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Gothic Music

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The term "Gothic Music" may cover a range of phenomena - from the music of the Goth bands of the late 70s/eighties, to the scores composed for horror films and thrillers, to music, not originally composed for, but used in, a Gothic film which, by this process, becomes Gothicized (the most famous example, perhaps, being Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* (1973) as used in *The Exorcist* (1973)).   Significantly, what all these Gothic musics have in common is a trans-media connection between film and music.

Some twentieth-century classical music has been Gothicized for the purposes, initially, of the film industry, though it has since become a wider musical currency. Composers like Carl Orff and Krzystztof Penderecki, who experimented with the musical styles and aesthetics of former ages, have seen their work suffer this fate. William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) and David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006) all feature at least one work of Penderecki's.   "O Fortuna" from Carl Orff's cantata *Carmina Burana* (1935-6) has been so often used for the purposes of horror that it has slid into the realm of parody and satire (used in an episode of *The Simpsons*, "Gone Maggie Gone" (2009) as well as the trailer for *Scooby-Doo on Zombie Island* (1998)). Orff's strong mediaeval-sounding rythmns, bare fifths, lines of unadorned chant and massed choirs are re-interpreted by film-makers not as celebratory of the medieval, but as an excursion into the horrors of Gothic. The bi-temporality that characterizes the piece, its sense of historical disjunction – its 'mediaevalness' in relation to the very twentieth-century musical phraseology of the work as a whole – is essential to its re-understanding as Gothic, which, typically, embeds a problematic past within the present.

Many tropes from Gothic film scores have entered cultural understanding more generally, and are to be found in television programmes, advertising, popular music. The conjunction of sacred music and twentieth-century harmonies has become a particularly ubiquitious shorthand for horror: eg. the Orffian satanic/divine-sounding choir (used particularly effectively in The Sisters of Mercy's "This Corrosion" (1987)) or the, equally prevalent, cliché of a church organ playing a disconcerting mixture of complicated counterpoint and dissonant harmonies. Indeed, atonalism itself has also, in popular cultural terms, become linked with Gothic – think for example of the Phantom's organ playing and preferred composition style in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986). Other Gothicized and much revisited musical tropes include the child's music box, the percussive mechanical toy and the fairground organ (egs. Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932), Gene Moore's chilling score for *Carnival of Souls* (1962) and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' song "The Carny" (1986)).

The late 1970s saw the emergence of a type of music which, because of its "borrowing of punk musical elements" was intially described as 'post-punk' and 'minimalist punk'" (Gunn 1999: 37) before the adjective 'Gothic' or 'Goth' was settled on. Gothic music, in this sense, is the music, associated with - and a key component of - Goth subculture, performed by bands who were either self-identified as, or identified by Goths as, Goth. Goth music has a characteristic emotional range, though it is as well to take into account Paul Hodkinson's warning that the "dark mix of emotion, angst and energy often associated with Goth music, for example, may be linked by some to elements of Gothic literature, but has at least as much to do with the influence of longstanding themes from within contemporary popular music." (2007: 262) What perhaps is most characteristic of Gothic music in relation to many other Gothic texts is the poignancy of its particular emotional positioning, its mixture of rebellion, desire, nostalgia, ironizing, and its potent Romanticism.

Catherine Spooner writes of Goth subculture more generally "Goths suture their identities from complex networks of literary and cinematic affiliations, incorporating the various characters and archetypes they encounter into their fantasy life and playing them out

through costume" (2004: 165). Such allusive play is characteristic also of Goth music. Gothic bands, most notably the lead singers, often play off against very specific cultural icons, often, though not always, cinematic: such figures as Dracula, tortured Christs, the heroes of a spaghetti Western, vampires, femme fatales, the Demon Lovers and serial killer. In Goth music "Gothic tropes and discourses may be embedded at the level of structure, voice, lyrics and performance style" (McEvoy 2009: 28). Gothic songs may be structured as framed narratives. Performance styles tends to be theatricalized. Voices may suggest personae, examples include Siouxsie Sioux's broken-voiced dominatrixes or the high-voiced pure heroine and the harsh tones of the vamp that give us the conceptual vocabulary to understand such songs as the pop Gothic Shakespears Sister's "Stay" (1992). In performance,the Gothic song is both theatre and lyric "Gothic from the outside and as first-person narrative" (McEvoy 2009: 29)

Goth music in its earliest phase is primaily the work of guitar-based bands with some characteristic palettes: ultra-low, often perilously loose, bass sounds, "sinister jangling guitars" (Hodkinson 2002: 36), the metrononic exactitude of the drums (in the case of many bands, eg. The Sisters of Mercy, Gene Loves Jezebel, Alien Sex Fiend, an actual drum machine). Gothic music frequently suggests different temporalities, using suggestively passe styles – eg. Fields of the Nephilim's indebtedness to Morricone - to create the sense of a past which is being revisited, or exists within the present. Such music often conjures up a particularly acute sense of space and/or place, and, in its heightening of contrast, could be said to have invented a kind of musical chiaroscuro. In numerous Gothic tracks circular guitar riffs create a feeling of claustrophobia and looped-linearity. The Cure's "A Forest" (1980) is a particularly good example, suggesting labyrinthine space, its many lines creating an intricate texture in which to enmesh the listener, as it conveys the experience of "Running towards nothing/ Again and again and again".

The account of classic Sisters of Mercy-type Goth given above does not do justice to the heterogeneity of 1980s Goth which also includes the folk-rock sounds of All About Eve, the use of mediaeval music by Dead Can Dance, the Gothic punk of The Damned or the

pyschobilly, more characteristic of US Gothic music. Goth music in recent years has been even more heterogeneous fusing with electronica, dance, industrial and metal. Mick Mercer, writing in 2002, uses all of the following tags (and more) to name some of the fusions that he detects in (self-identified) Gothic music: Doom Metal, Ethereal, Dark Romantic, Dark Ambient, Goth Metal, Celtic Acoustic, Techno-Synth-Ind, Dark Trance, Goth Folk, Dark Trip Hop, Synthcore, Electro-Goth, Dark Industrial, GothPop-Coldwave, Goth-Gangsta, Ind-Electro-Goth, Gothic Darkwave Blues.   Increasingly other musics, not traditionally described as Gothic, are coming to be experienced as Gothic through associations of their usage, often through cinematic tradition; thus Weill/Brechtian cabaret is often re-interpreted as Gothic in what has come to be called "Dark Cabaret" (eg.Dresden Dolls). As Gavin Baddeley writes "It's now harder to cite music that hasn't been dubbed 'Gothic', or adopted by the Goth scene, at some point, than to identify music that has." (2006: 273-4).

SEE ALSO: Goth Subculture.

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Mini Biography

Emma McEvoy lectures in the department of English, Linguistics and Cultural Studies at the University of Westminster. She has published various articles on Gothic and Romantic texts and is co-editor, with Catherine Spooner, of *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (2007).