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Medievalism, music, and agency in *The Wicker Man* (1973)

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The community of Summerisle is characterised by contradiction and ambiguity. The pseudo-pagan rituals in *The Wicker Man* (dir. Robin Hardy, 1973) are enacted through elaborate trickery and deception, and ostensibly draw upon a set of local beliefs, rooted in occult historical practices related to springtime, fertility, and harvest.¹ The villagers are framed as modern-day peasants, subject to the ultimate control of their feudal Lord (played by Christopher Lee) whose leadership of the community culminates in his role as master of ceremonies in the three-day ritual that provides the film's narrative frame. The villagers are ultimately responsible for the sacrificial murder of policeman Sergeant Neil Howie (Edward Woodward), and seem unfazed by the brutality of their communal act. An ancient past, whose practices were revived by Lord Summerisle's Victorian grandfather, is pitched against the urgency of the present in which Sergeant Howie searches for missing girl Rowan Morrison (Geraldine Cowper) against the ticking clock of a murderous Mayday rite. The significance of medievalism found in *The Wicker Man's* score lies in its role not only of underpinning the narrative through its blend of music history and folklore—both of which were genuinely revived in the nineteenth century—but also in its contribution to crafting a sense of moral legitimacy to the final, brutal climax, justifying the act of murder itself. The music of *The Wicker Man* possesses its own agency, but its placement and synthesis with the visuals makes it very difficult for the audience to

know whether music signals something positive or negative; the effect is frequently unsettling.

The music in *The Wicker Man* can be divided into two main categories. The underscore includes a wide range of styles, blending original and pre-existent music; it helps to establish the geographical location of the island through its incorporation of folk music signifiers. Diegetic music is used extensively, and comprises examples of participatory music-making at key points in the narrative, typically with lyrics that suggest their historical, British roots. The diegetic songs are often performed on screen as part of local customs relating to springtime, fertility, and sex, heightening the audience's experience of the erotically charged island community. These elements work together to emphasise the helplessness that the policeman feels, who is dislocated both geographically and morally from the Christian mainland and its values. The way in which music is treated in the narrative disconnects not only the policeman protagonist, but also by extension the audience, from the concept of a logical, chronological development from historical past to present day.

Ambiguity is a fundamental part of the film's concept. The viewer may find it difficult to empathise with the gruff, moralistic, and judgemental Howie as he begins his investigation, even though he is the protagonist. The film is ultimately a horror movie, but for much of the time it functions as 'a curious mixture of detective story and folk musical' Smith (2008, p. 162).² Music and medievalism work hand-in-hand to create ambiguity in three main ways. Firstly, and perhaps most significantly, the

score is replete with quotations from, or allusions to, real (pre-existent) or fake medieval, or traditional music as the basis for arrangements in the underscore and diegesis. The sound-world of *Summerisle* (and *The Wicker Man* more generally) is also created by an original approach to orchestration and arrangement, combining musical signifiers of old and new. Finally, melodic materials are sometimes structured in disorienting ways, either in their underlying compositional features, or through their recurrence in different parts of the narrative; this aspect is problematic for analysis because of the substantial re-editing of the film as part of its complex production history, but is nonetheless worthy of some consideration. These three lines of enquiry are strongly interrelated, and will inform the discussion below collectively.

The creative musical team

The score for *The Wicker Man* was devised by a team, the distinctive make-up of which was influential on the choice and manipulation of musical materials as well as on the practicalities of performance on screen and on the soundtrack. Paul Giovanni (1933–90) was credited as the score's composer. Giovanni was not musically literate in a score-based sense, but his artistic vision led the project, and his musicianship is evident in his on-screen performance of 'Gently Johnny'. Giovanni employed Gary Carpenter as associate musical director.³ Carpenter, Peter Brewis, and Michael Cole (multi-instrumentalists), produced the musical recording, supported by three members of Carpenter's band Hocket, a band whose name was derived from the medieval compositional device in which a melodic line was split between two or more parts to create a distinctive texture.⁴ Carpenter's role within the production was as arranger, orchestrator, and conductor. The music was largely pre-recorded for playback on the

