Barbeque Man Unleashed: The Greatest Professional Wrestling Work Of All Time

by

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Philip Rupprecht

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Music in the Graduate School of Duke University

2013
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

*Barbeque Man Unleashed* consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 is an original score, *Barbeque Man Unleashed: The Greatest Professional Wrestling Work Of All Time*. Chapter 2 is an article entitled "Prelude To a Fist" concerning the subject of musical depictions of morality in the practice of professional wrestling entrance themes.

*Barbeque Man Unleashed* is a symphonic ballet scored for piano and virtual orchestra. It depicts the fictitious rivalry between North Carolinian professional wrestlers Barbeque Man, Jr. and Baron Banks Gentry. Divided into two parts, or two wrestling matches, the contrasting entrance themes for the two wrestlers clash to result in overlapping key centers, rhythms, and tempos. The music was written as a through-composed score to be shown with a video, "*Barbeque Man Unleashed: Symphonic Ballet With Action Figures*." *Barbeque Man Unleashed* fuses together various musical styles, drawing on currents drawn from high modernism (such as serialization of pitch and rhythm and collage); cartoon music (such as the highly ironic scores of Carl Stallings), Hollywood blockbusters, and Southern popular music (including several styles of country music and gospel). Though none of the borrowed tropes in this piece are immune from parody, they are all valued equally in terms of their emotional weight in telling the story.

Chapter 2 introduces a study on musical depictions of morality in entrance music in World Wrestling Federation (WWF) professional wrestling from 1985-1997. Designed to elicit an immediate response from the audience, entrance music acts as the first
component in revealing the wrestler’s role, traditionally hero or villain, babyface or heel. While the intention of music in ‘real sports’ is to excite the crowd and perhaps mentally encourage the athlete for competition (e.g., a baseball player walks to home plate; during basketball time-outs), music in the WWF is produced to intentionally connect musical styles and materials to specific morality in wrestlers’ characters and identities. In some cases, wrestlers reversed roles in the scripted storylines and their original music was altered through re-orchestration, re-harmonization, and the recycling of previously used themes. Focusing on how WWF composers presented musical genres, instruments, and even melodic and harmonic figures, this chapter emphasizes how entrance music heightens in-ring drama and how it developed to blur musical right from wrong in the culture of its fans.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Kenneth and Peggy.
## Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ iv

List of Tables .................................................................................................................................. viii

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................. ix

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................ x

Chapter 1: *Barbeque Man Unleashed: The Greatest Professional Wrestling Work of All Time* .......................................................................................................................... 1

  Preface ........................................................................................................................................ 2

  Part One ...................................................................................................................................... 13

  Part Two ..................................................................................................................................... 34

Chapter 2: *Prelude to a Fist: Portraits of Music as Emblem of Morality in WWF Professional Wrestling Entrance Music (1985-1997)* ........................................................................ 79

  Musical Examples ..................................................................................................................... 107

  Bibliography ............................................................................................................................. 116

  Biography ................................................................................................................................. 118
List of Tables

1. Table 1: List of the Virtual Instrument Libraries.................................................12
List of Figures

Figure 1: Val Venis Theme (Intro)..............................................................................107
Figure 2: The Rock’s Theme (Revised Intro)...............................................................107
Figure 3: The Fabulous Rougeaus’ Theme.................................................................108
Figure 4: The Rockers’ Theme..................................................................................108
Figure 5: Jake ‘The Snake’ Roberts’ First Theme (Babyface).................................109
Figure 6: Jake ‘The Snake’ Roberts’ Second Theme (Heel).....................................109
Figure 7: Tatanka’s Theme.......................................................................................110
Figure 8: Ted Dibiase’s Theme Compared with Tatanka’s.................................110
Figure 9: Martel and Venis Themes with Different Saxophone Parts..............111-112
Figure 10: Nicolai Volkoff Theme- “All For the Motherland”...............................112
Figure 11: Kamala Theme (Vangelis with Added Vocals and Stomps)...............113
Figure 12: Mr. Perfect Theme................................................................................113
Figure 13: Hunter Hearst Helmsley Theme.............................................................114
Figure 14: The Undertaker Theme (Babyface and Heel).........................................114
Figure 15: ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin First Theme (Heel).......................................115
Figure 16: ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin Second Theme (Babyface).......................115
Figure 17: Nation of Domination Theme (Intro).....................................................115
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So many people helped to make this dream project a reality, and I could not thank every one sufficiently enough. However, I want to thank the following: my committee, in particular Stephen Jaffe, whose mentoring over the years has been invaluable to my development as a composer. I appreciate Louise Meintjes, who went with me to WWE Monday Night Raw, had a great time, and asked questions leading to thoughts I had yet to consider despite a lifetime appreciation for the spectacle. Similarly, I’m grateful to Philip Rupprecht for all the fun and insightful talks on music and life over the years; to Allen Anderson, whose mentoring and knowledge at UNC-Chapel Hill always made me joyful about the world of contemporary music; and to Anthony Kelley, for inspiring and challenging students to the best of their abilities. In the video presentation, I thank Samir Arora for ideas on how best to present the music and images. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for all your support and allowing me to construct a scaled wrestling arena in your basement, and thanks to my brother, Gray, for his amazing photography, dedication, and all the laughs we had from some of the photography outtakes. I thank my sister Katie for giving me confidence to make music that better shared my thoughts and experiences. Finally, I’m grateful to Ginger Hunter for convincing me of things I thought impossible in this wrestling match called life.
Barbeque Man Unleashed:
The Greatest Professional Wrestling Work Of All Time

A Symphonic Ballet

Paul Swartzel
Preface

Barbeque Man Unleashed: The Greatest Professional Wrestling Work of All Time

Work- (1) Fake. (2) Pretend to make something look real. (3) Wrestle.  
- John Abercrombie’s Guide to Wrestling Terminology

Work (verb)- To deceive or manipulate an audience.  
- Wikipedia, “Glossary of Professional Wrestling Terms”

Introduction

My first appreciation for classical music as a child was through professional wrestling. Seeing my favorite wrestlers make grand entrances accompanied to the sounds of an orchestra, I was convinced they composed the music. I began to take my dad’s camcorder and record myself playing piano pieces. My performances could not begin until I gave an interview to the camera, mimicking the diction wrestlers gave in theirs. The piece was my opponent, the piano my wrestling ring. “Ya know something, Mean Gene, for too long Minuet in G has stood in the way of what’s right, and it’s time for some payback!” Music, for me, was a wild, exaggerated home for escapism, ultimately leading to the reinstitution of justice until my teacher assigned a new piece. I wrote Barbeque Man Unleashed: The Greatest Professional Wrestling Work of All Time in attempt to reconnect with that home.

My dissertation research centers on entrance music in professional wrestling. Designed to elicit an immediate response from the audience, entrance music acts as the first component in revealing the wrestler’s role, traditionally hero or villain, babyface or

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heel. Barbeque Man Unleashed depicts the fictitious rivalry between North Carolinian professional wrestlers Barbeque Man, Jr. (babyface) and Baron Banks Gentry (heel). Their contrasting entrance themes form the basis of the musical development in the piece. The score is divided into two sections, or wrestling matches, and reflects changes in wrestling storylines I witnessed growing up, progressing from family-friendly morality plays as a child to more adult oriented and racy content during the so-called WWF ‘Attitude Era’ of my teenage years (1988-1999).

The score for Barbeque Man Unleashed is not for live performance but rather a representation of a digital composition. It was originally intended that a piano soloist could perform the piece live with electronics, cabaret style. This score attempts to preserve some version of the envisioned live performance I had in mind and which I hope to complete at a later date. In particular, the following sections lend themselves immediately to performance by a piano soloist:

Part 1: mm. 84-109

The music was written as a through-composed score to be shown with a video, "Barbeque Man Unleashed: Symphonic Ballet With Action Figures," created by Gray Swartzel, Samir Arora, and me. Both were presented in Scheaffer Theater, Duke University, on March 3, 2013. The present score does not include all of the music used in the video, but is rather something like a suite. The time line refers to the location in the video. The video with my music may be found at the following URL:

https://vimeo.com/60915697
**Synopsis of the Action**

Part One.

It is a dark time for the International Wrestling Federation (IWF), as the villainous Baron Banks Gentry has defeated longtime fan favorite ‘Barbeque Man’ Ervie Moontower with a devastating move known as The Foreclosure. ‘Barbeque Man’ dies from his injuries, while his wife, Barbeque Ma’am, dies from shock. Their only child, Montezuma, witnesses the horror from the crowd. With no prior wrestling experience and armed with only his late father’s entrance music, Montezuma challenges Gentry to a match for the following night at Monday Night Ruckus.

