

How to select music for acts

You can find a lot of information on staging, make-up and routining. But solid information about music and its use is scarce. There are a few who lecture about it, but they can't give crystal clear principles. "Each artist is unique, so there are no rules." Then what is the secret of those who use music very well in their acts?

I am Jan and perform magic on music since I was sixteen. I collect music for years and have spend many hours listening how great performers use music in their acts. I have learnt a lot from that and want to share three rules of thumb that can make your choice for the right music easier.

Many artists put time, effort and money in their acts. They script it and tweak it untill its good, great or perfect. I think music should get the same attention. Once you have a great piece, you can use it for years to come.

Music can support your act and enhance it. But it should never distract. If you see a movie, you hardly notice the music. Many people cannot even remember the music afterwards. The music is not there for itself, it is made to enhance the movie. It should do the same with your act.

From my experience and observations I have deducted three rules of thumb that I use myself and want to share with you. When you use music, it must be:

- 1) stronger then possible patter**
- 2) instantly emotionally recognizable**
- 3) appealing to everyone in your audience**

1) Music or patter

A routine is mostly accompanied by music or patter. A great patter asks for good speech and good script writing. Patter clearly enhances an act. It explains something illogical, it calls for emotions or it fills time. If your act is stronger with music, skip the patter. But if your patter makes the act stronger then with music, it should of course become a speaking act. This differs between artists. Test and you'll know what will work best with your audiences.

Another option is using music while you talk. This can give more atmosphere to the whole act, especially if it's not a humoristic act. A memory can become stronger with the right music in the background. It can evoke feelings from your audience.

2) Instantly emotionally recognizable

An act creates an atmosphere. You want to 'hit' the audience. It should strike them as remarkable, different or ... Required for this is emotion: laughter (comedy), amazement (feel like children again) or fear (dangertricks). Music can deliver the emotinal background for acts in huge varieties.

I do workshops on highschoools and play songs I use for my acts. Every song I use has been carefully chosen. And teenagers immediately say what I had in mind. They can tell instantly if a piece is fun, exciting, dangerous or used for a finale! This is only possible if your music unambiguous and universally recognizable. If people say different things about the same song, or they don't know what to say at all, it's not suitable.

3) Appealing to everyone in your audience

Choose music that is suitable for everyone. There is no music that everybody will like. They don't have to, as long as they don't get irritated by it. In a movie the music is in the background, hardly noticed, but it enhances the movie. Not all music can do this.

A lot of music like opera or house can be used only limited. The music must fit your character and storyline! Be critical and don't think too easy about it. Some day you may find out you can do cardmanipulations on Vivaldi, like Lance Burton does.

I see young performers using house, trance, hardcore, etc. These musicstyles are based on rhythm and not on emotion. It's great to dance and get in trance, but it's goal is different than yours. You do not want the whole audience to dance, you want their attention on the stage, on you.

Not everybody likes certain musicstyles, part because of the culture associated with it. People cannot identify with that culture and are not open to the music either. If I have music that irritates my audience, I replace it. It's all about my act, not about my music.

Populair music

Using popsongs is possible, but can be tricky. Some people will love a certain song, while others will dislike it. I use songs when they meet my two requirements:

- 1) The lyrics fit very well with what I do or say
- 2) The song has the emotional hook my story requires

Examples can be Peter Gabriel songs when used by David Copperfield. Or the great 'everything fits together' act by Greg Frewin who does an Origami in cardboard with the song "I'm living in a cardboard box". Here the music enhances the act so much that people love the whole act, including the music. Another example is "Let's twist again" by Chubby Checker. It is most often used for the Twister-effect. Sadly I'm still convinced laypeople don't get the pun at all, but it is a fun-illusion and so is the music. However, the pun for magicians is so clear that everybody uses it...

Music without lyrics

Instrumental music can be great, but must be universally recognizable for it's mood or emotion. It should not be too recognizable either, or it will distract. People will start to clap or sing along. Others have a very specific memory with that one tune.

I mostly use soundtracks and classical CD's. Soundtracks are made to represent different emotions in one film. You have a CD with different emotions, but all in the same style. Never use music from different movies, artists or orchestra's within a short routine. That sounds horrible. Of course there are exceptions, but these are mostly experienced performers with a good ear.

When you have a thirty minute act with four different routines in it, things become different. Then I like to find the best music for every routine. The whole act will have more styles, but it will only offer your audience more variety. Think of your act as a movie: one scene has one piece of music. A whole movie consists of different scenes, each with their own piece of music.

Cut and paste

Quite often music has to be edited to fit your act. Often all is required is some cut and pastework to shorten the music or lengthen it. Or to create a nice transition. You can do this yourself with a piece of editing software (for example Magix music cleaning lab) for 50 – 100 euro and a bit of practice. Or find a friend who can edit your music. Bad cuts are killing.

Dare to edit after a few performances. Routines tend to get faster after initial performances. Cut your music or check the other pieces you've selected earlier. Perhaps a faster or slower piece will work better now.

If you want examples of music that has been edited, check out the complete list of all the acts David Copperfield has done, including the pieces of music that were used. Check out his specials and notice how these pieces have been cut and pasted together.

Select and delete

Collect a lot of music voor your acts that you like. The more you have, the more critical you can be. Good addresses are amazon.com, amazon.de and digitmovies.com. Varese Sarabande is also a great resource. Search for *soundtrack*, *score* or *filmscore*. Wacht it: movies can have a soundtrack (the songs) and a score (the instrumental part).

Select more pieces of music and ask a friend to name the first emotion / word that pops in their mind when you let them hear it. Only use music they feel the same about as you do.

Once you have pieces of music that are suitable, tape your routine. Perform it on all the pieces you selected. Afterwards you can see which music fits best. If the timing is correct. If the rhythm with which you move is correct. And if the ending is good. Must you fade-out the music? Does that fit the song? Or does de routine end when the music ends? Is it a good ending?

Conclusion

Everybody chooses music that fits him or her. But you can test in advance the quality of your music and see if it makes your act better by using the three rules of thumb.

Well chosen music will enhance your act without getting really noticed. Poor chosen music will be noticed immediately!

Do you have another method for selecting music? Tell me by mail. For questions or help to get started, send me a mail on info@goochelaarjan.nl

Author: Jan Kusters, The Netherlands

Date: 05-08-2009