film's 25 locations, and the musicians involved in the soundtrack also appear regularly in the film itself, sometimes uncredited. It is easy to see the similarities between Hocket's own influences (significant folk-rock scene performers such as Steeleye Span, Pentangle, and Alan Stivell) on the final score and style.⁵ The complex political and interpersonal history of *The Wicker Man*, separating out the contributions of individual musicians on the score is highly problematic.⁶ Giovanni's control of the music promoted his vision of the screenplay as 'an accumulation of details'.⁷ Within this context, it would be entirely inappropriate to treat analysis of the music within the final version of *The Wicker Man* in terms of its over-arching aesthetic consistency, or its defining creative vision; to do so would emphasise linear coherence for a film that was neither intending on uniformity nor a product where all the constituent parts fell together in a single, authoritative version. While such a point could be made about film more generally, the radical rearrangements of materials in *The Wicker Man* make it an especially problematic text in terms of its internal structure, which began as 'an accumulation of details' and whose details were then re-ordered over time. The blurring of the film's chronological presentation will instead be examined through its prominent medievalism, which is utilised musically and dramatically through the use of signifiers of 'now' and 'then'.

Music, place, and agency

Music fills Summerisle and lends dramatic impetus through its various sonic components. The island's geographical and historical identities are crafted by and imposed upon its visitor and the cinema audience in diverse ways primarily through music. The central role of music and sound is foregrounded by the film's official

trailer, which opens with Christopher Lee's typically imposing voiceover, suggestive of the horror genre. Within the space of two minutes, the trailer uses excerpts of dialogue, sound effects from pagan puppetry such as the gnashing teeth of a dragon's head, images of brass band instruments, a processional drum, a psychedelic rock band, screaming, recorders, folk rock fiddle and flutes, and bassoon. The effect of this montage verges on the comedic, its humour stemming from the apparent anarchy of the trailer's musical and sonic cues as well as the policeman's comment 'Dear God in heaven, even these people can't be that mad?'; set against a lively fiddle tune and cutting to an image of naked Britt Ekland slapping the wall with the palms of her hands, the policeman's question implies the islanders have lost all sense of reality. The audience is left potentially confused in terms of the genre that the film will ultimately occupy and the tone of its storyline: this sense of disorientation typifies *The Wicker Man*, even though the chaos of the trailer contrasts sharply with the film's opening scenes.

The opening credits offer a gentle portrait of the natural environment of Scotland, as the policeman lands his plane, whose engine blends into a low drone that seems to accompany the first of two Celtic folk / fakesongs, 'The Highland Widow's Lament', which is an arrangement of a traditional tune. Leslie Mackie, whose distinctive Scottish accent helps to situate the story geographically, sings the lament. The first tune segues to 'Corn Rigs', a song by Giovanni setting lyrics by Scotland's most famous poet, Robert Burns. 'Corn Rigs' opens with a short musical phrase (see **Fig. 1**) [*insert Fig. 1 near here*] that recurs in the film, though it does not form a part of the main song. The opening melody is tonally ambiguous, and is built mainly from

the policeman's non-participation in the musical rituals that punctuate the narrative.

Table 1 outlines the individual sections of the score against Howie's involvement or reaction [*insert Table 1 near here*]. The policeman is often present for musical performance as a witness, sometimes its only one. However, in these moments, he is shown as unwilling, disapproving, or physically separated from the music making.

'Maypole', for example, is performed by the male teacher (Walter Carr), school boys, and accompanying musicians, while Howie walks slowly past, observing the dance and listening to the lyrics—and afterwards Miss Rose's (Diane Cilento) explanation of their religious symbolism to her all-female class—with undisguised disdain. The song combines Christian and pagan imagery: paganism is signified visually by the maypole; sonically, the angelic purity of the boys' voices recall stylistic aspects of Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942), itself informed by twentieth-century medievalism. The unbroken voices of the boys project their innocence: the boys are not yet sexually active and yet are being indoctrinated into the island's practices through the use of ritual music and dance. Musical signifiers of Christian purity and innocence as found in Britten are in this way reappropriated as pagan, largely through the lyrics that connect human reproduction with the tree symbolised by the maypole, echoing Christian imagery of Jesus as Tree of Life (Luke 13: 18–19).