They make their entrances. After a tense faceoff, Gentry produces an inheritance notification and slaps Montezuma. They enter a slapping frenzy, and eventually Montezuma slams Gentry’s head ten times into the turnbuckle. Dazed and seeing birds, Gentry pretends to beg forgiveness. Out of nowhere, Gentry’s personal financial consultant, Vanderbilt Jenkins, flies into the ring and slaps Montezuma. With the referee distracted with Jenkins, Gentry hits Montezuma in the head with a steel chair. Montezuma collapses, and Gentry pins him to the referees’ count of three. The audience is stunned as a victorious Gentry walks out with Jenkins, the championship belt draped over his shoulder. Montezuma is seriously injured and placed on a stretcher. The scene fades to black.

Montezuma has some tough years after the deaths of his parents and subsequent loss to Baron Banks Gentry. Suffering from mental illness and substance abuse, he visits
his parents’ graves every night of Wrestlefest, begging forgiveness, looking for a sign. One night, a voice calls out: it’s The Legend. The Legend offers to train him as a wrestler if he promises to get clean. Agreeing, they travel to the world’s toughest wrestling locations. Soon entering the ring again, Montezuma becomes known as Barbeque Man, Jr., winning the adoration of wrestling fans all over the world, despite a losing record. One winter, BBQ Man, Jr. unexpectedly wins a 30-man Battle Royale and is given the opportunity to challenge Gentry for the IWF Heavyweight Championship at Wrestlefest 30.

Part Two

At Wrestlefest 30, after making their respective entrances, BBQ Man, Jr. and Gentry have a tense faceoff. They battle over a series of wrestling holds until Gentry slams Jr. to the mat and then out of the ring. Gentry reveals a toilet from underneath the ring and sticks Jr.’s head in it repeatedly. Baron Banks slaps him several times and puts him in The Foreclosure, the dreaded modified sleeper hold.

While in The Foreclosure, Jr. dreams of a forest. He hears voices and sees an old musical birdhouse, his blanket from childhood, and a teddy bear. Regaining his strength, Jr.’s arm rises as he breaks out of The Foreclosure. He hulks up and becomes impervious to pain, dishing punishment to Gentry with a series of kicks, elbows, and leg drops.

Climbing the top rope to deliver his father’s patented Barbeque Man Elbow, Vanderbilt Jenkins jumps in to smash a steel chair into Jr.’s face. With Jr. dazed, Jenkins charges. Jr. ducks at the last minute, and Jenkins flies out of the ring and crashes into the Spanish broadcasting table.
Gentry snaps his fingers and a collection of evil henchmen enter the arena and circle the ring. Gentry and Jr. have a sword fight, with Jr. slicing off Gentry’s tie. Two archers shoot arrows at Jr., followed by an evil Transformer with laser explosives. They miss. Mozart and Beethoven jump into the ring to attack Jr. and are quickly dismissed. Gentry and a chainsaw-wielding Richard Wagner corner Jr. Just when it seems Jr. has met his end, a Tyrannosaurus Rex ridden by Farooq, the great protector, eats Wagner. Jr. drops the distracted Gentry with a ‘Barbeque Man Stunner.’ Jr. climbs the top turnbuckle and successfully delivers the ‘Barbeque Man Elbow,’ pinning Gentry to the referee’s count of three. We have a new champion.

Brief Example of Musical Development

Ever since seeing Grandmaster Flash give a musical demonstration of hip-hop record spinning in 2004, I have been fascinated by the idea of taking two distinct musical materials and overlapping and crosscutting them to create something new. My first attempt at this was a piece for two pianos, Combine Records (2005), in which I wrote two separate piano pieces and, using effects pedals, treated them as if operated by an imaginary turntable performer. In Barbeque Man Unleashed, contrasting entrance themes for the two wrestlers clash to result in overlapping key centers, rhythms, and tempos. Barbeque Man, Jr. (Montezuma Moontower) first enters to his late father’s entrance music, a fast tempo 4/4 country rock theme in F.
Baron Banks Gentry’s Theme is a 3/4 waltz in A.

Colliding in the ring in Part One, the prevailing tonality is associated with the wrestler in control of the match at any given time. If there is no clear wrestler in control, their themes overlap in jagged clashes. This can be seen most clearly in Part One beginning at measure 86, where Gentry’s theme—roughly related to A major—is heard in the right hand, and in the left hand Barbeque Man’s Father’s theme is heard in fragments related to F, Eb and Ab. In m. 87, the hands flip and the RH plays the Barbeque Man (F-Eb-Ab music) and the LH descends using notes from Gentry’s A major.

I establish the two themes of the two principals in Part One and for the most part the music mimics the action on the screen. At the end of Part One, Barbeque Man, Jr. enters to his own entrance music, a more angular B flat minor theme in 13/16 (Part One, mm 196).
Part Two is characterized by a more free-flowing, continuous musical form with greater independence from the choreographic action. Its musical figures derive from a combination of the entrance themes, but as seen through the prism of Arnold Schoenberg’s *Klavierstück* Op. 19, No. 6. A few examples suffice to trace the connection (not so much in the order of appearance, but to outline the point).

The 3-note chords beginning Part Two (in the top two staves) correspond to the static chords opening Schoenberg’s piece.
Similarly, the repeated opening piano figure beginning in m. 209 outlines a wedge shape derived from the pitches found in measure 8 of the Schoenberg.

I imagined Schoenberg’s opus having a stranglehold on the first five minutes of the rematch, not so much to achieve postmodern irony, but because I liked the sound of Schoenberg’s bells suspended into a kind of eternity.

I’ve always found wrestling matches to be inherently musical, specifically anticipating the referee’s count to three. In many matches, the hero will slam the villain’s head into the turnbuckle exactly ten times as the crowd counts along, slowing as the hits approach ten; this action is depicted in Part One, mm. 107-109. Many other wrestling rituals are depicted, including the faceoff, the villain breaking the rules and getting away with it, a wrestler crashing down upon the Spanish broadcasting table, the hero ‘hulking up’ after it seems all hope is lost, climbing the top turnbuckle, and third party wrestlers interrupting the action.

One musical idea explored in the piece is what I call a *metrical kaleidoscope*, in which musical materials in various time signatures are stacked on top of one another in
succession. Instead of rhythmic cacophony, the figures are designed so listeners can hear numerous interlocking time signatures, all of which depend on their focus. Listeners can hypothetically hear several time signatures morph at any given moment; repeated audition leads the listener to feel a different rhythmic focus each time. I hope to have achieved a feeling whereby the music is felt as rhythmic in the absence of regular pulse; if one were dancing to the music, no choreography would ever feel wrong. This practice is utilized in the ‘Hulking up’ scene, in which Barbeque Man, Jr. breaks out of a submission move, fighting back against Gentry (p. 59, mm. 359 through mm. 391). The following metrical kaleidoscope reiterates Barbeque Man Jr’s second entrance music, now more fully realized and in stacked time signatures of 13/16, 4/4, and 3/4. The bass ostinato is in 13/16, the choir and tambourines are in 4/4, and the bongos and bass drums slams are in 3/4 (not notated).³

³ The piano plays mostly in 13/16 but occasionally jumps through each of the other time signatures to further obscure a uniform beat.
Musical Reasons for Creating the Piece

I saw the idea of scoring a professional wrestling match as an incredible challenge. The slow pacing of a match often surprises first time viewers, as wrestling fans would feel cheated to see a main event match end in a few minutes. They want dramatic action over an extended period with many unexpected turns. When I first started writing this piece, I thought it would be interesting to create a slow, atmospheric piece with periodic loud hits to emulate the slams, something slightly similar in sound to Andriessen’s *De Tijd*. However, after writing about five minutes of this initial music, I realized I was being artistically dishonest. I didn’t want to create a meditation on wrestling but a spectacle, as a wrestling match is meant to be. Like much of the music I love, wrestling relies heavily on timing, but it’s also not monochromatic. Wrestling matches can go from serious to comedic in an instant, playing with the emotions and failing if allowing the viewer to get too familiar and comfortable. Viewers are supposed to feel angry, surprised, sad, happy, disappointed, scared, and amused, and sometimes in no particular order. You can’t categorize great wrestling matches by a singular sentiment. *Barbeque Man Unleashed* fuses together various musical styles, drawing on currents from high modernism (such as serialization of pitch and rhythm and collage); cartoon music (such as the highly ironic scores of Carl Stallings), Hollywood blockbusters, and Southern popular music (including several styles of country music and gospel). Though none of the borrowed tropes in this piece are immune from parody, they are all valued equally in terms of their emotional weight in telling the story.
In addition to musical reasons, I was also fascinated by what Henry Jenkins III has called “a form of masculine melodrama which, like its nineteenth century precedents, lends its voice to the voiceless and champions the powerless” (64). Ultimately, the joy of professional wrestling is based on watching highly skilled performers create unforgettable stories through semi-predetermined choreography. The same can be said for listening to music. Jenkins concludes:

[Wrestling] celebrates and encourages working-class resistance to economic injustice and political abuse. It recognizes and values the diversity of American society...In short, wrestling embodies the fundamental contradictions of the American populist tradition. The politics of WWF wrestling is punch-drunk and rambunctious, yet it builds upon authentic anger and frustrations we cannot ignore if we want to understand the state of contemporary American culture. Wrestling makes you want to shout, and perhaps we have had too much silence.”

