

Jamming Giant Women:

Narration through Song in Steven Universe

Andrea Meseguer Fernández de Sevilla
Margarita Fernández de Sevilla Martín-Albo
Universitat de València
andrea.meseguer.fernandez@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the different functions that the songs perform as constituent tools in the narrative development of the storyline in *Steven Universe*, a cartoon TV series created by Rebecca Sugar. The narrative is driven by the disclosure of Steven's origin and by his development from childhood to adolescence. The soundtrack (and especially the songs) works as an integrated and fundamental element of the text. Attaching different musical styles (pop, rap, theatrical musical) consistently to the characters helps build their fictional personas. Purely musical procedures (integration of certain melodic themes, harmonies and specific instrumental colour) correlate to events in the narrative to provide information about the characters' backstories and the rules that apply to the convoluted fictional universe developed in the series. Songs also help characters find an emotional response to conflicting emotional states. Complicated feelings, such as toxic relationships, identity, sexuality, loyalty, sacrifice, parenting, gender stereotypes and many more are developed through songs. The integration of songs in the narrative always moves it forward, although they sometimes challenge the diegetic/non-diegetic dichotomy.

Jamming Giant Women: narration through song in *Steven Universe*

Steven Universe is an animated television series designed, written and produced by author Rebecca Sugar for Cartoon Network between 2013 and 2019. The series follows the adventures of a boy and three female alien characters in their mission to protect the Earth. At the same time as the adventures take place, a convoluted and overarching story of war and rebellion is revealed. In its 160 ten-minute episodes, along with the adventures, the show tackles many serious topics: the transition from childhood to adolescence, the quest for identity and independence from parents, the impact of the past on the present, how negative emotions such as guilt or jealousy are at the heart of conflict, and more. The imaginative approaches to personal development and family and social relationships in this series makes it stand out from other animated series for children, as does the music. The fact that its creator Rebecca Sugar herself composed the songs for the show, and the high quality of both the lyrics and the music in this cartoon series persuaded us it was worth looking deeper into the role of songs in the main narrative.¹ The purpose of this paper is to analyse the different functions that songs perform as constituent tools in the narrative development of the storyline, and to discuss the particular status of musical narration as an integrated part of the series² in the wake of studies showing time and again that music does indeed convey meaning in modern audiovisual texts. In *Steven Universe* the musical styles and the place songs occupy in the narrative both have a key role in developing the story.

Firstly, we will explain how the different styles help build the characters and give them background.³ Furthermore, we will show how intrinsically musical procedures are used to develop storylines or create relationships between characters.

Secondly, we will trace the relationship of the songs in the series to the musical genre, to see whether they match or differ from conventional uses. We feel entitled to do this given the unusual amount of songs that appear throughout the five seasons. The 160 episodes feature 47 different songs – considerably more than would be expected in such a production, although not enough to consider the series as primarily musical. On examining the use of songs compared to standard musical narratives, we extracted some interesting conclusions with regard to the specific status of musical narration.

The third part of our work will be devoted to the analysis of the narrative function of the songs. Unlike songs in musicals which usually stop the course of the action, songs in this series are often crucial in the transmission of narrative information which would otherwise need different procedures to be delivered comprehensively. Initially, we narrowed the

1 A full reference list for the songs follows the bibliography.

2 That songs play a key role in this series is largely acknowledged by both critics and author Rebecca Sugar. See Serrao (2017) and Mallikarjuna (2016).

3 The intentional use of songs to construct characters is made explicit by the author herself: “The melody, the rhythm, and just the fact that something has to be sung instead of spoken — especially if I can write something that has that effect on me as I write it — can tell you worlds about a character and how they’re feeling”. See Mallikarjuna (2016).

songs' function down to four categories according to their relationship with the diegesis, but further exploration of the status of these songs and their degree of integration with the narrative led us to pay attention to aspects of the musical genre that seem to need a closer look, such as how productive some interactions between the two levels (diegetic/non-diegetic) may be in musical narration and how even title sequences and end credits can have a narrative function.

Part One: Music styles and characters in *Steven Universe*

A brief account of the series' plot is necessary at this point. Steven Universe is a fourteen-year-old boy being raised by the Crystal Gems: Pearl, Garnet and Amethyst, although he used to live with his father, Greg Universe, a former rock musician. Steven has a gem instead of a navel, which indicates that he is half human, half Gem. The Crystal Gems train Steven to use his potential powers, which he inherited from his mother, Rose Quartz. She was the leader in a rebellion against the Diamonds, rulers of the Gem society who govern Homeworld with an iron fist. The consequences of the war between the Diamonds and Rebel Gems persist to the present day, leaving Steven not only with the task of discovering who he really is but also dealing with the fallout of his mother's actions.

There are three main narrative arcs throughout the series:

1. The uncovering of the Gems' nature and their history
2. Steven's evolution from childhood to adolescence and his struggle to become himself and not another version of Rose Quartz (Pink Diamond)
3. The eventual solution of the ancient conflict between Diamonds and Rebel Gems

Some secondary arcs are related to humans and some to Gems.

