THE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUFFY STUDIES 1.4 Four

Janet K. Halfyard

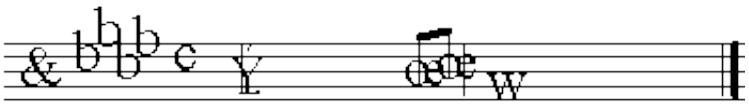
Love, Death, Curses and Reverses (in F minor): Music, Gender, and Identity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*

PDF Version

(1) Music plays an important role at a number of different levels in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. There is a great deal of source or diegetic music in the series, mainly issuing from The Bronze, very much the characters' "third place." In fact, in seasons one through three, we spend more time with the "Scooby Gang" at The Bronze than in any other place except the school and its library. Music in this environment forms part of the characters' sense of identity, a youth sub-culture defined by its music, very much "music their parents wouldn't like."[1] Giles appears at The Bronze in the pilot episode and thereafter is notable for his absence from it. In "Wild at Heart" (4006), his appearance, immediately following Willow's comment that The Bronze is the "one place that you can come back to where everything's predictable" serves to underline the very abnormality of his presence, an adult in their space.

(2) The role of diegetic music as a means of constructing identities is also present in the representation of music-making as a liberating act, a freedom from social constrictions: it is significant that both the werewolves, Oz and Verucca, are musicians in bands that play at the Bronze; and, again in "Wild at Heart," having seen Giles' record collection, Oz defends Giles' presence there on the grounds that "he was an animal in his day."

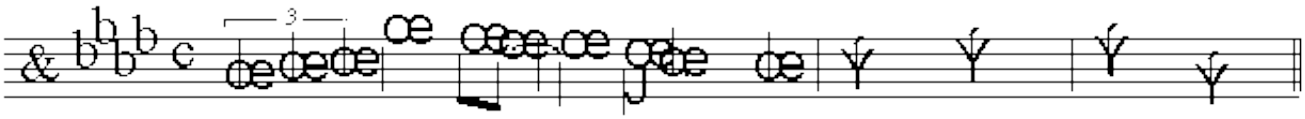
(3) The non-diegetic music also plays a role in the construction of identity in the season. This essay examines how identity is both constructed and reflected in the music of *BtVS* and the companion series, *Angel*, focusing on the opening credit sequences of both series and the theme tunes that are therefore closely identified with not just the series but with their title characters. The music can be looked at from two different perspectives: in terms of the relationship of these themes to each other and to other music associated with horror genres; and in terms of how music itself can communicate information to the audience about the identity of the character it represents. The first four notes of Nerf Herder's theme for BtVS's opening credits carry a wealth of intertextual associations:



(4) Firstly, there is the instrument itself: we have the sound of an organ, accompanied by a wolf's howl, with a visual image of a flickering night sky overlaid with unintelligible archaic script: the associations with both the silent era and films such as *Nosferatu* and with the conventions of the Hammer House of Horror and horror in general are unmistakable.

(5) The organ has become a signifier for horror, starting with its explicit diegetic use in *Phantom of the Opera*, and then becoming a feature of horror in its own right, with Dr Jekyll playing the organ in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1932) and the sound of the organ becoming synonymous with Hammer Horror in the 1960s and 70s. In more recent times, the use of the organ has become both a comic and ironic gesture, found in films such as the comedies *The 'Burbs* (1988) and *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* (1996), as well as more obvious Hammer successors like *House on Haunted Hill* (1999). The theme of *BtVS* starts with this organ horror signifier but then instantly changes its message. It removes itself from the sphere of 1960s and 70s horror by replaying the same motif, the organ now supplanted by an aggressively strummed electric guitar, relocating itself in modern youth culture, relocating the series in an altogether different arena than that of both Hammer and its spoofs.

