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Music in Audio Dramas: Continuity and Innovation from Radio to Podcasts

Today, the golden age of radio may seem long past. The AM and FM radio industries are dying and even the fairly recent satellite radio brands are struggling to compete with online streaming services.¹ But before the dominance of smartphones and television, radio was once the exciting new way to get stories and news delivered directly to one's living room. For 30 years, a format called radio dramas dominated the airwaves: voice-acted plays and narrated stories broadcast on the airwaves, often featuring unique sound effects and music to bolster the narrative. For writers and producers, radio dramas presented challenges and opportunities unique to their purely audio medium, generating styles and storytelling techniques distinct from films, novels, and plays.

However, at least in America, radio drama is often considered a relic of the past. Television's growing ubiquity drew both audiences and producers away, relegating radio channels to focusing on news and music, programs which often required less production work than dramas. While dramas remained fairly common on the BBC's radio network, America's Golden Age of radio drew to a close in the 1950s and 60s.² Only in the past couple of decades has there been a major resurgence of original audio-only stories—not over the radio waves, but on apps, websites, and mp3 players: narrative podcasts.

¹ Mandy Dalugdug, "Pandora's Monthly User Base Fell beneath 47m in Q1, as Parent SiriusXM Saw Revenues Dip 2% YoY," Music Business Worldwide, May 1, 2023, <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/pandoras-month-user-base-fell-beneath-47m-in-q1/>.

² David Hendy, "The Strange Survival of Radio Drama," BBC, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/100-voices/radio-reinvented/the-strange-survival-of-radio-drama>.

Podcasts first emerged in 2000 when programmer Dave Winer published a new version of the RSS feed, improving the digital file aggregator to now include long-form audio files as well as blogs and images.³ The RSS format allowed listeners to embed the feed into an app or website and keep up with each new serialized post. RSS feeds came to iPods in 2004, bringing podcasts to a mass audience for the first time.⁴ While many of the most popular podcasts follow a talk-show, documentary, or journalistic approach, some follow the path of the radio drama, focusing on telling unique fictional stories that draw the listener in. These narrative podcasts emerged in the mainstream with the success of *Welcome to Night Vale* in 2013.⁵ Narrated primarily by a single “radio host” character, *Welcome to Night Vale* (hereafter *WNV*) tells episodic stories of supernatural mystery and horror from a fictional small town in the American Southwest. Media studies scholar Andrew J. Bottomley describes how *WNV*’s success comes from a remediation of radio drama techniques, including its signature single-narrator monologue and mystery-sci-fi-horror genre bending, as well as a borrowing of aesthetics from community news radio.⁶

Bottomley’s comparisons do not stand alone. Within the academic discourse surrounding podcasts, writers such as Bottomley, Neil Verma, and Eleanor Patterson often emphasize the continuities in production, narrative, and style between radio dramas and podcasts.⁷ In “The Arts of Amnesia: The Case For Audio Drama, Part Two,” Verma explains an ongoing conflict in how

³ Andrew J. Bottomley, “Podcasting: A Decade in the Life of a ‘New’ Audio Medium: Introduction,” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 22, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): 164, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2015.1082880>.

⁴ Bottomley, “Podcasting: A Decade in the Life” 164.

⁵ Andrew J. Bottomley, “Podcasting, Welcome to Night Vale, and the Revival of Radio Drama,” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 22, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): 179–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2015.1083370>.

⁶ Bottomley, “Podcasting, Welcome to Night Vale,” 184.

⁷ Bottomley, “Podcasting, Welcome to Night Vale”; Neil Verma, “The Arts of Amnesia: The Case for Audio Drama, Part One,” *RadioDoc Review* 3, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.v3i1.5>; Eleanor Patterson, “Reconfiguring Radio Drama after Television: The Historical Significance of Theater 5, Earplay and CBS Radio Mystery Theater as Post-Network Radio Drama,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 36, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 649–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2016.1157287>.

podcasts are contextualized. While scholars like him tend to root them in the history of radio, podcast producers prefer to pitch them as a medium altogether new and innovative.⁸ They want to define podcasts away from the “‘old-school’ and ‘stodgy’” radio dramas, instead connecting their work more to film, television, and theater.⁹

However, one element that goes underexplored in this comparison to visual media is the use of music in audio dramas. Without visible actors or images, audio dramas must rely on the limited tools at their disposal, namely voice, sound, and music, to tell a full story: music comes more to the forefront of the listener’s attention.¹⁰ A few scholars—Boris Kremenliev and Kenneth Smith—delve into the music of radio dramas, and even fewer discuss music of narrative podcasts.¹¹ This essay seeks to bridge the gaps in this field of study, uncovering and interrogating how narrative uses of music have evolved over the decades, and examining the new technologies and changing industries that spurred on that paradigm shift. Though music is still usually seen as secondary to acting and narration, changes in industry expectations, production pipelines, and sound technology have facilitated an expansion of music’s role in audio dramas, integrating more into the narrative in new and unique ways.

