Jocular Juxtapositions, Parody, and Ludicrous Lyrics. Music in Monty Python's Comedy Films

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Dining after death. A galactic walk. The Great War. Animation, flanked by a contemporary TV presenter. A Trojan Rabbit and a twentieth-century historian slain by an Arthurian knight. And, for that matter: an organ piece by Bach, a swashbuckler score, elevator music, and a naughty nightclub song. All bounteous bric-à-brac.

Compatible with the eclectic mix of multiple storylines and the multifarious visual styles that characterize the oeuvre of British troupe Monty Python, the music used in their comedy films offers a kaleidoscopic collage of competing musical styles and genres, as well as a copious variety of presentations to effectively incorporate this myriad of music. And although it has been argued that 'the nature of Python is more verbal than visual' (Jerry Goldstone in Morgan 2019, p.159), I would argue that the musical component of their work is essential for its often timeless humorous appeal. To substantiate this, let's first zoom in on an example taken from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975, dir. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones). Scene 11: The Tale of Sir Robin.

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'A KNIGHT is trotting along through a wooden sun-dappled glade, followed by his trusty PAGE banging the usual half coconuts' (Cleese et al. 2003 (=Screenplay), p. 29).[1] This foley-like, rhythmically bashing of the coconuts hilariously representing the knights' horseback riding became one of the pinnacles of the film. Basically, it was a matter of budget, but Monty Python member Michael Palin recalled: 'you absolutely believed that *they* believed they were on horses. That was much funnier than giggling about it, saying, "Yeah, they're not *really*." That went throughout that joke, and it was much the stronger for it' (Morgan 2019, p. 153). A superb wink to the audience's suspension of disbelief.

THE BALLAD OF SIR ROBIN

The knight which the viewer soon gets to know as Sir Robin 'is followed by a small retinue of MUSICIANS in thirteenth-century courtly costume, one sings, and plays the tambourine, one bangs at a tabor (a small drum OED)[2] and one plays upon the pipes', according to the screenplay. 'The KNIGHT looks very proud and firm as we hear the first part of the song, but the combination of the lyrics and the large signs they pass, start to have their effect...' (Screenplay, p. 31).

The character of Sir Robin is loosely based on Geoffrey Chaucer's Sir Thopas in *The Canterbury Tales* (1387; Hoffman 2002, p. 141). Medievalists have qualified *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as 'some of the smartest comedy to come out of Britain in 1970s' (Day 2002, p. 127). Directors Terry Williams and Terry Jones opted to make the film as 'real' (read: authentic) as possible: 'to have a soundtrack that was *very* real, bone-crunching and everything. They were very medieval in terms of the sounds of it, but also the music as well. It was all as authentic as they could probably get (Morgan 2019, p. 191). From a musicological perspective, one could additionally argue that the movie presented a pretty accurate sound perception of the Middle Ages—for the time that is, since the Historically Informed Performance practice was only in its fairly early stages when the film was produced (See Haskell 1996).

Suggestively diegetic, Sir Robin's minstrels perform a three-stanza ballad. While the (badly synchronized) visuals indicate recorders, bagpipes, and a medieval tambourine, the sound we hear diverges. We hear double reed instruments (shawm, bassoon) and a recorder accompanying the song, rhythmically assisted by—indeed—a tambourine, while the clicking coconuts continue to provide an extra percussive layer. A tabor (which is played with sticks), as indicated in the script, appears to be absent from the actual scene. Singer here is Neil Innes who also mimics playing the tambourine. 'Seventh Python' Neil Innes is the composer of 'The Ballad of Sir Robin' and the other songs of *The Holy Grail*. Eric Idle interprets Sir Robin.

The period music of the minstrels sounds bold and exuberant. The song is written in a solemn F-minor. The Allegretto, binary meter adds a confident stride to the music. Open intervals (octaves; perfect fourths and fifths) suggest a heroic quality. The dotted rhythm and triplets, in combination with the wavy

melodic motions, provide the music with a blithesome atmosphere. All these elements create a high-spirited mood.

When the ballad commences, the lyrics fit this mood accurately, when the singing minstrel still praises Sir Robin's unique bravery: 'The music is jolly and bright, as if triumphant' (Screenplay, p. 34). Starting with the second stanza, however, the lyrics become more gloomy, as they vividly describe all the ailments that may befall the knight:

> He was not in the least bit scared to be mashed into a pulp
> And have his eyes gouged out and his elbows broken;
> To have his kneecaps split and his body burned away
> And his limbs all hacked and mangled, brave Sir Robin.

The incongruent humour of the scene is largely constituted by bizarre juxtapositions. It is the sum of the buoyant music, the increasingly ghastly lyrics, as well as the increasingly uneasy peeks of Sir Robin versus the ever merry faces of his knights in tights, that together make the mirth of the scene. As argued before (see chapter 3), film musical pun only blossoms when flanked by complementing cinematic elements, yet it is the multi-level contrast here that ultimately makes the joke.

We also experience a certain ambiguity regarding the diegetic realm: the song is manifest in the film's storyworld, yet it also conveys the message of the character description directly across to the viewer, thusly taking on the role of a non-diegetic commentator, winking big time to the audience. In this ambiguous and multi-interpretable sense, the music in this scene can also be qualified as operating on a syn-diegetic level, synthesizing plural diegetic expressions. (Wennekes 2019).

