

Assignment TV

By **TERRENCE O'FLAHERTY**

Background music has spoiled more television shows than anything except actors who are related to the producers. It is either too loud, too old, too sour, or too distracting. In its perfect state, it registers only upon the emotions, never upon the eardrums, and you don't know it's there at all.

In the past decade, while the public ear has become more delicately tuned through improvements in stereo recording and hi-fi speakers, television has continued to crank out its background music with a lack of finesse that would drive an organ grinder's monkey over the wall and back to the jungle.

Right from the start the television industry inherited the Hollywood moviemakers' fear of silence. Coupled with this is the silly conviction that loud music covers up bad acting. As the performance worsens the musical volume increases — much as an American tourist in an Italian marketplace tends to shout louder when his Italian isn't understood.

ONLY THE purist will deny the value of subtle "atmospheric" music under certain conditions. A few offstage violinists sawing away with restraint probably never damaged a well-acted death scene — provided the audience liked the guy who died and wanted to cry anyway. Indeed the musicians of the Hollywood studio orchestras are often the only skilled personnel connected with a show and they have saved more serious television dramas from erosion due to audience laughter than any other rescue organization in existence.

There are, however, some noises which pass for music today that sound like selections from your favorite kindergarten block band, the burping of a thousand infants, or the screams of a coloratura soprano surprised by a cold shower. They were particularly evident and

continually distracting on the recent Rachel Carson documentary, "The Sense of Wonder."

The musical background of the recent tour of San Francisco's M. H. De Young Memorial Museum may have served (mercifully) to obscure an amateurish script and the kittenish narration of Vincent Price, but it was gloomy enough for the crypt scene in "Dracula Meets the Werewolf of Paris." The experimental music heard so far on NET's "Video-space" project offers little hope for the future of the human ear pressed to the tiny screen.

RIGID UNION rules discourage local producers from using live musicians. The salaries for an original score performed in a sound studio in most cities make such a luxury out of question. As a result, local stations and independent producers rely on "music libraries" where the recorded selections are listed under hilarious titles such as "Russian marching music" or "Sounds of Spring." To find the right sort of tune to match each scene can take hours, even days.

"Going into the music library is like going on an Easter egg hunt," according to an informant of mine. "You can find a lot of things that 'might do' but it takes time to locate the right selection — if it's there at all."

"A half-hour show might use as many as 30 musical 'cuts' at from \$10 to \$20 each. As consequence you work with what you can find and hope to God the sound engineer won't turn it up too loud."

But he usually DOES. And regardless of what's being played, or whether it's live or recorded, the real problem with background music is that it DOESN'T STAY IN THE BACKGROUND. It's the foreground music that's giving background music a bad name.



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