Through the creation of a new match, Barbeque Man Unleashed is an attempt to form a soundtrack for the entire spectacle that made me love music in the first place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: List of the Virtual Instrument Libraries</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symphobia 1 and 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Strike Percussion 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omnisphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stylus RMX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Loops’ Dirty South Vocal Samples</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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4 Jenkins III, Henry. “Never Trust a Snake.” Steel Chair to the Head. Ed. Nicholas Sammond. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. This comment follows Jenkins’ exploration of the misogyny and racist elements presented in some of the storylines from the early 90s (pp. 52-64), comments with which I agree. I was aware in creating this score and study that there was a danger that I might serve as a vehicle to perpetuate these stereotypes. At the same time, the popularity of the WWF and its use of music in particular suggested a need for scholarly and artistic inquiry, which can be done without endorsing undesirable stereotypes.

5 Purchased by the author with full creative license (2012).
Barbeque Man Unleashed: Part One

(Subtitle): "At Wrestlefest 24, Baron Banks Gentry became the new IWF Heavyweight Champion when he defeated longtime fan favorite 'Barbeque Man' Ervie Mountower with a devastating move known as The Foreclosure."

"Barbeque Man died from his injuries that evening. His wife, Barbeque Ma'am, died from shock."

"Their only child, Montezuma, witnessed the horror from the crowd."

©2013 Paul Swartzel
"Without any previous wrestling experience and armed with only his late father’s entrance music, Montezuma challenged Gentry to a match for the following night at Monday Night Ruckus..."

Montezuma (Barbeque Man, Jr.) makes his entrance...
Baron Banks Gentry makes his entrance...

Perc/FX

Orch. 1/
Piano

Orch. 2

Perc/FX

Cash Register FX

Ah!

cha - ching!

Harpichord

Full Orch. and Chorus
The two wrestlers have a tense faceoff...

\[ \text{Strings and Harpsichord} \]

\[ \text{Brass repeated notes as fast as possible (ad lib)} \]

\[ \text{Cheering, chanting audience} \]
BBG produces an inheritance notification...

Jr. slaps Gentry multiple times...
Montezuma is dazed...
Montezuma blocks Gentry's next slap...

*Allegro drammatico*

\[ \text{Tempo} \approx 112 \]

Montezuma pushes Gentry...

*Poco pesante*

(a little heavier)

Gentry pushes back...

\[ \text{Tempo} \approx 116 \]

Montezuma blocks Gentry's next slap...
They push each other back and forth...
They enter a slapping frenzy...

Piu mosso

\( \frac{q = 148}{\text{Solo Piano}} \)

They enter a slapping frenzy...
Jr. pushes Gentry into the turnbuckle...

...and slams Gentry's head ten times
Gentry seems to beg forgiveness...
Meno mosso
\( \text{flute} \)

Gentry falls to the ground dazed...

Solo Cello

Str. col legno and Ww.
Vanderbilt Jenkins, Gentry's financial consultant, flies in the ring and attacks Jr.

While the ref is distracted, Gentry hits Jr. with a steel chair...

Gentry pins Montezuma and wins...
Jr. is placed on a stretcher and wheeled out of the arena...

Steel Guitar and Muted Strings

Piano, distant with reverb.

Steel Guitar and Muted Strings
(Subtitles): "Montezuma had some tough times after the deaths of his parents and subsequent loss to Baron Banks Gentry..."

"Alone in the world while battling mental illness and substance abuse, his parents' graves, begging forgiveness, it seemed as if he'd never survive..." maybe looking for a sign..."

"...And then one day, a voice called out..."

"It was... The Legend."

"The Legend made him an offer: Get clean and he would train him. He agreed, and they traveled to the world's toughest wrestling locations. It wasn't easy, but Montezuma persevered."

"And every night of Wrestlefest, he'd visit his parents' graves, begging forgiveness, maybe looking for a sign..."
"One day, he showed up for training only to find a note..."  
"You're gonna need some entrance music. Good Luck."

---

"He soon gained the respect and adoration of wrestling fans worldwide, despite a losing record..."  
"The following winter, he entered a 30-man Battle Royale with an opportunity to face Baron Banks Gentry at Wrestlefest..."

---

"Full Orchestra"
"And he won."

"Ladies and Gentlemen..." "It's time for the rematch."

Barbeque Man Jr. (Montezuma) makes his entrance...

Perc/FX

Orch. 1/ Piano

Orch. 2

Rubber Band Bass

Rooster sound

Elec. Bass

Slide Guitar

[8'30"]

[31]

And he won.

Ladies and Gentlemen... It's time for the rematch.

Barbeque Man Jr. (Montezuma) makes his entrance...

Perc/FX

Orch. 1/ Piano

Orch. 2

Rubber Band Bass

Rooster sound

Elec. Bass

Slide Guitar

[8'30"]
Abrupt cut-off
Part Two: Rematch

No Disqualification Match for the IWF Heavyweight Championship

(Time in Video [10'25"]

Gentry shows off his championship belt...

Jr. and Gentry have a tense faceoff...
They lock up...
Jr. puts Gentry in a full nelson...
Jr. puts Gentry in a headlock...
Gentry breaks out of the hold...
Gentry parades around the ring with his arms in the air.
This pleases Vanderbilt Jenkins and his women escorts...
Gentry picks up Jr. and throws him out of the ring...
Gentry produces a toilet from underneath the ring...

accel.
Gentry places the toilet in the center of the ring while Jenkins carries Jr...
Gentry sticks Jr's head in front of the toilet...
Perc/FX

Orch 1/
Piano

Orch.

Perc/FX

Gentry sticks Jr's head in the toilet...

...brings him out of the toilet...

\[13'10''\]

[Faster]

\[= 2.10\] Faster
Back in the toilet... And out...

\[ \text{\textit{Faster}} \]

"And out..."

[13’18’’]
Jr's head is submerged in the toilet liquid...

Perc/FX

Orch 1/ Piano

Mm 1

Slower

$= 140$

[Underwater] Celesta and Steel Pans

[Underwater] Bass and Marimba

Toilet submersion FX

[13'23"]
Gentry pulls Jr. out of the toilet and slaps him repeatedly

Gentry pulls Jr. out of the toilet and slaps him repeatedly
Perc/FX
Orch 1/
Piano
Orch.
319

\[ \text{Orch 1} / \text{Piano} \]

559

\[ \text{Gentry puts Jr. in the dreaded Foreclosure} \]

527

\[ \text{Orch 1} / \text{Piano} \]

527

\[ \text{Orch.} \]

527

\[ \text{Perc/FX} \]

527

\[ \text{[13'55"]} \]

\[ \text{[14'05"]} \]
Jr. weakens...

Jr. falls unconscious...

Alpenglocken
Out of tune
Jr. dreams of a musical birdhouse...

and his childhood blanket...
and a teddy bear...

Jr's arm begins to rise and shake...
Jr. breaks out of The Foreclose and grabs Gentry by the neck
Jr. kicks Gentry unleashes legs, kicks, and elbows on Gentry...
Jr. climbs the top turnbuckle...
**Jenkins hits Jr. with a chair and charges...**

Jr. ducks and Jenkins flies out of the ring onto the Spanish broadcasting table...

---

63
Jr. turns around and Gentry snaps his fingers. His evil henchmen walk out and encircle the ring...
Jr. and Gentry have a sword fight...
Jr. slashes off Gentry's tie. Gentry snaps his fingers again...

Archers fire arrows at Jr...
An evil Transformer fire
explosive laser cannons at Jr.