Monty Python's genus of humour is legendary. The lemma *Pythonesque* is even incorporated in the *Oxford Reference*, indicating 'the style of or resembling the absurdist or surrealist humour of Monty Python's Flying Circus'.[3] It all began as a television sketch series of forty-five episodes, aired on the BBC between 1969 and 1974.[4] As in the televised sketches, their movies make ample use of anachronistic language and unlikely references. The typical 'British'[5] humour of the Pythons has been addressed by diverse authors and from different angles (among them Bischop 1990, Day 2002, Harty 2002 and 2015, Hoffman 2002, Neufeld 2002 and 2015, and Simões 2017). Published analyses of the comical aspects of their use of music, however, remains largely under-researched, if not overlooked, with the semiotic analyses by Philip Tagg of John Philip Sousa's *Flying Circus'* signature tune (Tagg and Clarida 2003, pp. 398-408), followed by Liz Giuffre and Demetrius Romeo on 'The Lumberjack Song' still being rare exceptions (Giuffre and Romeo 2017).

Of the handful of feature films which the Monty Python troupe released between 1971 and 2014, only three offer a (predominantly) coherent narrative. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) presents a derisory storyline set in a medieval, Arthurian context; *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979, dir. Terry

Jones) paints a preposterous picture of the days when Jesus Christ was still around. *The Meaning of Life* (1983, dir. Terry Jones) offers a series of hilarious sketches variously addressing philosophical, scientific, and religious readings of its title. In this handbook chapter, diverse strategies behind Python's employment of music to increase cinematic jocular effects will be analysed.[6] In the three films addressed here, absurd situations are regularly framed within musical parody, instrumental pastiches, textual satire, lyrical alterations of stressed syllables, oxymorons, et cetera.

Monty Python and The Holy Grail

'The Ballad of Sir Robin' is not the only song in *The Holy Grail* that embraces a typical incongruency type of humour. In scene 8, it is the song by King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table. The scene is a brilliant Gesamtkunstwerk of resourceful visualization, shot editing, incongruous side-effects, music, dance, and text. Above all, it makes use of a quick-witted combination of anachronisms in text and music, and an extensive playing with false word accents. The knights tell us that in war they are 'tough and able' while they also 'impersonate Clark Gable'. Its setting is the interior of the medieval hall of Camelot.

The rhyme type used for the song is exceptional. It seems to be a mash-up between a Persian Quatrain (aaba) and a Distichon, with some resemblance to a Heroic Sestet.[7] The song scheme follows an aab(b)acc sequence, in which the a-line structurally rhymes with table and c with Camelot. 'The most important comedic aspect of these lyrics is the fact that few words (…) actually [do] rhyme with "table" and "Camelot". Words such as "formidable" and "unsingable" are made to rhyme with "table" by moving the stress of the word to the syllable of "a": formi-DAY-ble, unsing-AY-ble (Hillebrand 2017, p. 9). This feast of false word accents is in line with a technique which English literary historian George Saintsbury once qualified as 'intentional doggerel': premeditated bad poetry (1906, pp. 392, 413-416). In other circumstances, this type of joke would be rather blockheaded, but here, the intentional textual clumsiness, with all its alternative accents, comes across as the meticulously refined stumbling of a master circus clown. Even more so: Python's conscious ham- and handedness at this superior linguistic level only effectuates due to, as well as through, the music.

Whereas 'The Ballad of Sir Robin' is more or less periodically in style, the knights' song in Camelot is situated within a twentieth-century filmmusical number, thoroughly incongruent with, and anachronistic, regarding the place and time of the Arthurian setting. The downright out-of-context musical style of a Gilbert and Sullivan species mixed with a 1920/30s Rockettes choreography in a Broadway staging, adds an additional component to the gag. The description in the screenplay reads 'Knights are engaged in a well-choreographed song-and-dance routine of the very up-beat "If they could see me now" type of fast bouncy number' (p. 21). The reference meant here is the song 'If my

friends could see me now' from the Broadway musical *Sweet Charity* (1966, music by Cy Coleman, and lyrics by Dorothe Fields), or even more so, its later filmic adaptation *Sweet Charity: The Adventures of a Girl Who Wanted to be Loved*, starring Shirley MacLaine (1969, dir. and choreographer Bob Fosse).

The music features an immediately inventive ear-catching melody in which, augmenting the afore-mentioned musical influences, Jacques Offenbach's can-can dance ('Galop infernal') from the operetta *Orphée aux enfers* (1858) fights for aural priority with the mid-1880s 'DOO-dah!' Camptown races tune. This minstrel song composed by Stephen Foster has gained world-wide fame through its association with the cartoon character of the Foghorn Leghorn. At the same time, Julius Fuçik's military march *Einzug der Gladiatoren / Entrance of the Gladiators*, Op. 68 (1897), also never seems too far removed from the mix (see Figs. 41.1 and 41.2). All in all, the song makes multiple metaleptic musical references that are ridiculously incongruent within the medieval framework.

The instruments are, once again, historically anchored, and, yet again, what you see is not what you hear. We see fiddle, shawm, recorder, lute, and drum

Fig. 41.1 Knights of the Round Table versus Cancan, DOO-dah!, and Entrance of the Gladiators

Fig. 41.2 (a and b) The Holy Grail Main Theme

suggestively performing the diegetic accompaniment; what we hear is a far larger ensemble than this banda, most notably in the wind instruments section. Tuned percussion and cymbals are apparent. While the drummer nearly operates as a(n anachronistic) conductor banging his instrument on the beat, we actually hear striking off-beat accents. The (well-tempered) helmets of the soldiers are incorporated in a hilarious percussion break. The suspension of disbelief is yet again well prepared; it is a common cinematic bursting into song, and in all aspects, adheres to the Broadway musical tradition.