(6) The theme for *Angel* is, on the surface, entirely different from that of *BtVS*: tempo and texture are certainly noticeably different from the driving forces of Buffy's music. However, not only are both themes in the same key, F minor, but the first four notes, which in *BtVS* are the notes from which the entire theme tune is derived, are also the first four notes of *Angel's* theme, the fourth note (E flat) be transposed up an octave in *Angel*'s music, rising instead of falling as it does in *BtVS*:



(7) Whereas Buffy's basic theme is only four notes, Angel's is, interestingly enough, 13 notes long,[2] that 13 and all its associations with bad luck and the forces of evil providing a neat (if probably unintentional) metaphor for his status as demon. The similarities of key and motif between *BtVS* and *Angel* are a thinly disguised means of reasserting the eternal bond between the two characters—although they are separated (into two series, apart from anything else), they will always be connected: the shared motif stands as a symbol of their love and also of their separation. The differences between these themes, however, are just as interesting and speak more clearly to the idea of music as identity.

(8) One of the most striking differences between the two theme tunes is their mood. Buffy's theme is for amplified rock band, and the melodic line is carried by an increasingly frenetic electric guitar. Angel's theme is more obviously lyrical, slower paced and written largely for acoustic instruments: piano and cello dominate the melodic line. One could easily argue the appropriateness of this on the grounds that Buffy is a modern girl, and therefore more likely to listen to the kind of music heard in her theme, identifying with it and being identified by it on grounds of her youth and chosen cultural environment, particularly the Bronze. Angel, meanwhile, is an 18th century Irish vampire: rock music is certainly not "his" music in terms of his somewhat unusual age group or culture, and so a more classical and slightly Irish-folk sounding theme is one that he might identify with more readily. However, what cannot be ignored about the two themes is that it can be argued that Buffy's music is coded male, and Angel's is coded female.

(9) Some of the most systematic work on audience reception of film and television music has been done by Philip Tagg with Bob Clarida and Annahid Kassabian. Tagg's reception test is impressively straightforward: ten tunes (taken from a range of film, TV, and popular music) are played, and participants are asked to write down any verbal-visual associations (VVAs) that occur to them in response to the music. This test was carried out between 1979 and 1986 with groups of students in Sweden (92% were Swedish). 70% of them had no formal musical training and had for the most part not encountered this music before, so could not be influenced in their responses by knowledge of the films and TV programs for which the music had been written.

(10) The test generated a large amount of data, and of the various analyses that have resulted from it; of the most interest here is Tagg's 1989 paper, "An Anthropology of Stereotypes in TV Music?" This puts forward an analysis of gender-associative responses to certain kinds of music by establishing which tunes produced VVAs of a man or men, which of a woman or women, and which of mixed-sex couples. To summarize, from this it appeared that four of the ten tunes might be characterized as "female," in that they produced significantly more female VVAs than male; that the VVAs of four of the other tunes were predominantly male; and that two could not clearly be categorized. Using the four "male" and four "female" tunes, the music's characteristics were analyzed to see if there were musical qualities common to the two groups of tunes. Bearing in mind the music of *BtVS* and *Angel*, these are some of Tagg's findings:

Musical parameter	**Male characteristic**	**Female characteristic**
Tempo	Faster	Slower
Note values[3]	shorter (therefore appearing faster)	longer (therefore appearing slower)
Rhythm	more rhythmic irregularities (e.g. syncopations, repeated notes)	more regular: normal dottings and divisions of note groups.
Phrasing	Staccato, quick repeating notes	Legato, smooth and flowing
Dynamics	Same volume throughout	Phrases get louder, then softer
Instruments(melody)	electric guitar, synthesizer, trumpet, percussion	strings (e.g. violin and cello), flute, piano
Instruments (accompaniment)	Strumming guitars, brass, synths, percussion	Strings, piano, woodwind

(11) The above is, in many ways, a very good description of the two theme tunes under discussion here, but with Buffy's corresponding far more closely to the male category and Angel's to the female. In particular, the audible pulse of *BtVS* is around 200 beats per minute, while *Angel* is closer to 126. Note values in *BtVS* are noticeably shorter than those in *Angel*. The basic pulse of *BtVS* is subdivided into two throughout the accompaniment and even in the final stages of melody line, making the music seem to increase in tempo towards the end. Angel's music is smooth and flowing, with a dynamic shape to the phrases and a melodic line that concentrates on cello and piano; Buffy's music remains at a similar volume throughout, although it gradually gets higher in pitch; and it uses the rock band line up implied by the male side of Tagg's analysis. In terms of rhythm, it has both male and female qualities in that it is characterized by "male" repeated notes (strumming) and "female" regularity. In that it is significantly syncopated, Angel's melody also has characteristics associated with male rhythm.