Voice and Sound in Audio Dramas

In television and films, music and sound can sync to images on a screen, allowing for interplay between the two. While the orchestra swells, characters take action and events can be conveyed through images alone. Often, one might be able to “see” the source of a sound, coming

⁸ Neil Verma, “The Arts of Amnesia: The Case for Audio Drama, Part Two,” *RadioDoc Review* 3, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.v3i1.6>.

⁹ Verma, “The Arts of Amnesia, Part 2,” 5.

¹⁰ Kenneth M. Smith, “Music in Radio Drama: The Curious Case of the Acousmatic Detective,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 147, no. 1 (May 2022): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2021.30>.

¹¹ Boris Kremenliev, “Background Music for Radio Drama,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1949): 75–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1209387>; Smith, “Music in Radio Drama.”

from an on-screen radio, instrument, or object. In quieter moments, music can underscore dialogue, with the characters' lip flaps and nonverbal gestures revealing subtext making it clear who is speaking. Radio dramas allow for none of these affordances. If one only hears music, then the music is what's happening. There is no other screen; no other way to convey information.

In a similar way to novels, audio dramas are a single-sense experience. One cannot look at, read, or touch a radio drama, one can only listen. But single-sense does not mean single-stream. Within just a stereo mp3 audio file, played through the cheapest earbuds, many things can be happening at once. Multiple characters speaking, layers of sound effects, full orchestras of instruments, and even competing songs can all assault one's ears at the same time. But, as that chaotic sensory image evokes, there is a limit to how much audio information one can process at once without losing a sense of meaning (though the overwhelming loss of meaning could be a narrative goal within itself). As such, more so than audio-visual media, creating an audio drama is in part a practice of restraint. What does an audio drama "show" its audience? What does it leave unsaid, submerged, or implied?

Often, due to these considerations of overwhelming the audience or creating illegibility, a dichotomy is created between the words of a story and everything else. Music and sound effects become secondary to spoken words, considered as superficial ornaments instead of core narrative devices. Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* illuminates this hierarchy in film and breaks down the barriers between voice and sound, encouraging a relativization of speech in favor of other audio streams.¹²

In audio dramas, this supremacy of words can be even more entrenched, since they're seen as the primary way of communicating information and progressing the story: no visual

¹² Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (Columbia University Press, 2019), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/chio18588>.

images can convey the story non-verbally. Instead, producers with a “show don’t tell” approach occasionally use sound effects to lend a more visceral quality to auditory actions. Sounds such as footsteps, crowd noise, engine roars, and doors closing can help establish characters in a space, taking the place of a film’s establishing shot. These sound-as-image techniques can also be used to great effect in depicting violence or horror scenes. While words can evoke a mood of unease and tension, audio dramas often rely on music and sound effects to create moments of high drama and violent catharsis. Like in films, there’s a wide range of how much violence is “shown on screen.” As Verma explains, early radio dramas were more tongue-in-cheek with their violent sound imagery, with a “smile inside every scream.”¹³ Modern podcasts can be more visceral and affecting, depicting even “ghoulish sound of [a body] being ripped apart.”¹⁴ In both cases, sounds are used to evoke violent imagery in a way that words alone cannot, stimulating the darkest images of listeners’ imagination. Higher fidelity and serious actors can result in a more harrowing and intense experience, but even non-serious sounds can symbolically represent and evoke the “on-screen” action, perhaps in a more palatable way.

Sound effects are deeply integrated into some audio dramas, using them to “show” action instead of narrating it, but many eschew worldizing or dramatizing effects entirely, focusing solely on spoken words to tell their story. When used creatively, sounds can take the place of stilted exposition and description to create a more emotional, engaging experience. When reduced to a subservient role, however, they act more as punctuation than full sentences, content with laying behind or below the all-important text. Many audiobooks that include sounds take this latter approach, since the original work already has all the scene-setting descriptions. Audio

¹³ Verma, “The Arts of Amnesia, Part One,” 14.