The evocation of Britten's music was deliberate by the creative team, and tapped into the competent audience's knowledge of nationalistic musical expressions of the post-war period. As Heather Wiebe (2012, p. 1) has shown in relation to Britten's work, music played a crucial part in 'articulating memory and community', as part of a range of cultural activities of the mid-twentieth century, whose focus was the renewal of British identity; it was common to find themes resonant with national

memory, history, and geography in diverse high status and more popular media. *The Wicker Man* can be seen playing out against that context. Carpenter (2013, p. 4) has reflected that

Musically, there are hints of traditional Irish music, Pentangle, Benjamin Britten and so on. The decision to generate a faux folk narrative drawn from many traditions was a conscious one paralleling the film's non-site specific conceit—you know, sort of Scottish but not a Scotland that really exists!

Essentially, the music is Scottish enough, historical enough, and present-day enough, to conjure up a convincing musical identity for the unique soundscape of *Summerisle*.

The musical landscape does not provide a benign context for the Scottish location; it is effectively imposed upon the policeman, especially in the case of seductive or obscene music found inside and outdoors.¹⁰ This imposition is typified by Howie's bewilderment at the sexually suggestive songs performed by the maypole dancers and at the fireleap, by his witnessing of a bawdy performance of 'The Landlord's Daughter' in the inn where he is staying, and when observing a rite of passage which is accompanied by the local musicians singing 'Gently Johnny' in the room of the inn directly below the one in which Ash Buchanan loses his virginity to Willow. Sexually provocative songs, whether humorous or seductive, are often apparently performed for his pleasure, entertainment, or provocation; in each case, Howie resists invitations to join in. The closest Howie comes to temptation in the film is during 'Willow's Song', which opens as a diegetic performance in which local musicians playing their

folk instruments (acoustic guitar, violin, drum) accompany Britt Ekland's vocal performance (dubbed by Leslie Mackie) of Giovanni's fakesong. Towards the end of 'Willow's Song', as the seductive power of the music affects the Sergeant, the sound world is transformed through the use of amplified instruments and distortion. The policeman hears Willow, and initially seems to respond to her siren call. Although he cannot see her physically, Howie's behaviour is indicative of having weakened in his stoic chastity, perhaps the last moment in which – were he to have succumbed to sex with Willow – his ultimate fate as sacrificial virgin would have been avoided. The scene closes as he retires to bed, having locked the door, but it is clear from his behaviour that her song and bedroom percussion have affected him on a physical and emotional level.

There is one exception to the policeman's personal distance from music, and it is significant in terms of his character and in the drama as a whole. As can be seen in **Table 1**, the film as originally conceived included mirrored renditions of Howie singing 'The Lord's My Shepherd', a traditional hymn setting the words of Psalm 23. At the beginning of the film (a scene later deleted), he sings it within the Christian community of his church on the mainland as part of Holy Communion. He sings it again, in a desperate rendition, inside the wicker man; in this second appearance of the well-known psalm setting, it is heard in counterpoint with the villagers' ritual performance of the medieval rota 'Sumer is icumen in'. The effect is not unlike the aural quality of multi-texted motets of the Middle Ages, though in this situation the melodies are not synchronised, they are independent, a feature that reminds us that the villagers are deaf to the policeman's cries and to his moral position. Once more, the

policeman rejects the music of the villagers, here creating his own music as an act of defiance (a protest which they ignore).

