Activity 2 – Performing Apologies

Music is often thought of as something you hear, but in actuality there are many different ways we experience music. You can think of this in terms of music having many different layers. In an audio recording, these layers are mostly made up of sounds such as the voice (if any) and instruments (if any). In a live performance (or a video recording of a live performance), other layers include visual aspects such as the performer's appearance and any gestures made during performance. Finally, other layers, including textual information such as any words that surround the performance (for instance, song lyrics or programme notes), or even extra musical sounds, including noise from the audience and wrong notes, can influence how we interpret a performance. Thus, although we think about 'music' as being a sonic phenomenon, and performers as primarily concerned with sound, a musical performance can also be thought of as a multimedia event.

This affects how we interpret music and its performances, with one of the key points being paying attention to how these different levels or kinds of information interact. Features often combine to strengthen each other: for instance, when a pop singer whispers 'I love you' during a slow, quiet love song this can create a sense of intimacy due to the meaning of the text, the volume of the voice, and the genre of the song. It is also possible for features of a performance to seem to conflict with each other, for example, when 'sad' lyrics are set to a jaunty sounding tune, or vice versa.

The following activity will take you through an analysis of two instances of the pop song "Sorry" by Justin Bieber. The lyrics indicate a classic story of a love gone wrong with the singer requesting forgiveness and a renewed relationship with the woman he addresses. Does the song work as an apology? If not, why? If so, what kind of apology does it indicate? After you have worked through the following activities, compare your answers with those in the Guidance Notes.

Justin Bieber, "Sorry" (2015)

Take a look at the following video of a live performance, available via YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1ec4wrRmts

Watch the video, then work through the following questions:

1. What are your first impressions of the song's meaning or communication?
2. What is it about the music (sound, structure, genre characteristics, etc.) that leads you to interpret the song in this way?
3. What non-sonic aspects (performer appearance or behaviour, lyrics, etc.) of the performance support this interpretation?
4. Are there aspects of the music or performance that work against this interpretation?
5. Do the stories told by the different elements (music, text, performance, video) match up?

Now, compare the video of a live performance with the official lyrics video of the song, available via YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ELbX5CMomE

Watch the video through then answer the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between the action of the video and the song?
2. How does the action of the video influence your impression of the song's meaning or intent of the communication?
3. Does this video change your interpretation of the live performance? If so, how?