Mozart and Beethoven jump
into the ring to attack Jr...
Mozart is slapped down...

Beethoven is slapped down...

Perc/FX

Orch. 1/
Piano

Orch.

(Beethoven 5th symp.)

(Tristan and Isolde)
Gentry and a chainsaw-wielding
Richard Wagner corner Jr...
Out of nowhere, a Tyrannosaurus Rex shows up and eats Wagner...

Gentry is distracted and in disbelief...

74
Jr. drops Gentry with a 'Barbeque Man Stunner'...
Jr. climbs to the top of the turnbuckle...

Jr. jumps out and successfully lands the 'Barbeque Man Elbow'
\[ j = 280 \]

[Orch 1/Piano]

\(q = 280\)

[Orch.

Perc/FX]
Jr. pins Gentry. The ref counts to three...

We have a new champion...

The Powerbomb and the Glory...Forever.
Paul Swartzel

*Prelude to a Fist: Portraits of Music as Emblem of Morality in WWF Professional Wrestling Entrance Music (1985-1997)*

A lot of people aren't interested in blurred lines between what is real and what is fake. They want the real. Wrestling fans don't care about that. They're captivated by the boundary.

– Alex Whybrow

Wrestlers remain gods because they are, for a few moments, the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils a form of justice which is at last intelligible.

- Roland Barthes, *On Wrestling*

Wrestling is ballet with violence. –Jesse Ventura

At WrestleMania VIII (1992), villains Papa Shango and Sid Justice attacked an overmatched Hulk Hogan. When all was seemingly lost for Hogan, electric guitar power chords blasted out of the loudspeakers in the Indianapolis Hoosier Dome. 60,000 fans instantly rose to their feet and cheered. Broadcaster Gorilla Monsoon screamed, “Wait a minute! That’s The Warrior’s music!”¹ The Ultimate Warrior, absent from wrestling seven months, emerged sprinting towards the ring to save Hogan from his attackers.

The 1980s and 90s included the first instances when fans of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) were conditioned to identify specific entrance music with particular wrestlers. Designed to elicit an immediate response from the audience, this music acted as the first component in revealing wrestlers’ roles, traditionally hero or villain, babyface or heel. While the intention of music in ‘real sports’ is to excite the


79
crowd and perhaps mentally encourage the athlete for competition (e.g., a baseball player walks to home plate; during basketball time-outs), music in the WWF is produced to intentionally connect musical styles and materials to specific moral fabrics in wrestlers’ characters and identities. In some cases, wrestlers reversed roles in the scripted storylines and their original music was altered through re-orchestration, re-harmonization, and the recycling of previously used themes. Focusing on how WWF composers presented musical genres, instruments, and even melodic and harmonic figures, this paper addresses the attempt to construct musical morality in the WWF, emphasizing how entrance music heighten in-ring drama and developed to blur musical right from wrong for its fans.

Various angles have been used to write about professional wrestling, most notably in comparisons to Greek theater (Barthes) and as a form of working class masculine melodrama (Jenkins). While entrance music is a popular topic among wrestling fans, preexisting writings on the subject have been primarily concerned with popular early 21\textsuperscript{st} century bands recording entrance songs or emphasized retrospective top ten lists with no musical analysis of entrance music. Jenkins writes: “Much like nineteenth century theatrical melodrama used denotative music to define the characters’ moral stances, the wrestlers’ entry into the arena is preceded by theme songs which encapsulate their personalities.”\textsuperscript{2} In the following, I attempt for the first time to understand the composition, utilization, and evolution of entrance theme songs, these larger than life encapsulations.


As several professional wrestling companies faced bankruptcy in the early 1980s, Vince McMahon, President of the WWF, gambled survival on reaching out to new media outlets, specifically the music industry and newly created Music Television (MTV). For this venture, commonly referred to as the ‘Rock ‘n’ Wrestling Connection,’ McMahon, through associate Lou Albano, made contacts with popular performers Cyndi Lauper and Rick Derringer, who would ultimately record songs and make music videos featuring wrestlers from the promotion. The WWF eventually included Lauper in a scripted storyline involving factions fighting over rock ‘n’ roll’s inclusion in WWF culture. McMahon’s move proved remarkably successful, as a bout featuring Lauper as wrestling manager became the highest viewed event on MTV at the time.³

The WWF released their first album in 1985 consisting of original songs and skits about wrestlers and wrestling culture. Wrestlers sang and interrupted one another to create feuds for TV broadcasts. Some tracks eventually became entrance music, though not necessarily for the specific wrestler featured on the album.⁴ The WWF was not the first wrestling promotion to create an album, but the first to make character specific entrance themes the norm for every match.⁵ The WWF released a second album, _Piledriver_ (1987), focusing on less known wrestlers and personalities. At this point, entrance music was a success; one storyline from 1986-87 involved a clash between ‘Mr. Wonderful’ Paul Orndorff and Hulk Hogan over coveted entrance music. Due to demand,

⁴ The most popular entrance theme of the 1980s, Hulk Hogan’s _Real American_, was actually written for Big John Studd.
⁵ The first musical albums on wrestling were from England and Argentina in the 60s and 70s. WWF star Antonina Rocca released a record of Latin American Music in the 70s featuring the wrestler jumping off the top rope on its cover.
McMahon hired house composers, among them Jim Johnston and Jimmy Hart, and to date the WWF has sold millions of albums (O’Bryne 86).


Perhaps a more fitting term for entrance music would be *theme*, as it also accompanies a wrestler’s victory and exit from the arena. The theme for a winning babyface follows immediately after his victory, reinforcing his rightness and the reinstitution of justice in the storyline. However, sound choreographers play with audience expectations. For a winning heel, slight pauses can occur between the end of a match and playing of his theme, mirroring the reluctance of fans to accept the outcome. As described above, a match may be interrupted with theme music for a third-party wrestler involved in the storyline, though such interruptions occur more during skits or speeches rather than matches.

A losing wrestler’s theme may be heard after a match to signal that the storyline has not concluded. At the 1991 Survivor Series, a four-man babyface team led by Roddy Piper lost by disqualification, resulting in music for the winning heel team led by Ric Flair (Richard Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*). Piper then attacked Flair into retreat. Fans cheered as Piper’s Scottish bagpiped theme replaced Flair’s. A loser’s theme is also heard if the particular character realizes his errors and switches from heel to babyface; at WrestleMania VII, heel ‘Macho King’ Randy Savage embraced his estranged wife, Elizabeth, who rushed to save him from attacking ‘Sensational Queen’ Sherri, Savage’s

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current companion upset over his losing a career-ending match to The Ultimate Warrior. Randy Savage instantly turned into a babyface, though he kept the same theme.  

The arrival of a theme can signal a supporting character’s push into a more substantial role in the storylines. In 1991, a wrestler named Virgil had endured humiliation while playing a servant to the ‘Million Dollar Man’ Ted Dibiase. After many literal slaps to the face, Virgil finally fought back, knocking out Dibiase to the sound of a roaring audience. He appeared on the next broadcast with his own entrance music, heard for the first time.

The majority of entrance music at the first WrestleMania (1985) was pre-existing popular songs, with Phil Collins’ Easy Lover opening the spectacle. Hulk Hogan’s appearance in the film Rocky III led to his entering to its hit song Eye of the Tiger. These songs served more to excite the audience than as entrance themes, though Bruce Springsteen’s then recent Born in the USA was used in a match pitting an American babyface against a non-American heel.  

The use of Springteen and Collins’ songs functioned as one-shot deals since the WWF preferred not paying royalties to recording artists.

Among house composers, original themes varied from repeated rock guitar riffs to through-composed pieces in practically any genre. Jim Johnston wrote many of the first original themes using electric guitars and synthesizers. Instrumentation often became associated with character and personality traits, playing on connotations with musical instruments and genres: a backwoods country character entered to banjo, a yuppie heel to

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Kenny G-inspired soprano saxophone. The theme for evil dentist character Isaac Yankem, DDS featured a high-pitched drill on top of a barely audible classical string orchestra, as if heard in a dentist’s office while having a procedure. Mankind, a mentally unstable character, entered to music resembling Barber’s *Adagio*, echoing his supposedly tormented past. The man portraying Mankind, Mick Foley, occasionally wrestled as Dude Love, a free-spirit hippie complete with tie-dyed shirt and disco anthem named after his character.