¹⁴ Verma, “The Arts of Amnesia, Part One,” 14.

dramas have the potential to integrate sound and music more into their narratives, using them instead of and in tandem with words to add complexity to a work.

Music in Golden Age Radio Dramas

Following the trend of prioritizing voice over other audio streams, Boris Kremenliev's 1949 guide, "Background Music For Radio Dramas," explains his techniques for composing music under and around the voice.¹⁵ As a composer, scriptwriter, producer, and U.S. army specialist in radio music, Kremenliev is finely attuned to the musical expectations of his era.¹⁶ He worked during radio drama's Golden Age, a period in the 1930s-1940s when "one-third of all transcontinental air time is given to dramatic programs, more than one-half of the major ones originating in Hollywood."¹⁷ In this booming industry, Kremenliev describes the difficulties of being a radio composer: dealing with tight deadlines, small orchestras, an already-busy audio track, and "compensat[ing] for the missing visual image."¹⁸ Composition is essentially the last thing considered in production, an afterthought to the narration and sound effects, with the composer only having a day or two to write the score before it must be recorded by the orchestra.

Relegated to the background, Kremenliev describes four main uses for music in radio dramas: signatures, which introduce a series, curtains, which end a scene, bridges, which quickly transition between two scenes, and backgrounds, which vaguely underscore dialogue.¹⁹ He emphasizes the need to not cover up dialogue and suggests underscore music should have no more than two lines happening at once.²⁰ This ear towards avoiding overcomplication echoes the

¹⁵ Boris Kremenliev, "Background Music for Radio Drama," *Hollywood Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1949): 75–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1209387>.

¹⁶ Kremenliev, "Background Music," 75.

¹⁷ Kremenliev, "Background Music," 75.

¹⁸ Kremenliev, "Background Music," 76.

¹⁹ Kremenliev, "Background Music," 76.

²⁰ Kremenliev, "Background Music," 78.

aforementioned discussion around vocal predominance and legibility. Since music is considered last, it must weave around the voice and not distract from it, never the other way around.

To that effect, Kremenliev dedicates a good portion of his essay to discussing instrumentation: what combinations are common, how instruments are used and recorded, and how they interact with the narrative, with an eye towards budget, practicality, and technology.²¹ In light of modern synthesizers, samplers, and globe-spanning networks of musicians, this restrained approach seems very humble. Kremenliev defines his work by its limitations: of time, of budget, and of auditory space. While he expresses excitement about composition possibilities on the fringes of traditional practice, he stresses that radio music is “*commercial composition*, and these [experimental composers] cannot afford to bite the hands that feed.”²² After all, what keeps music secondary to voice is not only technological, sensory, or aesthetic concerns, but largely commercial ones. Production and publicity teams expect legible voices and restrained music, as that’s what they’re used to broadcasting. This attitude was especially prevalent in the Golden Age of the radio industry, where huge channels and conglomerates like Hollywood studios would risk time and money to produce and broadcast a whole radio drama series. Today, what allows for more auditory experiments in the podcast space is not only the new production technology but the newly decentralized audio industry.

Music in the Intermediate Period

When audiences and producers fled the radio industry at the end of the Golden Age, the production of radio dramas didn’t stop entirely. A few notable American productions such as *Dragnet*, *CBS Radio Mystery Theatre*, and *Star Wars* branched off into their own paths, without a

²¹ Kremenliev, “Background Music,” 76-80.

²² Kremenliev, “Background Music,” 81.

unified industry to connect them.²³ In the UK, the BBC continued its prominence as a radio behemoth. A forward-facing new director, Martin Esslin, took the BBC's drama department in a more contemporary direction in 1963-77 and cemented radio dramas as one of the company's main products.²⁴

The music of one BBC show, the 1989-98 Sherlock Holmes drama series, received an in-depth exploration by the University of Liverpool's Kenneth M. Smith in "Music in Radio Drama: The Curious Case of the Acousmatic Detective."²⁵ Though written in 2022, the focus of Smith's paper serves as a temporal bridge from Kremenliev to the modern day. As opposed to Kremenliev's highly competitive Golden Age industry, the BBC had a strong hold on their listeners, not much competition in the radio drama space, and therefore had the freedom to more freely experiment with sounds. Instead of hiring a composer, the show had a musical director: first Leonard Friedman, then Michel Haslam.²⁶ They employed a soundtrack of precomposed classical music while attempting to avoid melodramatic cliches, featuring music prominently in the story and subtlety tying it into the show's layers of meaning.²⁷

