a new wave of Australian television comedy, particularly a suite of productions that, according to the producers, develop “new ideas, stories that haven’t been told or ways of telling stories that make audiences look at the world differently, especially with comedy” (Princess Pictures: online).

Chris Lilley has used music in his various projects to deliver comedic content including the use of diegetic and non-diegetic musical jokes and the development of comedic situations. Throughout his various series he has used musical performances as punchlines, first gaining significant attention and success with the “Indigeridoo” sequence from *We Can Be Heroes* (2005), a segment he was asked to recreate for the Australian television industry’s annual awards, The Logies, in 2006 (Bellman, 2006). Originally performed as part of a backstage musical parody
sequence in the original mockumentary series about the search for the Australian of the Year, “Indigeridoo” was the title song for a musical developed by the fictional Chinese students’ theatre group featured in the show. The musical’s aim was to retell the story of indigenous Australia, and when performed by Chinese medical student Ricky Wong (played by Lilley) and other actors as part of the group, the lyrical puns and tokenistic imagery (demonstrated in Figure 1 below), combined with a clichéd performance style of high school, piano-based musical theatre, created a now iconic piece of Australian television comedy that has been included in the Australian Screen repository and curated by a specialist screen commentator (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 1: Screenshot of ABC TV’s website still featuring the “Indigeridoo” song sheet, now a decade after the original broadcast of the series. Taken from http://www.abc.net.au/tv/heroes/ricky/lyrics.htm, accessed 14/4/15.

Figure 2: Screenshot of the “Indigeridoo” segment as now housed at the Australian Screen repository. Taken from http://aso.gov.au/titles/tv/we-can-be-heroes-episode-3/clip1/, accessed 14/4/15.

While not the focus of this paper, it should be noted that more recent Lilley productions have been criticized for exaggerated racial characterization that includes the use of blackface when playing the Polynesian character, Jonah. Details of these concerns have been well summarised and explored by Polynesian media commentator Morgan Godfery (2014).
In subsequent series Lilley continued this mockumentary and backstage musical performance presentation. In particular, the presentation of “A Bad Girl with a Bad Habit” by the high school drama/music teacher character of Mr G for *Summer Heights High* (2007) and the various tracks presented by rapper S.Mouse’s in *Angry Boys* (2011), including the single “Smack My Elbow”. In each case Lilley, the real-life composer, performed the songs as part of his characterisation on screen, allowing each character to claim ownership of these compositions during the course of the diegesis.

Of course Lilley’s series do draw on existing conventions and expectations. However, the most obviously ‘borrowed’ musical reference; the quoting of the David Bowie lyric for his first series title (“We Can Be Heroes”) is something that has been so overshadowed by Lilley’s own creations that we have not come across one media or academic review that cite it. Similarly, the performance within a performance style used in the examples above is a technique that many musicals have used across television and film. The relatively low budget production style, use of voice over and direct-to-camera address has meant that Lilley’s work has been categorised by organisations like Australian Screen as a ‘mockumentary’ (Matthews, 2015) rather than aligned with musicals.

The existing academic work exploring Lilley’s creations acknowledges his masterful development of individual characters to connect to audiences. In an overview of the second Lilley series, *Summer Heights High*, O’Hara (2007) focuses on the development of Lilley’s schoolgirl character Ja’mie. Although this character had previously appeared in *We Can Be Heroes*, O’Hara gives weight to the contextualization of the character within the contemporary Australian school system, arguing that “Summer Heights High does not play for laughs, which is part of why it is so funny … it is a hilarious and accurate picture of a lot of what happens in schools today” (O’Hara, 2007: 72).

