



Activity 1 – Musical Apologies

What is a musical apology?

When we think of an apology, we tend to think of an expression of regret for having done something wrong. However, apologies are actually quite complex sets of actions: in addition to the expression of regret, they tend to include an explanation of what was wrong, an acknowledgement of responsibility, an offer of repair, and/or a request for forgiveness. Apologies are usually made by one person to another or by one group to another group and they often aim at restoring relationships that have been broken. Although not all apologies 'work' in the sense of restoring relationships, the ability and willingness to say 'sorry' when one has done something wrong is a key feature of communal life.

In one sense, a musical apology is an apology that has been set to music. This suggests that a musical apology can be thought of as a 'genre' of musical pieces that are interpreted as communicating similar feelings as a spoken apology might do.

How can we tell if an apology 'works'?

Initially, it may seem as though whether or not a particular apology (musical or otherwise) is successful is either irrelevant or impossible to determine; after all, scholars don't ordinarily seek out situations where apologies are offered and ask everyone to write down how they feel! Yet, in our everyday lives, we regularly evaluate apologies according to criteria such as the apologizer's perceived sincerity and appropriateness of the apology. We often do this unconsciously. When we have been the recipients of a sincere and appropriate apology our feelings about the hurtful event can be changed; conversely, when we feel as though we have been hurt and those who have hurt us either ignore us or refuse to apologise, feelings of resentment and anger can build up.

Musical apologies can offer an opportunity for individuals and social groups to come together through participating in an emotionally significant activity. For instance, later in this set of exercises you will be introduced to a song composed as part of racial reconciliation efforts in Australia. In this case, performing "Sorry Song" as a musical apology is intended to acknowledge and heal the wounds left by past wrongs in order that the community can become more united and healthy. However, even on an individual level, making an appropriate and timely apology can have a significant impact on our relationships with those around us. Even though most of the time when we apologise we say it with words, some scholars have suggested that the act of putting words to music can help us communicate difficult things. Thus 'singing' our apologies to each other might actually help us communicate!



How can we evaluate musical apologies?

This section introduces you to some of the materials and methods used to analyse music. You'll be using these in the activities, so feel free to refer back to them later.

Materials

What sort of 'materials' do we study in music? In other words, what is music made of?

Sound: This includes timbre or quality of sound, instrumentation, and production elements. This may vary between live and recorded performances.

Structure: In Western art music this kind of analysis is often based on a written record such as a score; however, it is possible to analyse musical structure without one, eg. by listening closely to a recording or live performance. How are the sounds arranged? What do their relationships to each other reveal? Is this structure shared with other pieces of music?

Text: The most obvious kind of text musicologists deal with are the lyrics in texted works. Sometimes these are like poetry, sometimes they are like prose, and sometimes they are unintelligible or make no sense! What might these different characteristics signify? Is the composer also the lyricist? What about the performer?

Visual elements: What do you notice when music is performed? What performance behaviours are there? How do performers present themselves on stage (clothes, gestures, etc.)? What are the audiences' reactions?

Context: This is a broad category covering all the ways a performance of music might be related to its surroundings. Important questions might include: what is its history? Who performs it, where, and in what context? Who composed it and under what circumstances?

Methods

Ethnography/digital ethnography: Initially developed in social anthropology, ethnography attempts to describe and analyse a way of life or culture, often through direct observation. Ethnographic methods include case studies, participant-observation, and life history. Digital ethnography refers to the study of cultural groups as they form online (for example, online forums for people who listen to particular bands) and, less-commonly, to ethnographic work conducted online (often alongside in-person observation).

Structural analysis: A form of analysis that looks closely at how the music is put together. Structural analysis is often (but not always) based on a score and draws on concepts and vocabulary from music theory.



Performance/performativity analysis: A holistic form of analysis that includes the artist's production of sounds and movements; persona (stage presence), technical competence, and style; it also includes elements like the acoustics and physical set-up of the performing space, audience seating, lighting, contributions of the director, sound technicians, etc.—everyone involved in bringing the performance to be.

Reception: Reception histories examine the critical responses people have to music as well as the language they use to describe their experiences. These can range from published reviews by professional music critics through to a composer's description of a work or even casual comments made by listeners on social media. Theories of reception offer a way to understand how musical meaning and value is socially constructed.

Tasks

The following questions are designed to get you thinking creatively about musical apologies. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers but working through them will help prepare you for the activities that follow in this resource.

1. Take some time to think about your own experiences of apologies. Has anyone ever said 'I'm sorry' to you through music? Have you ever tried to use music as a way of apologising to someone else? In what kinds of relationships do you think a musical apology would be most suitable?
2. Can you think of any examples of 'apology' pieces of music? What are the characteristics of these pieces? What makes them appropriate for apologising?