Smith connects the drama's music to Chion's concept of *acousmatic sounds*. In film, acousmatic sounds are those which are heard without the source of them being seen. They can add mystery, magic, and confusion to a scene, foreshadowing a character or event before it appears.²⁸ Though nothing is "seen" in radio, Smith argues that sounds in audio drama still can be more or less acousmatic than others: sometimes the source of a voice or effect is obvious and telegraphed, like from an established character, while sometimes it can be mysterious and

²³ Patience Wieland, "A Brief History of Audio Drama | Acast Podcasts," Acast, October 26, 2021, <https://www.acast.com/blog/podcaster-stories/a-brief-history-of-audio-drama>.

²⁴ Hendy, "The Strange Survival of Radio Drama."

²⁵ Smith, "Music in Radio Drama."

²⁶ Smith, "Music in Radio Drama," 109.

²⁷ Smith, "Music in Radio Drama," 109.

²⁸ Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 72.

unknown.²⁹ The Sherlock Holmes radio drama often uses this technique with its music, especially violin solos. The listener is constantly unsure of where the music is emanating from, and whether it is non-diegetic “pit music” or if it’s being played by Sherlock Holmes himself. In a few episodes, the show makes explicit that this music is performed in-universe, crossing the “fantastical gap” between non-diegetic and diegetic music. For example, a violin bridge leading from one scene to another gets interrupted when Dr. Watson enters, and a wrong note is struck by Holmes.³⁰ The intro and outro music, Mendelssohn’s Violin Sonata in F minor, is once implied to be played by Holmes, once occurring at a concert he’s attending, and once clearly communicated as pit music (as it occurs while the characters talk).³¹ Though the piece stays the same, its context constantly shifts, complicating its meaning within the story. Smith explains how these pieces are used to give the character of Holmes more agency within the story: Watson is the main narrator and usually provides the story’s framing devices, but here Holmes, in control of the violin music, is in control of the story itself.³² He leads its twists and turns, using clues and characters as instruments in his orchestra. As Smith puts it, “Holmes’s musical utterances, in which his violin synecdochically stands for himself as narrative acousmètre, gives him a direct voice, Holmes’s violin representing perhaps a counterpoint to Watson’s direct narration.”³³ The music takes on narrative weight and agency, carefully crafted between the diegetic and non-diegetic worlds to act as a character and narrator both. This is the expansion of music’s role that audio dramas can strive for, using the unique acousmatic properties of the medium to break down traditional barriers and consider the music as one of the main techniques of storytelling—alongside, not underneath, the voice.

²⁹ Smith, “Music in Radio Drama,” 111-112.

³⁰ Smith, “Music in Radio Drama,” 115.

³¹ Smith, “Music in Radio Drama,” 117-119.

³² Smith, “Music in Radio Drama,” 119.

³³ Smith, “Music in Radio Drama,” 119.

The Sherlock Holmes series is both complemented and limited by its choice to use only precomposed classical music. On one hand, it effectively draws on the preexisting associations listeners have with those pieces: they evoke the erudite and aristocratic England of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories, use works of Wagner and Verdi to make allusions to their original operas, and communicate musical emotions in a way very familiar to Western audiences.³⁴ However, it also creates a less distinct musical identity for the series and less opportunity to develop music narratively through leitmotifs and synced underscoring. Finally, this music was either sampled or recorded in-house by a team of four musicians. Working within these strict limits of instrumentation (either using an existing recording or playing piano and violin) created a coherent theme but cut off options for using different timbres. In all, the Sherlock Holmes series and other dramas that existed after the Golden Age had more room to explore musical ideas in a smaller industry with fewer strict expectations. As part of the BBC, the Holmes production team was able to access professional recordings and musicians and used all the tools at their disposal creatively. Though technological and aesthetic challenges still hedged them, they created exciting new experiments in sound and storytelling.