As previously mentioned, we will now discuss how the use of specific musical styles contributes significantly to round out each of the main characters' personalities. It is generally accepted that attaching a specific musical style to a character can help define them. Philip Tagg (Tagg, 2012) – among many others – is very specific about how a certain style can activate previous knowledge for an audience, both in terms of their familiarity with the musical genre and the position it occupies in the culture in which it is found. When we talk about musical styles, we assume that certain inherent traits (rhythm, harmonies, texture, instruments) convey meaning because they exist in the Western listener's experience and prompt associations based on our experience of such styles. That is why, for example, rock music carries connotations of “strength”, “independence”, “freedom”, etc., which are automatically attributed to a character that sings and plays rock songs.

Let us start with the protagonist, Steven, whose songs are usually acoustic with ukulele accompaniment at the beginning of the series. Vocally, Steven sings with the natural voice of a child, with a slightly airy out-breath (but perfectly in-tune). Steven's songs in the first part

of the story are apparently simple, but they are never trite or simplistic and the harmonies are enticing and quite sophisticated (perhaps with the exception of *Cookie Cat*, Steven's first song, which is more a chant than a proper song). The best example of his first style is provided by *Be Wherever You Are*, from the episode "Island Adventure".⁴ Though formally simple, (simply a repetition of the same melody with different lyrics three times), the harmonic progressions which give glimpses of distant tonalities provide quite an interesting musical setting for the main idea at this point: the "mindfulness" of living in the moment and eventually allowing oneself to be "whoever you are".

As Steven grows up, he starts to sing in a very professional vocal solo style with piano accompaniment that shifts into orchestral, as usually found in conventional musical narration. In the completely musical episode "Mr Greg",⁵ Steven reveals himself as a proficient solo singer in a short but interesting song, *Both of You*, which is melodically and harmonically complex. See Figure 1 to illustrate this point.



Figure 1: *Both of you*. Fragment of the score. Notice the harmonic shift from B minor to a distant tonality (B flat major) in the "I love" lyrics and the difficult leaps of this vocal line.

Although Steven's voice and style evolve throughout the series, paralleling his growing up, the songs never become a showcase for his vocal powers, despite not being easy to sing. In a way, songs act as the catalyst for a certain situation to develop, becoming more or less complex as the situation demands. Both harmonies and lyrics are chosen for reasons other than just sounding good: they have their own meaning and are perfectly contextualized within the whole narrative.

As we have already said, throughout the series there is a specific style of music for each character's personality. Greg Universe, Steven's father, sings and plays classic rock, with either an acoustic (*Destiny*, *Wailing Stone*)⁶ or an electric (*Just a Comet*)⁷, guitar, depending on the "singing situation". In other words, he can give another character a private acoustic performance or recreate the concerts of his youth with fully amplified effects. Powerful rock music characterizes Rose Quartz too, although we could say she is musically associated with Greg (see *What Can I Do for You?*). As regards the three Crystal Gems, who are

4 Season 1, episode 30. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIREK5ZL1jA>

5 Season 3, episode 8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mle_1cIWYLo

6 Season 1, episode 49. "The Message" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9CTRAtbwTo>

7 Season 1, episode 47. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3M47LlGAWU>

Steven's guardians and mentors, Pearl and Garnet are more "adult" characters, whereas Amethyst is less concerned about being responsible and usually takes more risks. These contrasting personalities, Amethyst's immature or childish traits in comparison to Garnet or Pearl, have a musical correlation in the way her only solo song is styled. *Tower of Mistakes*⁸ is undefined and unsophisticated. Amethyst is a "laid back" Gem, born outside their Home-world and not as perfect as the others, and this is reflected in her soft, repetitive and care-less style. The lyrics of her song are addressed to Steven, to whom she wants to explain her attitude and say sorry at the same time.

As to Pearl, right from the beginning she has the manner of a lead character in a conventional musical theatre style,⁹ usually accompanied by the piano. She has a pleasant, smooth, educated voice, which allows her to perform intense and complex themes such as *It's Over, Isn't It?*,¹⁰ which could easily become a standard for solo singers outside the series. Her vocal characterization helps to highlight her differences with Greg and reinforces her diffidence when the other Gems sing and play in a rock band in "We Need to Talk", an episode which will be discussed later.

Garnet's mysterious and interesting personality is characterized with a very metric rap style. Electronic music accompanies her numbers and interesting beats and high-range vocals show up in *Here Comes a Thought*¹¹ and *Stronger Than You*.¹²

To sum up, we can affirm that the characters in this series present a consistent relationship to the musical styles attached to them, and that this helps construct their personas in the narrative.¹³

Part Two: Is Steven Universe a musical? Narration and emotion in songs

As can be inferred from the previous section, singing songs is something that happens regularly in the fictional world of *Steven Universe*, and within the series itself it is fully accepted just like the Gems' special powers. The very musical lifestyle of the main characters is diegetically justified mainly because of Greg's past as an unsuccessful rock musician. He has created a bond with Steven through teaching him how to make music and by encouraging him to compose and use music to express his feelings. To a certain extent, Steven's vision of music as a powerful instrument for communication permeates the whole series and motivates the appearance of many of the songs.