Importantly, Turnbull argues that Lilley’s work is some of the few pieces of Australian output that has not been lost in international and local translation (2010). Discussing the place of the Australian television industry’s output in contemporary global discussions of the medium, she contextualises Lilley’s work as innovative in terms of its reach and approach; saying “What’s exciting is not only Lilley’s growing international recognition, but also the possibility that as an Australian television scholar I too might get a chance at a world stage … talking about some Australian television (other than soap opera) that people might actually have seen” (2010: 112). Lilley’s work in establishing a renewed faith in Australian comedy, both to local and international audiences, is of particular interest to us here as we explore how he has built this trust in his creations. His success in securing international funding and support with HBO and the BBC via his artistic input and co-production with Princess Pictures (Knox, 2009) has arguably helped subsequent Australian artists like Josh Thomas go on to do similar production and distribution deals in recent years (Lallo, 2013). In addition to maintaining writing, producing and acting control, we suggest his targeted use of original music has also built this following for his work.

**Exploring television theme tunes**

We have already outlined how Lilley’s comedic storytelling has foregrounded musical set pieces with specific performed pieces by individual characters. Now we
wish to focus on the development of his televisual theme tunes, noting a sonic similarity in their composition and orchestration that draws on largely ascending, arpeggiated, medium-paced non-lyrical melodies. As well, there is a marked visual similarity with the visual titles of each series, characterised by slow motion, out of focus tracking shots that introduce the world of each new series. We suggest that when considered as part of Lilley’s collected works, these individual theme tunes37 and opening sequences create a metanarrative and form of branding across Lilley’s output so far.

We will focus specifically on the theme tunes Lilley has written for four of his five television series to date38, noting their similar styles and ideological approaches. This is despite each series dealing with quite distinct subject matter – as indicted by their titles and settings, over time Lilley has chosen either individual characters or situations on which to structure his comedy. We explore why Lilley has chosen to sonically brand his projects in this way. Analysis of Lilley’s themes will connect with existing screen sound theory on theme music (Neumeyer, Buhler and Deemer, 2009; Kassabian, 2001) to consider how television themes differ in functionality from big screen film themes.

Specifically we will examine whether themes used across whole television series function as leitmotifs to unify and engage audiences. Unlike most films39, television series take place over multiple episodes and numerous years, and, as such, require a sense of flow to be developed across these. Stillwell (2011) notes how there are rarely traditional character leitmotifs in television sound, largely due to cost and the fragmentary nature of the form. When they are there “they usually serve as some sort of identifier, such as a fragment or development of the theme music, or an atmospheric cue that gives a sense of mood, location or ambience” (123). Moving away from purely character-based leitmotifs, we argue that considering the theme music itself as leitmotif allows for connecting narratives, connecting the experience of the audience, and in a sense branding the work of particular artists.

Television sound has yet to enjoy the sustained analysis and theoretical grounding of its filmic cousin. More specifically, writing focused on the television theme song, the most represented area of television sound, is still relatively scarce. While the area received detailed analysis in Tagg’s 1979 dissertation and eventual publication (2000), little scholarship has evolved around this. Tagg identified three basic functions of theme music in television, what he deemed the reveille function, preparatory function and the mnemonic identification function. Essentially these translated to attracting the attention of viewers, preparing them emotionally for what would follow (and any generic conventions one might expect), and finally, providing a memorable musical signature for the television program/series (2000: 93-96). As we will see below, these functions remain the essential feature of television themes, and are used by Lilley to brand his televisual works and prepare audiences for the content that follows. Further scholarship into television themes has included Hicks’ (1992) study which classified 20 television theme tunes into four categories based solely on lyrical content and excluded any musical consideration. The lack of musical focus makes it extremely limited in its

37 Note that while Bryony Marks was responsible for the music in the first series, and John Foreman for the last two, Lilley himself composed all theme tunes (and many of the ‘set pieces’) in the series’.
38 The analysis does not cover Jonah From Tonga where Lilley has composed a deliberately Tongan sounding theme, and used Tongan words (albeit very few of them) in it. This marks a departure from the pattern we highlight here, although ‘Tongan-ness’ aside, there are still some musical similarities.
39 The caveat here is obviously films that are part of a trilogy or longer sequence of narrative, for example The Lord of the Rings trilogy or the Harry Potter films.
applicability. James Deaville’s own contribution to his 2011 anthology on television sound provides an exhaustive history on writings in and around television sound. More detailed analysis of both historical and current phenomena can be found in Rodman’s (2010) study, along with Donnelly and Hayward’s (2013) recent anthology. The latter includes a chapter from David Butler that references the concept of leitmotifs, and themes more broadly in television, as well as debate on the relationship between television music and film music.\footnote{We note here that there is much more to say about the similarities and differences between television and film music, particularly in terms of comedy as a genre and a mode of address, but this is beyond the scope of this article.}

