

Mix In Music

By Lenn Millbower, MB, MA, The Learnertainment® Trainer



“Music is the art of thinking with sound.”

Jules Cobarie

Music is the rhythmic accompaniment to our lives. People are born to music, study to music, drive, eat, sleep, and dream to music. People spend more money on music than on books, and music stars become our idols and companions.

We expect to hear an auditory signal and will usually supply one when none exists. Some people will talk to avoid silence. Others will leave a TV or radio on in the background, or provide their own music by singing, humming, rapping or whistling. An extreme example is person who whistles while walking through a graveyard. Their auditory signal adds comfort and warmth to the cold and foreboding environment.

The auditory signal is critical to success in live training. Imagine training devoid of audio (no laughter, no conversation and no lecture) and you see the point. Audio is present in training. What that auditory presentation lacks is variety, especially where music is concerned.

Composer George Burt once commented, “When we see pictures and hear music at the same time we invariably make a connection, if only on an unconscious level.” When music is combined with information powerful brain connections occur. Anyone who learned their ABCs by singing a song, learned to say words by watching Sesame Street, or remembers the song that was playing on the radio during a critical moment in their life knows first hand the power of auditory signals.

There is ample evidence of the effectiveness of music in aiding learning. A wealth of studies from the education, musicology and health care fields demonstrate the effectiveness of music in increasing learning, healing and self-esteem.

History also proves the point. Twice in the past, audio and video were separate and then combined. The result was electrifying.

Sound Wins

The first silent films were short scenes lasting only a minute or two. They were immediate, but short lived sensations. Absolute silence, the total absence of both voice and musical sound proved to be a deadly combination. Viewing a silent film was described as “cold and bare, ghostly, lifeless and colorless.”

Fortunately for the theater owners, musicians were already on their payroll. The theater owners told the musicians to play something, anything. They did, and it worked. Music became so effective at solving these problems that film critics of the era called music the “flame which brought life and warmth” to the experience.

Live music accompaniment continued out of necessity until The Warner Brother's “talking” picture “The Jazz Singer” came out in 1927. Within one year, silent films were extinct! Silent film stars, directors, musicians, and non-talkie theater locations went silent

themselves. The public had spoken for sound.

Several years later radio found itself threatened by television. Radio networks feared that the combined audio and video signals of TV would put them out of business. There were some dislocations, but radio did not die.

The comparison between silent films and radio is instructive. When people had a choice between a solitary auditory signal (radio) or an auditory signal combined with a visual signal they favored the combination, but still patronized the audio signal. Conversely, when people had a choice between a solely visual signal (silent films) or one combined with audio, they, by acclimation, chose the combined signal. TV AFFECTED radio. Talkies DESTROYED silent film. Sound won.

Sound Wins Again

Home video games had been around since the late 1970s when Atari introduced the home video game equivalent of the silent film: "Pong." Pong offered a limited visual presence, and more importantly, an auditory signal that consisted of only a single "pong" as the electronic ball bounced from side to side.

Home video games progressed from this simple beginning, becoming more interactive and visually stimulating, while largely ignoring the auditory signal. Like silent films, home video games didn't emanate warmth. And also like silent films, the bottom fell out of the home video game market. By 1984 American stores were refusing to carry video games.

And then in 1985 something revolutionary happened. Nintendo introduced gamers to the Super Mario Brothers. By 1990, Mario the Italian plumber was recognized by more American children than Mickey Mouse!

Super Mario Brothers succeeded because it was a complete package, offering striking visuals and, more importantly, auditory coherence. Lead designer Shigeru Miyamoto in describing the game's design stated, "The state of mind of a kid when he enters a cave alone must be realized in the game. Going in, he must feel the cold air around him. Not just the experiences but the feelings connected with those events were essential to make the game meaningful." The game's music was instrumental in connecting those feelings.

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Fortunately for live training, it already has an audio signal: the trainer. Unfortunately, listening to that one auditory signal all day makes for really boring training. It's not an accident that we refer to it as "death by lecture."

Film composer George Burt once observed, "When placed together (video and audio) to achieve a common goal, a great deal more is expressed than would be possible by means of either medium alone." Music, when properly inserted into the training environment can lift some of the cold, lifeless quality that often typifies training. Among other usages, music can provide cover for silent activities and small group discussions, announce the beginning and ending of breaks, reflect the emotions of the learning and enhance activities.

Twice in history an audio-visual medium faced a crossroads. In both cases, success resulted when the auditory and the visual signals were integrated. Trainers who, with history as their guide, integrate the auditory component will gain a huge advantage

over the competition. They will never hear complaints about “death by lecture.”

Lenn Millbower is the author of the book, *Training with a Beat: The Teaching Power of Music* and the composer-arranger of *Do You Want To Learn With Music: Game Show Themes for Trainers*, a best selling CD of royalty free music designed for learning environments, *Show Biz Training* (AMACOM, 2003) and numerous industry publications. Permission is granted to reprint this article with proper attribution to Lenn Millbower and Offbeat Training®.

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