At a later moment (scene 24), Prince Herbert of Swamp (Terry Jones) also wants to burst into song but is structurally hindered by his father (Michael Palin): 'You're not going into a song while I'm here!' This paternal commandment is preceded in the screenplay with the note 'Music intro', and immediately succeeded by 'Music stops' (p. 47). The non-diegetic underscore commences every time Herbert wants to break into his musical number. In chapter 6, Marcel Bouvrie notices that every time the King of Swamp orders his son to stop singing, he 'turns his gaze towards the non-diegetic orchestra which then, indeed, stops playing. In doing so, he seems to be fully aware of the invisible apparatus of the soundtrack and directly interrupts it, satirizing the common trend of characters in musical films who at any opportunity want to enter into a song' (p. 113).

Library Music

As we have seen, medieval musical gimmicks work for the humour in 'The Ballad of Sir Robin'[8] and in the medieval-inspired instrumentation of the Camelot musical scene; however, only Innes's *songs* were eventually retained in the final film score. Neil Innes's additional Middle Ages-inspired, non-diegetic soundtrack did not make it to the final cut (Morgan 2019, pp. 191-94; Idle, p. 63). Terry Jones: 'Neil Innes' music sounded quaint, it didn't have an epic feel to it' (Morgan 2019, p. 184). '[I]t killed the comedy stone dead', Eric Idle confirmed: 'It did not need sackbuts and tabors, it needed swashbuckling Hollywood movie music'[9] (Idle 2019, p. 63). '[R]eally corny, heroic music' was, according to Jones, what the Pythons wanted (Morgan 2019, p. 184).

These quotes plainly illustrate how music was considered an integral component of the film, and actually for the Pythons's general comedic strategy. From the very beginning of the *Flying Circus* TV series, music was omnipresent in the troupe's creations. The theme tune of the series is John Philip Sousa's march *The Liberty Bell* (1893), and in the *Flying Circus* episode 'Whither Canada', the 'famous composer' Michael 'Two Sheds' Jackson was presented, mocking a BBC interview with contemporary composer Michael Tippett. Mozart, and most notably Beethoven, are hilariously impersonated in the 'Archeology Today' episode in which the second tries to compose the opening theme of his Fifth Symphony, time and again distracted by his (hoovering) spouse. The same famous motif is heard as an interlude in the song 'Decomposing Composers' from the troupe's final studio album *Monty Python's Contractual Obligation*

Album (1980). Here, Johann Pachelbel's Canon in D-major, P. 37 (date unknown), forms the dominant accompaniment. The song, interpreted by Michael Palin with a cockney accent, narrates the cruel fate of composers whose music lives on while they are destined to die. 'Beethoven's gone, but his music lives on / And Mozart don't go shopping no more / You'll never meet Liszt or Brahms again / And Elgar doesn't answer the door'. In another episode we encounter an orchestra playing Johann Strauss's *Blue Danube* (1866) in a field while the musicians are blown up one by one, as if we see a terrorist's take on Haydn's Farewell Symphony (1772). In another *Flying Circus* sketch, a music director is invited in a BBC 'Farming Club' program to talk about Tchaikovsky, 'born in a Ken Russell film just outside St. Petersburg', as presenter John Cleese tells us. In short: *Circus* skits are full of musical mirth. It is therefore not surprising that Python screenplays give plenty of references to music as well.

For *The Holy Grail*, the producers ultimately opted for stock music as its underscore, all taken from De Wolfe Music Library in London (Morgan 2019, pp. 191-94). The film's opening music is set in a Dorian mode, and features parallel fifths in the melody, dense brass chords, military percussion and rhythms: all elements which create a strong contrast with the jocular images, especially those of the knights riding imaginary horses implied by simply banging on halved coconut shells. A perfect, authentic cadence is built towards the end of the scene. This particular construction of mounting climax is conventional—even cliché—for finales of large orchestral works and films. Here, it contrasts with an orchestral interlude reminiscent of *A Summer's Place* (1959, dir. Sloan Wilson, music by Max Steiner) while it also contrasts the folkish, incongruent Mexican music toward the end of the opening music of *The Holy Grail*. A brief brass fanfare forms the main theme and recurs throughout the film.

Overall, the underscore of *The Holy Grail* adheres to traditional film scoring. In scene 16, for example, tension is built-up through dissonant stingers within an overall atonal orchestral idiom (Screenplay, 'spooky music', p. 45). The stingers are also used to contrast the dialogue: when The Knights Who Say Ni hiss: 'We want … a shrubbery!' (p. 46)—a stinger we hear. This witty incongruity of drama and the mundane, significantly heightens the comedic effect due to the nature of the dissonant stingers and their spot-on timing.

A senseless, and therefore funny, musical insert forms the electric organ tune on the Bridge of Death, which is repeated after the film's end: 'Slushy organ music starts and the houselights in the cinema come on', the screenplay notes: 'organ music continues as the audience leaves' (p. 89). This organ stock music, hugely anachronistic and contrasting in both atmosphere and time to the film's storyline, suggests a seventh-inning stretch in an American baseball game. The organ is used to deconstruct the cinematic illusion, in line with an upended film projector and the breaking of the fourth wall by the police who chase the assassins of the Very Famous Historian ('who is not A.J.P. Taylor').

Scene 5 offers a short, yet memorably funny musical pastiche. Here, the flagellanti sing the closing phrase of the medieval plainchant *Dies Irae* for the Day of Wrath: 'Pie Iesu Domine, dona eis requiem' (Pious Lord Jesus, grant

them rest). The monks sing only this line of the *Dies Irae*, repetitiously and not in Gregorian monosonic unison but in anachronistic parallel fifths, while banging 'themselves on the foreheads with wooden boards' (Screenplay, p. 15). The procession of flagellants is inspired by a scene from Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* (1957), in which the monks menacingly sing the *Dies Irae*—in unison. The 'Piu Jesu' rendering reappears two times in *The Holy Grail*: in an animated intermission as well as in scene 31, when the monks bring out the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch. This time, their chant is antiphonal within a more sprightly set arrangement, while the prominent parallel intervals remains intact.