Butler (2013), in following an earlier caution from Donnelly (2002) that television music “should not be analysed as if it were film music” (332), argues that, while “sharing some approaches to the scoring of narrative fictions, television music and film music are not the same and to expect them to operate in similar ways is to ignore the specific nature of each medium and the manner in which its audiences primarily access it” (Butler, 2013: 164). Where Donnelly had been focused on the technical differences between the two sonic forms – which may not still apply given advances in television broadcasting and playback fidelity – Butler highlights the different viewing conditions between television and film, arguing that television sound is largely about trying to capture and sustain the attention of the audience. But not all televisual sound is doing that alone, and by considering the larger filmic arc of leitmotivic sound in television we can highlight nuances that connect series together.

Title music sequences, or theme tunes, have long been an integral part of the soundtrack for films. As Buhler, Neumeyer and Deemer argue, theme tunes act as a crucial buffer between the outside world and the diegetic world of the film (2010: 165). Not only is music essential to this “framing” but also to the establishment of such things as mood, genre, geography, pacing and the like.\footnote{The exception to this are films that eschew non-diegetic music altogether, such as the Dogma 95 films.} While theme tunes may have become more complicated with cinema in recent years, given the common predilection for launching straight into the narrative and holding main titles and credits to further into the film (or only at the end) (see Neumeyer and Buhler, 2009), we would argue that television has continued to rely on the framing and announcing function that theme tunes afford.

Theme tunes are key parts of television programming. As Tagg (2000) highlighted, theme tunes function as key identifiers for the program, in the first instance indicating the genre of what is to come. For example, upbeat slap bass motifs indicated comedy in the case of Seinfeld; the iconic BBC Stereophonic workshop created Science Fiction sonically in the case of 1960s Doctor Who; the sound of nursery-rhyme-like melodies and performances for Sesame Street let us know that a children’s program is coming. Theme tunes can also indicate new forms of televisual storytelling - for example, when iconic film composer John Williams composed a special score called “The Mission” for NBC nightly news, arguably we were told with this one piece of programming strategy that televised journalism was moving from straight reporting and into showbiz-inspired infotainment.\footnote{It could be said that many viewers now engage with television in different ways, including watching programming on demand, in binge batches and in online segments, however it’s fair to assume that those that still watch news programming would still be engaged in this traditional way given the time-sensitive nature of this type of content delivery and its relationship to network ratings and prime time expectations.}

Further to this, theme tunes can also indicate a program’s narrative and provide summative prologues for viewers, so despite the repetitive nature of programming,
new viewers are always familiar with the narrative. Often this function is performed lyrically as per the theme tune to *The Nanny, Gilligan’s Island* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (which each lyrically tell the ‘story so far’ of the show’s main characters and their contexts). Donnelly notes that The Who’s song ‘Who Are You’, used as the theme tune for *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, becomes “a reference to the narrative’s search” in contemporary drama (2005: 145-6). One might also posit its use to attract the attention of a targeted demographic for the program, namely former fans of The Who that now represent the middle-aged, middle-class dominant television viewing audience.

Theme tunes have an important role in announcing their product. When we hear a show’s theme tune, the ‘flow’ of normal programming (as Raymond Williams famously said of television, 1974: 78-118), is disrupted. Even where programs are consumed as part of DVD box sets or binge release via online systems like Netflix, most often theme tunes remain either as DVD homepage soundtracks or as episode markers. With the theme tune, the viewer is given an aural cue to direct their full attention to the screen. That is, of course, assuming the program and the theme tune interest that viewer. As Donnelly writes in a rare account of television theme tunes and their function: “Title themes provide product differentiation within a crowded arena of competing television programmes. They provide essential branding, providing audiences with instant recognition of the forthcoming programming” (2005: 145).

