

J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* in TV Commercial Advertisement

In a discussion about how the postmodern attitudes of composers and listeners broaden musical meanings through the use of hypertextual digital interfaces, Willem Strank named J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* as an example:

Conceived as an educational work, it was originally meant to be used by a very small audience of musicians before it was elevated to the status of one of the most important compositions in the history of music. Its second life of reception turned it into a different kind of work and rarely do any contemporary readings of it regard it as an educational piece of music.¹

However, if modern audiences no longer associate the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (WTC) with the didactic-pedagogical sphere, what values are associated with it? And by what mechanisms? While extensively answering these questions is beyond the scope of this article, the focus here is on a specific outcome of the processes of hyper-dissemination and semanticisation of musical repertoire in the contemporary world, namely television advertising. Indeed, since «television advertisements are the most overt records joining life-style, social class, and material aspirations to musical style»,² the study of commercials is a way to delve into the social function of music in general.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, this study seeks to index commercials that feature Bach's WTC as a soundtrack, grouping them according to the types of brands sponsored, as well as the audiovisual strategies and repertoire employed. By doing so, the article aims to explore and analyse various approaches to the interaction of music, image, and text in television advertising. Secondly, this paper presents a case study of an

¹ WILLEM STRANK, *Contextual Marketing. Analyzing Networks of Musical Context in the Digital Age*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Advertising*, ed. by James Deaville, Siu-Lan Tan and Ron Rodman, New York, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 119-140: 138.

² DAVID HURON, *Music in Advertising. An Analytical Paradigm*, «The Musical Quarterly», LXXIII, 4 (1989), pp. 557-574: 567. This passage is also quoted also in the fundamental article by PETER KUPFER, «Good Hands». *The Music of J. S. Bach in Television Commercials*, «Bach. Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute», L, 2 (2019), pp. 275-302.

advertising campaign by a major Italian manufacturer, Poltroneseofà, which in the span of a few months aired three television commercials with Bach's Preludes as the soundtrack. Finally, this article discusses the plausible reasons that lead companies to select Bach's music as the soundtrack for their advertising campaigns. The examination of the meanings that brands, producers, and contemporary audiences attribute to the WTC intends to offer insights into the broader cultural significance of Bach's music and its role in shaping contemporary advertising practices.

It is worth noting that there is still a lack of available systematic research instruments for the analysis of soundtracks in international advertising production today.³ Indexing commercials by musical genre, composer, or soundtrack is challenging due to the lack of platforms focusing on these criteria. This results in complex processes of searching, finding, and describing and difficulty in identifying the individuals involved in commercial conception and production. Consequently, it is difficult to obtain a comprehensive overview of commercials in a given area and time period, limiting investigations to random sources.⁴ In light of these challenges and for the sake of methodological coherence, this study limits its scope to television advertising broadcast in Western countries (Europe and North America) since the 2000s.

A Profile of Advertisements

A total of sixteen commercials were identified that meet the aforementioned criteria. These commercials were broadcast between 2005 and 2021 in Italy (5), the USA (5), the UK (3), and France (2). The majority of them promote brands from the financial sector (banks or insurance companies), as well as furniture, fashion, car, and food companies; other commercials promote special events such as the Red Bull Flying Bach performance or Time Warner Cable's Super Bowl broadcast. Bach's repertoire is used sporadically by most of these brands. In some campaigns, such as those of the Italian fashion company Versace, the WTC is used as part of a communication strategy that associates sophisticated collections with classical music.⁵ Alternatively, a single brand by Poltroneseofà designs

³ Cf. NICOLAI GRAAKJÆR and CHRISTIAN JANTZEN, *Mapping Research on Music in TV Commercials*, in *Music in Advertising. Commercial Sounds in Media Communication and Other Settings*, ed. by Nicolai Graakjær and Christian Jantzen, Aalborg, Aalborg University Press, 2009, pp. 13-52.

⁴ The research was conducted by using lists by Peter Kupfer and Nicolai Graakjær and digital hypertext devices generally interested in publishing short videos (YouTube, Ispot.tv, DailyMotion, Sounds-Familiar).

⁵ Just to make a few examples: the 2018 autumn-winter collection was advertised with Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* (<https://youtu.be/xLCeeUDhiCk>) and Vivaldi's *Inverno* (<https://youtu.be/e8ef6NVALEM>), the 2019 spring-summer collection with music from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* (<https://youtu.be/-fKH4RzlmYo>) (last accessed 25 April 2024).

multiple interconnected commercials with diverse soundtracks taken from the WTC while the British bank NatWest used the same Prelude in two different advertising campaigns broadcast several years apart.

Although music is the focus of this study, it is important to note that the sound aspect is usually one of the last components of an advertisement's production process. When producing a commercial, the agency and brand first establish an advertising strategy and target audience socio-demographics. Then, the creative director, copywriter, and art director are selected to create a storyboard and hire a production and post-production team. Only at this point does the choice of music come into play.⁶ The primary goal of every brand is to offer customers a benefit, make a promise, and to urge them to dream and feel emotions, so that they are appealed to take action and purchase the product.⁷ Some commercials achieve this by proposing micro-dramas and using a protagonist whose story is significant enough to capture the audience's attention and allow them to identify with the character. For instance, the commercial by the bank Barclays (Barc2013)⁸ features a child's dreams coming true as he grows up, gets married, and starts flying airplanes. The protagonist delivers an extradiegetic monologue that seems like an expression of an inner dialogue, interrupted only in the last seconds by a female voice announcing, «Barclays, services bancaires et gestion patrimoniale».

Similarly, in a 30-second advertisement, online broker Ameritrade (Amer2012) engages its customers by narrating a story about Karen and Jeremiah: the couple falls in love, gets married, has two kids, buys a house, and never argues about money as their financial advisor guides them through their entire lives, from long-term investments to retirement planning. In this case, the great realism of the images chosen by Barclays is substituted by a mixture of reality and cardboard: just as an nameless puppeteer “constructs” the cardboard backdrops through which the two protagonists have to find their way, only a financial advisor is able to build their financial solidity.⁹

⁶ Cf. PETER KUPFER, *Fitting Tunes. Selecting Music for Television Commercials*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Advertising*, cit., pp. 72-92: 73-74.