A last clichéd strategy of audiovisual humour is used in an animated sequence: natural herald's straight trumpets or buisines are played by naked, bent over blokes blowing the instruments with their bottoms. Likening the sounds of brass instruments to flatulence is a stock musical pun on the raspberry sound of low notes, as noted in chapter 3. The Pythons do not shy away from such stock.

Monty Python's Life of Brian

Four years following *The Holy Grail*, *Monty Python's Life of Brian* premiered. The film score is not created by one composer, but by an amalgam of contributors. The movie is set in Biblical times, featuring Brian Cohen of Nazareth (Graham Chapman) who is mistakenly hailed as the new Messiah.[10] The opening song already exhibits a unique parodic level. 'The Brian Song' was written by André Jacquemin and Dave Howman, two composers who would also contribute to *The Meaning of Life* a few years later. The lyrics were written by Michael Palin. Singer was the then sixteen-year-old Sonia Jones. 'The Brian Song' overtly parodies another title song: that of the third instalment in the James Bond series, *Goldfinger* (1964, dir. Guy Hamilton).[11]

The James Bond title song is composed by John Barry, and Shirley Bassey's rendition of it is legendary. Both the orchestral score and the lyrics of *Life of Brian* imitate *Goldfinger* in refined detail. Linda Hutcheon defines parody as 'a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity' (Hutcheon 1985, p. xii), and yes, it is the difference which generates the musical pun. Nevertheless, the similarities between the two are also considerable. Both songs feature a comparable vocal type and share the orchestral timbre; the two songs also make use of vigorous call and response interactions between string and brass ensembles. Likewise, the use of a plunger mute for the prominent trumpet calls stands out in both cases, as well as the manner in which both drums and cymbals are incorporated.

The main musical motif of 'Goldfinger' is a melodic interval of a major third; it is usually descending, but it ascends and descends when played by the prominent plunger-muted trumpet. This descending motif returns in amended forms in the lower brass in 'The Brian Song' as a descending perfect fourth, descending major second, and a diminished fourth. The vocal line and the lyrics are the most prominent elements of the parody. Both songs follow a similar

pattern; in 'The Brian Song' this is presented with comedic climaxes. The vocals start by singing a name (i.e. 'Goldfinger' versus 'Brian') with an ascending interval, followed by a pause. Subsequently, through a weaving and gradually ascending melodic motion, the lyrics introduce the protagonist. In the case of Goldfinger, his Midas touch, for example, and how sly he is. In the case of Brian, the lyrics signal only banal issues such as Brian's aging, that he 'had arms and legs and hands and feet'. A descending fifth leap paired with fairly meaningless lyrics deflate the musical anticipation that has been construed: the listener may expect an ascent to the tonic with an astonishing revelation. Yet nothing of the sort occurs, creating a contrasting comedic effect. This pattern is repeated almost literally, explaining how Brian grew from babe, to boy, to teenager, 'no girl!', to the man called Brian. It is clear: he 'is no more than anyone else. He is not Jesus, nor is he a hero (James Bond) or a villain (Goldfinger)' (Simões 2017, p. 72).

   Both songs conclude with a sustained, belted note marking their climax, a trademark of James Bond title songs likewise parodied in *Life of Brian*. However, here, the final note is stretched to an extreme length and heightened pitch: as if the voice is strangled until it pops, ultimately ending with a synchronized gunshot and scream. The accompanying animation shows a rising angelic figure shot down from the sky (Fig. 41.3).

Fig. 41.3   Comparison title song *Life of Brian* (1979) with *Goldfinger* (1964)

Geoffrey Burgon (1941-2010) was commissioned as composer of the overall film score of *Life of Brian*.[12] It was a coincidental choice, director Terry Jones has admitted. Not knowing any other composers, he simply asked Burgon for the job. Nevertheless, it turned out to be a great choice. Burgon gave the movie 'a simple but biblical-epic sound – so important in making the audience believe in the world, so the comedy could play against it' (Jones 2010).

A good example is the chase scene following Brian's bedaubing of the city walls with 'Romani ite domum' (Romans, go home!'). Here, in scene 10, the music effectively contrasts the visuals; it appears to be chaotic through its action-packed and tension-creating dissonance and chromaticism while Brian is on the run for the Roman soldiers. Stinger-like marcato, parallel chords are played by the brass. The techniques used clearly contribute to the onscreen action. In some moments, the music is synchronized with the action on screen, such as when the high-pitched flute trill marks the onset of the chase. Elsewhere, the score seems out of place, such as when the brass chords do not mark any distinguishable events as Brian is ambling through a calm alley, where the contrasting music enriches the scene's comic qualities.

When bystanders utterly ignore the ongoing chase, continuing to browse the market, the music retains its fast tempo and chaotic, unpredictable time signature changes. Subtle synch-points between music and visual montage weld the sound and images together, despite the content's incongruity. The scene gains in comedic effect through the balance maintained between connectedness and disconnectedness. When Brian is saved (or kidnapped) in scene 14 by Extra Terrestrial Aliens, the score ('exciting music')[13] is a clichéd mockery of orchestral outer space film music, including sound effects of sirens, shooting and racing, packed with fierce accents and ascending melodic lines which emphasize the high-velocity spaceship. The 'suspenceful music' in scene 11, when the People's Front of Judea want to kidnap Pilate's wife, is realized by, among other elements, a low bassoon pattern against high harp plucking accompanied by violin tremoli.