Nevertheless, the narration of *Steven Universe* is not entirely musical: of 160 episodes, only 42 have songs and their occurrence is far from evenly distributed. In this table we can see

8 Season 2, episode 11, "Cry for Help". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUEWv1OecoE>

9 Listen to her in *Strong in the Real Way*, episode 20, season 1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFctQMCs3k4>

10 Season 3, episode 8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5T5rCSmduaY>

11 "Mindful Education", season 4, episode 4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHg5omdODFM>

12 "Jailbreak", season 1, episode 52. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OWq38TikzU>

13 Aivi Tran and Steven Velema, responsible for the background music and sound effects, confirm our point. See Thurm (2016).

an overall account of the appearance of songs in the series. Some episodes have more than one song.

SEASON	NUMBER OF EPISODES	NUMBER OF EPISODES WITH SONGS
1	52	18
2	26	7
3	25	3
4	25	6
5	32 (29+3)	8

Table 1. Number of episodes per season and number of episodes with songs.

As previously mentioned, in many musicals, if a character has a profession related to music, the musical numbers are more “natural”, so to speak. When Greg sings and plays we feel this is perfectly plausible. This resource, creating a diegetic motivation for introducing the musical number, is typical of musical cinema.¹⁴ When Pearl starts singing *Strong in the Real Way*¹⁵ as she picks up and folds Steven’s T-shirts, the whole number follows the convention of the musical genre, in which these kinds of “introspective” songs have a function similar to a soliloquy in the theatre, and so we accept that Pearl starts singing all of a sudden without the need for a diegetic motivation, in this case to show how worried she is about Steven’s obsession with physical training. Although as a general rule musical numbers are carefully justified in the narrative in *Steven Universe* (much more often than even in mainstream musicals), sometimes they just take advantage of the convention.¹⁶

The point to make here is that although many musical film (or even theatrical musical) resources are put to use in *Steven Universe*, the musical numbers that include a song are so embedded in the narrative fabric that they become completely integrated (Penner, 2017).¹⁷ Rather than being catchy tunes to market the series, the songs, when they occur, are firmly anchored in the scenes. Making music is part of Steven’s world. Even his “enemies”, the Diamonds, have songs that serve the narrative.¹⁸ Especially illustrative of the need to integrate the songs is the scene in which a new Gem, Peridot, appears. This grumpy Gem, newly arrived on Earth, needs to vent her frustration and Steven shows her how she can make a song out of anything, even the sound of an electric drill. She starts composing, helped by Steven, who also explains what makes a good song in terms of musical notes by singing. At

¹⁴ See Penner (2017).

¹⁵ Season 1, episode 20. See note 11 for link.

¹⁶ See later the discussion of “Mr Greg”.

¹⁷ See her discussion of the integrated musical, a term coined by John Mueller in his article “Fred Astaire and the Integrated Musical” (Mueller, 1984).

¹⁸ *What’s the Use of Feeling Blue?*, season 4, episode 15 (see Appendix).

the end of the day Peridot has written her own song (*Peace and Love on Planet Earth*¹⁹) and, most importantly, shares it with Steven and the Crystal Gems. The passage of time, from morning to night, is shown in a montage sequence in which the image cuts from one place to another but the song is continuous. Continuity provided by music to underscore fragmented space is widely used in films and many of the songs in Steven Universe have this function in addition to specifically delivering information, as we will see later.²⁰

Narrative songs

By analysing the type of narrative content the songs carry in the episodes in which they appear²¹ we can observe how they deliver information that is crucial for the development of the plot. Songs move the narrative forward in two ways:

1. They prompt memories and provide information about the past which explains relevant facts in the present.
2. They provide continuity in scenes which jump from the present to the past (montage scenes) and also that jump from place to place, using cross-cutting editing.

Some songs and musical numbers accomplish both things at the same time. In the Appendix we have included a list of all the songs and a brief description of how they contribute to the plot.

We will now discuss two episodes to illustrate what we mean with narrative songs, first “Mr Greg”²² and then “We Need to Talk”.²³

The first, “Mr Greg”, despite its apparent playfulness, is crucial to the development of the plot. To better understand how the songs work, we are going to describe their occurrence and their function. “Mr Greg” is an episode that is entirely sung (and danced!). It starts with Greg earning a lot of money by selling his song *Just a Comet* as a jingle for Pepe’s Burger. After having stated that many nice things *Don’t Cost Nothing*²⁴ in an acoustic duet with guitar accompaniment, a frenetic guitar beat initiates the new song, *Empire City*, in Greg’s classic rock style. Greg, Steven and Pearl set off to *Empire City*²⁵ to celebrate. They start their trip with glimpses of the hectic metropolis while singing this dynamic song before arriving at the hotel. There the staff perform a song and dance number (*Mr Greg*) to welcome the “bazzillionaire”, in the Reinhardt/Grappelli (guitar and violin) style. Greg, Pearl and Steven are treated like royalty and shown to their penthouse on the top floor of the skyscrap-

19 “It Could’ve Been Great”, season 4, episode 3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rdlc4b5NL5g>