⁷ With this regard, Kupfer notes that «Since the 1980s there has been a shift in television commercials away from touting the benefits of a particular good or service [...] toward emphasizing the ‘end-benefit’ or experience provided by using or owning that good or service [...]. These end-benefits usually have little to do with the factual or functional features of the product and have everything to do with the emotional, psychological, and/or value benefits associated with purchasing that product» (PETER KUPFER, *Classical Music in Television Commercials. A Social-Psychological Perspective*, «Music and the Moving Image», X, 1, (2017), p. 26).

⁸ All acronyms refer to Appendix.

The British bank NatWest (Nat2019) also exhibits these comic-narrative features in its more recent of two advertisements, which portrays the absurd challenges faced by a couple in search of a home. Given the challenges of the current real estate market, it is easy for young adults to identify with the couple and desire the bank's promise to make this experience more bearable by providing the opportunity to sign a contract with ease and ensuring continuous on-site and remote support. The narrative is constructed through a combination of tragicomic images, offstage voiceover, character dialogue, and a succession of diegetic noises that enhance the realism of the scene. In all three commercials, the banks' insight can be summarized as their omniscient ability to understand their customers' dreams, anticipate their needs, and simplify their difficulties.

The humorous elements of Ameritrade and NatWest can also be seen in two other commercials, which are not related to banking, but likewise provide viewers with a taste of the extraordinary experience offered to them. The first one is for the US television channel Time Warner, which sponsors the annual National Football League finals. The ad features actor Ricky Gervais who declines a social media friend request and is then suddenly thrown into a war zone where actress Mary-Louise Parker is being chased by zombies. The entire commercial plays with a caricature of cinematic special effects, diegetic sounds such as explosions and engines, and off-screen voice commentary. The second advertisement is for Warburton's bread and has a similarly surreal, albeit a very different tone. The ad consists of scenes featuring the arrival of a lorry, the ticking of a clock showing 3pm, and a series of sequences in which chairman Jonathan Warburton toasts his bread. These moments are portrayed as almost heavenly, and the abrupt interruption by the secretary announcing a video phone call with George Clooney adds a brief moment of amusement. Slow motion plays an essential role, as do some of the objective sounds in the scene, while the contemplative, celestial dimension is created through the quasi-absence of text and is implemented by the soundtrack.¹⁰

Besides commercials based on a descriptive-narrative dimension and the search for an overall coherence of the image, there are also commercials that emphasize diversity. The

⁹ The models of Barclays and Ameritrade are condensed in Poltronesofà's commercials (Polt2020a, b, c): the protagonists are two craftsmen already familiar from television, depicted in impressive but realistic shots; the voice, however, is that of an external narrator who comments on the images and/or introduces the advertising message.

¹⁰ Special effects designed to enhance the impact of the image are also used in the commercial for Red Bull flying Bach (Red2016), a performance that combines ballet and breakdance with Bach's music. The commercial shows the extreme virtuosity of the dancers involved, spoken by an external male voice that is muffled as the amazing images of contortions and spins unfold.

commercial most similar to those analysed so far is from the Italian pharmaceutical company Farindustria (Farm2006). It aimed to raise public awareness about the value of medical and pharmaceutical research by showing clips of people with health problems whose lives have been improved by medications. Images play a central role and are matched together very well in terms of position and camera movement, since in the commercial there is no sound, and the verbal message is only conveyed through short inserts. The situation is different with two commercials from the US-based Allstate Insurance (All2010) and the aforementioned British bank NatWest (Nat2016), which share some similarities. In the images, one recognises in both cases sequences of people (and landscapes) of different ages, social classes, and origins, and both commercials end with a switch from the first vignettes referring to past eras to the last ones, which are set in the present and relate to the sponsored brands. As regards the text, both ads are based on a monologue with a strong moral value: Allstate Insurance, in particular, chooses the slogan *The only thing we have to fear is fear itself*, delivered by Franklin D. Roosevelt during the 1932 US election campaign.¹¹ It is not a coincidence that an American insurance company chooses to use Roosevelt's words after the economic crisis of 2008; the company's commercial, indeed, features fourteen people who represent different models of an "American citizen", portraying a community that has the courage to overcome difficulties, just as they did during the crisis of 1929, and are able to cope with the present hostilities. NatWest, on the other hand, uses a monologue that addresses global warming, homelessness, and man's inhumanity, summarizing human nature's contradictions in thirty second («we are brave and stupid, we are creative and destructive»). The aim is to make everyone responsible for their actions («so we all have a duty for what we do»), including the bank, which has faced public criticism («we are what we do»). Again, the screen is followed by a series of black and white vignettes showing children, the elderly, military personnel, hooligans, and suffragettes, only taking on colour to display the bank's logo. If we compare the All2010 and Nat2016 videos with the commercial created by Donatella Versace (Vers2018) to advertise the 2018 spring-summer fashion collection, the latter is semantically simpler but no less impressive. In just seventeen seconds, thirteen models repeat the brand name «Versace» in close-up shots: as the creator says, «this campaign represents the link between past and present»¹²

¹¹ See also P. KUPFER, "Good Hands", cit., pp. 290-292.

¹² WILLIAM DEFEBAGH, *Versace's New Campaign Is as Legendary as You'd Expect*, «L'Officiel», 12 September 2017, <https://www.lofficielusa.com/fashion/versace-spring-summer-2018-campaign> (last accessed 29 March 2023).

and becomes a tribute to the history of the fashion house, as the sponsored collection modernizes some of Gianni Versace's most popular outfits over the decades.