Augmenting Burgon's non-diegetic score, there are a few striking moments in *Life of Brian* in which pre-existing music is incorporated. When Brian is tailed by a pack of people who see him as the Messiah (end of scene 17 and 18), a fragment of Claudio Monteverdi's *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (1610) is quoted. The anachronistic, fully deviant Baroque scoring, indicated as 'holy music' in the screenplay, appears to provide Brian with a divine status. The incorporation of Baroque music may be reminiscent of the eclectic soundtrack of Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *The Gospel According to S. Matthew* (1964), in which Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, BWV 244 (1727) and his Mass in B-minor, BWV 232 (1749) are cited. In his article 'Is Funny Music Funny? Contexts and Case Studies of Film Music Humor', however, Miguel Mera qualifies the Monteverdi quote as a non-effective attempt at referential humour, because if the audience does not recognise the citation, they will not only 'fail to understand the joke, but also that a joke ever existed' (Mera 2002, pp. 100-01). This is undeniably true; however, the real question is whether this is indeed

problematic. Musical competence and music historical awareness are part and parcel of 'getting' referential lampoons. Or, as music critic Philip Clark wrote in *The Guardian*, 'Musicians and the musically-literate have (…) access to a part of the Pythonesque soul that might otherwise fall on deaf ears' (Clark 2014). It seems almost certain that there are verbal and visual pranks that comparably escape the attention of many a viewer. By citing Monteverdi, Burgon and the Pythons may have provided an insider prank for those in the know. For the rest of their viewers, the sharp idiomatic contrast suffices to emphasize Brian's supposedly blessed new status.

Always Look on the Bright Side of Life

The best known song of the film, perhaps even the most renowned Python song *tout court*, 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life', was written by Eric Idle. The jovial, ironic text of the song is deeply incongruous with the impending, horrible martyrdom-death on the cross which awaits the protagonist and his fellow convicts. It bares resemblance to a Disney song, even 'a sort of Spartacus musical' (Idle 2019, p. 101). 'The song was supposed to be ironic', Idle wrote, 'but it ended up being iconic'. 'People began to sing it in real wars and in real danger'. It ultimately became 'the number one song requested at British funerals' (Idle 2019, p. 2). Idle wrote the fundamentals of the song in twenty minutes, using jazz chords he learned from the Mickey Baker guitar course.[14] The song is 'a very British thing', Michael Palin remarked: 'no matter what goes wrong, keep smiling, we're all cheery' (Morgan 2019, p. 266).

This finale of the film (scene 35) with its situational ironic lyrics is set in an uplifting major key. During Brian Cohen's crucifixion, his fellow victims cheer and whistle along in the source scored music-hall evergreen: 'So, always look on the bright side of death, / Just before you draw your terminal breath, / Life's a piece o' shit, / When you look at it'. It is performed diegetically by co-crucifee Mr. Frisbee (Eric Idle) and his fellow victims, while being accompanied by a non-diegetic, off-screen combo. A sweeping string section joins in, flanked by background-vocals, creating an incongruent, cheery music-hall whole which even includes a cliché modulation. The condemned rhythmically swing their heads to the music as the camera pans out to a long shot of the twenty plus crosses on the hill while the end titles appear.

As in *The Holy Grail*, the cinematic medium is gayfully deconstructed toward the end of the song when Eric Idle draws attention to the fact that we are watching a film. Initially, this is carried out fairly subtly by the use of metaphors that liken life and death to a theatrical show ('You must always face the curtain with a bow' or 'You'll see it's all a show'). Gradually, he blatantly addresses the audience directly by saying that we have reached the end of the film, urging them to buy a copy of the recording, available in the theatre's foyer. This self-awareness disrupts the suspension of disbelief, making the audience members hilariously self-aware of their position as (life's) spectators.

The Meaning of Life

'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life' offers a superb species of Python absurdity: bizarre songs including incongruous lyrics are inherent throughout their oeuvre, be it in the television series, the theatre shows, or in their movies. It is likewise a trademark of *The Meaning of Life*. The American television producer David Morgan appropriately qualified this collection of consecutive Python sketches as 'a broad mediation on the perilousness and absurdity of human existence that comes across visually as a mix between Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman and Busby Berkeley' (2019, p. 284). The final scene in heaven's theatre once again indeed embraces a Berkeley type of massive musical choreography framing an over-the-top Christmas song, performed by Graham Chapman. There is no real narrative in *The Meaning of Life*, nevertheless, all 'chapters' do, in one way or another, typify the human condition. The film thematizes an Albert Camus-inspired absurdity: life is pointless—therefore enjoy it while you can, since no one escapes the Grim Reaper. The title could just as well have been The Lunacy of Life. Once again, the soundtrack combines non-diegetic (source) scoring and hilarious, diegetically performed songs, while also offering a shrewd collage of quotations from pre-existing music, hymn style quotations, muzak, et cetera. The citations range from Bach on the battlefield to John Philip Sousa's *Flying Circus* signature tune, and from the Hawaiian song 'Aloha-oe' in the *Philosophy à la Carte* sketch to the Israeli folk song 'Hava Nagila' in the *Live Organ Transplants* chapter. Incongruency galore. Bounteous bric-à-brac: paradigmatic Python.