(12) Tagg also describes the shape of the melodies in the study. Male melodies tend to have their highest notes on the first accented note of the complete motif, which is hard to argue for the theme of *BtVS*, but neither does it describe *Angel*'s melody. However, female melodies, Tagg observes, have either an "up-and-back-down" or "down-and-back-up" contour, and have "generally descending tendencies," which may include drops of as much as a sixth that aren't found in the equivalent male motives. Angel's theme is clearly of the "up-and-back-down" variety and it rises for only three notes before descending for six, rising for another two and then dropping suddenly by a fifth: the trajectory of the melody is very much downward, the final note being considerably lower than the starting note. While Buffy's theme is made up of fournote motifs which often end on a note lower than the starting note, the theme as a whole has an unquestionably rising tendency, so while the melodic shape does not obviously fit the male pattern, it is also not obviously female, while Angel's is.[4]

(13) This musical gender reversal leads to the question of whether it is a reflection of similar reversals in the characters' coding within the narrative: are Buffy and Angel gender-reversed in the way their characters are positioned and portrayed?

(14) Representation of Buffy as a heroine reveals how she rewrites the rules of the heroic in relation to the female. In fact, some of the differences in *BtVS* as a whole become more apparent when it is set alongside a superficially comparable series such as *Charmed*. Both have strong female protagonists with "special powers" and a mission to protect the world from evil; both are supported by supernatural men whose very nature makes normal romantic relationships highly problematic, Leo the "White Lighter" being the rough equivalent of Angel (although Leo also combines this role with characteristics of the "Watcher"). Nevertheless, one only has to look slightly closer to see that the two series are positioned very differently, not least by the fact that in *Charmed*, there are very rigid boundaries separating good and evil: in direct opposition to the moral codes of *BtVS*, in *Charmed* it is a very much a case of "demons bad, people good," a position that *BtVS* explicitly rejects.[5]

(15) Other aspects of Buffy's position in relation to the Halliwell sisters are also interesting in terms of Buffy as new kind of female hero. *Charmed*'s heroines are a trio of young women who work in collaboration, their powers mutually complementary; Buffy essentially works alone. The principal members of the "Scooby Gang" support her, but their role is often peripheral or takes the form of providing distractions: Willow's use of the internet and her spell casting both fall into this category; Xander is frequently perceived as a hindrance and his best form of help comes from his passive pseudo-memory of tactical knowledge rather than any ability to act; Giles is essentially a walking reference library. The *Charmed* trio's mutual interdependence (they can only perform advanced magic together, drawing on "the power of three") reinforces the idea of women as sociable, working best in cooperative groups, while Buffy's fundamental aloneness corresponds more closely to classical ideas of the hero. Luke Skywalker, Indiana Jones and even Superman (particularly in his 1990s TV incarnation) all have their support networks of friends who provide them with information, technical and emotional support (as well as providing distractions to create opportunities for the hero to act), but when it comes down to the moment of confrontation, the hero must prevail alone. This scenario is repeated in the relationship between Buffy and her gang as well as in the perpetual problem of her super-powers being a source of friction in her relationships. Even in the penultimate episode of Season Four ("Primeval," 4021), when the Scooby Gang perform their most daring spell ever to allow Buffy to draw on the combined powers of all the Slayers, she is physically separate, the only character actively engaged in the confrontation with Adam. The gang are in another room, lending passive, psychic support to Buffy as narrative agent, a role traditionally associated with male agency rather than female, and this is one of the reasons that Buffy appears to acquire the characteristics more of the hero rather than of the heroine. The whole question of power and agency is also differently defined between the Halliwells and Buffy. Their strength is supernatural, magical, a power of mind and spirit which seems a more obvious type of power for a woman to possess, as in terms of physical strength, women cannot compete with men—except, of course, that Buffy can. Her power lies in *preternatural* strength which is therefore defined not as magical but out of the ordinary course of nature: she is superhuman, not a witch. Her agency lies not in the mind (there is always a measure of surprise when Buffy gets good grades) but in physical strength, again putting her more clearly in the realm of male action heroes.

