

# Do y'wanna 'know' what I 'know'? - A Christmas case study of musical irony

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Spoiler alert – if you love Christmas carols then please read no further. In the book, *The evolution of emotional communication*, Altenmuller, Schmidt, and Zimmermann suggest that emotional responses of basic emotions (e.g. happiness, sadness, anger, fear) are 'remarkably invariant across listeners of different ages' (2013, p.277). Juslin and Sloboda found that 'the ascribed emotion of a music performance could be well predicted from a fairly small set of characteristics, relating to pitch, speed, intensity, and articulation etc.', and that these characteristics are also used to evaluate emotions in a person's speech (Juslin & Sloboda, 2011, p.84). But in *Expression of emotion in music and vocal communication: Introduction to the research topic*, Bhatara, Laukka, and Levitin agree that emotions resulting from incongruent songs (containing incongruent interaction between music and lyrics) are more complex than basic emotions, due to the ironic context from which they are experienced (2014, p.212).

"Incongruent interactions transform meaning from what might be gleaned from listening to either the music or the lyrics alone...incongruent interactions make messages more poignant and can serve as an anthem for social movements...however, incongruent interactions run the risk of listener misinterpretation" (Herrmann and Herbig, 2016, p.72). For example, incongruence can be found in a track entitled *Perfect day* (Reed, 1972), where the subtext of the song alludes to a premise that the singer's day is made 'perfect' from an addiction to opiates. The musical accompaniment is innocent but the lyrical meaning is darker. Another example is *Do you hear what I hear?* made famous by Bing Crosby in the 1960's. On one level, this is simply a contemporary Christmas song, arguably an interpretation of Christian nativity. Lyrical indicators in this carol that corroborate this interpretation include phrases such as "Shepherd boy", "A star dancing in the night", "Mighty king", and "A child shivers in the cold". With the exception of the military style drumming the music accompaniment could easily be described as initially calm, choral and reflective, moving towards a denser climatic finale using strings, a transposition up a minor second, use of a brass section, and increased counterpoint.

Noel Regney and Gloria Shayne Baker composed this carol during the period of unease caused by the Cuban missile crisis and its lyrics reflect a message for peace. Ironically (and anecdotally) Bing Crosby recorded his vocals to the song on November 22, 1963, the day that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas,

Texas (see <https://www.carols.org.uk/do-you-hear-what-i-hear.htm>). Non-congruence is effective in providing the listener with mixed messages, arguably interpreted as irony through a darker twist of a seemingly positive message. In the case of *Do you hear what I hear*, the lyrics "A star, a star, dancing in the night with a tail as big as a kite" now suggests images of war; a nuclear missile heading towards an innocent narrator perhaps, rather than a navigational constellation and interstellar awe. Likewise, the lyrics "A song, song, high above the tree with a voice as big as the sea", infers images of a thermonuclear explosion, rather than a choral culmination.

This was a surprise, and the psychological affect that this song has on me is forever changed. In *Sweet anticipation*, David Huron states, "The phenomenon of 'surprise' represents a failure of expectation. From a biological perspective, surprise is always a bad thing. Even when the surprising outcome turns out to be good, failing to anticipate the outcome means that the brain has failed to provide useful information about possible futures. Predictive failures are therefore cause for biological alarm. If an animal is to be prepared for the future, the best surprise is no surprise" (Huron, 2006, p.21). From a phenomenological perspective, my lived experience of listening to *Do you hear what I hear?* after my hermeneutical epiphany, is quite different from my initial listen - the snare drum has much more significance, clearly inferring military action, and the lyrics far more sobering. The surprise that I felt gave salience to my perception of this track, and has continued to do so every listen since.

## References

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