The choice of the hymn is also significant in terms of its musicological context and its textual content. The biblical Psalm was adapted as a song lyric by Francis Rowe for publication in the Scottish Psalter (1650). Its melody, by Scottish writer James Leith Macbeth Bain (1860–1925), is known as ‘Brother James’ Air’ (see **Fig. 2**). The song therefore links directly to Scottish, Christian heritage. *(Insert Fig. 2 near here)*

Fig. 2 ‘The Lord’s My Shepherd’ (hymn in the public domain,
<http://openhymnal.org/index.html>)

The Lord's my shep-herd I'll not want, He makes me down to lie In
 5 pas-tures green He lead-eth me The qui-et wa-ters by. He
 9 lead-eth me, He lead-eth me, The qui-et wa-ters by, In
 13 pas-tures green He lead-eth me The qui-et wa-ters by.

Although the hymn may be sung on any occasion, it has long been a popular choice for funeral services. In its first appearance in *The Wicker Man*, ‘The Lord’s My Shepherd’ is sung with the camera focused on the engagement ring of Howie’s fiancée; the shot pans out to reveal she and the policeman sharing a hymnbook as part

of communal worship on the mainland. This is the first time that the audience is informed of Howie's engagement, and from which they might infer that he is a chaste virgin in preparation for marriage. At the end of the film, the islanders indicate that they lured Howie to the island in full knowledge of his virginity because it made him the perfect sacrifice, contrasting the pagan rites with his deep knowledge of, and faith in, Christianity. Howie thus becomes a Christ-like figure whose murder echoes aspects of Jesus's crucifixion (the brutality of the non-Christian crowd, for example); to a modern audience the actions might also recall popular mythologies stemming from the martyrdom of Christians in later centuries (such as Joan of Arc, burned at the stake in 1431). The specific funereal associations of the hymn heard more generally and innocently at the opening of the film are clearly intended here. As is relatively common in the horror genre, the film's story features a protagonist who is at once hero and victim; he is the sacrificial lamb of Christ-as-Shepherd. In a gender flip of conventions from stage and screen in which it is usually *women's* virginity that is placed under threat and scored through standard semantic conventions such as their general level of vocality or by the songs that they sing, the male police officer's sexual purity is portrayed through his non-participation in erotic or non-Christian song, and by his performance of just one religious song.¹¹ The final rendition of 'The Lord's My Shepherd' is part of his attempt to recommend his soul to heaven, since he dies unshriven.

Table 1: Musical performances in *The Wicker Man*

Church service [long version only]	Howie sings the hymn 'The Lord's My Shephard' as a member of the church congregation
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'The Landlord's Daughter'	Trapped within a spontaneous performance of this bawdy song in the inn, he disapproves
'Gently Johnny' [long version only]	Voyeuristic, Howie attempts to ignore the performance by the inn customers, disapproves and prays, goes to bed and covers ears
'Willow's Song'	Listens to and is stirred by the music, but remains physically separated from Willow by the walls of the inn
'Maypole'	Voyeuristic, disapproving
'Fire Leap'	Voyeuristic, disapproving
Lord Summerisle and Miss Rose perform 'The Tinker of Rye'	Audience, disapproving
Chopping song	Howie is involved in ritual actions against will, but he does not perform musically
Final scene	Summerisle villagers, led by Lord Summerisle, sing an arrangement of 'Sumer is icumen in'; Howie, inside the wicker man, sings 'The Lord's My Shepherd'

Medievalism, historical time, and reality

The manipulation of perceptions of historical time is key to *The Wicker Man*, whose narrative takes place in a community that is physically isolated from the mainland, but which also takes its rituals from a blend of pre-Christian and nineteenth-century

medievalist practices. The documentary nature of the film is expressed in the opening credits, which include acknowledgements:

The Producer would like to thank the Lord Summerisle and the people of his island off the west coast of Scotland for this privileged insight into their religious practices and for their generous co-operation in the making of this film.