Music in Modern Independent Podcasts

The modern podcast boom in 2004 and the emergence of narrative podcasts in 2013 brought many new ideas and techniques to the forefront. Instead of needing a large production team, live orchestra, and broadcasting station, small groups or even individuals can craft a podcast from their own laptops. While many celebrities and media companies made podcasts, many of which became very successful, those are often journalistic or talk show-style programs and rarely feature narratives or composed music. The glaring exceptions to this generalization

³⁴ Smith, "Music in Radio Drama," 113, 123-27.

are what Benjamin Horner calls “composed feature documentary podcasts,” narrative journalism projects that use music to heighten the drama of a non-fiction story.³⁵ Though this type of podcast is outside the scope of this essay, Horner’s succinct analyses of how voice, sound, and music interact were useful references for this paper.

Many podcasts that fit within the category of “audio drama” are produced independently, with small teams and a single music composer/performer/producer, instead of an orchestra or music team. Decent-quality microphones and audio software are now much cheaper and easier to use than ever before, so audio drama creation has become democratized—no longer the exclusive domain of Kremenliev’s Hollywood or Smith’s BBC. One such proudly independent podcast that weaves music into its narrative is *Friends at the Table*. With an ear towards the past, one can hear how *FatT* carries on the legacies of audio dramas while innovating with its use of music.

Friends at the Table is an actual play podcast that’s been running online since 2017.³⁶ Here, “actual play” means that the podcast’s story is not pre-written and acted out, but is created collaboratively and semi-improvisationally through storytelling games, often including dice or cards. Unlike some other actual play podcasts or live streams, however, *Friends at the Table* (hereafter *FatT*) does not hide the hand of the editor. Their games are not played in real-time or in the same room: each member of the cast lives in a different city, and their recorded video calls become the content of the show. Producer Alisha Acampora, composer Jack de Quidt, and host/writer Austin Walker then edit the podcast, streamlining conversations, fixing audio issues, writing music, and recording extra narration for introductions and “pick-ups.” These elements of

³⁵ Horner Benjamin Phillip Richard, “The New Aural Actuality: An Exploration of Music, Sound and Meaning in the Composed Feature Documentary Podcast” (Canterbury, Kent, England, Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019), <https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/download/70cdfd34f1c8b810bbe9de682c47da89e00e428060a20a478a15d419df6ba5e9/2052004/B%20Horner%20PhD%20thesis.pdf>.

³⁶ “Friends at the Table,” accessed May 12, 2023, <https://friendsatthetable.net/>.

production align *FatT* with the larger continuity of audio dramas. Though the form of actual play differs significantly from that of scripted drama, the show delivers the same high-tension moments, thoughtful storytelling, and intricate sound design. De Quidt's music always flows in tandem with Walker's narration and other players' decisions, creating unique moments of layered musical-verbal storytelling.

Three such moments occur in the first episode of *FatT*'s new 2023 season, a science fiction story titled *Palisade*.³⁷ Every episode of *FatT* begins with a signature song, like in Kremenliev's categories. Interspersed with the music are either audio clips from the previous episode forming a recap or a unique narration created by Walker, usually from some character's perspective. Recaps and intros are nothing new here: these forms carry on techniques from the Golden Age that bolster the serialized stories of radio dramas, allowing listeners to pick up a weekly episode in stride.

Walker writes these introductory monologues with de Quidt's music in mind, shaping the flow of narration around the music's phrases and swells. In the games the cast plays, Walker often serves as a game master, facilitating the story and controlling the world instead of playing one specific character. As such, he has the most control over the story and themes (though collaborating with players is a major focus) and he acts as the show's host and narrator. In order to justify a character monologuing for a minute, Walker's intros often take the form of in-universe recordings, transmissions, or diaries. As such, the combination of Walker's narration (both recorded and "recorded") and de Quidt's score creates a strange mix of diegesis and *acousmetre*. While the narration is in-character, it's often from a new character or one that isn't heard much, so figuring out exactly who the speaker is becomes part of the story. The music is generally

³⁷ Austin Walker et al., "PALISADE 01: Into the World Pt. 1," March 10, 2023, in *Friends at the Table*, produced by Alisha Acampora, podcast, mp3, 2:54:49, <https://friendsatthetable.net/palisade-01>.

assumed to be non-diegetic, but the ways that the monologues intertwine and react to the music make it seem like more than simple scoring.