20 See Appendix for songs signalled with the word “montage”, ten in total.

21 See Appendix.

22 Season 3, episode 8.

23 Season 2, episode 9.

24 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFoqxt9fx6A>

25 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HM_NIOwnfzs

er. The number is interrupted because Pearl refuses to continue the dance. The next scene shows Pearl entering the suite and looking at Greg and Steven asleep. There is a bouquet of roses, a reference to Rose Quartz, which prompts the appearance of non-diegetic piano music in the background and the cue for Pearl's most professional song in the series, *It's Over, Isn't It?*. It begins as a soliloquy, recalling her relationship with Rose and how she preferred Greg over her. But this moment is not wasted in useless contemplation; while she sings and dances on the balcony, Pearl makes the clouds change shape and performs a scene which describes her former attachment to Rose, and Greg's interference in their relationship. By looking at the sky, Steven, who is eavesdropping, gleans crucial information about the origin of Pearl and Greg's feud over Rose Quartz. At the same time, the song provides an outlet for Pearl's unresolved conflict with Greg, which has never before been verbalized. The fact that Pearl and Greg do not appear to get along was precisely the reason Steven wanted Pearl to come and celebrate with them in the first place, so that the two adults would have an opportunity to talk. The three of them return to the dance hall in the hotel, where a pianist is playing. Steven gives him some money and takes his place. Deftly playing and singing *Both of You*, he tells Pearl and Greg how important they are to him and why they have to resolve the conflict. This scene shifts from reality to fantasy during the song: Greg and Pearl appear in blue and yellow in a dream-like scene outside diegetic space. In the middle of the song they talk about their differences, they dance together and eventually they overcome their jealousy over Rose. Magically, they return to the hall and a realistic setting, where they receive a round of applause. The episode elegantly ends when they come to a realization about some of the things they have used (hotels, service, meals) during *Those Cost Something*, in a reprise of *Don't Cost Nothing*. That Steven has overheard Pearl singing about Rose is made clear when he twice sings the words "It's Over, Isn't It?" before he falls asleep in the back seat of the car. These words and music have now acquired a completely new meaning.

We can say that even when the series admittedly embraces the convention of musical film, it is more than a mere tribute to the genre. From the perspective of narrative development, this episode seals an alliance between Greg and Pearl and provides information about Rose Quartz in the past that is now known to Steven. A little indulgence in musical numbers does not mean the plot cannot be moved along.

Now let us discuss how the music works in "We Need to Talk".²⁶ In this episode Greg shows Steven and Connie a recorded performance on an old VHS. In what resembles a rehearsal, we see Greg singing and playing the electric guitar, Garnet the synth bass and Amethyst the drums. Rose is the other vocalist. The song is *What Can I Do for You?*.²⁷ Pearl, who represents Rose's attraction to Greg, is not singing with them. She is looking on jealously from the side of the stage and after Rose and Greg sing the song together (clearly the lyrics refer

26 "We Need to Talk", season 2, episode 9, part 1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGohbPsu-7s>

27 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cblLkkZeM1g>

to their relationship), she steps in to dance with Rose. When two Gems dance together, “fusion” occurs, and Pearl wants to show Greg how well they “fuse”. Fusion will be explained in detail later but suffice to say here that Gems do this to become a new, bigger and stronger Gem. We see how Pearl fuses with Rose while Greg plays a skilful electric guitar riff, which ascends as his wonder increases at the event he is witnessing: the appearance of a giant woman, Rainbow Quartz. The musical commentary – carefully presented as diegetic – clearly helps the narration to evolve in the entire episode. The song *What Can I Do for You?* unites Greg and Rose and provokes Pearl’s jealousy, the guitar solo correlates with Greg’s emotions and the ascending riff reaches its peak when he witnesses the appearance of Rainbow Quartz.

“Fusion” and music

To understand “fusion”, we first need to explain what exactly Gems are. Technically speaking, their actual gem (worn visibly on any part of their body) is the only material part of them. The rest is a light projection of their own perception of themselves. Different types of Gem have common general characteristics: Sapphires have one eye, Pearls are slender and refined, Quartzes are big and strong, etc. But the hairstyle, outfits and small details are chosen by each Gem. Now we understand this quality of being a projection, we can address fusion. Two (or more!) Gems have the ability to fuse into a new, bigger body that holds both of their physical gemstones. This body will have traits combining the original two Gems’ bodies. Not only that, but their newly created personality will also be a fusion of the parts involved. In this way, an entirely new person is created through the process of fusion. Fusion can result in a body with multiple legs, arms, faces or eyes, and the greater the difference between the Gems involved, the more unusual the number of body parts their fusion will have. This is something Steven and the audience can see for the first time in the episode “Giant Woman”.²⁸ Steven learns that they have the ability to create a new Gem when Amethyst and Pearl mention a certain “Opal” character, who is a combination of the two of them. When starting to go up the mountain, Steven insists that they fuse, his insistence becoming a song in which he strongly asserts this request. The song has several functions: firstly, it consolidates Steven’s vocal persona in the choice of musical style; secondly, it starts to develop the concept of fusion; and thirdly, it gives continuity to the montage scene that shows how they climb the mountain to accomplish the mission. When Opal finally appears, Steven knows that she is a friend when she sings a small section of this song, which clearly implies that Amethyst and Pearl – who heard Steven’s song previously – are contained in this powerful Giant Woman, who saves him.