The WTC in Commercials

As mentioned above, the musical component in the overall economy of a commercial is not prioritized in the production process, although it is crucial to its communicative effectiveness.¹³ To accomplish this task, most commercials favour short excerpts from current hits or, more recently, newly composed pieces. Selecting a piece from the repertoire of the past is a more difficult and rare undertaking,¹⁴ as the goal is to find in this music «something timeless, but which also speaks to the moment».¹⁵ Bach is generally one of the “classical” composers most favoured by the advertising industry because some of his works are so well-known and the abstract quality of his music is especially apt at conveying different meanings. However, of the more than a thousand works that make up his catalogue, the musical fragments used in commercials are not very numerous or varied. As Peter Kupfer noted in his study of Bach's music in television advertisements aired between 2009 and 2018, the selection falls almost predominantly on a few preludes for solo instruments (notably the Prelude from the *Cello Suite* No. 1 BWV 1007) and some great icons of Bach's music, such as the Aria from the *Orchestral Suite* BWV 1068 or the *Brandenburg Concertos*.¹⁶ Regarding the WTC, the advertising industry extensively uses only one piece from the collection: the Prelude No. 1 in C major BWV 846. This is justified because it is one of Bach's best-known and most recognisable compositions and because it is entirely in keeping with the style of the “prelude for solo instrument”, whose abstract character allows it «to take on any number of meanings depending upon the context».¹⁷ This preference is confirmed by the ads discussed herein, with ten containing excerpts from Prelude No. 1 in C major BWV 964, while three use Prelude No. 2 in C minor BWV 965, and only one mentions

¹³ David Allan recognises a musical track in 83% of the advertisements under investigation (DAVID ALLAN, *A Content Analysis of Music Placement in Prime-Time Television Advertising*, «Journal of Advertising Research», XLVIII, 3 (2008), pp. 404-417), while in Graakjær's research the percentage reaches 90% (NICOLAI GRAAKJÆR, *Music in TV Commercials. Formats, Frequencies, and Tendencies*, in *Music in Advertising*, cit., pp. 53-73: 55-58).

¹⁴ Concerning the use of classical music in commercials, cf. P. KUPFER, *Classical Music in Television Commercials*, cit.

¹⁵ ROY TRAKIN, *The Story of “Similau”, the Peggy Lee Song Sexing Up Samsung's Galaxy Note8*, «Variety», 8 November 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/music/news/the-story-of-similau-the-peggy-lee-song-sexing-up-samsungs-galaxy-note8-advertisement-1202608486/> (last accessed on 29 March 2023), cited in P. KUPFER, *Fitting Tunes*, cit., p. 76.

¹⁶ Cf. P. KUPFER, “Good Hands”, cit., pp. 279-280.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 281.

Prelude No. 3 in C sharp minor BWV 966 and the first two and a half bars of Prelude No. 8 in E flat minor BWV 853.

To comprehend how the intersection of the visual-sound-verbal and musical dimensions in commercials occurs, we adopt a dual approach. First, we concentrate on the musical text itself, and secondly, we examine its use in the broader context of ads. Bach's repertoire is widely recognised for its interpretational flexibility, and the Preludes, due to their technical-didactic "study" nature, are particularly susceptible to interpretations that emphasise both their lyrical-melodic and/or virtuoso-performative dimensions. As a result, advertising agencies that use Bach's Preludes can choose interpretations of the same piece that diverge significantly in their sonority and approach. One interesting parameter to consider is tempo;¹⁸ in advertising, a performance with a persistent rapid rhythm is generally suitable for reinforcing a sense of urgency or amplifying the soundtrack's build-up, which is already implicit in the video's visual and textual components. This is evident in Ameritrade's advertisement (Amer2012), which features the Prelude No. 1 in C major played at a tempo of 100 beats per minute (bpm). Music is synchronized with the rapid sequence of visual images and text depicting the hectic lives of Karen and Jeremiah, thereby reinforcing the sense of unstoppable ambition. The combination of the fast-paced soundtrack and frenetic visuals communicates to the potential client the importance of seeking the assistance of a financial advisor to build a solid financial foundation capable of withstanding unexpected events.¹⁹ In contrast, other advertisements employ a very slow tempo in performing Bach's Preludes to emphasize, through the music, what has already been conveyed in the visual and/or textual-verbal aspects of the commercial. For instance, in the Time2012 advertisement, Prelude No. 1 in C major is played at 55 bpm, which strengthens the sense of restlessness by combining the sluggishness of the music with the slow-motion footage. Similarly, in the Nat2016 commercial, the same Prelude is slowed down even further (33 bpm) and is supported by prolonged string drones to unify the sequence of binary oppositions throughout the ad and allow for greater focus on the verbal content.

¹⁸ With regards to different uses of Prelude No. 1 in C major according to its tempo, see: DAVID NEUMEYER, *Meaning and Interpretation of Music in Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2015, pp. 187-188.

¹⁹ In the Poltronosofà commercial that aired in April 2020 (Polt2020b), the Prelude No. 2 in C minor was played at a speed of ♩ =140-145 bpm: The imagery and verbal text refer to the desire of the company and Italians in general for a new beginning after the abrupt standstill due to the Covid 19 pandemic, which literally trapped an entire country indoors, «on the couch». The enthusiasm for this new beginning, for the production system, and for life in general, is reinforced by its combination with a soundtrack that – although it repeats the same figuration over and over again – is upbeat and energetic.

The interplay between sound and image is further exemplified by the use of timbre, which can imbue music with new and divergent meanings, and help to demarcate the borders of its new context. A case in point is the fuel company Total Excellium's (Total2005) decision to utilise a synthesizer to perform the Prelude No. 1 in C major, which serves to reinforce the somewhat dehumanized and postmodern atmosphere of the sterile petrol station in which the scenes are set. The accompanying visuals depict a failed long-distance rendezvous of a petrol station attendant with the alluring Séverine, who, after some hesitation, opts for Excellium fuel, which allows one to drive «plus de km avec le même plein» (more kilometres with the same tank). This choice ultimately prevents the new rendezvous, since Séverine will more rarely visit the petrol station and «forcément [ils se verront] moins souvent» (inevitably they will see each other less often).