The intro *FatT*'s episode "Twilight Mirage 01: The Beloved Dust" is a good example of a moment like this, with Walker embodying an unknown character, taking dramatic pauses in sync with the music, and speaking vivid descriptions of images and places³⁸. Juxtaposed with this acousmatic yet traditional introduction is the unique opening for "PALISADE 01: Into the World Pt. 1."

In Palisade, Walker not only interacts with the music but moves with its rhythm, speaking in a heightened, poetic cadence like a chant or a spoken song.³⁹ He rhymes and repeats phrases for emphasis like "on Palisade," "nothing is stationary," "fifteen hundred days," and "how many days." Instead of being recorded in a single take, this narration is clearly made of a few different takes edited together to best fit the music. These cuts are perhaps made audible on purpose to imply that the character who is speaking has also edited their voice. The intro music is usually assumed to be non-diegetic, but the character matches the song's cadence too perfectly, implying that he's listening to it as well. The speaker's identity is obscured in the audio, as he's a character that's been neither heard nor mentioned before. The episode's description, however, explains that the narrator is Baldwin Home a.k.a Black Screen, an underground revolutionary radio broadcaster on Palisade. Adopting the cadence of the radio host character, Walker, himself a podcast host, creates a musical experience that blends characterization, exposition, dynamic flow, and rhythm. In doing so, he makes reference to his medium's history, at once creating a charismatic radio personality reminiscent of the Golden Age, borrowing a narrative device from

³⁸ Austin Walker et. al, "Twilight Mirage 01: The Beloved Dust," June 30, 2017, in *Friends at the Table*, produced by Alisha Acampora, podcast, mp3, 1:55:00, <https://friendsatthetable.net/twilight-mirage-01-the-beloved-dust>, 0:00:00-0:02:08

³⁹ "PALISADE 01," 0:00:15-0:02:57.

audio dramas like *Welcome to Night Vale* that allows a single “radio host” narrator to tell a broad story, and crafting a dynamic and immersive introduction to a new fictional setting. Additionally, the song begins and ends with submerged speech: a distant voice speaks random numbers through layers of distortion and static. It’s a number station, a kind of radio station used for spies to send coded messages, another reference to the world of 20th-century radio. These sounds bookend the high-energy intro music that promises revolution, a stark reminder of the empire’s mysterious spycraft that surrounds the setting.

This intro breaks down the divisions between narration and music and flips the usual hierarchy: the music was written first and the monologue came after. It feels more like a “song” than a separate narration and signature, a single united moment of musical storytelling. None of this would be possible without de Quidt’s music, calling to mind a hip-hop backing track for Walker’s in-character rap, inspiring the narration and working alongside it to set a tone for the season. The track, “Nothing is Stationary,” was created purely with electric guitars and digital synthesizers, drawing on sounds and motifs of previous seasons of the podcast while incorporating new instruments to give this season a distinct musical identity that still feels in line with the larger setting of the Divine Cycle.⁴⁰ Walker, de Quidt, and Acampora were able to send the audio files back and forth across the internet to workshop them, base the intro on the music, and edit it all together into a complete moment.

This level of collaboration across cities simply wouldn’t have been possible in the Golden Age, when all the audio had to be recorded in-studio. Everything from the affordable mics to the digital audio software to the downloadable synthesizers to the internet group call to the RSS feed is a unique element of the new era of audio drama production. Each new

⁴⁰ Jack de Quidt, *Nothing Is Stationary*, PALISADE: Friends At The Table Soundtrack, Season Eight, 2023, <https://notquitereal.bandcamp.com/track/nothing-is-stationary>.

technology opens up opportunities for collaboration, convenience, and meaning-making, not replacing but adding onto the tools and techniques of radio dramas past.

These new opportunities allow for new idioms of interaction between music and voice, such as the intro to “Into the World.” At the same time, music still plays some of the same roles it did in radio drama: “Nothing Is Stationary,” though combined with narration in a unique way, serves the purpose of a traditional musical signature. The episode’s next musical moment, “Palisade Orbital Descent,” is a fairly unremarkable bridge, transitioning from a casual chatting segment into the actual gameplay and story.⁴¹ The third song appears later in the episode, accompanying an out-of-character pick-up recorded by Walker.

“On the Approach” is what Kremenliev would call “background music” or Chion would call “pit music.”⁴² It’s non-diegetic, not acknowledged in the text, and doesn’t serve some special narrative purpose on its own. But it doesn’t just heighten the emotions of a moment or set the scene for a listener: intertwining with Walker’s narration, the music brings to life the visual, auditory, and olfactory sensations that Walker describes. It is clear by the wording just before this moment that Walker had said a different version of this speech during the time of recording and decided to go back and record a version that was more poetic. While he wasn’t writing to music like in the introduction, he likely knew that this moment of narration would warrant a soundtrack to accompany it.