(16) The politics of her sexual behavior also cross a conventional gender boundary, corresponding more to what we might associate with male behavior in film and TV narratives than female. As has been observed by Gina Wisker:

> Buffy does not buy into the conventional safety constructions of young women in conventional horror. . . . she is a modern young woman without either being a pure virginal character or a rampant femme fatale.

In the same way that both the filmic Batman and James Bond, in his Dalton and Brosnan incarnations, have a moral code that allows them to have one romantic relationship in each film, so Buffy is (quite literally) serially monogamous, Angel being her partner in the early seasons and Riley more recently. In managing to negotiate a space for herself in which she can have more than one sexual relationship without appearing to compromise the moral integrity her calling demands, she places herself in a territory traditionally reserved for heroes, for whom sexual partners—"getting the girl"—have always been an expected perk of the hero's job. This is not to say that Buffy is in any way not female, but that her behavior, her narrative function and her music all indicate a subversion of behaviors, narratives, and music that are more usually a male preserve. This is, perhaps, the essence of her "girl-power" (Wisker), the appropriation for herself of territory (and music) that has previously been largely unavailable to women.

(17) Angel's position is equally unusual, and this reflects the ambivalence of his music. Again, much is revealed by returning to the comparison with the composition of the group in both *BtVS* and *Charmed*. Buffy's gang is a rather amorphous body: there are the four main characters, but also a variety of hangers-on, which include Angel himself, Faith, Anya, Tara, Oz, Riley and even Spike. Angel's "gang," however, is a very consistent three, even if a different three in the first and second halves of Season One, Doyle being replaced by Wesley.[6] However, the profile of *Angel*'s trio, especially in Season Two, is surprisingly similar to that of *Charmed*'s. "Seriousness" runs in direct correlation to age with Angel and *Charmed*'s Prue as the "most serious" and least likely to smile, characters who hold the position of most responsibility and authority within the group. Cordelia and Phoebe, the two youngest characters in each trio, are both viewed (without necessarily a great deal of evidence) as the most prone to irresponsibility, even if Phoebe is less of an archetypal airhead than Cordelia has always been set up as; and Wesley and Piper hold the middle ground, displaying varying levels of both sense and silliness, although the difference is most dramatic in Wesley, where his fluctuation between competence and incompetence is frequently used to comic effect.

(18) The same pattern runs true on an active/ passive power scale. Angel and Prue have the most developed powers and greatest physical strength derived from supernatural sources, Prue being able to move objects (e.g. hurl people against walls), as well as being able to astrally project herself—neither of her sisters has more than one power. Piper can "freeze" everything and everyone around her, so while she cannot act directly, she can prevent (or delay) others acting against her. Comparably, Wesley has the Watcher's knowledge (which often serves a similar purpose) and a fair degree of physical strength with which to make an impact, if a less profound one than Angel. Meanwhile, Phoebe and Cordelia share a near identical and entirely passive gift: each is subject to visions of innocents in need of help.

(19) Where Buffy ultimately acts alone, Angel is more dependent on his group in order to be able to act: Cordelia provides

(19) Where Buffy ultimately acts alone, Angel is more dependent on his group in order to be able to act. Cordelia provides him with the impetus for action, whereas the Scoobies tend to respond to danger after it appears. Likewise, where Buffy's group tends to shift to include temporary and "part-time" members, Angel's is much more of a fixed entity, working more like the cooperative female group of the *Charmed* sisters; and although both trios have a support group of friends, particularly police contacts, none of them are ever truly brought into the group: they may assist, but they always remain outside the core of three. This is also an explicitly female construct: heroes (with the possible exception of Batman and Robin) do not work in permanently formed groups, whereas supernatural females have been working in groups of three since the Greeks: the Fates, Gorgons, Graeae, Hesperides and Furies are all trios of magical sisters, and the model for others throughout Western history from the three witches of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to the three of *Charmed*: and the familial aspect of the various "three sisters" can be carried over to Angel's realization, through Cordelia's assertion at the end of *Angel* Season Two that he, Wesley, and Cordelia are themselves a family unit.