In the aforementioned instances, the adaptation of Bach's Preludes for commercial purposes is constrained to the choice of performances that differ in parameters such as tempo, character, and instrumentation. Nonetheless, the advertising industry avails itself of considerably greater flexibility in manipulating musical texts to achieve their communicative objectives, so that creators do not hesitate to propose actual variants to Bach's text in their commercials. In commercial construction, conveying a concise and immediate message within a 30-second time frame is a critical aspect and the music is required to sustain a rhetorical structure of an ascending and descending musical narrative while adhering to the introduction-development-conclusion rhetoric. Bach's first two Preludes from the WTC are well-suited for this purpose, as they summarize a complete harmonic development (I-IV-V-I) in the first eight bars. Nevertheless, advertisements frequently demand a more rapid conclusion and force an (oftentimes abrupt) interruption of Bach's discourse by hastening the transition to the final bars of the pieces. In these occasions, final bars are condensed so that the tonic affirmation and the hovering of the final arpeggio coincide with the commercial's conclusion and/or the gradual fading out of the advertised brand's logo.²⁰ The advertisements for Time Warner (Time2012) and Red Bull flying Bach (Red2016), which utilise Prelude No. 1 in C major and Prelude No. 2 in C minor, respectively, provide an illustrative example since, in both cases, the commercials leverage tension to communicate their intended messages. The first commercial aims to highlight

²⁰ "Amputations" appears in Time2012 to restore the happy ending; in Farm2006, Amer2012, Barc2013, Red2016 to indicate the brand name; and in Nat2016 and Nat2019 to create a distinctive brand jingle. In All2010, the jump from m. 18 to m. 30 serves to underline the transition from the past to the present, highlighting in this way that Roosevelt's message is embraced and adopted by the Allstate Union policy.

the sense of urgency preceding the Super Bowl match, while the second seeks to convey the exceptional and highly challenging nature of the choreographic performance to Bach's music. Musically, in both cases, Bach's Preludes undergo a process of fragmentation and reassembly, resulting in an acceleration of the harmonic rhythm to facilitate the visual and textual development of the advertisement.²¹

Finally, advertisers have used Bach's Prelude No. 1 in C major in both its "original" form, characterised by a repetitive arpeggio notation, and in transcriptions that emphasise the inherent melody in its contrapuntal structure, following performance and compositional traditions dating back to the nineteenth century and leading to Charles Gounod's *Ave Maria*.²² The Barclays soundtrack (Barc2013), for example, integrates the Prelude's arpeggios with a violin melody that begins at m. 5 with the words «bon investissement», in order to emphasize the bank's intervention in the protagonist's life to help him achieve his dreams.²³ Similarly, Farindustria (Farm2006) integrates Fabrizio Campanelli's original song *Daydreaming* with sung and spoken words, adding emotive meaning to the commercial by pairing images and lyrics focused on the flowers of blossoming Love-Lies-Bleeding.²⁴ The most impressive example of this is Warburton's commercial (Warb2021), which uses the famous *Ave Maria* sung by English soprano Byony Purdue. In particular, it is fascinating to see how Warb2021 uses music to convey a nonverbal message and create a sacred atmosphere around the product. By using the Latin lyrics of the *Ave Maria* as the sole soundtrack and synchronizing it precisely with the images of toasting bread, the brand elevates the simple act of making toast to a sublime experience that evokes religious and emotional connotations. The music only kicks in when Mr.

²¹ The Time2012 rendition jumps from m. 7 to mm. 12-13 (including the diminished seventh resolving to D major) and then to the restored dominant key in m. 30, which introduces a shortened version of the concluding arpeggio of mm 33-34. In Red2016, however, after the first 3 bars of Prelude No. 8 in E flat minor BWV 853 – which function both musically and figuratively as an introduction – the Prelude No. 2 in C minor BWV 847 begins with the following sequence: mm. 1-4, 4, 1, 1-3 with an interruption in the last semiquaver, before moving quickly to mm. 37-38. These cuts are all aimed at bringing a feeling of reassurance to the message, guaranteed in the music by the definitive arrival on the tonic.

²² For a simple presentation of the formal-compositional features of Preludes No. 1 in C major and No. 2 in C minor, cf. DAVID LEDBETTER, *Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier. The 48 Preludes and Fugues*, London, Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 143-147 and 151-152.

²³ The same is true of the Nat2019 commercial, where the melodic line is set in the lower register for cello, which supports the arpeggios that follow one another with a pointed rhythm, giving the music a more modern and ironic touch that is consistent with the overall communicative structure.

²⁴ Indeed, as Hsuan-Yi Chou and Nai-Hwa Lien noted, the combination of nostalgic music and lyrics in a commercial message prompt an effective response from viewers (cf. HSUAN-YI CHOU and NAI-HWA LIEN, *Advertising Effects of Songs' Nostalgia and Lyrics' Relevance*, «Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics», XXII, 3 (2012), p. 314-329: 324).

Warburtons begins to prepare his toast; the word «Ave» coincides with the bread being taken out and smelt, «gratia» with the toaster ejecting the toast, which swirls around in the air (as if it were a divine ascension), and «Deus» with the dab of butter appearing in the foreground and melting perfectly on the warm bread. This example illustrates how vocal music can be a powerful tool in advertising by conveying complex meanings and emotions that go beyond the limitations of spoken language.²⁵ The use of vocal music, in particular, can add an extra layer of meaning to the message, as the lyrics and melody combine to create a unique and memorable experience for the audience.