This type of conceit—a deliberate blurring of reality and fiction—is common to many cult films and television programmes, from *The Twilight Zone* (with its distinctive opening monologue) (1959–64); to *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

The historicity of the symbolic rituals depicted in *The Wicker Man* has been further emphasised outside of the filmic content by the director's and the screenwriter's (Anthony Shaffer) claims as to the detailed research that they undertook in preparation for filming. In particular Hardy and Shaffer cited Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890) as influential on the notorious final scenes.¹² It is clear from the film that no specific practice was lifted from Frazer's accounts, but rather that the creative team drew liberally from relevant sections in order to devise a suitably convincing religion and set of associated ceremonial traditions. The plausibility of the island's religion is lent credence by the scenes in which the policeman consults *The Golden Bough* (actually an especially printed mock-up of it, with images) on the occult in Summerisle's public library (see **Fig. 3**). [*insert Fig. 3 near here*] The imagined text is then used as a voiceover, read

out by the policeman as he pieces together the previously nonsensical events that he has witnessed, and reaches the conclusion that Rowan must still be alive.

Fig. 3 Sergeant Howie researches the occult practices of Summerisle, consulting a book that draws on Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890) (image in the public domain)

The library scene is musically important since it is the first to be scored with a genuine piece of medieval British music, namely the early-to-mid thirteenth-century monophonic secular song 'Mirie it is while sumer ilast'.¹³ The use of medieval music was in part influenced by Carpenter's school education and later his professional training at the Royal College of Music, where standard surveys and anthologies of music from the Middle Ages to the present day would have been available to him. There is a natural question to be asked as to whether the average viewer would have known these pieces too. Here, I would argue there is a cultural distinction between the musical training of young people in the 1960s and 1970s and that received today; the use of the *National Song Book*, for example, would have required children to sing and learn standard pieces of nationally significant early music, of which both 'Mirie it is' and 'Sumer is icumen in' are typical, though they did not feature in that specific collection.¹⁴ Media such as the television and radio, not least the BBC's Third Programme (forerunner of BBC Radio 3), brought a wide range of classical, early, and folk music to family audiences. *The Wicker Man*'s 1973 viewers would therefore

have been more ‘competent’—to use Anahid Kassabian’s term (2001, p. 20)—than we might expect in picking up the presence and semantics of medieval British song.

In the film context, ‘Mirie it is’ becomes an instrumental piece of pageantry within the underscore, not dissimilar from the sort of historical arrangements found in films about the Tudor dynasty (notably the mini-series *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (1970), which featured a score of early music arranged and performed by David Munrow and the Early Music Consort of London).¹⁵ The recomposed tune—whose mensural qualities are unclear in the original manuscript source but which were commonly rhythmicized in editions of the twentieth century—is inflected with details culturally associated with Scottish traditional dances like the Strathspey (short-long rhythms sometimes known as ‘Scotch snaps’) or the past more generally (parallel fifths) (see **Fig. 4**). A simple harmonic accompaniment with bare fifths provides the foundation for some improvisatory decoration on repeats as one might expect in renaissance or baroque music. The instrumentation is dominated by brass, including trumpet and eventually tuba, an instrumentation that prepares the way for the presence of brass in the procession ‘The Hobby Horse’ in the rite itself. The harmonic accompaniment of ‘Festival’ includes some moments of deliberately jarring harmonic dissonance, but mainly the effect is akin to sixteenth-century instrumental dance music. Overall, the underscore is a quiet and supportive accompaniment to the factually based scene in the library; the audience is encouraged to look, with Howie, at the reference materials, especially at their woodcut images that very precisely prefigure the costumes that feature in the final ceremony. Passages of the text are both heard as if from the policeman’s inner monologue and spoken aloud. The audience empathises with

Howie, in the moment in which his research—accompanied by the musical markers of the past—reveals to him the connection between history, the symbolism he has so far witnessed on Summerisle, and his expectation for what is about to unfold in the present: there will be a human sacrifice, and that, by implication, ‘Rowan’s not dead!’ That exclamation is marked aurally by the disappearance of the underscore, which brings Howie and the audience’s attention sharply back to the present.

Fig. 4: ‘Festival’ (Gary Carpenter), bars 39–44, based on ‘Mirie it is’. ‘Scotch snap’ rhythms can be seen at the start of bars 40 and 42. © Copyright 1973 British Lion Music Ltd.