The lyrics hint at the fact that fusion combines you and someone else to create an entirely new person, and also that the parts can just un-fuse and go back to be separate entities if they so desire. Later in the episode, we see the fused Gems separate as soon as there is con-

²⁸ Season one, episode 12, *Giant Woman*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XT13ijUfSts>

flict between them. As to the musical accompaniment for this song (mainly ukulele and some discrete bell chimes and synthesizer pads in the bridge), it perfectly corresponds to the first style attached to Steven.

It is also important to note that fusion for its own sake and not for fighting purposes is in itself an act of rebellion against Homeworld and is not accepted. Fusion between different Gems creates beautiful unique results that cannot be achieved any other way. Among the rebels – the Crystal Gems who live on Earth – it is celebrated, but development and change are not well regarded in Homeworld. Why is this relevant to explain the use of songs?

The idea of fusion and how it works is not a simple one and may not have been easy to grasp without the songs and dances. In time, the viewer gains a clear understanding of the process and all the rules that apply to fusion without anyone actually explaining them. We have to infer from the narrative that the act of fusion itself is subversive in Homeworld. Gems are originally created for a certain purpose. Rubies or topazes can and must fuse for battle, but anything else is outside the norm and considered “improper”. However, diversity proves to be a strength since fusions represent the best of their parts. The Crystal Gems ability to fuse acts as an elegant motif to celebrate and vindicate diversity as a productive and positive aspect of living together. Consequently, to describe the mixture of different song and music styles in *Steven Universe* as simply eclectic would not be completely correct. The approach the series employs is an unconventional way of making diversity productive. And it is precisely that mixture of musical genres that correlates with the process of fusion: the combination of diverse elements is transformed into something much better.

Apart from this general idea, some musical “mixing” between the Songs *Stronger Than You*, *Something Entirely New* and *Sapphire’s Song* illustrates to what extent music can help to reinforce the idea of fusion.

We first realize Garnet is a fusion in the last episode of season 1, “Jailbreak”.²⁹ In this episode we meet the two Gems who make up Garnet – Ruby and Sapphire – before we know who they are. At this point in the series we still know very little about fusion and the song in this episode, *Stronger Than You*, deepens the meaning of this concept and how it works. As Garnet fights an enemy who does not understand why they would want to stay fused, Garnet sings this song, which emphasizes the importance of love when it comes to fusion. Let us take a look at some of the lyrics:

Well I am even more than the two of them!
Everything they care about is what I am!
I am their fury, I am their patience
I am a conversation!
I am made o-o-o-o-of
lo-o-o-o-ove

²⁹ See Appendix for context.

Narratively, the song's lyrics explain that fusion is much more than it might seem at first sight and the song thus delivers relevant narrative content. Nevertheless, it uses a much more subtle element than simply the lyrics to convey the idea of fusion: the melody itself. Earlier in the episode we hear Sapphire (one of the Gems who form Garnet) singing a short melody so she can find Ruby (the other half of the fusion) while she is incarcerated. Sapphire's Song can be seen in figure 2.³⁰



Figure 2: *Sapphire's Song*. Fragment of the score

It is a nice short *a capella* “vocalise”, simple and melodic. Now let's take a look at the chorus of *Stronger Than You*³¹ and the melody for the words “made of love”. See figure 3.



Figure 3: *Stronger than You*. Fragment of the score

Clearly, *Sapphire's Song* has been integrated into Garnet's song. This resource is so useful it is used again in the next season, in the episode “The Answer”.³² Garnet tells Steven how Ruby and Sapphire met, how it was a huge scandal and how they had to run away and join the rebellion in order to be together. In the story they sing the song *Something Entirely New*,³³ in which we again learn more details about what being fused means for the Gems. Right at the end of the song they dance and fuse together shortly after humming the melody in figure 4.



Figure 4: *Something Entirely New*. Fragment of the score

30 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvE2CgTEXco>

31 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OWq38TikzU>

32 Season 2, episode 23.

33 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEJvCQ7QZEo>

It is once again the same melody from Sapphire's Song, which is now present to imply that fusion is about to happen. To sum up, through these songs (*Giant Woman, Stronger Than You and Something Entirely New*), we gain a better understanding of the concept of fusion. Now that we have seen how purely musical procedures reinforce the narrative content in the story, we can discuss what music does in terms of emotion. This has definitely been consciously considered in this series. If we compare it to other animation series, we have to conclude that *Steven Universe* confers much importance on the characters' inner feelings and interpersonal relationships in the development of the narrative. In this aspect, songs undeniably contribute to the transmission of mood (hence changes in harmonies, different instrumental settings, vocal styles, etc.). Songs explain conflict and allow the development and understanding of emotionally complex situations through the lyrics and their musical setting. As we said earlier, songs in *Steven Universe* are a natural response to conflict.³⁴ But at the same time songs always provide valuable information to understand the plot. If we consider *Let's Only Think About Love*,³⁵ we can observe both functions. At the beginning of this song, in the introduction, we encounter a very mature Steven grooming himself (shaving!) for the wedding in front of a mirror in the purest style of the introspective song. He is coming to terms with the fact that Rose Quartz shattered Pink Diamond but also simultaneously providing a recap of the parts of the story we need to remember. Once he decides to put the problems to one side to celebrate Ruby and Sapphire's wedding, the song suddenly goes from gloomy to optimistic, bells ring and everything is fine. Later on during the episode, when talking to Peridot, however, Steven makes reference to a big danger, which we are more aware of thanks to the information in the introduction.