This analysis reveals that the use of Bach's Preludes in commercials is carefully selected and edited to enhance the communicative potential of the commercial as a whole. The selection of the most appropriate musical excerpts is crucial in post-production, and allows for interpretative and compositional creativity. Bach's Preludes, in particular, have been used to create a tapestry of sound that can hold together a dense sequence of images and words. In many cases, the synchronisation between the music and image-word dyad aims to emphasise phraseology, highlighting rhetorical knots and avoiding monotony (Allst2010, Nat2016, Vers2018, Polt2020b). The irregularity of pauses and accelerations of verbal ducts juxtaposed with the regular flow of Bach's musical figurations creates a sense of accumulation that adds depth to the commercial's message. The use of silence also adds a layer of meaning; for example, in Time2012 and Nat2019 the first notes of Bach's Prelude are postponed and begin with a change of scene like in Red2016, where the Prelude No. 2 in C minor signals the beginning of the performance (with the voice even falling silent). In the Barc2013 commercial, the entrance of the violin is used to represent the bank's intervention in the protagonist's life. Overall, the use of Bach's music in commercials is a complex process that requires careful consideration of the communicative message of the product. As Nicholas Cook already noted more than thirty years ago, «music transfers its own attributes to the story line and to the product, it creates coherence, making connections that are not there in the words or pictures; it even engenders meanings of its own. But it does all this, so to speak, silently».²⁶

Poltronesofà and its Partnership with Bach

During the peak of the Covid-19 emergency, from April to June 2020, Poltronesofà, a medium-sized Italian company specialising in armchairs and sofas, aired three television

²⁵ Cf. D. HURON, *Music in Advertising*, cit. p. 565

²⁶ NICHOLAS COOK, *Music and Meaning in the Commercials*, «Popular Music», XIII, 1 (1994), cit., p. 27-40: 38.

commercials that include excerpts from the WTC.²⁷ Founded in 2005 in Forlì, northern Italy, Poltronosofà is located in an economically prosperous area where small to medium-sized family businesses have traditionally thrived. The company has experienced significant growth, with its revenue increasing from 54 million euros in 2007 to over 144 million euros in 2012, and has established itself as one of the leading brands in the industry.²⁸ Poltronosofà targets middle-income customers who are attracted to low-cost marketing and medium-quality products at relatively affordable prices. Poltronosofà's communication policy has always emphasized the family-oriented dimension of the company, the "made in Italy" label, and constant last-minute and special offers. To this end, Poltronosofà has heavily invested in TV and radio commercials.

In Spring 2020, due to the rapid increase in Covid-19 infections and deaths, even Poltronosofà had to suspend all business. At the onset of the lockdown in Italy, the entire population was confined to their homes, with limited permission to leave only for basic needs and essential business. This was mandated by the Prime Minister's decrees issued between March 9th, 2020 and March 25th, 2020, which ordered the start of a nationwide lockdown, closure of shops, and suspension of all non-essential work activities. These measures drastically «changed the habits and severely affected the daily routine of the majority of the population»,²⁹ forcing them to stay indoors. Furthermore, the first waves of Covid-19 in 2020 resulted in over 746,146 deaths in Italy, recording a 76.8% increase in deaths compared to the previous three-year period, second only to Spain in Europe.³⁰ After the Easter holidays, a first phase of partial recovery of economic activities began, leading to the resumption of tourist and gastronomic activities in May. Eventually, in the first half of June, the gradual loosening of restrictions allowed for the resumption of other activities, resulting in an apparent return to normality for the population, and businesses such as Poltronosofà were allowed to resume their normal production and sales activities.

In response to the unexpected situation caused by the pandemic, Poltronosofà, like most brands in Italy, had to completely reconsider its communication strategies. Initially, the company ceased its pre-pandemic advertising out of concern that it might create

²⁷ Unfortunately, despite numerous attempts to make contact, it was not possible to communicate with the company's marketing department for this study.

²⁸ FEDERICA DAMETTO, *Caso Poltronosofà. L'artigianalità nella produzione su larga scala*, tesi di laurea in Economia internazionale, Università degli Studi di Padova, a.a. 2015-2016, p. 22.

²⁹ *Due anni di pandemia. L'impatto su cittadini e imprese*, in *Rapporto annuale 2022. La situazione del Paese*, Roma, Istat, 2022, p. 98.

³⁰ All Istat data are extracted from *Due anni di pandemia*, cit., pp. 79-83.

confusion among its customers, but after a period of silence, Poltronesofà returned to the airwaves, broadcasting a series of commercials specifically tailored to the various phases of the emergency. In its first commercial aired in April (Pol2020a), during the most critical phase of the lockdown, Poltronesofà addressed «Italians» with a sensitive yet resolute tone: the commercial depicted moments of Italians' new daily lives, with a particular emphasis on the renewed collective interest in cooking, but it also appealed to their courage and pride urging them to «take the future into [their] hands». Poltronesofà promised to «help Italy get back on its feet soon» by «staying at home» (with a clear allusion to the very popular hashtag #iorestoacasa) but remaining «more active than even» (because they are committed to creating «new scraps of the future»). According to Daniela Pietrini, this first commercial «does not aim to highlight the features of a product or brand, but to strengthen the bond with the brand by expressing empathy and comfort towards consumers».³¹ In this sense, the company's communication strategies align with those of other brands during the pandemic, but incorporate frequent semiotic references to the textile and real estate sectors in both the verbal and iconic dimensions of the advertising product.³²

A month later, in the May advertising campaign (Pol2020b), Poltronesofà shifted its discourse towards creating excitement and anticipation for a return to normality. The focus was on the brand's product, with the use of the phrase «it's almost time» as a deictic reference to the imminent “phase two”. The advertisement highlights the waiting period, with one of the protagonists preparing for a special occasion by shaving and wearing a tie and still emphasizes the collective dimension of being «Italian», showing the strength of the nation that had overcome adversity by continuing to create and design. The focus remains on the Italians, who can now hope for a new freedom, represented iconically by the flight of a butterfly released from the windows of a house, bringing beauty back to the outside world. This imminent return to normality is highlighted by the reappearance of the historical and famous super-slogan, «Poltronesofà, autentica qualità», which had

³¹ DANIELA PIETRINI, “*Ci siamo dovuti fermare*”. *La nuova lingua di marketing e pubblicità in tempo di Covid*, «Lingua Italiana», 2 July 2020, https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/articoli/scritto_e_parlato/marketing.html (last accessed 20 April 2023).