In film sound studies, the leitmotif “connotes a concise, recurring musical statement associated with a non-musical object or idea” (Link, 2009: 180). Most often these musical statements are linked to key characters, objects, concepts or places within the diegesis. Commonly recognized examples of this exist in movies like *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), the *Harry Potter* series and so on. The repetition of the necessarily recognisable leitmotif becomes essential in alerting the viewer to a narrative event (even an ephemeral presence such as ‘The Force’ in the *Star Wars* films). Indeed Butler (2013) points out that “The core function of a leitmotif is to guide the listener through the narrative … [and as such] will seldom remain the same throughout the drama but will transform in structure, key, instrumentation and so on in relation to the unfolding narrative” (168). Thus in television music, leitmotifs rarely get the chance to evolve with the narrative due to the shorter lengths of television programs, and more often are ‘themes’ that connect to characters but stay the same throughout the program (Ibid.) By extension, however, the heralding function, repetition and evolution of leitmotifs fits neatly with the operation of television theme tunes as they occur over different series, connected either by the premise of the show (eg *Doctor Who*) or the creator (eg Chris Lilley). For the purposes of the present study then, Chris Lilley has developed a type of theme at the beginning of each episode that both alerts the viewer to its commencement and immerses then in a familiar (and presumably positive) understanding of what is to unfold. The evolution of the sound of the leitmotif echoes developments in artistic intent, subject matter and, as we will see with Lilley’s work, production value. Further evidence of the leitmotific function can be observed in the short grabs of television theme tunes commonly used at the beginning and end of breaks for commercial television – an overt sonic cue to the viewer to reconnect with the diegesis of the television world.

While this basic repetition is somewhat straightforward, Link usefully notes that “Television’s static motivic framework can become a powerful force in creating a stable tone or identity of perhaps more importance to the continuing nature of television than to the ostensible single-event film” (Link, 2009: 186). Furthermore,
we would contest that leitmotifs can actually travel across and through televisual series, an idea that this been used in television usually to describe discrete characterization, as for example, Mills’ analysis of the character of Angel in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (2011: 182-4), or the development of Rose’s theme in the *Doctor Who* (Butler, 2013: 167-174).

Here we want to explore this further by suggesting that there is a recognizable leitmotif for the comedic series’ of Chris Lilley generally, rather than to indicate specific characters or settings. For this to be the case, the diversity of leitmotif construction must be acknowledged. The filmic examples cited above are largely concerned with leitmotifs constructed via melodic devices. Link has demonstrated how various musical devices can demarcate a leitmotif, he notes that “the leitmotif’s flexibility … lies in the fact that any musical parameter might become its identifying feature” (Link, 2009: 185).

As the analysis below will demonstrate, for Chris Lilley’s theme tunes, it is largely textual devices that work to unite his work and connect viewers through the various series as well as within them by connecting specific characters, situations, etc. The subtle alterations and developments between theme tunes, seen in the light of leitmotif functioning, allow Lilley to connect and ‘knowingly wink’ at his audience even prior to the commencement of the diegesis of different programs, as well as just with different episodes of the same program. As in filmic leitmotifs, the development of the themes alerts viewers to narrative changes within each of the series.

**Chris Lilley’s theme tunes, and across series comedic leitmotifs**

Lilley’s first three programs, *We Can Be Heroes*, *Summer Heights High* and *Angry Boys* all utilise theme tunes that he composed, and they are all similar in terms of sonic approach. While each operates to communicate (humorously) about its diegetic world, Lilley also draws on textual devices to connect the three of them.

As can be seen above, the series are connected visually through their opening title screens. As noted above, the first series *We Can Be Heroes: Finding the Australian of the Year*[^43], ‘documents’ five fictional characters (all played by Lilley) in their quest to become Australian of the Year. The title card appears over clouds parting to reveal some blue sky, neatly referencing the aspirational and inspirational qualities of the candidates. The title font enforces the possibility of serious documentary, with the gold colouring, shading and capitals all typical of a documentary genuinely exploring this topic.