(20) This formation of a cooperative, mutually interdependent group, then, is one aspect of "female" coding in *Angel* that can be seen mirrored between the musical and narrative constructs. In addition to his distinctly gender-ambivalent name, some of the "feminized" qualities that are most obviously attributed to Angel himself relate to his curse, which simultaneously prevents him from functioning either as a vampire or as a human. His moral code, imposed on him by the acquisition of a soul, means that he cannot bite ("because it's wrong" as Faith might tell us, pretending to be Buffy) and he cannot have sex with the woman he loves lest it make him happy and turn him evil. Given that the vampire's bite is conventionally seen as a sexual metaphor, a sublimation of the erotic impulse, Angel is effectively doubly castrated (voluntarily, on both counts, as it turns out) which, while not making him female certainly doesn't allow him to act as a classically male character. He is forbidden both his primary function as vampire and also as the romantic lead—in both cases "getting the girl" is not an option he allows himself. Yet, just as Buffy is all woman, if a new kind of heroine, so Angel is clearly a romantic male figure within both narratives; and the music does, in fact, remind us of this. During the title sequence of *Angel*, at the point where David Boreanaz's own name credit is shown over several shots of Angel in action, the (female) cello is replaced as the principal melodic instrument by the (male) electric guitar. This substitution lasts exactly as long as Angel/Boreanaz's personal credits, the cello taking back the melody after four measures as Cordelia's image appears. Angel's various dualities (man/ vampire, lover/ celibate, vulnerable/ immortal) are clearly reflected in the male/female duality of his music's construction.

(21) *BtVS* and its spin-off, *Angel*, have attracted attention because of the way in which they transgress boundaries. It is not necessarily anything so simple as blurring: if a boundary, such as male and female codings in music, is blurred, then it loses its ability to reveal anything meaningful. Instead, *BtVS* and *Angel* acknowledge and even rely on the fact that the boundaries are there but cross them anyway in order to reveal a world more subtle and complex in its construction than film and TV horror narratives have usually allowed. This subversion of long-maintained constructs appears to extend to every level; and so it should probably not surprise us that it can also be found in the music that identifies the title characters.

Bibliography

Gorbman, Claudia. *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1987.

Kassabian, Anahid. *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music.* London: Routledge 2001.

Tagg, Philip "An Anthropology of Stereotypes in TV music?" *Swedish Musicological Journal* 1989: 19-42 http://www.theblackbook.net/acad/tagg/articles/tvanthro.pdf.

Tagg, Philip and Bob Clarida (2000) "The Reception Test," Part 1, chapter 3 in *Ten Little Tunes* 2000 (forthcoming 2001) http://www.theblackbook.net/acad/tagg/bookxtrax/intro3.pdf.

Wisker, Gina "Vampires and School Girls: High School Jinks on the Hellmouth" *Slayage* 2 (2001). http://www.middleenglish.org/slayage/essays/slayage2/wisker.htm.

---

[1] Editors' note: see S. Renee Dechert's essay "This is Oz. He's in a Band": *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Rhetoric of Music" forthcoming in *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

[2] It could be interpreted as 14 but a) the 14th note is the first note of the next phrase and b) that 14th note should simply be another single step fall from the D flat onto the C; instead, it's a leap to the F, in order to begin the second phrase in the same way as the one before.

[3] For the benefit of those unfamiliar with music terminology, note values refers to how the basic beat of the music is subdivided. If the basic beat is a crotchet (quarter note) this can be subdivided into smaller values such as 2 quavers (8th notes) and 4 semi-quavers (16th notes). The smaller the note value, the more sounded notes there are per measure and the faster the music seems to be going.

[4] Tagg makes it clear in his paper that the analysis and its conclusions apply to the 8 tunes that he is considering; and it must be acknowledged that there is quite often a cross over between what he describes as 'female' music and music that is sometimes used to describe heroic men within film soundtracks. However, both Tagg and I are not analyzing underscore music here, but theme tunes, which (as writers such as Gorbman (1987) have pointed out) tend to give the perceiver a great deal of information about the nature of what they are about to watch (e.g. jazz usually implies film noir or some other kind of crime drama) Most film and TV genres are associated with particular musical styles and will give us coded information about the narrative that is to follow.

[5] See, for example, Buffy's argument with Riley in "New Moon Rising" (4019).

[6] Editors' note: in seasons two and three, *Angel's* gang has, of course, added two new members: Gunn and Fred.