³² The over-voice says: «in questi giorni siamo fermi, come voi, ma non certo con le mani in mano. Sì, abbiamo tutto il tempo di cucinare, ma il tempo è sacro. Con le nostre mani *continuiamo a progettare, creare, disegnare* nuove forme di piacere, *ritagliare* nuovi *scampoli* di futuro, immaginare nuovi stili di vita. Oggi il coraggio e l'orgoglio di essere italiani si dimostra così, prendendo il futuro nelle nostre mani. Restiamo a casa, certo, ma siamo più attivi che mai. Solo così possiamo *aiutare l'Italia a rialzarsi presto... dal divano*». In italics I indicate all terms that semantically refer to Poltronesofà.

disappeared in the April commercial, and reinforces now the sense of continuity between before and after the pandemic.

The third commercial by Poltronosofà, which aired on television between the end of May and the first half of June (Pol2020c), marks a significant shift in the company's communication strategy. The advertisement opens with the question «Everyone talks about it, but what is recovery?» and focuses on the brand's specificity rather than using rhetoric of comfort and hope. For Poltronosofà, recovery means resuming its activity and marketing its primary product, the sofa. Thus, the commercial presents a «spatial» offer to the customer, providing them with an assessment of their old sofa, free transportation of the new one, and a loan with instalments. Although the message still alludes to the Covid situation, the terminology used is reminiscent of Poltronosofà's traditional advertising, and the display of the offer makes this commercial much more informative than the previous two.

These three commercials offer insight into the response of Italians and the country's market during the early months of the pandemic, showcasing a supportive and proactive attitude characterized by the persistent slogan “everything will be fine”. They also reveal a growing impatience as individuals and the collective population faced medium-term consequences of the sudden halt to a life that had been slowly rebuilding itself. Finally, the commercials depict a euphoria that ensued from attempts to return to daily life as if nothing had happened. While each commercial captures the current mood, Poltronosofà's advertisements maintain a clear reference to the company's communication policy, evident in the portrayal of the pandemic “experience” and the preservation of a line of continuity between pre- and post-emergency times. The third commercial is the closest to the company's traditional communication in terms of insight and tone, effectively describing the concept of “recovery”, however, elements of continuity are also present in the preceding commercials. For example, to reinforce the brand image and values, Poltronosofà consistently features iconic craftsmen of the company and emphasizes their skill and techniques through close-up shots of their hands and tools. After all, the alternating use of medium-distance and close-up or extremely close-up shots emphasizes the craftsmanship of the company's artisans and their specialized tools. Even the voiceover, delivered by the Italian actor and voice-over artist Alex Poli, provides a cohesive thread throughout each commercial, while the exclusive use of music in the soundtrack adds a subtle emotional component to the visual images. Moreover, the first two commercials were shot indoors,

likely to avoid creating a sense of dissonance between the actions of the craftsmen and the experiences of viewers who were confined indoors during the pandemic. In contrast, the third commercial was filmed exclusively outdoors and prominently features the misty landscape of the Po Valley, as well as wheat fields that represent the area where the company is headquartered, evoking a sense of place and identity closely tied to the brand. In this sense, the technical similarities of the three commercials contribute to the creation of a consistent and unified brand image and message. In brief, these technical elements work in concert to create a consistent and unified brand image and message in all three commercials.

What role do music and Bach play in this context? The choice of pieces by the same composer (Bach), from the same collection (the WTC) and in the same form (the prelude) play a significant role in the overall advertising strategy, since this selection serves to create a cohesive image. Nevertheless, tracks are different for each commercial and gradually introduce the WTC. Pol2020a uses Prelude No. 1 in C major to create a pleasant and optimistic tone that reflects the brand's determination to maintain its pride despite the difficult situation. The sequence of arpeggios represents the company's unwavering commitment to their craft and the belief that everything will be fine. In contrast, Pol2020b features Prelude No. 2 in C minor, which has a frenetic and effervescent tone: the repeated figures and turning notes reflect a sense of restlessness felt by Italians still forced to stay at home. Finally, Pol2020c features Prelude No. 3 in C sharp major, which is based on an ascending pattern and conveys a sense of movement and energy that corresponds to the spirit of the commercial.

Overall, the use of Bach's Preludes, selected for their specific tonal qualities and moods, helps to create an emotional connection with the audience, while also highlighting a discontinuity with Poltronesofà's typical communication strategy. The short-term use of Bach's music shows that Poltronesofà wanted to create a sense of exceptionality, distinguishing these advertisements from previous and subsequent campaigns. Moreover, even though Poltronesofà typically produces low to medium cost products, the settings, characters, and clothing featured in these advertisements have a refined and old-fashioned aesthetic. This complements the sophistication of Bach's music, which helps Poltronesofà to create a refined image for its brand, which may appeal to new sociodemographic "Italian" groups. In this regard, it would be interesting to know how many viewers actually recognised the Preludes from the WTC or at least assumed that they were compositions by

Bach. The only available data in this regard are the comments on the commercial videos on YouTube, in which several users request the name of the composer and the piece of music used in the soundtrack. Moreover, it is significant that Poltronosofà uses piano in all the three commercials: this instrument, indeed, is linked in the collective imagination to the domestic and public (and collective) dimensions and recalls the overlap of private and public spheres experienced by Italians during the lockdown. Eventually, it is also possible that debates about the closure of cultural venues during the pandemic influenced Poltronosofà's choice of music, but there is no concrete evidence to support this theory. Overall, the use of Bach's music during the pandemic helped to emphasise the mood of each commercial and create a unified and polished image for the brand, which may have contributed to its success during a challenging time.

Why Bach?