Many themes began with a short sound effect or catchphrase that had first appeared during wrestler interviews or promotions. The music for heel ‘Million Dollar Man’ Ted Dibiase begins with smug, maniacal laughter. For Val Venis, self-professed ladies’ man and pornography star, a growled, ascending saxophone glissando precedes “Hello, ladies” in imitative counterpoint [figure 1]. Sound effects from nature were used, for example, the wrestler Mantaur entered to animal noises while Skinner, the ‘Alligator Man’, entered to swamp sounds.

Some themes use wrestler voiceovers to quickly sum up their characters. While women sing “Money, Money, Money”, Ted Dibiase speaks: “Everybody’s got a price. Everybody’s gonna pay, ‘cause the Million Dollar Man always gets his way.” Babyface-turned-heel Owen Hart once stated, “Enough is enough. It’s time for a change. I tried to be a nice guy.” The deranged Mankind screamed, “Why did you do this to me?” and “Just make the voices stop.” Voiceovers allow for quicker recognition of character morality while the musical components have more ambiguity.

Catch phrases can also derive from audience participation. In the 90s, crowds
began to chant, “You suck!” at heel wrestler Kurt Angle. The chant grew in popularity and Angle’s theme was altered to mockingly include the lyrics, “I don’t suck!” sung with the theme’s melody. Likening his work to film scoring, Jim Johnston states that catchphrases are inserted only after completing the instrumentals and not considered when composing. However, upon further inspection, this is not always true. Rocky ‘The Rock’ Maivia’s initial theme began with the question, “Do you smell what The Rock is cooking?” As his persona as the brash ‘people’s champ’ became increasingly popular, the catchphrase was modified several times. His question intensified, and later changed to the more declarative, “If ya smell what The Rock is cookin’!” To make his entrance more dramatic, drums beats were inserted and his delivery made in tempo with the music to follow [figure 2].

The degree of thematic alteration generally depends on whether a wrestler portrays various ‘gimmick’ characters or uses his real or career name. Ric Flair always kept the same theme, and was known as Flair throughout his career despite its being a pseudonym. Always known as ‘The Rock’, Rocky Maivia’s theme alterations derive from his initial theme. Meanwhile, as the aforementioned voodoo-gimmick heel Papa Shango became Kama Mustafa, and later pimp character The Godfather, each of his themes were unrelated to the previous. Henry Jenkins III writes, “The most successful wrestlers are those who provoke immediate emotional commitments (either positive or negative) and are open to constant re-articulation, who can fit into a number of different conflicts and retain semiotic value” (Jenkins 1, 43-44). This assessment also rings true with successful lasting themes during this period, initially functioning to assist fan

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investment yet flexible enough to allow for reinterpretation or alternation when the character reverses roles.

One WWF composer, Jimmy Hart, often asked wrestlers what their favorite music was and then attempted to mesh it with their character. In contrast, Jim Johnston stated: “A lot of times, if [a wrestler] makes a request… it’s more directed to songs that they listen to in their car or when they work out, as opposed to what the right music for their character… I look at it like I’m scoring a film for either a bad guy or a good guy. First, I look at the emotional makeup of the guy. What is the basic mood or mindset of the character?” (Gulla 96). As Johnston became the primary WWF composer, his work characterized by a greater selection of musical genres in contrast to Hart, who, given his background as a rock musician in Memphis, mostly wrote rock themes.

**Tempo and the Body**

Roland Barthes, in “On Wrestling”, defined the wrestler’s body as the first sign of moral code and intentions. In relation to musical themes, the body initially functions as general indicator of tempo. Larger, lumbering wrestlers have slower tempos, while smaller and more agile wrestlers have faster tempos. Themes last until the wrestler reaches the ring, either walking or running in rhythm, so tempo plays an important role in musical styles employed. Generally, the faster the tempo, the more repetitive its musical gestures; slower tempos allow for more elaborate music. When babyface wrestlers turn heel, their new themes have slower tempos, and they adjust their entrance pacing

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accordingly regardless of their body shape. Adam Bomb, a nuclear bomb themed menace in the 90s, initially walked to the ring with an ominous, pulseless theme. After turning babyface, the melody of his theme was transformed into a faster tempo heavy metal riff with electric guitar, bass, and drums. Conversely, the face painted and full leather attired tag team Demolition, popular babyfaces of the 80s, initially walked in tempo with their rock theme, with songwriter Ric Derringer singing, “Here comes the Ax, Here comes the Smasher, The Demolition, Walking disasters.”12 Turning heel, they were given a pulseless, slower music similar to Adam Bomb’s initial theme. An unpopular move with fans, their new theme signaled the WWF sending them out of the promotion, perhaps easing the transition by associating their characters with less appealing music.

Theme tempo changes often signal wrestler movement through the match. Former wrestler Laurence de Garis writes that elements must be consistent: “For a wrestler to do a ‘dancer’ gimmick, it takes more than just a couple of dance moves in between spots; the dancer must move gracefully throughout.”13 Here, the wrestler physically adapts to his musical representation while the theme adapts to his emotional identity. When Mexican-American character Tito Santana morphed into El Matador, his movements towards his opponents, in tempo with his slower revised theme, reflecting the moves of a daring bullfighter.

In the following seven portraits, I present instances where wrestling entrance themes have been established and then altered to trace a character’s evolution in the

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1990s. The Rockers used power chords to underline blue-collar masculinity, while Jake ‘The Snake’ Roberts’s music changes to accompany his shift from babyface to heel. From the 1990s, with the events WrestleMania VI and VIII, I relate three instances of WWF’s musical practice of tracing change and audience identification by using ethnic stereotypes, changing political events, and imitation classical music. Two concluding portraits describe the use of music in tag-team matches, such as The Darksides vs. The Royals at the 1995 Survivor Series, and the narrative changes which marked WWF’s response to competition from Ted Turner’s World Championship Wrestling in the mid to late 1990s.


Wrestlers present themselves as composers. 80s Canadian heel tag team Fabulous Rougeau Brothers generated angry heat, or strong crowd reaction, by facetiously purporting love for their newly adopted country, The United States. Matched against The Rockers at Wrestling Challenge, they entered to the synth-pop All-American Boys. Written by their manager and WWF composer, Jimmy Hart, the song satirically claims to embody American masculinity:

“From Montreal to Memphis, Parlez-vous Français?
Tell all the girls the Rougeaus are on their way
We're called pretty boys, we're not a musclehead
We hate that long-haired look, we like the preppy look instead

We're all-American boys! (4x)

We don't like heavy metal, we don't like rock 'n' roll
All we like to listen to is Barry Manilow
On peut pas les sentir, dans le monde ils sont les pires
On aime les faire fâcher 'cause I mean we love the USA!
We’re all-American boys! (4x)”\(^{14}\)

Announced by the Wrestling Challenge broadcasters as the singers on *All-American Boys*, The Rougeaus aim to offend on several levels. “Tell all the girls” attempts to intimidate the male audience, though singing robotic, staccato sixteenth notes does not convey traditional musical masculinity [figure 3]. By claiming the easy listening singer Barry Manilow as sole musical inspiration, their villainy to WWF audiences derives from extolling rejection of rock n’ roll, heavy metal, and large muscles as patriotic, All-American virtue, disrupting what Henry Jenkins III writes of as the WWF projected myth of “might makes right.” (Jenkins 63) They seek to confuse American audiences by including non-translated French lyrics, purposely playing to perceived xenophobic tendencies of the working class fan base.\(^{15}\)

The Rougeaus are not actually the singers, but their theme is written to give that impression. The instrumentals are professional, but the vocalists are deceivingly amateur, blurring the authenticity of the Rougeaus as performers by alternating pitched and non-pitched vocals through the verses and seemingly laughing their way through the recording. To WWF fans, the heel theme needs to sound professional at least instrumentally for the Canadians to be taken seriously as in-ring threats.

With the Rougeaus’ music cut short, The Rockers’ babyface theme emerged to the roar of the crowd. Singing “We’re outta control. We like to Rock n’ Roll,” this theme features a low fidelity distorted electric guitar riff on E, G, and A power chords [figure


\(^{15}\)Translation: “You can’t touch them, in the world they are the worst. We love to get them mad, cause I mean we love the USA.”
4]. The Rougeaus’ antithesis, the high energy and long haired Rockers wear torn t-shirts and long tights, graciously acknowledging their adoration. Their theme is more repetitious than their opponents’; and they quickly run to the ring to stand on the turnbuckles. The Rougeaus and manager Hart respond:

*Interviewer:* We’re down at ringside with three men obviously upset. That was [The Rocker’s] song, that was them singing, and they sound pretty good.