Part 3: Diegesis and songs

If we want to conform to the classical distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic, the songs in *Steven Universe* fall into four categories.

1. Diegetic singing

All the songs the characters sing at concerts or to each other – *Wailing Stone, Destiny, Just a Comet, What Can I Do for You?*, etc. (see Appendix) – belong to this category. The instruments we hear correspond to those we see because the characters are playing them and the song is motivated or justified; that is, the characters are fully conscious of singing and not speaking. The song is a form of social exchange, for example *The Jam Song*.³⁶ This is a duet

³⁴ The creator herself is perfectly aware of this. "When [the show] is tackling heavier topics, I hope it's clear that I'm trying to tackle these topics gently and respectfully. *Steven Universe* is not a tragedy or a dark comedy, it will always be warm and sweet. So if a heavy topic throws that into question, I find music can keep it clear that it's meant to be a sweet and healing thing" Mallikarjuna, (2016).

³⁵ "Reunited", season 5, episodes 23 and 24. *Let's Only Think About Love* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYYMgRothFA>

³⁶ "Sworn to the Sword", season 2, episode 6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IiHavtKvBCg>

with Connie, Steven's best friend, in which the violin is visually present because they are "jamming"; in other words, playing together. It is worth mentioning that Connie does not have her own songs or a definite style to represent her, but the violin is associated with her character. Formally, it is slightly more complex than *Be Wherever You Are*³⁷ but very similar in style. *The Jam Song* parallels the reestablishment of equality and harmony between the two friends after a difficult time, when Steven did not want to involve Connie in his endeavour to protect the world because she might get hurt and refused to speak to her.

Other songs such as *Be Wherever You Are*, *Peace and Love on Planet Earth*, and even *Giant Woman* also belong to this category in a way, because although the characters are self-consciously singing, the source of the instrumental music is not visible. But, since they usually lead to a montage sequence, the acousmatic sound of the instruments is softened. Besides, maintaining a certain musical style to represent the characters makes it natural to have their sounds around them.

2. 'Diegetic' in the convention of the musical genre

Lately, there has been a lot of discussion among specialists about the pertinence of applying the diegetic or non-diegetic dichotomy to musical narratives. It is well known that in opera, the theatrical musical and musicals, our suspension of disbelief has a very low threshold and we accept singing and dancing in situations that clearly depart from a realistic representation of life.³⁸ Taking this into consideration, some of the songs in *Steven Universe* could be considered "almost" diegetic inasmuch as they function as a substitute for dialogue. *Dear Old Dad*,³⁹ *Do It For Her*,⁴⁰ *What's the Use in Feeling Blue?*⁴¹ and many other songs could be naturalized; that is, we could easily ignore that they are songs because they provide an entirely satisfactory setting for plot development (with the added value of including nice tunes). Once again, we have to stress that in this series songs never stop the course of the action: musical numbers always provide some kind of insight for the different motivations or former actions of the characters.

3. Crossing the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic

Much has been discussed about background music as opposed to source music and, more often than not, the boundaries are not as clear for composers as they are for narratologists. What we mean by this is that composers sometimes take realistic elements from the diegesis and integrate them in the score, so the boundaries between what belongs to the fictional world and what does not are somewhat fuzzy. One always wonders: is it possible that the

37 In *The Jam Song* we see more variation in the structure: verse, bridge and verse, ABA.

38 See Penner (2017) and Heldt (2013).

39 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UViYKBlpFbc>

40 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yG8caPPY1Y>

41 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtA-juh3rf4>

characters “can hear” non-diegetic music at times? In Steven Universe we have an interesting example of this phenomenon, the song *Full Disclosure*.⁴²

This episode acts as a recap of the previous season, but this song is also important in terms of giving a full account of the development of Steven’s feelings towards Connie and the management of trauma. During the episode, Connie repeatedly phones Steven to find out if he is alright after the events in “Jailbreak”, and Steven becomes anxious about telling her the truth because he does not want to worry her. Both Steven and the audience hear the phone ring several times. Without any apparent connection, Steven bursts into song to get his feelings off his chest. As he reaches the chorus, we recognize it as the melody in his ringtone. Not only that, but the instrument that plays this main melody is the actual phone. What does this mean?

The song takes a sound from reality, Steven’s phone, and integrates it into the musical setting, only this time Steven is not aware of it as he was with Peridot’s song (the drill in *Peace and Love on Planet Earth*). Here music directly connects the anxiety he is expressing through the lyrics with the ringtone, which in turn connects the situation to Connie on the other side of the line and in Steven’s mind.