The monologue describes how the characters experience certain sensory stimuli when they are around particular types of magic. One faction’s magic dulls and scrambles sound around it, one shines brightly and hurts observers’ eyes to look at, and another creates pungent odors in

⁴¹ “PALISADE 01,” 0:32:28-0:33:06; Jack de Quidt, *Palisade Orbital Descent*, PALISADE: Friends At The Table Soundtrack, Season Eight, 2023, <https://notquitereale.bandcamp.com/track/palisade-orbital-descent>.

⁴² “PALISADE 01,” 2:14:00-2:17:44.; Jack de Quidt, *On the Approach*, PALISADE: Friends At The Table Soundtrack, Season Eight, 2023, <https://notquitereale.bandcamp.com/track/on-the-approach>.

the mind of anyone nearby. As Walker utters each phrase, the electronic music bends and shifts in response to conjure these images. The music starts on the word “feel,” with a hit from reverb-laden electric guitar, bass guitar, and synthesized bass drum. Sudden, quiet, and expanding, the cue evokes the visual of dropping dye in water—it demands notice as it floats on top of Walker’s words. Even from the first note, this is clearly not a sound that could have existed in the Golden Age. It’s slow and lingering, a lilting guitar melody backed up by distorted drums and strange unnatural synths. As Walker builds up his monologue, discordant rhythmic noise creeps in behind the guitar. When he talks about the magic “swallowing your words as you speak them,” the guitar slowly evaporates into reverb and the drums cut out, leaving only the rhythm of the airy synths.⁴³ The melody gets swallowed and nullified by the “magic” of Walker’s words, before it comes back with a full, harsh drumkit to illustrate the horror and threat of the enemy. When it does, the bass guitar comes to the fore with a much darker, grittier sound than the guitar. A similar moment happens at the end of this first monologue segment, where Walker names the type of magic—void magic—as the music cuts out for just three beats.⁴⁴ The next major shift seems to happen late: not when Walker shifts to the next faction but when he says “whenever Exenceaster March [the villain in charge of another faction] shows up.”⁴⁵ De Quidt choosing this moment to sync creates a visual of the villain actually showing up, meaning the audiences’ senses are changed then, not only the characters’. What causes the effects is not just talking about the faction, but them actually “appearing” in the story. The music evokes these sensory effects as Walker says them, making the listener part of the world by forcing to experience the sensations. Accompanying this moment is a distinct instrumentation change to bright, cloying, pulsing synth pads and pure guitar tones as Walker describes the characters’

⁴³ “PALISADE 01,” 2:14:51.

⁴⁴ “PALISADE 01,” 2:15:13.

⁴⁵ “PALISADE 01,” 2:15:25.

vision getting bright and painful, seeing parhelions and floaters in their vision.⁴⁶ A suspended symbal swell evokes the rising brightness of walking into the sunlight and a high synth run creates the confusion and strangeness of a mirage. Next, the word “aroma” cues a short section of deep, drifting synths that pulse so much they seem to breathe in and out.⁴⁷ The unique sounds de Quidt chooses sync with Walker’s evocative description to create images, feelings, and even smells in the listener’s mind. It becomes a visceral experience, making listeners feels somewhat strange, uncomfortable sensations to immerse them into the world.

Friends at the Table draws on the aesthetics and associations of radio while crafting its music and narration together to form a unique synchronicity in its aural storytelling. Many other podcasts today do similar auditory experiments, integrating music and sounds into their stories from the very start, instead of putting it last like Kremenliev’s producers. Though the technologies that allow for *FatT*’s level of collaboration and synthesis are fairly new, creative use of music in audio narratives isn’t something entirely foreign to the radio drama, as the BBC’s Sherlock Holmes series shows. Now and going forward, audio dramas can draw on their history on the airwaves for inspiration, finding techniques for sound-based storytelling unique to their audio medium. Audio dramas, though tied to a single sense, still have so much more they can explore within the world of auditory storytelling.

⁴⁶ “PALISADE 01,” 2:15:39.

⁴⁷ “PALISADE 01,” 2:15:52.

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