*Jimmy Hart:* You gotta be crazy, you idiot! That’s horrible. Who has the right and the nerve to turn off The Fabulous Rougeaus’ music and put that garbage on there? These guys can’t sing, they were out of key!

*Jacque Rougeau:* [To The Rockers] You guys think you’re something else, don’t you. We went to Memphis, Tennessee and recorded our own song, and what do you do? You record your own song, you copycats!16

Pitting Memphis studio-produced synth-pop vs. raw, startup garage rock n’ roll, WWF morality rests on perceived masculinity and musical authenticity to blue-collar culture. However, necessity engenders higher production values for the Rougeaus since the involved level of craft in theme production invariably implies WWF investment in representing characters. Heels need to win a lot to raise the dramatic stakes, and The Rougeaus did that night. With the arena cutting to silence, The Rockers remained in the ring agonizing on their loss, a ritual Roland Barthes described as a “gesture of the vanquished wrestler [signifying] to the world a defeat, which far from disguising, he emphasizes and holds like a pause in music.” (24) The Rockers would fight on, but no longer with vocals in their theme; babyfaces cannot afford amateur vocals. Although they won the rivalry with The Rougeaus months later, The Rockers began publicly experiencing scripted turmoil, resulting in one, Sean Michaels, attacking the other, Marty

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Janetty, over potential stardom as a singles competitor. Turning heel, Michaels would enter to his own new theme, *Sexy Boy*, in which the wrestler himself sang about his looks and ability to seduce women. This theme, a slower and more harmonically complex rock track, was unrelated to his previous one with The Rockers. Michaels walked bobbing this head in rhythm, his face upturned to dismiss the audience.

(2) **Face to Heel Theme Alteration: Jake ‘the Snake’ Roberts (1991)**

Jake ‘The Snake’ Roberts wrestled for years as a babyface, frightening arrogant heels with his pet Boa constrictor, revealing their inner cowardice. Roberts’ workman-like walk was always in step with his theme, beginning with a pulsating synth bass of sixteenth notes at 104 beats per minute [figure 5]. An E minor 7th chord suspends over the bass, dynamically intensifying before the arrival of the drums. The beat enters over chords of D major and B minor 7th before confirming the tonic with E minor 7th. Repeated, ascending A minor and B minor chords lead to a deceptive cadence on C major with added sixth as if to signify Jake’s endless personal struggle for justice. Before returning to repeat the progression starting on D major, a short bass riff occurs, later becoming a major component in Roberts’ next theme.

Turning heel in the fall of 1991, Roberts produced a new snake, a live king cobra, to bite an incapacitated babyface Randy Savage, much to the horror of the audience. Interviewed days later at Survivor Series, Roberts entered to a theme beginning with the ominous, echoing words “trust me…”17 The previously mentioned synth bass riff appears reshaped, now distorted and reverbed in a slower tempo of 84 beats per minute [figure 6].

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17 Ibid, p. 81.
Accented syncopation from the original theme has disappeared, each note receiving slight staccato attacks. The new bass riff repeats throughout the theme as the original chord progression mostly remains. However, the initial suspended chord from the original has been altered to emphasize the pitch A, giving an impression of d minor. The downbeat of an accented low pitch D opening the original has been replaced by bass drum, and while in strict time, it feels unleveled due to always arriving on the offbeat. The original harmony remains though much quieter, distorted, and suspended for longer durations.

The WWF fan would probably be aware of the changes to the harmonic rhythm but not the extent of the similarity to its original most likely due to smaller voice leading movements and tied notes between shared pitches between chords. The crowd at the Survivor Series booed heavily as Roberts mirrored these alterations, walking unevenly in a slower, slithering pace.


The success of the Rock n’ Wrestling Connection ensured many babyfaces entering to rock themes despite the cultural background of their characters. At WrestleMania VIII, a young wrestler known as Tatanka, a Lumbee Native American character, competed against fashion conscious heel Rick ‘The Model’ Martel, who previously taunted Tatanka for his lack of class and ignorance of fashion. Before their entrances, several Lumbee men danced in the ring to authentic Lumbee music (consisting of voice and drums) in support of Tatanka. Reinforcing stereotypes as he is interviewed backstage, Martel informs the audience that the match might not take place since
“Tatanka [was] outside scalping tickets.” 18 Chris Samuels, who played Tatanka, was a registered member of the Lumbee people from Pembroke, North Carolina. The WWF had long made use of American Indian characters, though they were never actual Native Americans and they did not have entrance themes. Since his debut, the WWF announcers repeatedly mentioned Tatanka, a babyface, as authentically Native American. Promos were filmed showing Tatanka educated by tribal elders on the meaning of his dress, war cry, and face paint, though his appearance, much like the names for his wrestling moves, were based more on a pan-Indian Hollywood representation than traditional Lumbee attire or terminology. Tatanka claimed to embody the spirit of all Native Americans; however, after the Lumbee men completed their dance, Tatanka entered running in tempo to separate music, looking and sounding much different.

Tatanka’s theme begins with his ululating, a practice traditionally performed by women in American Indian cultures but one Chris Samuels routinely performed during his matches. His ululation occurs before he enters the arena, disrupting Roland Barthes’ assertion that the body acts as first moral indicator. More important, the ululation alters how the listeners interpret the music to follow. I played Tatanka’s theme for several friends and colleagues, first without the opening ululation, the second time included. Without the ululation, most heard it as a standard rock riff. When including the ululation, each listener immediately reassessed the instrumentals as containing American Indian stereotypes. Ethnomusicologist David Samuels, in an interview with the author, says that Tatanka’s theme, featuring staccato, accented pentatonic chords and repeated perfect fifth intervals, resembles the musical representation of warring Apache Indians in 1940s and

18 Ibid, p. 78.
50s Hollywood films (2011) [figure 7]. Heel broadcaster Bobby Heenan enforces these stereotypes, asking his partner about greeting Tatanka properly with “Hey-how-are-ya, Hey-how-are-ya,” falling perfect 5ths in his speech to mimic the staccato ending of his ululation.

In Tatanka’s theme, stereotypes run together to hint at the inflections of the blues scale (inclusion of D flat in G minor). For cheering WWF audiences, an awareness of Tatanta’s musical assimilation trumps his repeated narrative as authentic Native American. Dancing sideways in rhythm with his theme, Tatanka high fives fans whom, just moments earlier, showed little appreciation for true Lumbee music.

Spraying his “Arrogance” perfume from an atomizer, Tatanka’s opponent, ‘The Model’ entered wearing short purple tights with a tuxedo top. Opening with dream-like harp glissandos, The Model’s theme leads to poppy jazz with slurred soprano saxophone, electric piano, and drums recalling the sound of Kenny G. With a “Yes, I am a model” button on his top, Martel walks to the ring as if a runway, dismissing fans with his head upturned. During the match, Tatanka uses his ululation attempting to rally the crowd.
Tatanka goes on to win the contest, and with his theme playing, again proceeds to high five fans while dancing sideways. Gorilla Monsoon states, “What a future this youngster has, a real Native American!” His theme and appearance are based on stereotypes, but Henry Jenkins III reminds us the WWF will “demean groups even when they are intended to provide positive role models.” (Jenkins 64) Martel soon left the WWF with Tatanka promoted in the storylines, his righteousness deriving from supposed awareness of heritage, yet more importantly his embrace of rock n’ roll. Curiously enough,

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Tatanka’s theme resembles Ted Dibiase’s but without the accented syncopation and slight swing [Figure 8]. Tatanka would join Dibiase’s ‘The Million Dollar Team’ when turning heel in 1994.

Rick ‘The Model’ Martel’s theme was recycled years later in 1997 for pornographic film character Val Venis. Keeping the bass and drums instrumentation, the theme takes new meaning through different playing techniques and slight variations in the chord progressions [Figure 9]. Alto saxophone growling and glissandos, matched with more sophisticated improvisation, add to the cliché for pornographic film soundtracks. Emphasizing pitch C on the saxophone in measure five implies chord switches from F# minor to raunchier F# minor 13, while changes from D major to d minor in measure thirteen add for greater harmonic contrast to the established key of e minor.

(4) Foreign Fanatics/World Music Heels

While the earliest wrestling promoters relied on local, regional hostilities to draw heat, or strong crowd reaction, the advent of television in the 1950s led promoters to create heels thought evil to all-American working class people regardless of geography. Nazi characters were the most successful heels following World War II, while Asian wrestlers played Japanese characters, a trend continuing through the 80s and 90s (Beekman 94).