The musical score for 'Festival' (Gary Carpenter) is presented in two systems. The first system covers bars 39, 40, and 41. The second system covers bars 42, 43, and 44. The music is in 6/8 time and G major. The right hand plays a melodic line, and the left hand plays a bass line. The score includes bar numbers 39 and 42, and a copyright notice for British Lion Music Ltd.

Musically, the medieval material of ‘Mirie it is’ was combined with gestures that were familiar from the folk-rock tradition of the 1960s and 1970s, though electric instruments do not occur at this point in Carpenter’s arrangement.¹⁶ These features include the presence of melodically driven material, the use of drones, a focus on ballads or (as in this item) dance-based materials, and the development of musical ideas through repetition, ornamentation, and improvisation. The casual listener to Fairport Convention’s *Liege & Lief* (1969), an album that succeeded in creating ‘a

musical and social climate within which it became acceptable to perform folk music in a rock context and even (for some) rock music in a folk context', will find these qualities in abundance (Brocken, 2002, pp. 99–100). Similarly, in performances by harpist Alan Stivell, the historical slippage between medieval and folk music, presented within a rock paradigm, is something that is as hard to pin down today as it would have been for audiences of the 1960s and early 1970s, and that was entirely the point. Folk-rock deliberately drew on the past as a form of self-legitimation, connecting demographically with youthful nationalist and regionalist countercultures interested in reviving lost English, Breton, or Celtic traditions. The word 'authenticity' was ubiquitous in discourse relating to the folk and early music revivals of that period, and functioned to mythologize both older musical practices and the performance styles of those recreating them in the concert hall. In *The Wicker Man*, the convergence of what might be deemed 'classical' early music with a rougher, more direct vernacular or 'popular' performance tradition was indicative of the authenticity of the fictitious island's heritage and its 'present' musical soundscape. The medievalism found in folk rock provided the imaginative bridge from past to present.

The specific date of Howie's 'present-day investigation' was the same year as the film's general release, and this is indicated by visual evidence in the film. A photographic display on the local inn's wall contains annual images commemorating plentiful harvests and their celebration; the absence of Autumn 1972's photograph (only a picture hook remains) is the first clear signal that it is now spring 1973; a calendar found by the policeman in his search of the island later confirms it.

Ironically, the present-day feeling is most emphatically depicted in moments in which genuine medieval music is used. This is most effective in the final scenes, which incorporate an on-screen performance of 'Sumer is icumen in'. 'Sumer is icumen in' was originally copied into a manuscript belonging to Reading Abbey in the early 1260s, and has since come to represent a wide range of historical, national, musical, and cultural ideas.¹⁷ In the middle decades of the twentieth century, 'Sumer is icumen in' was ubiquitous as a symbol not so much of thirteenth-century music more as an appropriated representation of British music, the start of a national tradition of vernacular song, and also as indicative of English folk music.¹⁸ Musicians working in the 1960s and 1970s also experienced 'Sumer is icumen in' through the prominence of the early music revival, led by charismatic performers and ensembles like David Munrow and Jantina Noorman (*Musica Reservata*).¹⁹ The Middle English lyrics meditate on the coming of the warmer months, and on nature, over a pair of tenors repeating the text 'Sing cu cu', suggesting bird song. The central place of nature in paganism, and the islanders' need for their rite to deliver the fecundity of the springtime and summer, provide a strong justification for the choice of song. 'Sumer is icumen in' was thus an ideal piece through which to tap into associations with distantly historical, nationalist, vernacular song traditions, even though the piece has no link with Scotland.

On screen, 'Sumer is icumen in' is transformed into a ritual song, with diverse instrumentation and choreographed swaying by the community singing it. The distinguishing canonic features of the original are discarded, instantly simplifying it for its repurposing as a folk melody. Instrumentally, the bass drum adds ceremonial

weight and the tuba and upper brass extend the pageantry of ‘Festival’ to the public sacrificial display. Added harmony and ornamentation enrich the palette, rendering the song more modern, and some adjustments—though relatively few—are made to the lyrics to ensure that their rustic and pastoral elements are foregrounded and understood. For example, the medieval line ‘Awe bleteþ after lomb, lhouþ after calue cu’ becomes ‘Ewe bleats harshly after lamb, cows after calves make moo’. The final performance of ‘Sumer is icumen in’ repeats the song several times without variation, the performance only temporarily obscured by the policeman’s hymn and the sound of the burning animals and the wooden structure.