Non-diegetically, 'The Meaning of Life' title song accompanies some opening animation. Written by John Du Prez and Eric Idle, and performed by the latter, the lyrics, true to philosophy, offer more questions than answers: 'Why are we here? What's life all about? / Is God really real, or is there some doubt?' The text shows a modest preference for alliteration ('While the scientists say we're just simply spiralling coils'). The song is furthermore set in a fairly regular end rhyme structure (mostly aaab, with the last line ending on 'the meaning of life'). While one might expect a more pensive, subdued type of music to accompany such a text, the music offers a Fats Domino sounding accompaniment ('Blueberry Hill'), lushly arranged with brass.

The chapter *Miracle of Birth, Part 2: The Third World* features the blasphemous song 'Every Sperm is Sacred', written by André Jaquemin and Dave Howman. The father (Palin) of a humongous Roman-Catholic family arrives home and announces that he has been fired and therefore needs to sell his children since there are too many of them—the largely exaggerated mass of offspring makes for a hilariously hyperbolic setting. It is all to blame on the church, since Catholics are not allowed to use contraceptives; overpopulation is a problem in Yorkshire parallel to that in the 'real' Third World. The wit of the song is created by the contrast between the innocent-sounding children's choir, incongruently singing about men's semen: 'if a sperm is wasted, / God gets quite iraaaaate!'. The song is staged against a cardboard décor of a

working-class British neighbourhood and tightly constructed within a grandiose Broadway choreography, complete with cancan and tap dance. The end rhyme of the refrains follows a regular abab-form. The use of anaphors—a figure of speech which presents repeated words at the beginning of a sentence—is characteristic of the lyrics. The sketch closes with a further incongruous sequence. The exodus of children out of the house of the Catholic family is watched by the Protestant neighbours from across the street. The husband praises their liberal faith because, *au contraire*, they can use a condom whenever they feel like it, yet they never have sex, something his spouse ardently regrets.

Penis Song

Even more hilarious is the lavish use of synonyms in the 'Penis Song' which opens chapter 6 of *The Meaning of Life*: *Autumn Years.* This brief lounge song is in stylistic imitation of English playwright and composer Noël Coward (1899–1975), as the subtitle indicates. The short song collects a copious amount of slang words for the male sex organ. From behind his baby grand, Eric Idle as Coward impersonator suggestively opens with an arpeggio during a posh dinner. Dressed in a smoking jacket and silk scarf, he introduces his newly written piece celebrating the joys of having a penis. The content of the song is completely out of place; nonetheless, the well-groomed diners loudly applaud his song when finished. The scene is loaded with literary amusement through the use of oxymorons, for example, a 'frightfully witty song'. Alliterations are likewise savvily employed: 'You can wrap it up in ribbons. You can slip it in your sock'. Eric Idle equals the male genitalia with stiffy, dong, dick, tadger, Willy, Percy, John Thomas, one-eyed trouser snake, and so on. The humorous technique of using a string of synonyms is reminiscent of the 'Dead Parrot' sketch from the *Flying Circus*, in which John Cleese likewise offers a seemingly endless series of alternatives to indicate, in this case, the death of the colourful bird. The synonyms for 'penis' are stressed lyrically and musically: they are placed at the end of phrases, occur together with cadences and ornamentations in the accompaniment, and receive staccato treatment.

In addition to the comic conjunction of incongruous components, the music itself is also humorous. The jazzy tune is sung in swing, meaning that the repetitive eighth notes are quite jolting, parallel to the singer's parlando articulation. The piano accompaniment is harmonically effective; the progressions are clear and propel the song forward. Even so, the way in which the accompaniment is played adds another amusing layer. The chords are mostly sparse—just enough notes are played to reveal the chords' qualities (i.e. major or minor, with dominant sevenths or not, etc.) and function (i.e. tonic, dominant, etc.). Frequently, they are widely spaced. Additionally, the rhythm of the piano part is rather simple and abrupt as notes are exclusively played on strong beats. This abruptness is further increased by the abundance of staccatissimo, and emphasized by creating contrast through leading into staccatissimo chords and longer
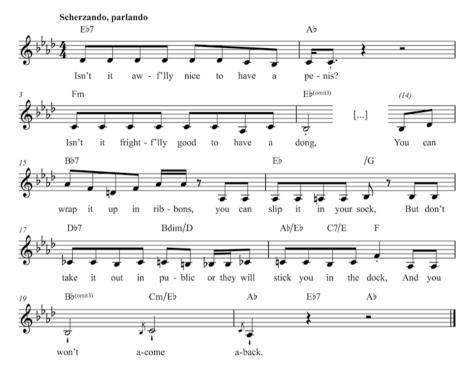
Fig. 41.4 Penis Song

held ones, following the staccatissimo chords with pauses (bars 10–11, Figure 41.4). The same techniques are used in the piano ornamentation to the word 'dong' (bar 5), where staccatissimo notes leap across octaves, and an acciaccatura draws further attention to the conciseness of the playing style. The combination of swing, the sparse voicing, and the curt and abrupt intonation creates a somewhat wonky and graceless impression. This is also at odds with the smooth and sophisticated style of piano performance one would expect at a fancy restaurant in Coward's day.