‘World music’ for heels must sound exotic to WWF fans if the character remains silent, because hints of assimilation undermine the narrative. Bowing to their evil manager, Mr. Fuji, the highflying tag team The Orient Express ran silently to a fast
pentatonic theme played on xylophones in perfect fourths. In contrast, the larger heel Sumo wrestling character Yokozuna walked to a slow pentatonic melody played on a Japanese flute supported with echoing, reverbing stick hits. Yokozuna does not speak English in the storylines, so audiences denote evil intentions from his meditative enjoyment of music composed with no intention of exciting them. A greater allowance for musical hybridity occurs when characters speak English. These themes, even with rock instrumentation, imply foreignness with one offset instrument even when the offset instrument has nothing to do with the evolution of the character. It is enough if it sounds foreign. Iranian character The Iron Sheik, with an oath to humble and break the backs of all Americans, had a sitar theme with electric guitar and drum accompaniment. Toothpick chewing, machismo Cuban character Razor ‘The Bad Guy’ Ramon entered to loud cowbells and older synthesizers, making associations with Al Pacino’s character from the 1983 film Scarface.

Political theme music reflects changing climates and foretells future character development. Soviet characters continued as political heels as the USSR fell apart in the late 80s, and no one was more associated with deploring the values of American audiences than the lumbering Nicolai Volkoff and his tag team known as The Bolsheviks. His theme, All for the Motherland, opens with two intimidating bars in C minor quickly leading to a mournful trumpet solo, perhaps hinting at inner personal struggles [figure 10]. At WrestleMania VI, the first WrestleMania after the fall of the Soviet Union, The Bolsheviks were filmed warming up their voices in bathrooms before their match. Entering the ring, they began their ritual of singing the Soviet National Anthem. The
crowd cheered as their opponents, The Hart Foundation, attacked them mid-verse. “You know those two Bolsheviks don’t like to be messed with when it comes to their singing,” stated broadcaster Jesse Ventura. After quickly losing the contest, The Bolsheviks no longer featured in WWF storylines. Volkoff, revealing heartbreak over the Soviet’s destruction of his beloved homeland, was revealed as a patriotic Lithuanian-American babyface by changing his theme to Sousa’s *The Stars and Stripes Forever*.

The idea of recording ‘world music’ formed an implicit component in the storyline of heel Kamala, supposed ‘Ugandan Cannibal’ and reported former bodyguard of Idi-Amin. Like a carnival man introducing a member of a sideshow, the character Dr. Harvey Whippleman beckoned “The Lord of the Jungle,” and a bare-chested, spear carrying, wood-masked wrestler entered behind his “handler” cloaked in a dated insect repelling safari suit. The arena’s loudspeakers blared unison singing of a pentatonic melody with foot stomps and ululations [figure 11]. The singing is from Vangelis’ *O Papathanassiou, Earth Part 2* (1973). However, its recording does not include any stomps or ululations, meaning WWF composers specifically layered them for Kamala’s theme. The steady stomps quickly fall out of sync with the freer tempo singing on Vangelis’ recording. The singing itself does not necessarily evoke any particular culture, but the additions recall musical stereotypes depicting ‘savages’ in Hollywood films from the 50s and earlier, perhaps most evident in Disney’s *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1953). Furthermore, Kamala’s theme intends to resemble authentic, vintage field recordings with inclusion of highly audible record-popping effects and distortions.

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After losing a *coffin match*, Kamala violently ended his association with Whippleman and his former handler. Seeking guidance, he was embraced by the African American manager Reverend Slick, who made it his mission to ‘civilize’ the Ugandan through a series of televised trips to movie theaters and bowling alleys. Once transitioned, Kamala’s theme was updated in later appearances to feature professionally recorded digital mbiras and drums.

(5) **High Brow Heels and Classical Music**

Most themes featuring classical music are associated with narcissistic or wealthy personalities, playing on the perception of highbrow culture’s unkindly attitude towards the seemingly humble, working class world of wrestling. The venue matters: the use of classical themes in WWF arenas implies not only disdain for the crowd but also implies a rejection of rock music and popular culture, no matter how some orchestral music attaches to heroic associations in cinema and concert halls. Like music in ‘real sports,’ entrance themes intend to excite arena crowds, so they boo the foreign classical themes and cheer the domestic rock themes. Additionally, the absence of a steady drumbeat or pulse in any genre implies a heel. Only in a rare instance were competing wrestlers each assigned classical themes, and this was after one of the participants, Randy Savage, played a heel for years under the same music.

The first recorded use of classical music in wrestling occurred in the 1950s with ‘Gorgeous’ George Wagner and Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance (#1 in D Major)*. Like Rick ‘The Model’ Martel, George sprayed perfume from an atomizer and stuck his nose
to the crowd as a butler cleaned his feet. As sixty percent of wrestling audiences at the time were women, Wagner, with long bleached blonde hair held together by a bobby pin, simultaneously drew praise from sexually repressed women and scorn from homophobic men (Beekman 83). By the 1980s, ‘Macho Man’ Randy Savage continued the Elgar tradition, while heel Ric Flair entered to Richard Strauss. Harley Race and King Haku entered to Mussorgsky’s ‘The Great Gate of Kiev’ from *Pictures at an Exhibition* despite its key of E Flat having a separate classical tradition of symbolizing heroism.

Original classical-like instrumental themes composed in the early 90s mockingly exaggerated the gestures of the genre. The character Mr. Perfect had a pentatonic theme so grand that every note was supported with timpani hits [figure 12]. The theme for bodybuilding wrestler Lex Lugar, first known as ‘The Narcissist,’ took inspiration from the slow section in Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. Switching to a patriotic babyface, his updated, unrelated rock theme included lyrics on the personal qualities it took to be a hero.

Hunter Hearst Helmsley, a wealthy blueblood character from Greenwich, CT, entered to a gentle, mock-baroque piece complete with synth flute, harpsichord, and strings [figure 13]. Deriving its harmony from a descending G major scale, it vaguely recalls Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*. The repeated rhythmic and melodic gestures combine with exaggerated harpsichord trills to hint at parody, while the uncharacteristically loud pizzicato strings are intended to humorously blur the perception of the piece as authentically Baroque. When his initial WWF push was not particularly successful, Helmsley became HHH and entered to the lively ‘Ode to Joy’ from
Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

(6) The Darkside vs. The Royals, Survivor Series (1995)

Wrestlers with individual themes musically need to have their musical tags unified for the sake of moral homogeneity in special tag team matches. Held every November since 1987, the annual Survivor Series features two battling teams of four wrestlers each, babyfaces versus heels, grouped through interlinking storylines. The captains of each team enter separately to highlight the main rivalry. The 1995 event pitted babyfaces The Darkside vs. heels The Royals. Three of the Royals, Hunter Hearst Helmsley, Jerry ‘The King’ Lawler, and Isaac ‘The Royal Dentist’ Yankem, were each assigned classical themes as individual wrestlers, but this night were grouped under Lawler’s Great Gate of Kiev, which was previously used in the 1980s by Harley Race and King Haku. The Royals’ five hundred pound captain, Mabel, appeared months earlier in the tag team Men On A Mission, proclaiming themselves “a positive influence to inner-city youths struggling to decipher right from wrong.” Break dancing to upbeat hip-hop à la decade earlier Run-DMC, they soon became fan favorites, even appearing in WWF music videos:

“M to the A to the B - E - L
He gets ready at the sound of the bell”

Citing underappreciate fans, Mabel turned heel as a singles competitor. Embracing the high crimes of the streets, he entered to slower, wordless hip-hop beats.

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layered over police and ambulance sirens, recalling NWA’s *Gangsta Gangsta*. “He’s not dancing tonight,” one surprised broadcaster observed at the time. “He’s all business.”

Winning the 1995 King of the Ring tournament to proclaim himself King Mabel, he entered while carried on a throne. Aligning with fellow royal combatants, his theme was revised to include an inserted brass prelude in C before the sirens and beats.

As I have demonstrated, entrance themes are used to represent a wrestler’s culture or character type, sometimes both, and in Survivor Series matches in the 1990s, babyfaces are united through positive cultural representation instead of character. The Darkside included Savio Vega, a Puerto Rican; Fatu, a Samoan; and Henry Godwinn, an Arkansan hillbilly character. Unifying under Vega’s salsa theme, their collective implicitly signifies inclusive dancing culture rather than the cultural mindset of an individual wrestler.

