**“The Sound of Whedon: the influence of Joss Whedon’s early television series on TV scoring”.**

Janet K Halfyard

Paper give at Euroslayage: sixth biennial Slayage conference on the Whedonverses at Kingston University, July 2016

When *Buffy* came along in the late 1990s, television music was not at all as it is today. One of the important differences between then and now lies in the use of musical themes. During the 1980s and through much of the 1990s, the received wisdom was that, with few exceptions, it was not feasible to use recurrent musical themes in TV scores, by which I mean a theme that appears in more than one episode. This seems to have stemmed from two different but complementary perceptions about music as a problem in TV. Firstly over the span of a series, a regularly repeated theme might simply become annoyingly intrusive. Secondly, quality TV shows avoided underscoring scenes because, as Robert Thompson observes in his discussion of quality TV in the US in the 1980s, among the key identifiers of quality TV was a focus on writing – dialogue - and a desire for realism; and music, with its potential to mask dialogue and its ability to emotionally manipulate an audience in a way that does not happen in real life, was therefore something that rather worked against the ethos of shows like L. A. Law and thirtysomething. The result was that in quality TV, music mostly operated quite literally at the edges of scenes, a segue providing continuity across the narrative gap as we cut to a new scene.

Meanwhile, the big cult TV show of the 1980s was the rebooted *Star Trek* franchise, and here too, perhaps surprisingly, music was perceived as a potential problem. In the vast majority of episode scores, the only recurring theme is variation on the theme

tune itself. Other melodic ideas are specific to the episode and do not recur. This strategy was promoted by the franchise producer, Rick Berman, who (as Jeff Bond notes) felt 'the scoring style of the original series was too melodramatic, and that the use of this same approach in the new show was undermining the carefully-constructed reality of the program' (168) – this is a moment in cult's move toward quality TV. Berman strongly encouraged his composers to write in a much more unobtrusive way, avoiding percussion, loudness and memorable melodies, and most especially avoiding the reuse of themes from one episode to the next.

The first season of *Buffy* in 1997 was musically very conventional for TV at the time: each episode score used musical material that did not repeat in later episodes. This changed when Christophe Beck began composing for season 2: from the very start, he wrote with a greater level of musical intricacy and detail, and developed a gentle, minor key piano vocabulary for Buffy and Angel which turned into a fully fledged theme halfway through the season in 'Surprise'. However, Beck's use of theme was quite unlike what you would find in a film score, and suggests he was well aware of the danger that a recurring theme would simply become intrusive. He combined the conventional episode specific themes with a very small number of distinctive long melodic themes written and then placed to make it pretty much impossible not to notice their presence, the best known of which is the Buffy/ Angel theme. The way Beck got around the obtrusiveness issue was by using these themes very infrequently, and at times it seems to me he makes a conscious decision not to use a theme at a moment that seems entirely appropriate specifically because he wants to save it for when it will have most impact.

After *Buffy*, the use of musical themes in cult TV scoring rapidly became normal, most notably in scores like *Lost, Battlestar Galactica, Dexter, True Blood* and *Game of Thrones*. All of those series, however, take a quite different approach to *Buffy* in order to get round the "I've heard this theme so often it's getting really boring" problem. These shows have 30 to 50 themes jostling for space in the score so you won't hear any one of them often enough to get bored with it. The music of Buffy had a really important role in bring theme into TV scoring in these shows, even if their overall strategy for using them was different; but there is a show which has taken an enormous leaf out of the Buffy music playbook, and that is *Supernatural*, the most successful cult TV show of the TV3 era if one measures it in numbers of episodes, now in its 11th season and renewed for a 12th.

There are three important and in their different ways, innovative elements to the *Buffy* musical strategy: the use of a restricted thematic score that saves themes for importantly emotional moments; occasional shifts into other genres where music plays a really important role in facilitating that shift (Hush, Once more with feeling, Selfless); and the use of popular music to define the Bronze and establish a sense of the authentic musical environment that the characters themselves inhabit, rather than the more usual strategy of needle-dropping hits with which the audience is already not just familiar but to which has an existing personal affiliation.

*Supernatural* picks up all three of these elements in its musical strategy although not always in an obvious way. Popular music, now 1970s classic rock (a bizarrely anti-intuitive choice given that the target demographic of the CW is the female 18-34 audience), is again located in a specific space, namely the Impala – there is a

really strong connection between the car and the music, both of them ‘classic’ in their own ways, the classic ‘muscle’ car and the classic, muscular rock. There is an equally strong connection with Dean: his car, his music – and in the same way that the music of *Buffy* centred on Buffy herself (quite naturally, as the central character), the music of *Supernatural* centres on Dean, both the rock music, a musical identity he inherited from his father John, and the themes in the soundtrack. Sam is often a curiously musically empty space – we have very little idea what music he listens to, and he does not seem to have ownership of any of the themes the way Dean does.

For a show galloping toward its 250th episode, there is a tiny group of recurrent themes, about half a dozen. One of the things I really love about the *Supernatural* themes is how difficult they are to stick labels on. In Buffy, the themes sometimes look like they can be labeled easily and those labels turn out to be too blunt or possibly just plain wrong – the Buffy/ Angel love theme is a case in point in that it is mostly a theme about loss, not love; and most of Buffy’s themes are positioned in the most emotionally vulnerable parts of the narrative landscape. It’s exactly the same in *Supernatural* – the score avoids the plethora of character and place themes found in shows like *BSG* and *Game of Thrones* and instead uses a tiny number of conceptual themes: so, one which I am currently calling ‘The Agony of the Mission’ is first heard in the teaser of the pilot episode as John and child Dean watch the burning house in which Dean’s mother has just died, the event that leads John to become a hunter in order to avenge her death; its most recent appearance was in season 10, episode 22, beside Charlie Bradbury’s funeral pyre as Dean unequivocally blames Sam for her death and swears he will avenge her – he

seems to find his mission again in his fury and agony over her death, as John originally found his in Mary's. More than 200 episodes separate those two uses of that theme, and yet the resonances of the narrative connections are still strong. That's memory.