4. Non-diegetic

Within the non-diegetic category of songs, we find two particular cases worth mentioning. From a strictly narratological point of view it is important that the song is sung by a voice that does not belong to the diegesis. The first time this happens is in the last episode of season 3, “Bubbled”, when we hear *Love Like You*.⁴³ As Steven is rescued from drifting in space by the Crystal Gems, he faints at the idea that his mother, Rose, killed one of the Diamonds in order to win the war. While he is unconscious, an unknown voice, which does not belong to any character, sings *Love Like You*⁴⁴ over a montage scene. The song ends when he regains consciousness. This happens for the second time much later, in the season 5 episode “Escapism”.⁴⁵ In it, while the real Steven is in prison in the Gems’ Homeworld, his astral projection manages to reach Earth to ask his dad and the rest of his friends for backup. In the scene in which he finally makes contact with them, an unknown voice (as in “Bubbled”) sings the song *Escapism*⁴⁶ over the muted action. The scene ends with Steven fainting and regaining consciousness back at the prison.

The parallelism between the two situations lies in Steven’s lack of consciousness. It is visually supported by the image, with a blurred frame of Steven’s legs to enhance the effect.

42 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rkezoBi8fs>

43 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfaGjOFj_pc

44 Throughout seasons 2 and 3, the song *Love Like You* was slowly built up as end credits music, a new verse being added every few episodes. With the conclusion of season 3, the song was complete. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWhjh9BpIrc>

45 Episode 28.

46 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4n7FFCPWDmo>

In both situations, Steven himself is unable to sing, so the voice steps in to fill in for him. These are the only times Steven faints in the entire series, making it a consistent procedure to replace his voice.

Another apparently non-diegetic song in Steven Universe is the opening sequence. The main theme, *We Are the Crystal Gems*, is one of the most well-known tunes in the show, and three versions are used in the series (an official extended fourth version exists but is part of an extra video that does not belong to an episode, so it is not integrated in the timeline). This theme song reveals changes in Steven as he matures, since the transition between the first version and the second has a direct relationship with his development and growth. In the first version of the opening (which covers season 1 and season 2 up to the episode “Sworn to the Sword”), Steven is finding his place among the Gems and only sings the line “and if we think we can’t” in the whole song. The other Gems sing all the other lines and he manages to squeeze in at the end with “and Steven!”. When the second version appears, Steven has gained better control over his powers. The song is the same, but it is sung in a different style, with more instrumental accompaniment. Steven gets to sing many more lines in the new version. Visually, Steven is also presented as a much more mature and collected person and many other characters also show signs of development.

See the lines sung by Steven in the second version in blue:

We are the Crystal **Gems!**
We’ll always save the day
And if you think we can’t
We’ll always find a way
That’s why the people of this world
Believe in.
Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl and Steven!⁴⁷

His importance in the group has grown and this makes the theme song adapt to the situation. In the last episode in the series, the theme song is sung within the narrative for the first time. Now Steven finally gets to sing the whole song by himself and the music becomes integrated in the montage scene at the conclusion of the series with all the creatures having the damage they suffered during the Gem war erased. Up to this point the theme song has only existed in the extradiegetic⁴⁸ space, but now it belongs to the diegesis. It has ceased to be non-diegetic, crossing over from that space outside the diegesis that is not even part of the episode. In this third version, the lyrics change to bring closure to the series and have an optimistic undertone: it is a celebration of life and the end of conflict.

⁴⁷ *We Are the Crystal Gems* (Season 2). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-O13uTtwZM>

⁴⁸ In texts from television or radio, the space for the channel or radio station and their corporative messages and sounds is known as extradiegetic space. Opening and closing credits belong to this space (Rodman, 2010).

'Cause we believe in peace and love
We are here for fun!
If you're not then let's not fight 'cause
We've already won!⁴⁹

Conclusions

Steven Universe presents a level of narrative complexity that places it above mainstream cartoon series. Different musical styles (pop, rap, hip-hop, rock, theatrical musical, etc.) instrumentation (acoustic, electronic) and harmonic treatments are used in a productive and creative way to serve the plot. In *Steven Universe* the musical numbers are integrated in the storytelling process and can cross the boundaries that theoretically separate diegetic from non-diegetic music, either akin to some musical films or in more unconventional ways, to the extent of integrating extra-fictional music (the songs from the opening and closing credits) into a part of the diegesis. To sum up, we wish to point out that in *Steven Universe*, beneath an apparent plot of fighting and adventure, difficult and important issues concerning the problems of understanding the world of adults and the complexity of feelings and attraction are treated in a healthy and natural way, and the use of music is crucial in accomplishing this aim.

