

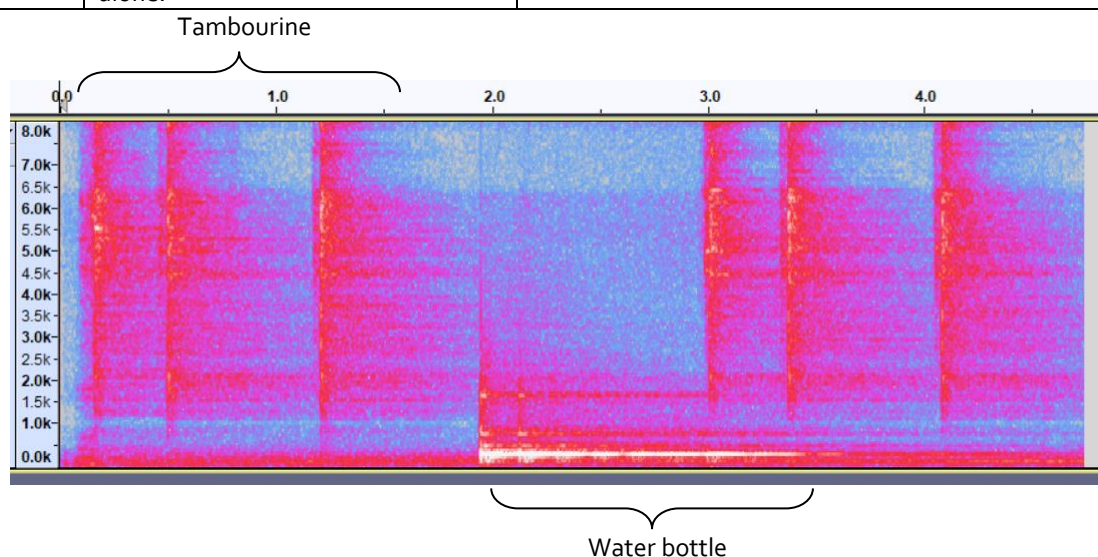
Analysing Music

Analysing music is all about using techniques and tools to gain insight into a piece of music or a musical practice. There are huge variety of approaches to analysing music, and each method reveals/emphasizes certain aspects and doesn't show others. In analysis, it is more helpful to think about what analyses are useful/less useful, rather there being one 'correct' answer. Here are just some of the techniques and approaches to analysing music, some of which may be unfamiliar to you. We can apply them to the same music, to illustrate how each approach tell us something different.



Pet Sounds is a 1966 album by the Beach Boys. Group member Brian Wilson wrote the music, with lyrics by Tony Asher. The record is notable for its experimental production and unconventional musical practices. It's a rich example for musical analysis, and particularly the song 'God Only Knows'.

Motivic/thematic analysis	This approach examines how musical fragments are repeated and changed across a piece or set of pieces, and the effect of such processes.	Though <i>Pet Sounds</i> doesn't use directly-repeated melodies between songs, the whole album has a sense of musical unity by emphasizing arch-shaped melodies in the treble, and stepwise descending bass parts. Listen out for them. The shapes are particularly noticeable in the doo-wop vocals in 'God Only Knows'.
Harmonic analysis	Examining the underlying harmony of music is particularly helpful for understanding how a sense of musical departure and arrival is created.	'God Only Knows' keeps the listener guessing because it seems to be in two keys at once (E major and A major): the verse seems to centre on E, the chorus on A. This ambiguity mirrors the uncertainty in the song's lyrics.
Transformational theory	An approach sometimes called neo-Riemannian theory emphasizes the movements between chords: how one is 'transformed' into another by changing the notes.	The vocal harmonies of the Beach Boys often have more to do with how the music moves smoothly by step, rather than going to or from a 'home' tonic chord. In 'God Only Knows', the unusual harmonic movement from verse to chorus doesn't sound awkward to our ears because notes are kept in common between them. See also 'Good Vibrations' for this effect.
Soundwave analysis	A variety of analytical techniques can be used to analyze the waveforms of the sound recordings. This can be particularly useful for analyzing timbres and differences that are difficult to identify by ears alone.	The picture below shows the opening of 'Caroline, No', which features a tambourine and a water bottle being hit. This spectrogram shows higher frequencies higher in the picture and louder frequencies in highlight. We can clearly see how the bright, sharp tambourine contrasts with the echoing lower water bottle.



The opening percussion of 'Caroline, No' from *Pet Sounds*

Your Turn...

We have a challenge for you, to get your analytical thinking started. *Pet Sounds* and other songs made at the same time were created with a lot of experimentation in the studio. Some different versions have been released. We can use demos and early versions to help us understand the creative process.

1. Compare the finished version of 'Good Vibrations' with this early version. What do you notice that's different?

	Final Version	Early Version
Lyrics and vocal performance style		
Structure		
Rhythm		
Texture		
Instruments and the mixing/production		

You can also listen to these outtakes from the studio session.

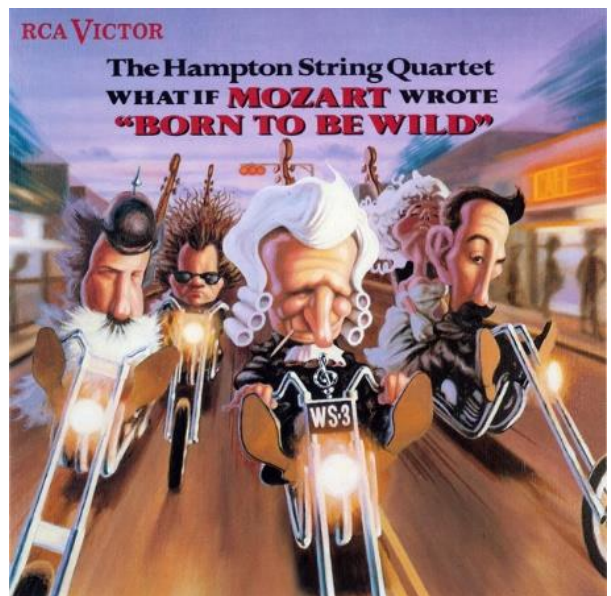
What can we learn about the creation of the music from listening to these outtakes? How might modern production make it more difficult for future researchers to access these materials? What are the opportunities and restrictions of using demos/outtakes for researching music?

2. The Hampton String Quartet made a record of 'classical' arrangements of pop songs called 'What if Mozart Wrote Born to be Wild' (right).

Write a short review of the string quartet version of Good Vibrations 'in the style of Mozart'.

- What is the appeal of this recording?
- What's kept, what's lost, from the original?
- What's added?
- Who is this recording for?
- Critically appraise this recording.

Email your comments and thoughts to tim.summers@rhul.ac.uk, and/or arrange a meeting once you begin at Royal Holloway!



Read: Rachel Beckles Willson, 'Music Theory and Analysis', in J.P.E. Harper-Scott and Jim Samson (eds), *Introduction to Music Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 25–42.

For more on *Pet Sounds*, try Philip Lambert, 'Brian Wilson's *Pet Sounds*', *Twentieth-Century Music* 5/1 (2008), 109–133. Available on the author's site [here](#) (scroll down to read the article).