

MUSIC THEORY'S ROLE IN MAINSTREAM DIGITAL JOURNALISM

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Slides available at www.alyssabarna.com/research

DELICIOUS

D

F

A^b

C

minor 3rd

Note: May also be interpreted as a minor iv with an added 6th in the bass



Alex Ross ✓

@alexrossmusic

Following



A curious Internet trend of recent years: oversimplified, misleading, or—in this case—wildly erroneous "music theory" explanations of popular songs.

Linda Shaver-Gleason @LindaHyphen

Whoever does the analysis at @ClassicFM has messed up AGAIN. That's a plagal cadence, not a perfect or authentic one.
twitter.com/meganlavengood...

12:06 PM - 20 Nov 2017

21 Retweets 80 Likes



7



21



80



OUTLINE OF THE PRESENTATION

I. Problems

II. Examples

III. Journalism

IV. The Pitch

PROBLEMS

Where have all the theorists gone?

Who is writing the articles?

What is a music theorist?

Answer:

Give the people what they want.

EXAMPLES

“8. Displaced Guitar Rhythm in “Let Down” (1997-5, 2:11)

In the first chorus the lead guitar plays a three-note melody starting on a high A (A–G#–E). It happens right on beat 1, but in the second chorus, it gets moved back a beat early, beginning on beat 4 of the previous bar.

Why? To my ears, the misplaced high A actually *foreshadows* the song’s climax: Yorke’s heroic ascent to that same high A in the third verse (“one DAY”).”

EXAMPLES

"1. Euclidean rhythms in "Pyramid Song" (2001-2, throughout)

Why has more ink been spilled on this rhythm than any other moment in Radiohead's catalog? Like the Golden Ratio in music, it's because of a special geometry. The five chords are arranged unevenly over 16 beats as 3+3+4+3+3. It's longer in the middle than the ends, just like a pyramid, and, just like a pyramid has four sides of 3 angles and one side with 4 angles, this rhythm has four chords lasting 3 beats and one lasting 4 beats. Coincidence? Maybe not: both of these pyramid shapes can be explained through the Euclidean algorithm—a mathematical formulation nearly as ancient as the pyramids themselves."

Dua Lipa's "New Rules" Is This Year's Ultimate Lament for a Fuckboy

The song may be in a minor key but its message is upbeat: Screw sadness, don't answer the phone, not my loss.

"Both 'New Rules' and 'Dido's Lament' are in a minor key, which is a common and traditional method of conveying sadness."

"There's an ascending bass-line which is quite nice, and a quite a common technique, but I think that's really nice, just this moving up the scale every half bar or something."

DIGITAL JOURNALISM

Pitches should be short (ca. 300 words or less)

Have a social media presence

Demonstrate a sensitivity to tone

Respect the editor-writer relationship

Consider the issue of readership fluency

Google your topic

Do not cut down the work of others

LINGO

Evergreen

Peg

Hot Take

Topic vs. story

Headlines (Hed)

THE PITCH

Hi Jacob,

I am Lily's on-call music theorist and friend; I heard that you guys were discussing iPhone ringtones, and I love the idea of doing a story about them because they're fragments of music that people coexist with everyday. I like the idea of potentially doing this right before Apple's developer conference in early June, because it will be a time when people have Apple on their mind and are looking for anything to read.

What I can offer in a story would be an analysis of a few of the most popular ringtones (Opening, Marimba, Xylophone - or others!) that focuses on pitch and rhythm, like how the rhythm of the ringtones works to both destabilize, but continually engage our attention, encouraging us to pick up the phone. I can provide some basic (i.e. readable by non-musicians) rhythmic transcriptions to show this, too.

There are a few great academic studies on this that I can support this with: an entire book on ringtone culture (called the *Ringtone Dialectic* by Sumanth Gopinath...it includes a discussion of the role of ringtones in film as well), and how the repetition affects perception (Elizabeth Margulis, *On Repeat*). Obviously I would summarize and make these arguments accessible to the readers, and I think discussing the role of ringtones in film/TV is particularly cool.

I think we've discussed how writing for mainstream outlets is part of a broader initiative I'm working on to figure out how to share more of what we work on in academic music theory with the general public. Which is just to say that I really welcome your feedback or suggestions about directions for a piece. It's all really helpful to me.

Best,
Alyssa

No, iPhone ringtones aren't bad. They're musically sophisticated.



Apple CEO Tim Cook at the Apple Worldwide Developers Conference Monday, June 4, 2018, in San Jose, Calif. (Marcio Jose Sanchez/AP)



By **Alyssa Barna**

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June 7

Appendix 1: Selected Bibliography

Appendix 2: Suggested Digital Publications

Appendix 3: Some Journalism Lingo

www.alyssabarna.com/research

Appendix 1: Selected Bibliography

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Appendix 2: Suggested Digital Publications

- Slate (http://www.slate.com/articles/briefing/slate_fare/2017/10/how_to_pitch_slate.html)
- Noisey (Vice)
- Rolling Stone
- Vox
- Jezebel (feminist/women's/gender topics)
- Wired (Culture, nerd culture, e.g. Ludomusicology topics)
- Classic FM (vague)
- NY Magazine
- Complex
- Pitchfork
- Stereogum
- NPR Music
- Fader
- NME

Appendix 3: Some Journalism Lingo

- **Evergreen:** A story that has flexibility to run at an undetermined time.
- **Peg:** A timely/time sensitive piece: the peg is the "why you're doing this now." For example, "Pegged to the Superbowl, I'd like to write about Renee Fleming's performance..."
- **Hot Take:** Topical opinion piece; motivated clicks; often contrarian; time sensitive
- **Take:** An (less time sensitive) analytical contribution
- **Topic vs. story:** A story is timely, urgent, uses a human character, and is relevant. A topic is more evergreen. Editors prefer stories.
- **Headlines:** Editors generally write headlines. If you had a fully realized and catchy headline you could pitch, that could be helpful if you've studied the headlines the publication has used before. Sometimes when considering your story, editors will ask what the headline could be and visualize it.