[^43]: Also known as *The Nominees* in the UK and USA.
Summer Heights High continues the sky theme, as a fake sun rises over the fictional Summer Heights High School. Summer Heights High documents the life of three members of the school; the self-appointed ‘Director of Performing Arts’, teacher Mr G, Tongan student Jonah Takalua, and former private school student Ja’ime King, who viewers first met as a candidate for Australian of the Year in the first series, who is on exchange to the public Summer Heights High School. The lack of capitalisation, colourful shading and angled presentation give more than a clue to the comedic bent of the series, somewhat fittingly given viewers are now aware of Lilley’s style, and indeed of one of the main characters.

Finally, Angry Boys dispenses with the sunshine, instead announcing its imposing credits over cloudy skies, firmly placed on the horizon. As implied by the title, Angry Boys explores the tensions, traumas and troubles faced by young males growing up in the 21st Century. As with previous series, Lilley plays a range of characters, from an American rapper S.mouse to Ruth ‘Gran’ Sims, a 65-year-old grandmother and prison officer at the Sydney Garingal Juvenile Justice Centre for teenage boys.

The musical similarities between the three theme tunes are immediately striking. In all, Lilley has adopted a choral melodic motif, largely involving wordless vocables, albeit with small differences. The first in the corpus, We Can Be Heroes, has a scruffy, ‘under-produced’ choral melody. It is also introduced through didjeridu accompaniment a nudge towards a particularly clichéd type of Australian representation (a particular type of ABC-documentary- an Australian Story type), coupled with the ultimate bland representation of Australianness, the repetition of the word ‘gday’. Combined with the choral melody it provides an ironic sense of gravitas, and this builds throughout the course of the series, as regular viewers of such programs come to understand. With the repetition of the leitmotif, the repeated theme tune, audiences come to associate this theme with Lilley’s comedic approach and the overall suggestion of irony.

Lilley continues the choral motif into Summer Heights High. Cleverly he alters the relaxed slang of the choral melody for an expertly executed, overly articulated choral performance. Clearly implied in this is the choral dexterity of a highly performing school choir, where, despite the absence of any words, emphasis is placed on every syllable and accent. Not only does the melodic textural musical device connect the series to his earlier work, it also helps set the scene for the high school world of the series, simultaneously providing a humorous comment on the ‘perfection’ of the school choir, especially in light of lead character Ja’ime’s disdain for authority and propriety.

Angry Boys, once again calls on the wordless vocables of a choir to announce its leitmotif. Again, textually the connection to previous series is clear. The textural leitmotif works to draw together the audiences of the different series and potentially expand the audience base. It also ensures there is a degree of cultural capital in understanding the full corpus of Lilley’s work. Once again with this leitmotif, Lilley develops it to suit his narrative and comedic intents. Here the choir is exclusively male and young (to suit the subject matter). The melodic contour is also developed and involves more intervallic movement than either of the previous themes. This serves to add a certain degree of aggression and punch to the semantically absent vocables. The aggression is furthered through an increase in tempo from the previous two themes and a shouty, rough texture from the voices. Again, the direct connection to young teenage and pre-teenage boys is well made, as is their ‘angry’ nature.
Lilley himself acknowledges his humorous intent, but views the development of the leitmotifs more in financial terms. As he explained in an interview to promote the soundtrack release for the music from Angry Boys, his process when writing music for each series began out of necessity, and has gradually developed as his budgets and skills have grown:

*I think initially I wanted to just have a really funny program, but packaged together as this really serious documentary ... It was like the composer for the fake documentary didn’t get the joke, so they took it all a bit seriously. And the funny thing is that the budget’s gone up with each show, so the first time with We Can Be Heroes it was a Marimba and a couple of percussion instruments and stuff, and then we brought in a string section for Summer Heights High to make it bigger, and then there was this massive orchestra for Angry Boys, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and it was like ‘let’s just go crazy.’* (Lilley in Giuffre, 2011: 26)