Conclusions

At the heart of *The Wicker Man* lies a deep fear of the relationship between a missing girl and a complex, unnamed pre-Christian rite, one that draws on pagan symbolism and occult practices as well as on folk traditions, all placed in opposition to the conservative Christianity of the investigating officer. The medievalist incorporation of folk, early music and folk-rock elements provide a quasi-historical foundation for the storyline, which portrays a morally warped community whose religious identity has taken a particularly disturbing turn during the nineteenth century. The use of early music that had itself been part of the antiquarian revival of that period therefore places the responsibility for the actions of the islanders in the hands of Lord Summerisle’s Victorian grandfather, if not ‘further back’, in the period in which the ceremonial practices were first forged.

The free combination of generic markers, and, in many ways, the confusion of those markers in visual, verbal, and sonic terms, make *The Wicker Man* especially distinctive. BFI curator William Fowler has called it a ‘folk-horror “musical”’, for example. *The Wicker Man* is an odd horror though, since its truly terrifying moments are largely confined to the very final scenes. Moreover, *The Wicker Man* is not really a musical, since its main character, Sergeant Howie, has only one song: a simple, pre-existent hymn tune. The dramatic impulse of the film relies on the medievalism inherent in the choice and manipulation of old and new music by Giovanni and Carpenter. By the presentation of the most ‘real’ medieval songs for the library research scene and the final rite, the actions of the local community are historicised and legitimated. In a sense, agency is more strongly presented in the music of *The Wicker Man* than through its dialogue or characterisation. The heroism or evil intentions of the film’s main characters is continually shaped through the subversion of musical markers of character: the innkeeper and his daughter, for example, are complicit with events and with the bawdy music-making, but also seem to attempt to block the policeman from being present at the final ritual by capturing him and chaining him up. Howie is an unlikely, and ultimately unsuccessful, male hero figure; Lord Summerisle’s masculinity is suggested through his patriarchal rule of the island, but is confused by his transvestism in the sacrificial rite; his vocality in ‘The Tinker of Rye’ and in the final scenes establishes his historical, familial roots within the island community.

The juxtaposition of a reinvented pagan past against a narrative that is set in the ‘real’ present day of late April to 1 May 1973 requires the audience to believe that the

islanders—who have access to the mainland, trade with it, and appear to have many of its technological or stylistic features—are also fundamentally invested in the religious practices which were reintroduced to the island following centuries of Christianity. The plot is often bizarre and disjointed, the production values relatively basic, and the script cultish rather than a work of great literary merit. The score's medievalism is doubly synthetic: old music is presented anew, new is presented as old. The effect is to create an out-of-time Summerisle, through the manipulation of musical signifiers of 'now' (represented by psychedelic and folk rock elements, sometimes on electric instruments) and 'then' (comprising manipulated folk / fakesong, and early music, on classical, period, and electric instruments) (Harker, 1985; Koven, 2007).

The musical score functions in two important ways: firstly, it responds to the piecemeal, confusing, and dramatically incoherent narrative through stylistic eclecticism. More significantly, however, the score's medievalism, its reimagining of medieval and vernacular music within a single space, brings together the ancient and present periods through the lens of nineteenth- and twentieth-century revival movements of early and traditional musics.²⁰ The use of pre-existent music is more than referential of the actual medieval past: it recalls the sort of revivalist attitudes and methods used in music from the nineteenth century for its own antiquarian sake as well as in the creation of 'new' music during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²¹ Giovanni and Carpenter's score creates a broadly plausible musical sound world for the island and its community. So convincing is the use of medieval song that the final part of the film is given greater historical weight: the worshippers may

be brainwashed, but their actions are connected to a historical past rather than being part of an independently conceived, murderous plot. Their actions, though bizarre, are therefore rendered credible, legitimate, and even forgivable, not least through their chillingly joyful, communal performance of ‘Sumer is icumen in’.