Likewise, another theme which I'm not certain I have pinned down conceptually yet but let's call it 'Dying Twice is Hard to Do', appears very infrequently but I think the first time we hear it is as Bobby Singer sits by the funeral pyre of his wife, who he killed many years ago when she was possessed and has had to kill for the second time when she returned as a sort of zombie in the middle of season 5.

[example]

By the middle of season 7, Bobby himself is dead, and a ghost. As the boys discuss what they are going to do about him, we hear the theme again, reminding us of Karen, reminding us that Bobby may have died once but his death is also not yet complete.

[example]

The single most frequently used theme, however, is less conceptually slippery but still hard to put a label on, as evidenced by one blogger's description of it as the catchy 'Dean's family dedication theme'. I know what he is trying to say. The theme is about how Dean feels about his family, and that is very complex. There is love, regret, fear of abandonment, a sense of obligation and of failure, of loyalty and resentment, all bound up in one little theme. It first appears at the end of season 1; thereafter, in about four episodes per season, so it never quite goes out of mind but it never suffers from overuse

We hear it in relation to all members of his family and his complicated relationships with them: for example

- at the start of season 2, when Dean is on the verge of death and John ultimately sacrifices himself [example]
- at the end of the penultimate episode of season two, when Sam dies in Dean's arms [example]
- in season 5, when Dean is transported into his childhood memories of his long dead mother; and in season 7 we in fact hear it in relation to Bobby Singer, whose ghost is anchored to the world of the living by his old hip flask: he's been a surrogate father to the boys, and Dean's attachment and loss is signaled by the theme even as he fails to see Bobby.

Themes in *Buffy* and *Supernatural*, then, are not used as character and place labels: instead, they transport us to a particular place in the emotional landscape of the series; and like *Buffy*, *Supernatural*'s themes tend to describe a landscape of loss and emotional vulnerability that contrasts with the popular music and the 'horror scoring' that both series also use.

One other thing they have in common is a playful experimentalism. *Buffy* really pitched high on that front, with Hush, The Body and Once more with Feeling. Various other TV shows have done genre episodes, with mixed success – the musicals episodes of *Pysch* and *Sanctuary* were well meant but one was pointless and the other pointless and dreadful. *Supernatural*, meanwhile does it rather well, with 'special' episodes that are fully integrated into the narrative rather than standing separate from it, such as Monster Movie, Changing Channels and Fan

Fiction, all of which particularly use music as part of the experiment; and if you have never seen the spoof title-sequence song for the show as a supernatural sitcom that opens Changing Channels, run to youtube.

I want to finish by looking briefly at Fan Fiction, episode 200, because I think one of the most important things in Whedon's influence on television was the way it gave permission to experiment, to push what an audience may or may not be willing to accept, and *Supernatural* has continued that legacy of playful experiment, nowhere more clearly than in the way it wrote fandom into the show. *Buffy* itself had an enormously important role in the way TV shows interacted with fans through the fansite the Bronze, where Whedon and others from the production team took part in online forums; but *Supernatural* took this to a whole new level in season 4 with the introduction of the prophet Chuck, a pulp fiction writer who was unwittingly not writing fiction but writing down his visions of the Winchesters, with the result that his books reproduce the TV series as a book series located within the show itself, and with a diegetic fan base who know every detail of the Winchesters' lives but assume none of it is real. 'Fan Fiction' is an episode where some high school fans of the books are putting on their musical version of *Supernatural*, with all the characters played by teenage girls. In the finale of the episode and the musical, after the big bad has been defeated, the dialogue between the on-stage Sam and Dean, itself a recreation of actual dialogue we heard in season 1, is allowed to stand in place of what Sam wants to say to Dean at this point; and this is followed by an onstage rendition of Carry On, My Wayward Son by the girls. [example]

On one level, one has to ask how can this song be here? This appears in every season finale but only in the extra-diegetic soundtrack of the TV show; books do not have soundtracks, and this song is not played by Dean on his car stereo in any episode we see. But setting that to one side, it actually could not, should not have been any other song. Because this is, to all intents and purposes, the series theme tune, the only piece of music that regularly appears at the top of a show that has only a 10 second ident as its usual opening title. It (normally) only appears once per season but no other piece of music holds such a privileged and iconic position in the show – it operates as much as a theme marking the moment of narrative climax in the season finale as Dean's theme points to his emotional vulnerability. Here, marking not the start of the episode but its end, not the season climax but the series reaching its 200th episode, we have it musically transformed, reflected back at us in a way that allows it to generate new meaning – for the first time, Sam and Dean hear this song sung about them, recognizing themselves in it just as we hear a familiar song made unfamiliar as it sung to us in our own voices, the voices of the fans.

And I don't think we would have a series as musically interesting as *Supernatural* without Joss Whedon: he opened a lot of doors for television, and the musical one was very important. The best of Whedon's TV legacy lies in the shows that do not simply imitate his own contributions but which, like *Supernatural*, continue to innovate and invent in his wake.