Bach

Pre-existing music by Johann Sebastian Bach is used to suture the montage from the classroom to a school rugby match and subsequently, to the First World War sequences of the movie. During the *Physical Education* class (chapter 7), student Carter (Palin) is caught by messing around with an ocarina. Fellow-student Bigges (Jones) has to chuckle. Headmaster Humphrey (Cleese) then asks him to communicate what's so 'frightfully funny' going on, using the same oxymoron as in the 'Penis Song' scene. Thereupon, the Headmaster convicts Biggs to join the boys' team in the upcoming rugby match against the masters. Immediately upon this frightful verdict, the first notes of Bach's

D-minor organ *Toccata* are heard over the cut to the game.[15] The *Toccata and Fugue* BWV 565 (c. 1704) continues to accompany the visuals while the boys are beaten up by the foul play of the young masters. Cheered on by their colleagues in their robes, the teachers score time and again. Just like his young team mates, Biggs is eventually fully covered in mud. When bringing his hands to his head, the scene cuts to the battlefield, while the organ music continues, now largely masked by the sound of bombs bursting. The abbreviated version of Bach's music is halted by the cut to the film's next episode: *Part III: Fighting Each Other.*

In the humorous framework of the film as a whole, once again Bach's music does not so much contribute to generating comicality, as it clues building a contrasting feeling of concern, an aversion. While remaining congruent with the speed of the shotchanges, as well as contributing to masking both montage and change-overs, the inclusion of Bach's *Toccata* communicates outrageous dread and horror. The rugby match is altogether inappropriate, as grown men are shown violently defeating young boys to the great satisfaction of the fanatic spectators. The *Toccata* underlines the wickedness of the struggle. The effect is even stronger when this music underscores the silly, exuberant happy dance of the masters' triumph following the fixed match. The music smooths over the transition of student Biggs on the playing field to Captain Biggs on the battlefield, suggesting equivalence between the two scenes.

The choice for this specific Bach piece can be interpreted as a meta film music reference: the underscore application of it is highly clichéd. As early as in the silent film era, BWV 565 was employed as a cue for horridness and villainy. Since then, it has become a stock reference in sound films, as early as the 1931 *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (dir. Rouben Mamoulian). Other cinematic references which may come to mind are *Sunset Blvd* (1950, dir. Billy Wilder) with its jocular wink to the horror genre, Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) with its diegetic performance in a deserted church, and last but not least, and even more famous: *The Phantom of the Opera* (1962, dir. Terence Fisher).

Swashbuckler

A final, fairly short scene that musically stands out features the board meeting of The Very Big Corporation of America (chapter 16). The suits talk in an agitated jabberwocky with empathetic American accents about hat sales and energy fields in the universe, when suddenly their building gets raided by employees from another building. The scene continues as a pseudo pirate film, complete with canons and grappling hooks, despite the fight being set in moving office buildings as opposed to ships. The enter raid is underscored in the tradition of the swashbuckler, the heroic, flamboyant, and romantic adventures film with its matching, full orchestral score. Although this scene seems incongruently out of place, the pirate fight does not appear entirely out of the blue, as it was set up in the 'supporting feature' preceding the formal beginning of *The Meaning of Life.*

In this particular, ten-minute clip, the British Crimson Permanent Assurance company and its ancient employees are shown after a take-over by The Very Big Corporation of America. The workers are treated like galley slaves rowing on rhythmically beaten timpani. When one of them is sacked, the oldies revolt against their new American managers and turn the building into a war vessel—all action swashbucklery underscored. 'And so the Crimson Permanent Assurance was launched upon the high seas of international finance' and the ship/building subsequently sails over wasteland toward a Manhattan-look-alike to attack a mirror image of Wall Street, finally fighting the suits of The V.B.C.A.

The underscore by John Du Prez in both these sequences sounds like it was shot straight out of a classical-Hollywood-era swashbuckling film, stylistically reminiscent of Erich Wolfgang Korngold's score for *The Sea Hawk* (1940, dir. Michael Curtiz). The score provides large orchestral wall-to-wall music complete with heroic major-key horn themes, graceful, sweeping string sections, fanfare-like brass sections, harp glissandi, and boisterous percussion. It follows swashbuckling conventions, and it gains in parodic effect due to its repetitive inclusion in both quirky images and absurd events. The allusions to classical Hollywood cinema are emphasized by the title of the Short Feature Presentation: 'The Crimson Permanent Assurance', an implicit reference to *The Crimson Pirate* (1952, dir. Robert Siodmak, music by William Alwyn). Inserted in the swashbuckle scoring, the employees perform a source-scored type of Sea Shanty, a folkish work song, usually sung while sailing. A jovial vaudeville concludes the clip.

As in both *The Holy Grail* and *Life of Brian*, the finale of *The Meaning of Life* once more deconstructs all cinematic illusion. We twice encounter a cross-dressed Palin as Female TV Presenter. First during an interlude entitled 'The Middle of the Film', and again at the end, announcing that—indeed—we have come to the end of the film, pointedly preceded by a title card with the same message.

Conclusion

This chapter addresses *capita selecta* from three Monty Python comedy films. The analysed scenes and songs can be considered as typical examples of the way the troupe purposely featured music as a crucial component of their Pythonesque humour. Of course, there are many more examples that could have been discussed in these three movies, not to mention in the huge stock of *Flying Circus* television sketches. The 'Galaxy Song' from *The Meaning of Life*, for instance, forms both the conclusion of the *Live Organ Transplants* chapter, diegetically performed by Eric Idle in his pink evening suit, as well as the non-diegetic end title song of the whole movie. The lyrics of the song essentially relegate human existence, and thusly add meaning to the overall quest for the meaning of life. 'Just remember that you're standing on a planet that's evolving / And revolving at 900 miles an hour,/ That's orbiting at 19 miles a second, so it's

reckoned'. Many more moments with representative underscoring have necessarily had to remain unmentioned too.[16] Then again, including more cases would not have provided significantly more insight into the strategies used by the Pythons to generate humour through their crafty use of music.