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¹ *The Wicker Man* is a complex text existing in short and long versions, which are thought to exclude a good deal of suppressed or lost footage even in the more extended of the two. The 1973 film editing is problematic, with several rough cuts, and this led to some of the criticism in its early reception. The 2002 release of the longer version allows a more realistic depiction of events in time. The present chapter draws on material drawn from both of these commercially released versions, and is informed by the three-version comparison in Phillips (2013); I will not investigate the remake of *The Wicker Man* (dir. Neil LaBute, 2006).

² See chapters in this volume by Nugent and Cook [XREF](#).

³ Carpenter (2000) has written about his individual role in the film online, as well as in the introduction to the published piano arrangement of the score (2013).

⁴ Andrew Tompkins (guitar), Ian Cutler (violin), and Bernard Murray (percussion). The band are also credited or referred to in various places as Magnet or Lodestone.

⁵ The creative context for *The Wicker Man* within the background of folk, early and psychedelic rock music of the late 1960s and early 1970s is very effectively described in Young (2010, pp. 411–18). See also Kolassa's chapter in this volume [XREF](#).

⁶ This history is summarized in Dave Simpson's interview with Robin Hardy and Gary Carpenter (Simpson, 2013).

⁷ Paul Giovanni cited in Bartholomew 'The Wicker Man'; cited in Smith (2005, p.127).

⁸ On the use of opening sequences to establish genre and audience expectations, see Scheurer (2008, p.17).

⁹ The opening scenes of the film do not use 'Corn Rigs' in an unnerving way, but repeated viewings of the film might encourage an audience to hear the supposed innocence of the folk melody in the manner familiar from horror or Gothic genres in which children's nursery rhymes are used to indicate something more sinister.

¹⁰ Although there is insufficient space to discuss lyric and poetry in the present chapter, Scovell (2013) points out that the lyrical content is not only entertaining but instructive to the audience, 'telling the viewer as much about the story as the visuals'.

¹¹ The relationship between women's vocality (both the extent to which she speaks / sings and how she is scored) and her dramatic agency in opera and film has been explored in several studies, notably Kalinak (1982), McClary (1992), Smart (2000), and Haworth (2012).

¹² Frazer's (1890) book was regularly reprinted, including an abridged version that excluded discussion of Christianity as a comparative religion. *The Golden Bough* had direct influence on novelists and poets of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, notably William Butler Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, and James Joyce; see Vickery (1973).

¹³ An edition of the song (based on the unique preservation of it in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson, G.22, f.1v) may be consulted in Deeming (2013, no. 47, p.66). It is likely that Giovanni and Carpenter found this song, and 'Sumer is icumen in', in an edition such as Dobson & Harrison (1979) which features both songs rhythmicized. Spellings relating to the original song in its medieval source take the spelling from Deeming's edition ('Mirie it is while sumer ilast') rather than the spelling given in Carpenter's score or other modern editions.

¹⁴ The specific sources from which Carpenter selected these tunes are unknown. The melodies of similar or comparable songs were widely circulated in collections such as Stanford (1905, 1906).

¹⁵ XREF Breen and Fountain.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the complex relationships between folk, folk-rock, and authenticity, see especially Brocken (2002, pp. 89–109).

¹⁷ A full discussion may be found in Colton (2014).

¹⁸ For a full discussion of the reception of ‘Sumer is icumen in’, see Colton (2016).

¹⁹ On the revival of medieval music, see particularly Haines (2014). On David Munrow, see Breen (2015) and [XREF Breen](#).

²⁰ John Haines (2014) has emphasised the close relationship between the revivals of early and folk music both in the longer term, with their roots in nineteenth-century antiquarianism, and in more recent times, such as in the popular awareness of both ‘movements’ in the 1960s and 1970s.

²¹ On medievalism in late twentieth-century British music, see Colton (2010).