In light of this discussion, several questions remain unanswered. Why did the creators choose to employ Bach's music in advertising? What impact was expected of Bach's music on the television audience? What values are attributed to this repertoire? It is unlikely that these questions can be answered with certainty due to the limited corpus of advertisements studied and the inherent complexity of these sources. However, Kupfer has already noted that «creative directors most likely have not consciously developed a singular strategy for how to use Bach in commercials, much less has any industry-wide standard emerged for Bach specifically».³³ That said, it is possible to identify some common themes.

First, one can reflect on the contribution of music in advertising; for this purpose, David Huron's categories from over thirty years ago remain effective today,³⁴ since they allow us to observe how – once again – Bach's Preludes are called upon to play a role in the following ways:

- ◆ *Entertaining the audience by evoking emotions.* In some cases, the emotions evoked are directly related to the visual-verbal dimensions of the ad, although they may vary considerably in their interaction with the music (e.g., Farma2006 generates compassion, Warb2001 fascination, Red2016 excitement). In other cases, the music can entertain the audience without «necessarily any special affinity with a particular

³³ P. KUPFER, "Good Hands", cit., p. 301.

³⁴ D. HURON, *Music in Advertising*, cit., pp. 557-574. Huron's categorizations are not the only ones regarding the functions of music in advertising; for a deeper understanding and comparison with other models, cf. N. GRAAKJÆR AND C. JANTZEN, *Mapping Research on Music in TV Commercials*, cit., pp. 22-26.

product or service».³⁵ This is the case with Total2005 or Time2012, two ads in which the calm classicism of Bach's Prelude No. 1 in C major seems antithetical to the context of the images; on the one hand, the music instils here a sense of estrangement in the viewer, while on the other hand, it distracts from a storyline that might appear slow and boring by giving it a more captivating tone.

- ◆ *Strengthening the structure of the ad, giving it a sense of continuity.* This is certainly the case with all ads built upon the juxtaposition of images and/or a series of dramatic episodes, such as Allst2010, Nat2016, Vers2018, and even Farma2006. These ads rely on the sense of homogeneity in the verbal and musical dimensions to present their brands as inclusive, aimed at a very diverse target audience. From this point of view, the regular succession of repeated half-measure rhythmic units characterising the Prelude No. 1 in C major helps to implement the sense of a regular backdrop.
- ◆ *Targeting the audience and conferring authority to the brand.*³⁶ Regardless of whether the average audience recognizes Bach's Preludes or not, it is likely that most target listeners identify his music as "classical". Brands capitalise on this identification to reach their target audience: generally, wealthier and highbrow consumers who appreciate classical music, and who identify with the social and cultural meanings commonly associated with this repertoire.³⁷ For example, Barc2013's use of Bach recalls a culture almost contemporary to its foundation (1690), and addresses an audience with sufficient economic capacity to make large investments. A similar argument can be made for Vers2018, where Bach's music serves to highlight the historicity of its brand and to objectify the constant pursuit of a synthesis between tradition and modernity.³⁸ The case of Poltronesofà is different, for which the adoption of Bach's music is part of a broader operation of diversifying the audience and elevating its own brand.
- ◆ *Making commercials memorable.* Given the scarcity of classical music in advertising, using it can make a commercial stand out, distinguishing it from the competition

³⁵ N. GRAAKJÆR AND C. JANTZEN, *Mapping Research on Music in TV Commercials*, cit., pp. 560-561

³⁶ In this regard, Kupfer also acknowledged invoking associations with prestige and class among the typical uses of Bach's music in advertising. (P. KUPFER, "Good Hands", cit., pp. 284-285).

³⁷ Regarding the importance for a creator to consider effective matches both between music and the advertised product and between the viewers' consumer identity and their musical identities, cf. P. KUPFER, *Classical Music in Television Commercials*, cit., pp. 23-25.)

³⁸ Versace's example is not unique: Kupfer, in examining other advertisements aired in the US, has already highlighted how Bach's music can be used «to represent how old and traditional ideas can work in concert with more recent innovations and ways of thinking» (P. KUPFER, "Good Hands", cit., p. 289).

and conventional branding strategies. Therefore, incorporating Bach's music into advertisements serves as an effective means of creating a distinctive and lasting impact on the viewer.

It remains to be understood how precisely the choice of the WTC in advertisements relates to the values that the creators intended to convey with Bach's music.³⁹ As Nicholas Cook observes, «television commercials constitute an exceptionally fertile arena for investigating the negotiation of musical meaning»,⁴⁰ but the meaning of a musical composition is not inherent in the music itself but rather involves a negotiation with the interpreter, the contingent condition of reception, and the audience's previous knowledge.⁴¹ Consequently, even the attribution of values to Bach's Preludes cannot be unequivocal; nevertheless, some trends can be identified. On one hand, Bach is regarded as a contributor to the Western canon and a champion of cultural religious and secular tradition. The indispensability of the high culture tradition remains a value for some sectors of society; therefore, employing Bach's music in a commercial helps to associate the brand with a cultural, social, or economic niche. As has been widely noted, indeed, that «consumers view brands as having personalities, and prefer those marketing offerings that are similar to how they see themselves or to the type of person they want to become».⁴² In addition, Bach's historical significance makes him a valuable asset for brands seeking to establish themselves as reputable and trustworthy entities. This strong connection with a historical dimension that still operates in the contemporary world characterizes long-standing brands adapting to the present. Moreover, Bach's music is widely recognised as a symbol of purity and complexity, capable of instilling a sense of peace and reassurance in the listener. This sense of security is particularly effective in encouraging consumer spending,⁴³ and many brands have taken advantage of this by using classical music in their

³⁹ Regarding the functional use of classical music in advertising, Kupfer states that «it has clearly associated meanings, and advertisers do use it, ostensibly because it can help communicate a particular message» (P. KUPFER, *Classical Music in Television Commercials*, cit., p. 28).

⁴⁰ N. COOK, *Music and Meaning in the Commercials*, cit., p. 30.

⁴¹ NICHOLAS COOK, *Theorizing Musical Meaning*, «Music Theory Spectrum», XXIII, 2 (2001), p. 170-195: 180.