Incongruity is oftentimes a key element of Pythonesque humour. This can be traced in their musical choices as well, when jocular juxtapositions between ludicrous lyrics and the accompanying music are synthesized in their songs. Or, when the musical underscore in speed opposes the visual tempo, or, when the score skilfully thwarts the listeners' musical expectations. As well, the manner in which the Pythons treat music goes far beyond the contrast between the (often source scored) diegetic songs versus the commentary enveloped in the non-diegetic underscoring. And let's not forget that the final cut of films is always the end product of an often laborious process of trial and error, one that may have drastic effects on the soundtrack as well, as the history of the music track of *The Holy Grail* has made evident.

Python's nature is primarily verbal as argued before, yet their eloquence blossoms all the more when used in the straightjacket of songs' lyrics, where rhyme and rhythm largely dictate the structure. The lyrics of Python songs are often multi-layered, addressing either completely bizarre circumstances or exaggerated daily narratives, augmented by jocular views on more or less famous people or historic personae. Their texts display a high level of literary skills and techniques: alliterations, oxymorons, hyperboles, anaphors, and the like. But it is the addition of the musical accompaniment—be it incongruent, anachronistic, or otherwise—that ultimately contributes to Python's vocal witticisms.

Yet, when all is said and done, referentiality remains the key component of Python's musical mirth. Throughout their oeuvre, they present a smorgasbord of techniques to optimize the jocular effect of their musical references. A first one is musical *parody*, copying a musical source or source style with ironic critical distance. The title song of *Life of Brian* is exemplary of this species. The hymn in *The Meaning of Life*, 'Oh Lord, Please Don't Burn Us', composed by Eric Idle and John Du Prez on a text by John Cleese and Graham Chapman, is an ironic style copy of a traditional Protestant hymn. A second referential strategy is musical *pastiche*. In lieu of mocking the imitated source, as is the case with parody, here the source or source style is in a way eulogized. The swashbuckling scores by John Du Prez exemplify this particular technique, as well do Neil Innes's medieval songs in *The Holy Grail*. And to take stock: in swashbuckler sequences, the Pythons have either used newly composed or licensed stock music.

A third technique is *persiflage*, a frivolous bantering, a magnified imitation of a person or situation through the use of music. Idle's persiflage of Noël Coward is a singular example of this type, as is Sir Robin/Sir Thopas. These three referential strategies are commonly realized through pseudo-quotes or arranged/re-scored citations.

'Verbatim' musical quotations form yet another species of Python musical referentiality. These quotations can either be conceived through new renditions (such as the performance of the Hawaiian classic 'Aloha-oe' in *The Meaning of Life* or the 'Pie Jesu' by the monks in *The Holy Grail*), or inserted via pre-recorded performances (Bach's *Toccata and Fugue* in *The Meaning of Life of Brian*, or the insert of Monteverdi's *Vespro della Beata Vergine* in *The Holy Grail*). Then there are those sparse moments of *spoken* allusion to music, usually in secondary conversations on artists (songwriters Burt Bacharach and Hal David, for instance, are discussed in the *Philosophy à la Carte* sketch in *The Meaning of Life*).

And ultimately, the Pythons occasionally make mirth by degrading musical instruments, most notably the platitudinal depicting of raspberrying trumpets (*The Holy Grail*) or the satirization of the enormous length of nature trumpets by having them anchored with meters-long supporting sticks (*Life of Brian*).

Having summed up all of this, dissecting the musical ingredient from an audiovisual Gesamkunstwerk remains a highly artificial exercise. As mentioned earlier, film-musical pun only blossoms when flanked by complementary narrative, image, dialogue, sound and visual effects, visual montage, and, especially relevant to the films discussed in this contribution: choreography.

And by means of a coda: it needs to be said that a certain musical literacy is of the essence. A modest knowledge of musical styles (in a range from Baroque repertoire to Broadway productions) aids in getting the gist of Monty Python's references. Oftentimes, their musical allusions may be quite easy to recognize, even openly exposed, yet sporadically the references can be quite hermetic, even well disguised. Their humour is, in general, magnificently refined into the smallest of detail. Monty Pythons' Midas touch on music is not markedly less sophisticated.

Notes

1. Cleese et al. 2003. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Screenplay. London: Methuen Publishing Limited. Further referred to as 'Screenplay'.
2. Oxford English Dictionary
3. https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100356667. Last accessed 24 November 2022.
4. The group is composed of John Cleese, Michael Palin, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Graham Chapman, and Terry Gilliam.
5. While the troupe's humour is generally considered typically British, it should be noted that Terry Gilliam is an American.
6. Incongruous sound jokes (such as anachronistic 'the sound of extensive carpentry' (Screenplay, p. 27) with electric chainsaw sounds), have been left out of the discussion.
7. I thank Dr Yke Schotanus for suggesting this qualification.
8. An instrumental version is diegetically performed at the wedding party of scene 21 as a 'country dance in progress' (Screenplay, p. 54).

9. This qualification is indeed used in the screenplay, p. 54, shortly before a reference to 'Erroll Flynn music' (55).
10. For the historic details and references, see Larsen 2018.
11. This was not the first use of a James Bond theme song. In the *Flying Circus'* sketch 'Hell's Grannies', the opening of *Thunderball* (1965, dir. Terence Young) was cited.
12. The entire brass section was performed via extensive multitracking by long time Python collaborator, John Du Prez.
13. The screenplay quotes are taken from http://www.montypython.50webs.com/ Life_of_Brian.htm. Last accessed 25 November, 2022.
14. Idle refers to the popular, self-tuition method book series *Mickey Baker's Complete Course in Jazz Guitar-A Modern Method in How-to-Play Jazz and Hot Guitar* (1955).
15. This piece is uncredited; performer unknown.
16. Also left out is a discussion of all those cooperating: orchestras, choirs and other musicians, arrangers, as well as influential musicians who participated, either artistically or financially. Among these is Beatle George Harrison.

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