There are two things particularly notable in Lilley’s remarks: the first concerns the growing sonic quality exhibited throughout Lilley’s catalogue, and the second revolves around his positioning of genre. Kevin Donnelly (2013: 114) notes that “high quality music can misdirect away from other shortcomings of television programs and films ... Music can be one of the most palpable signifiers of superior production values in audiovisual culture” (2013: 114). The incorporation of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra to perform Lilley’s playful theme clearly demarcates the series as more professional and superior to the previous series’. However, reviews for Angry Boys indicate that this misdirection – the assumption of quality – did not fool the audience. Angry Boys was then the worst received of Lilley’s corpus, despite the growing production values. To be fair, critical reviews were mixed, some hailing Lilley for his ability to push the boundaries of ‘risky’ comedy and social commentary, while others noted the series just was not funny enough.*  

Ultimately the viewers voted and from a peak of 1.4 million viewers for the highly anticipated opening episode, the ratings fell dramatically to a low of 391 000 for episode 9 and 612 000 for the finale.

Lilley uses the term “fake documentary” to try and explain the genre positioning of We Can Be Heroes and subsequent series. Interestingly he does not use the term ‘mockumentary’ to describe his work, possibly because it is a word for critics and not creators? Or could it be that he trying to achieve something else, something more in between genres? Rodman (2011: 35) notes that American audiences can usually identify television genres easily. Moving on to music specifically he notes: “Music on television is perceived much like television genre in that composers tend to produce music for television narratives in certain styles of music that connect easily with the viewers’ expectations of genre conventions” (*Ibid.*). From Lilley’s own admission above, he has tried to execute the theme tune in such a way that people would associate it with ‘serious documentary’, further complicating the audience’s reading of his program. This was especially the case in We Can Be Heroes where the audience were yet to understand Lilley’s character based parody, and its straight-laced presentation. Thus the supposedly ‘serious’ theme tune points to the ambiguity in Lilley’s work – there is clear satirical, political comment there as well as comedy. And so even after the ruse is up by the second series, Lilley maintains

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the documentary sound of his theme, albeit nuanced for each new situation, in order to allow the critical comment to continue. In this way he allows the theme tune to serve multiple aims, similar in part to John Williams’ various (albeit non-critical) inclusions to the underscore in *Lost in Space*. As Rodman as observed: “*Lost in Space* was a sort of genre hybrid between SF drama, soap opera serial, and kid’s adventure show. Williams’s music served all three of these sub-genres well, through the musical functions of monumentalizing, profundity and hyperbole” (2013: 49). While profundity and hyperbole are clearly present (especially by the time we get to *Angry Boys*), Lilley’s themes also allow for a knowing wink to the audience, to remind them that all is not how it seems, or sounds.

This knowing wink is perhaps nowhere as pronounced as the title theme to *Ja’ime: Private School Girl*. Here Lilley has the orchestra in full flight, with sweeping glissandi and cymbal crashes used to make sure we don’t miss the point. The theme is announced via a thumping quaver bass motif, adding urgency to previous Lilley themes and ensuring immediate anticipation is felt. The full choir returns here to sing the (wordless) theme, with female voices now dominating as we watch scenes of Ja’ime preparing for school. Audiovisually there is far greater synchronisation with this theme. We see Ja’ime play the flute melody as it takes over in the orchestration, and a squeeze of perfume from Ja’ime’s atomiser, with attendant shimmer sound, begins the four bar harmonic transition to the dominant seventh. The key change sees the full introduction and power of the orchestra, with brass doubling the choral melody as Ja’ime, her mother and under sister (in that order) descend the spiral staircase. This theme is all about Ja’ime, whether she is conducting the orchestra from the flute in her bedroom, or timing her ‘awards-style’ decent, we cannot miss the star of the show. The huge texture matches the huge personality and prepares the audience to reunite with one of their favourite Lilley characters. Once again, from the wordless, choral melody to the heavy use of arpeggiated figures to the neat perfect cadence resolution on the title card, this is a theme Lilley fans recognise. It is a theme that reconnects them with Lilley’s corpus of work, and screams ‘look out, Ja’ime is back!’

