

# Sound imagery

It's a visually orientated world; **DENNIS BAXTER** says we shouldn't underestimate the full power of audio in isolation.



I was born during the boom of the TV generation, but my clearest childhood memories are of sound experiences. Buddy Holly on my mom's plastic AM radio, waking up to the sounds of bacon frying, and birds outside my window singing their hearts out in the steamy Southern spring. Even now, years later, after exhausting days filled with work and travel, when I fall asleep I sometimes fall into a dream that I've had since I was in my twenties. This dream is laced with sound — scary sounds. Perhaps from my years in the 1970s spent living and working in Germany, this drama dream is very vocal, lots of screams with chases in the Underground during the World War. I know that I'm vocally dreaming too, as my wife confirms that I am speaking German in my sleep. Decades later, I am still dreaming the sounds of those dramatic episodes.

As a sound designer, I'm blessed to have been in a position of dreaming (while awake) and imagining the sound of the last eight Olympic Games — and getting paid for it. Now, don't get me wrong; I don't pretend to take all of the credit for the sound of the Olympic sports because I have worked with some of the best audio practitioners and sound producers on the planet. And they have been very happy to tell me how they think things should sound. In fact, I will never forget the letter from a *Resolution* reader written in response to my first article in *Resolution* that flatly queried, 'What does a Yank know about football?' Gotta say that I have learned a lot.

At the end of the day — dreams aside — sound design fundamentals still lie with listening, learning and critical thinking. I've always had a mental image of the sound of sports, scenery and life in general. As a sound producer, your aural image must meet certain listener expectations, but after that you have creative freedom to aurally paint a picture of the world.

Recently I had the pleasure to work with fellow sound producer, Peregrine Andrews, who produced a BBC Radio 4 programme called *The Sound of Sport* that aired on 30 April 2011. I was a little worried about it because I have generally worked with sound for the televised medium, not radio. Plus, Peregrine asked me to be the host of the show — as in the voice.

But once we got into the creation of the programme, it became an exciting journey through

the soundscapes of sport. The radio documentary featured skilled, creative, sound designers and mixers who shared their techniques and secrets for capturing the sound in a way that a listener would recall it — rich, resonant and authentic to the experience of the sport.

So, you might ask, what is my point? It's all about the authentic memory of sound. Consider this on a personal level: remember when you bought your first record or cassette tape or CD? Usually the artist printed the song lyrics on the jacket, providing

an inspirational pathway through the musical soundscape. Just by reading those lyrics, your recall of the way the music sounded — the guitar licks, the bass rhythms, the vocal qualities — summoned your own sound memories.

In live broadcast sports, there is another game being played by the sound practitioner: authenticity. A game of producing sound that brings back your memories of what it should sound like.

Last week I visited an audio project in Stockholm, Sweden, that reminded me of an audio planetarium. The Audiorama, located on a picturesque waterfront with boats bobbing in the waves, is billed as the one and only venue for innovative drama, sound art and electroacoustic music in northern Europe. Built inside what was once a torpedo factory on Skeppsholmen Island, the Audiorama is acoustically and visually designed exclusively for the listening experience. It houses 21 speakers in discrete channels, surrounding the listener from floor to ceiling. The sound is imaged from eight Genelec 8260A speakers equidistant in a circle around the listener with five 8240A speakers above, four Genelec 8130A at floor level, and four 7260A LFE speakers. Because there is no visual image, there is no predetermined orientation.

Sound composer and technical producer, Marcus Wrango, created an audio theatre programme for school-aged children who visit the Audiorama. When I asked how the children reacted to the experience — especially of having nothing to look at — Marcus beamed in response. 'The children are completely enthralled in the story and experience,' he said, 'and furthermore, are fully attentive for the entire 70 minutes!' Character voices, places, spaces, special effects and music complete the sound image in their minds without any visual stimulation whatsoever.

The power of sound in a digital world with so much visual stimulation is not to be underestimated. Long form listening does not exist in an abridged world — with social media, games and video on demand. Personally, I believe that immersion in audio imagery is useful in developing the imagination and brain. Simply reading stories to my two grandchildren — aged 5 and 7 — has reinforced that belief. They bring me their books saying, 'Papa, read to us! Take us somewhere!' ■