⁴² *Conquering Consumerspace. Marketing Strategies for a Branded World*, New York, American Management Association, 2003, p. 24.

⁴³ Cf. CHARLES S. ARENI and DAVID KIM, *The Influence of Background Music on Shopping Behavior. Classical Versus Top-Forty Music in a Wine Store*, «Advances in Consumer Research», XX, 1 (1993), pp. 336-340.

advertising campaigns to strengthen the impression «that one’s product choices will lead to happier, healthier, and safer lives».⁴⁴

The majority of brands that have chosen to feature the WTC in their advertisements are linked to the financial and banking industry. Bach’s music is thus employed to help reassure potential customers about the reliability and affordability of institutions that they may trust with their savings. Finally, the WTC serves as a prime example of Bach’s exceptional ability to construct grand musical structures. This exemplifies another epithet commonly attributed to Bach, that of a master craftsman and architect who exemplifies methodology and perseverance; these values are closely aligned with brands that prioritise the creation of high-quality, tangible products such as food, clothing, or manufacturing items. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the WTC is a keyboard work, and as such, it requires skilful handiwork to bring forth its intricate melodies, much like the production of high-quality goods. The complexity of Bach’s creations – which lies beneath their apparent beauty and elegance – embodies a synthesis of great tradition and a curious interest in modernity, making them highly effective in promoting brands that value such qualities.

To summarize, Bach’s music seems to have become a powerful tool for brands looking to establish themselves as cultural, economic, and artisanal reputable and trustworthy entities. Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that the association between classical music and elitism is weakening. From a social and cultural perspective, Marxist theorist Timothy Taylor argues that «the new petite bourgeoisie attempts to confer legitimacy upon itself not by brokering high culture» but by embracing hip and cool culture,⁴⁵ so that «in advertising [it] is not educating mainstream viewers about the glories of art, but instead is introducing them to the sounds of the underground».⁴⁶ As a result, classical music is losing its distinctiveness and cultural value to other cultural proposals that were previously considered less prominent. From a musicological perspective, Peter Kupfer’s research on the socio-psychological impact of classical music in advertising suggests that «while sociodemographic backgrounds play some role in determining individuals’ musical tastes and product preferences when considered separately, psychological processes appear to kick into action when viewers are confronted with

⁴⁴ P. KUPFER, “Good Hands”, cit., p. 276. This relationship between Bach’s music and a sense of reassurance is at the core of Kupfer’s reflection on the use of Bach’s repertoire in advertising.

⁴⁵ TIMOTHY D. TAYLOR, *The Sounds of Capitalism. Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 237.

⁴⁶ T. D. TAYLOR, *The Sounds of Capitalism*, cit., p. 238.

audiovisual pairing».⁴⁷ Therefore, even Kupfer's studies refute a real "distinctive" dimension (in the Bourdieuan sense) of classical music, which, once integrated into the complex product of the video commercial, is received by the audience regardless of musical tastes in an extra-advertising context. According to this, classical music, and Bach's repertoire specifically, loses its distinctiveness and becomes more neutral, but at the same time more inclusive of wider market segments. In the end, advertisements, which have always been regarded as an exceptional barometer of the current relationship between lifestyle, social class, material aspirations, and musical meaning,⁴⁸ become a testament to the deep-rooted impact of the WTC, which has been in existence for over three hundred years. In other words, these few commercials testify to what extent Bach's WTC has truly become capable of effectively conveying a sense of beauty even in contexts far away from prestigious concert halls, making it a part of the collective experience.

⁴⁷ P. KUPFER, *Classical Music in Television Commercials*, cit., p. 44.

⁴⁸ D. HURON, *Music in Advertising*, cit., p. 567.

Appendix – TV Commercial Advertisements that include selections of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*

Name	Brand	Year	Typology	Place of dissemination	WTC Prelude
Total2005	TotalExcellium	2005 Url: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x15qi	Cars	France	Prelude No. 1
Farm2006	Farindustria	2006 Url: https://youtu.be/PZoqCwiMvpk	Health	Italy	Prelude No. 1
Allst2010	Allstate Insurance	2010 Url: https://youtu.be/hxTrZuGJ1zs	Finance (Insurance)	USA	Prelude No. 1
Amer2012	Ameritrade	2012 Url: https://www.ispot.tv/ad/72Js/td-ameritrade-wedding	Finance (Insurance)	USA	Prelude No. 1
Time2012	Time Warner Cable	2012 Url: https://www.ispot.tv/events/2012-super-bowl-commercials/time-warner-cable-enjoy-better	Event (TV)	USA	Prelude No. 1
Barc2013	Barclays	2013 Url: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x17y0hd	Finance (Bank)	France	Prelude No. 1
Nat2016	NatWest	2016 Url: https://www.sounds-familiar.info/2016/09/natwest-we-are-what-we-do/	Finance (Bank)	UK	Prelude No. 1

J. S. Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier in TV Commercial Advertisement

Red2016	Red Bull flying Bach	2016 Url: https://youtu.be/BKpw8ynGI5E	Event (performance)	USA	Prelude No. 2 Prelude No. 8
Vers2018	Versace	2018 Url: https://youtu.be/WCsIMfQDvHg	Fashion, Manufacturing	Italy	Prelude No. 2
Nat2019	NatWest	2019 Url: https://youtu.be/nCiszK4RRBg	Finance (Bank)	UK	Prelude No. 1
Pol2020a	Poltronesofà	April 2020 Url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYEMbObcl-g	Design, Manufacturing	Italy	Prelude No. 1
Pol2020b	Poltronesofà	May 2020 Url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZOkn-gQR3k	Design, manufacturing	Italy	Prelude No. 2
Pol2020c	Poltronesofà	June 2020 Url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xLxFE3lREc&t=24s	Design, Manufacturing	Italy	Prelude No. 3
War2021	Warburtons	2021 Url: https://www.sounds-familiar.info/2021-warburtons-advert-classical-music-george-clooney/	Food	UK	Prelude No. 1 (Gounod)