**Theme signatures and comedy**

Sonically, Lilley’s themes are similar, but they also help to brand his creations and tie them together. Like the models we argue above, these theme tunes can be considered ways to set the tone of the program, perhaps indicate its narrative, or even make a political comment. Of course, as comedies, it’s important to consider the potential for comedic effect that these provide, as the model of theme tune analysis and comedy proposed by Phil Tagg in his iconic screen sound project, *Ten Little Title Tunes* (2003), shows.

One of Tagg’s ‘tunes’ is an examination of audience responses to Monty Python’s theme tune, “Liberty Bell”. In addition to an extremely detailed analysis of the tune from a variety of angles, notes it relationship to humour:

> It should also come as no surprise that Python beat all other tunes hands down in three-digit HUMOUR category 107 [a reference to Tagg’s internal system of categorisation]. One possible reason may be that the tune contains something which might itself have been a humorous novelty feature when the march first appeared in 1893. We are referring here to the lone tubular bell note (the c5 in bar 4), struck as upbeat to the main part of the piece, and to the naively anaphonic way it stylises the sound of any bell.
rather than the weighty historical and ideological significance of the Liberty Bell itself. Another reason may be that the high number of recognitions the example received indicates that it was directly linked with the Monty Python series by many respondents, possibly also that several of those who did not mention the series by name had nevertheless experienced the music as belonging to something humorous on TV. (Tagg, 2003; 413-14)

Tagg points here to several connections between humour and the theme tune in this example. Firstly, he identifies the musical joke via the ‘novelty sound’ of the bell, but also the associated joke (articulated here when he suggests that some audiences laughed because they recognised the song ‘as belonging to something humorous’, even if it was not humorous in and of itself). This latter point is particular important for Lilley as he develops a consistent sonic marker from We Can Be Heroes to Summer Heights High, Angry Boys and Ja’ime. There is nothing notably comedic about the theme tunes themselves. Yet he is expecting audiences to make the association, to sense the parody and social comment that will follow, and, by using similar textural devices throughout his theme tunes he is expecting the flow of the joke to continue for each subsequent series. He is also using subtle textural changes to make sure the audience knows the work has a new focus, whether it be an individual character or a group of characters.

Conclusion

There is still much analysis and historical research to be done around the sound of television. Recent developments in narratives around ‘serious television’, including the often touted production values of HBO series for instance (DeFino, 2013), mean that greater attention will flow to this previously neglected audiovisual form. Yet it is not because television now looks or sounds like film that we should apply existing tropes and tools from film sound analysis to consider it. Rather it is because there is still real value in some of the analytical frameworks we use in film sound analysis being applied to television, albeit adapted to suit context. One such concept is the leitmotif.

This article has argued that television theme tunes, when applied over multiple series, can act as a leitmotif for the creator. The themes are repetitive, they provide narrative guidance to the audience, and they clearly announce or signpost what is about to happen. Thus even in a traditional sense they operate as we would imagine any leitmotif to function. Applied to the first four series by Australian character comedian Chris Lilley, we have seen how they communicate to his fan-base, connect characters, set us up for the parody and comedy that will follow, and prepare us for some, at times, harsh social commentary. For example, there is a stark difference between the apparently saccharine sonic introductions, characterised by breathy and elongated slow ascending melodies, and the show’s content that includes storylines around bullying, race and class relations and exclusions, and at times extremely ugly egotistical characters.

Across all four theme tunes there is a textural sameness in the vocable melodies, the growing orchestration, the neat resolutions and the connection to main characters. Neil Lerner discusses throughout his essay on the sound of the Star Trek television series over the decades it ran, the “remarkable homogeneity” (2013: 69) in the music. The same could be said for Lilley’s early work, though his body of work is much shorter than Star Trek! Whether this leitmotivic aspect will become
detrimental remains to be seen and, as noted above, Lilley’s last series, *Jonah From Tonga*, did depart from the formula to attempt a Tongan sounding theme. Curiously, the series was a ratings disaster for Lilley and his backers the ABC and HBO.45 While we are not suggesting the series failed because the leitmotif changed, it will be interesting to see what Lilley comes up with next, and whether he continues to sonically brand his corpus of work together.

References


Princess Pictures (nd), accessed 28/10/15.


