

## Is This Light Music?

While creating a picture disc record for Edinburgh Printmakers' Prints of Darkness exhibition, I've been reflecting upon the theme of "darkness" and its sister "light". My work has been described as having "dark" and "sinister" undertones. Although I don't think it dark in the negative sense of the word, the act of mixing several musical elements at once, sometimes with discordant harmonies and incongruous structure, can bring subversive results. This is because the expectation of music, at least if it's going to be popular, is that it should be clear and simple, adhering to a conventional melodic rhythmical structure.

The term "light music" generally refers to the kind of orchestral music that is put together with the intention of being played in the background to add more than ambience but not be intrusive to the point that it would stop a conversation at dinner. As time has progressed, not to say one cannot still appreciate it for the pure thing it may be, a new sense of irony has subverted light music. In the same way that one cannot watch a current affairs programme like "Newsnight" without thinking of Chris Morris' "Brass Eye", this music without turbulence can result in the active listener visualising cartoon-like scenarios of destruction and mayhem - "Tea For Two" being played out while the building is being bombed and a pack of coyotes being let loose on the ballroom floor. It is no wonder that when we grow up on a diet of cartoon music, full of depictions of violence, we are unable to keep a straight face on hearing Roger Whittaker's maniacal "Mexican Whistler" - do we really think it 100% full of joy or do we start to imagine that he is a lunatic? Am I the only person who finds it funny when the audience claps in time to the orchestra on "Friday Night Is Music Night" on BBC Radio? Is it that when all are clapping at once, often rhythmically out of step, people sound like morons? Or is it a recollection of the embarrassment felt when realising that no one told us when and how to gracefully stop?

How do we even categorise shades of music? For this we might want to look at the definition of the word "music". It comes from the Greek "muse", the gods and goddesses that inspire the arts and literature. Just as Edgard Varèse defined music as "organized sound", online dictionaries define it as "the art of arranging sounds in time so as to produce a continuous, unified, and evocative composition, as through melody, harmony, rhythm, and timbre", and "an aesthetically pleasing or harmonious sound or combination of sounds." So if music is to be agreeable it should be intrinsically harmonious and ordered, and the opposite of music is disagreeable noise. However, musicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez said: "music, often an art/entertainment, is a total social fact whose definitions vary according to era and culture," which reflects where we are at today. The decision on what is light, dark, popular and avant-garde depends as much on what year it is as how it may sound. It is an artist's job to dissect, question, celebrate, criticise, and rearrange content to challenge and form such decisions.

Light music has often celebrated resurgence during or just after periods of economic slump, injecting a certain air of longing for a time that never was. Pioneers of the Industrial Music scene of the early 1980's were fascinated with the Exotica genre. Both Throbbing Gristle and Boyd Rice referenced Martin Denny, coupling this with darker lyrics and more difficult music, and an often-missed sense of humour. The bright, sometimes otherworldly atmosphere elevates the listener from drudgery. It takes us to an innocent place of Hawaiian music and sandy beaches, to the end of a pier where the Wurlitzer whirls and the ice cream never melts. Leaving no stone unturned in choice of subject matter, light music sanitises well-known popular songs for popular appeal. "Blowin' in the Wind" by the Mystic Moods Orchestra takes us far away from Bob Dylan's world. With each new generation of protest song comes the sanitised version. Perhaps this, and the reminiscence of being stuck on hold or in a lift can make one cynical or suspicious of the "happy happy" themes. Nostalgia isn't what it used to be and we don't want to be sent to Hawaii.

Perhaps this is all coming over as a little too critical of the intentions of Light Music, when in fact it is the Dark Listener that is spoiling a perfectly good opportunity to be entertained. Light music to me, is lovely, it is nice. It's not going to go away, so I surrender to all things light so long as I can keep my dark sense of humour. While humming the tune of Ronald Binge's "Sailing By" preceding the late night shipping forecast, People Like Us wish you a cheery, whistle-free experience while enjoying "This is Light Music".

Vicki Bennett – People Like Us