⁴⁹ *We Are the Crystal Gems* (Montage last episode). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecrVOZ3z_Dk

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APPENDIX: NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF SONGS

SEASON ONE

1. *Cookie Cat* - Presents Steven as a child.
2. *Let me Drive my Van into Your Heart* - Presents Greg's career as an unsuccessful rock star.
3. *Serious Steven* - Steven sings about how "serious" he is, showing his playful side.
4. *Giant Woman* - Steven wants to understand the concept of fusion (MONTAGE).
5. *Birthday Song* - Steven deals with the fact that Gems do not age and do not know their birthday. Important information about the Gems' bodies is discovered.
6. *Strong in the Real Way* - Pearl explains how dangerous and destructive fusion can be.
7. *Steven and the Stevens* - Steven plays around with time and space. He is learning about complicated concepts and about his powers.
8. *Steven and the Crystal Gems* - Steven learns the consequences of time travel.
9. *Dear Old Dad* - Steven shows compassion for injured Greg and looks after him.
10. *Be Wherever You Are* - The lives of Steven, Sadie and Lars on the island adventure (MONTAGE).
11. *On the Run* - Steven and Amethyst run away from home to find the kindergarten where she spent her childhood (MONTAGE).
12. *Just a Comet* - Greg tells Steven how he met Rose Quartz, Steven's mother.
13. *Destiny* - Greg goes to find Rose and gives her a t-shirt. Rose is attracted to Greg.
14. *Lapis Lazuli* - Steven explains Lapis' motivations to his dad.
15. *Wailing Stone* - With the same melody as Lapis Lazuli, the song talks about translating the wailing stone.
16. *Sapphire's Song* - Sapphire sings so Ruby can find her in prison.
17. *Stronger Than You* - While Garnet is fighting, she explains the complexity of fusion. Cross-cut editing while the song is being sung shows how Steven, Pearl and Amethyst manage to escape from the interstellar prison.

SEASON TWO

18. *Full Disclosure* - Steven worries about Connie's wellbeing after dangerous events with the Homeworld Gems.
19. *The Jam Song* - Steven and Connie have solved their conflict and there is harmony between them again.
20. *Do it for Her* - Pearl teaches Connie how to fight with the sword (MONTAGE).
21. *What Can I Do for You?* - On an old VHS recording we see Rose singing with Greg and how she fuses with Pearl. This gives Steven more information about fusion.
22. *Tower of Mistakes* - Amethyst regrets what she did to Garnet.
23. *Haven't You Noticed* - Sadie is caught by Steven singing a popular pop song.
24. *Haven't You Noticed* - Steven performs Sadie's song at the Beachapalooza festival.
25. *Something Entirely New* - Ruby and Sapphire talk about how fusion felt to them (first time).

26. *Peace and Love on Planet Earth* - Steven teaches Peridot the importance of making music

SEASON THREE

27. *Like a Burger* - Commercial jingle that makes Greg rich (10 million dollars) Same music as Just a Comet (No. 12).
28. *Don't Cost Nothing* - Greg sings about the important things in life not costing money. Duet with Steven. They decide to travel to Empire City.
29. *Empire City* - Greg and Steven sing about going on vacation to Empire City while they are packing (MONTAGE).
30. *Mr Greg* - The hotel staff sings along with Greg and Pearl about how much money they have and how they are spending it. Pearl leaves, interrupting the scene.
31. *It's Over, Isn't It?* - Pearl sings a soliloquy about her relationship with Rose and Greg. Steven discovers the origin of Pearl and Greg's feud.
32. *Both of You* - Steven sings to Greg and Pearl to convince them to talk about their feelings because he loves them both. And they do (MONTAGE).
33. *Don't Cost Nothing/Those Cost Something* (reprise) - Greg and Pearl recount how much they spent on the trip and conclude unregretfully they could have just stayed at home.
34. *I think I Need a Little Change* - Greg sings about his life being Rose's partner.
35. *Love Like You* - This song appears when Steven is rescued from space and his reaction when he discovers that Rose Quartz destroyed Pink Diamond (MONTAGE).

SEASON FOUR

36. *Here Comes a Thought* - Garnet explains to Stevonnie how to handle the anxiety provoked by fusion.
37. *Still Not Giving Up* - Steven films a tutorial for YouTube on how to play guitar and encourages viewers to write songs to cope with complicated feelings. This is a video clip and does not belong to the series narrative.
38. *I Could Never Be Ready* - Greg finds enters fatherhood (MONTAGE).
39. *What's the Use of Feeling Blue?* - Yellow Diamond sings to Blue about Pink's death.

SEASON FIVE

40. *Working Dead* - Sadie improvises a dark song about hating her job.
41. *Ghost Song* - Sadie Killer and the Suspects perform live.
42. *That Distant Shore* - Lapis sings about conflicting feelings.
43. *Ruby Rider* - Ruby experiences life on her own.
44. *Let's Only Think About Love* - After recapping who Rose was and how the Earth is in danger, Steven recalls all the troubles surrounding their lives and the dangers that loom, but decides he would rather focus on the wedding.
45. *Familiar* - Steven sings about how similar feelings among the Diamonds and the Crystal Gems can be.
46. *Escapism* - The lyrics talk about someone who is trapped and wants to be free. The images show Steven's astral projection, which allows him to leave the Homeworld jail to ask his dad and the other Gems still on Earth for help (MONTAGE).
47. *We are the Crystal Gems* - Steven sings the theme song while he provides a conclusion to the series (MONTAGE).
48. *Change Your Mind* - Steven closes the episode and the series with this piece of advice.