For team captain The Undertaker, ritual eventually trumped morality. With enhanced theatrical entrances gaining popularity, The Undertaker’s included pyrotechnics, smoke, and cutting arena lights. Contrary to the use of classical music to underline highbrow, about which I have written above, his theme on church bells and organ featured a variation in e minor on Chopin’s funeral march [figure 14]. Switching to babyface, The Undertaker was perhaps the first wrestler keeping an initial heel theme despite its dark moral implications, and also the first embraced by fans for reasons other than his subscribed moral code. Winning against The Royals, The Undertaker continued a

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26 Despite growing up in Puerto Rico, the man who portrayed Savio Vega previously wrestled as the heel Kwang. A masked man hailing from ‘The Orient’, Kwang’s theme featured a slow pentatonic theme performed on Koto, flute, and gongs. Fatu had spent his career in ‘savage’-portraying tag teams, The Samoan Swat Team and The Headshrinkers, but recently switched to babyface by demonstrating his ability to speak English.
long babyface career as the Chopin portion of his theme morphed beyond recognition, the
organ slowly replaced by rock electric guitar, full choir, and heavy rock drums, only
church bells remaining from the initial theme.

(7) Into The Attitude Era: ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin and The Nation of Domination
(1996-1997)

By the mid 90s, The WWF was in a TV ratings war with its rival, Ted Turner-
backed World Championship Wrestling (WCW), each week attempting to outdo the other
in spectacle. Facing this competition, Vince McMahon gave a “New Directions” speech
to his writing staff stating WWF storylines would no longer feature good/evil,
black/white morality plays (Beekman 134). Instead, they borrowed heavily from
Philadelphia-based promotion Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW), unleashing
more violent and adult-oriented content. Introducing the ‘Titantron’, a giant video
monitor projecting images associated with wrestlers making their entrances, meant less
emphasis on themes to signify morality. Filming a segment for Monday Night Raw,
McMahon announced the new era:

_It has been said that anything can happen here in the World Wrestling
Federation, but now, more than ever, truer words have never been spoken. This is a
conscious effort on our part to 'open the creative envelope’, so to speak, in order to
entertain you in a more contemporary manner.... We borrow from such program niches
like soap-operas, like "The Days of Our Lives", or, music videos such as those on MTV,
Daytime talk-shows like "Jerry Springer" ...We, in the WWF, think that you, the
audience, are quite frankly tired of having your intelligence insulted. We also think that
you're tired of the same old simplistic theory of good guys versus bad guys. Surely the era
of the superhero urging you to ‘say your prayers and take your vitamins’ is definitely
passé._

Introducing shades of grey to characters, the ‘badass’ replaced the traditional babyface, with no one better suited for this role than Steve Austin. Austin began his career in WCW as ‘Stunning Steve’, a narcissist with bleached blonde hair and regal, orchestral music. Shaved bald with a goatee upon WWF arrival in 1996, his ‘Ringmaster’ and ‘Stone Cold’ heel characters showed utter contempt for the audience and ruthlessness against competitors, walking bullish to sounds of breaking glass before slow rising string glissando, bass, and drum hits leading to an e minor theme [figure 15].

Austin was matched against Jake Roberts at the 1996 event, King of the Ring. Roberts portrayed a weathered, born-again Evangelical babyface, keeping his nostalgic synth theme from the late 80s and early 90s, previously seen in [figure 5]. Quickly defeating Roberts, Austin took the microphone:

The first thing I want to be done is to get that piece of crap out of my ring! Don’t just get him out of the ring, get him out of the WWF...You sit there and you thump your bible and you say your prayers, and it didn’t get you anywhere. Talking about John 3:16. Austin 3:16 says, ‘I’ve just whipped your ass!’

With a sizable portion of the audience cheering, Austin soon became the most unconventional babyface superstar in WWF history. Emerging with louder breaking glass sounds and repeating heavy metal guitar riffs, his updated theme [Figure 16] derived from the initial melody and from the German augmented 6th chords in his previous theme [Figure 15]. Walking more quickly, he bobbed his head in rhythm, cursing to himself and extending his middle fingers to cheering audiences.

Meanwhile, The Nation of Domination, a four-man group patterned after The Nation of Islam and Black Panther Party, also made transitions into this era. Adopting the

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fist in the air ‘Nation Salute,’ their initial storylines in 1996 included feuding with various racial factions, dismissing one another for ‘not being black enough’, and public condemning certain members of secretly wishing to be white. Their theme opened with group chanting of “We are The Nation of Domination!” followed with slow, powerful drums and bass, and reiterations of “Nation” or “Domination” every four bars, each syllable receiving accents, staccato attacks [Figure 17]. Months later, their theme was altered to include amateur rapping from each Nation member detailing how they beat people down and force them “on [their] knees [to] start praying.” Later omissions of the rap kept only the original instrumentals and chants remaining. By 1997, the group shifted weekly from seemingly serious portrayals to comedic parody, making the omission of parody rapping on future themes blur their characters as heels or comic babyfaces. Moving to full parody, each member gained in popularity as they transformed into new characters claimed as their true selves. One member, aforementioned Kama Mustafa, formerly Papa Shango, became a pimp known as The Godfather, escorted to the ring by scantily clad women known as the ‘Hoe Train.’ Given a new, up-tempo theme based on 70s funk, he overlay the catchphrases “let’s get on the hoe train” and “pimps up, hoes down,” dancing on his toes while carrying a cane. The same generation of kids who booed Papa Shango when he attacked righteous Hulk Hogan at WrestleMania VIII, now teenagers, loved him.
Postlude

During the ‘Attitude Era’ (1997-2002), theme music diversity decreased due to the de-emphasis of good vs. evil storylines and a greater desire for creating commercial product. The WWF began releasing musical albums more frequently in the late 1990s, with one, *WWF: The Music Vol. 3*, selling over a million copies and reaching #4 on the Billboard chart.\(^{29}\) Three albums were released in 2001 alone. Contracting more bands and artists, and with seemingly every theme bound for commercial release, heavy metal and hip-hop became the exclusive WWF musical genres. By 2013, every major wrestling pay-per-view event had its own digital release featuring music heard during the broadcast.\(^{30}\)

Due to issues with copyright and royalties, the WWF replaced many of the 80s and early 90s themes when older wrestling events were rereleased on DVD and Blu-ray. Websites like Youtube have recently revived interest in earlier entrance music, particularly from users posting converted VHS recordings containing the unedited original material. Some fans have even created online shows featuring nostalgic round table debates on the effectiveness of specific themes. Watching these shows and reading online discussions, I gather that many fans have reservations about current themes, unsure whether they function to sell a character or itself. While marketing rock and hip-hop albums has been lucrative for the WWF, blurring the musical distinction between good vs. evil potentially has its cost. It is unclear whether the commercial success of less musically diverse themes outweighs dulling the dramatic aspect of the matches that

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\(^{30}\) WrestleMania XXIX, SummerSlam 2013
themes were initially designed to enhance. Jenkins III, in his comments later on the ‘Attitude Era’, echoed these concerns: “Maybe we are nostalgic for the moral clarity of traditional melodrama because at least then we’d know what ground to defend and whom to fight.”\textsuperscript{31} It’s not enough to simply recognize any given theme with a particular wrestler. Fans of wrestling have always been captivated by the drama of its boundaries, boundaries enhanced and intensified by musical practice. Whether the new musical practices will engender similar loyalty remains to be seen.

Musical Figures

Figure 1: Val Venis Theme (Intro)

Figure 2: The Rock’s Theme (Revised Intro)
Figure 3: Fabulous Rougeau's Theme (All-American Boys)

Figure 4: Rockers' Theme
Figure 5: Jake The Snake's First Theme Condensed (bablyface)

Figure 6: Jake The Snake's 2nd Theme (heed)
Figure 7: Tatanka's Theme

Figure 8: Ted Dibiase Theme compared with Tatanka's
Figure 9: Rick Martel and Val Venus Themes with Different Saxophone Parts
Figure 9: Continued

Figure 10: Nicolai Volkoff Theme- "All for the Motherland"
Figure 11: Kamala Theme (Vangelis with added vocals and stomps)

Figure 12: Mr. Perfect Theme
Figure 13: Hunter Hearst Helmsley Theme (Intro)

Figure 14: The Undertaker Theme (Heel and Babyface)
Figure 15: 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin First Theme (Heel)

Figure 16: 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin Second Theme (babyface)

Figure 17: Nation of Domination (Intro)
Bibliography


Biography

Paul Swartzel was born on June 27, 1982 in Raleigh, North Carolina. He received a Bachelors of Music with Highest Honors from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2005. He has received honors and fellowships from Bang on a Can, Yale School of Music Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, MATA Festival, Meet The Composer, ASCAP, and Duke University.