



A LOOK AT AIRLINE BOARDING MUSIC

What is “audio branding”? It’s a way for a brand to have a distinctive identity using sound, be that a jingle, corporate music or an advertising soundtrack.

The benefits of having a distinct audio brand include being able to sharpen your brand identity, as well as inciting certain emotions within consumers.

This a point made by marketing strategist, best-selling author and speaker **David Meerman Scott** in an interview with SimpliFlying Shashank Nigam last year. In the interview David made the point for why aviation brands should be more aware of their “musical logo.”

In fact, David has set up sonic branding studio “**Signature Tones**” alongside re-

ording artist, live music performer and music creative director **Juanito Pascual**, to work with organizations on the use of music and to establish a unique and memorable identity.

For an airline, your boarding music is of course part and parcel of your “audio brand”, which is why we asked Juanito Pascual to review a selection of airline boarding music and to give commentary on each one.





Norwegian Airlines

Norwegian says that the core of its audio branding, the musical track “Northern Colours”, “was composed and produced by Joel Krozer, with string and orchestral arrangements by Robin Mullarkey.

“The live instrumentation and voices were recorded in Trondheim at Øra Studio, using the Trondheim Solistene String Ensemble and Embla Choir who are both local to the area.”

Comment by Juanito Pascual

Norwegian Airlines in-flight music is a fantastic blend of high artistic and production standards matched extremely well with its intended context.

The instrumentation is lush and evocative, beautifully performed by a large cast of performers (strings and singers layered in over more contemporary keyboard sounds) and recorded at a very high standard of audio quality, allowing for the intended emotional potential of the music to shine through.

The composers initial use of ethereal instrumental sounds and the choice of gentle upwards-moving melodic gestures evokes not only a feeling of flying but conjures a peaceful and perhaps even sublime sense of floating.

It does a wonderful job of evoking the magic that can be associated with flying and helps portray the sense that this experience is both soothing and yet in some way wondrous



Etihad Airways

Etihad's boarding music was unveiled in 2015, at the time when Nicole Kidman was brought on board as the airline's brand ambassador and star of its TV ads.

The music was composed by Ramesh Sathiah, creative director and composer at the Sydney-based audio design com-

pany Song Zu, with the soundtrack being conducted by Roger Benedict of the Sydney Scoring Orchestra.

The airline says that it has "a cinematic score, peppered with Arabic musical elements, forms the perfect accompaniment to the imagery."

Comment by Juanito Pascual

Etihad Airways in-flight music is a bit of a study in mismatching content and context.

The composition itself has some interesting elements and complexities. There is however a surprising recurrence of some rather dissonant musical phrases.

One of the main melodic passages is played on a glockenspiel (related to a xylophone) and because some of the notes used, would seem better suited to a movie scene designed to arouse tension

and cue the listener to be a bit uneasy.

Adding to this is the use of some rhythms that would seemingly connote suspense.

The piece is several minutes long and does have some very lush and and tension-free segments. However, even in the midst of the more fluid and soaring sections there is harmonic movement that would seem better paired with a situation where ambiguity or uncertainty would be the intended emotional impact.



Cathay Pacific

We couldn't find much background information about the Cathay Pacific boarding music, **but one AV Geek YouTube** channel claims it is "written by a renowned Hong Kong composer, the music is a reflection on the majesty of flying, and the elegance that Cathay Pacific brings to every aspect of the journey."

Comment by Juanito Pascual

Cathay Pacific blends some contemporary sounds with traditional string sounds associated with their home of Hong Kong.

The choice of keyboard sounds in opening moments conveys a fresh and contemporary feeling while also feeling ethereal and soothing.

The inclusion of the traditional plucked string sounds blends well, at the same time as distinguishing them by bringing out this cultural element and gently tapping into

the inherent power of sounds to conjure deep associations and images.

The song rather quickly transitions however into what feels like a 1980's piano driven television theme song, relaxing, but perhaps a little irrelevant to this environment.

Also notable is the somewhat stiff rhythmic pulse in much of the piece, which gives this music somewhat of a march-like feeling, which also pairs in an unusual way with the piano melody.



Air Canada

“Born to Fly” is the boarding music developed specifically for Air Canada’s fleet of 787 Dreamliners.

Comment by Juanito Pascual

Air Canada has chosen to portray an up-beat and youthful energy in their music.

Stylistically drawing from the band U2 among other influences, it is music that conveys a combination of fun, excitement and optimism in a pop-rock-influenced song.

Compositionally, it sets the scene with a simple 3-note piano figure underscored by a gently crescendoing synthesizer, along with some wistful sounds evoking perhaps first rays of sunlight on a new day.

A rhythmic plucking is introduced on

electric guitar and then a second guitar starts a main melody at which point the whole band kicks in. Interesting to note is the piece continues by adding strings and going on a little melodic journey into a minor key, adding perhaps an association of seriousness to balance the otherwise up-beat and more lighthearted feel.

The piece comes back to a rock band instrumentation of with drums, bass and guitar underpinning a strings section, again giving a sense of youthful energy while retaining a certain elegance and classic feeling through the use of the string orchestra.



Finnair

According to the information on a Finland / Japan YouTube page, the boarding music is a track called “Vista Beauty.”

Comment by Juanito Pascual

The Finnair music is a lovely piece of music that has what could be characterized as a placid and perhaps very nostalgic quality.

The composition blends lush passages of strings, chorus and piano with an intermittent drum beat and shaker.

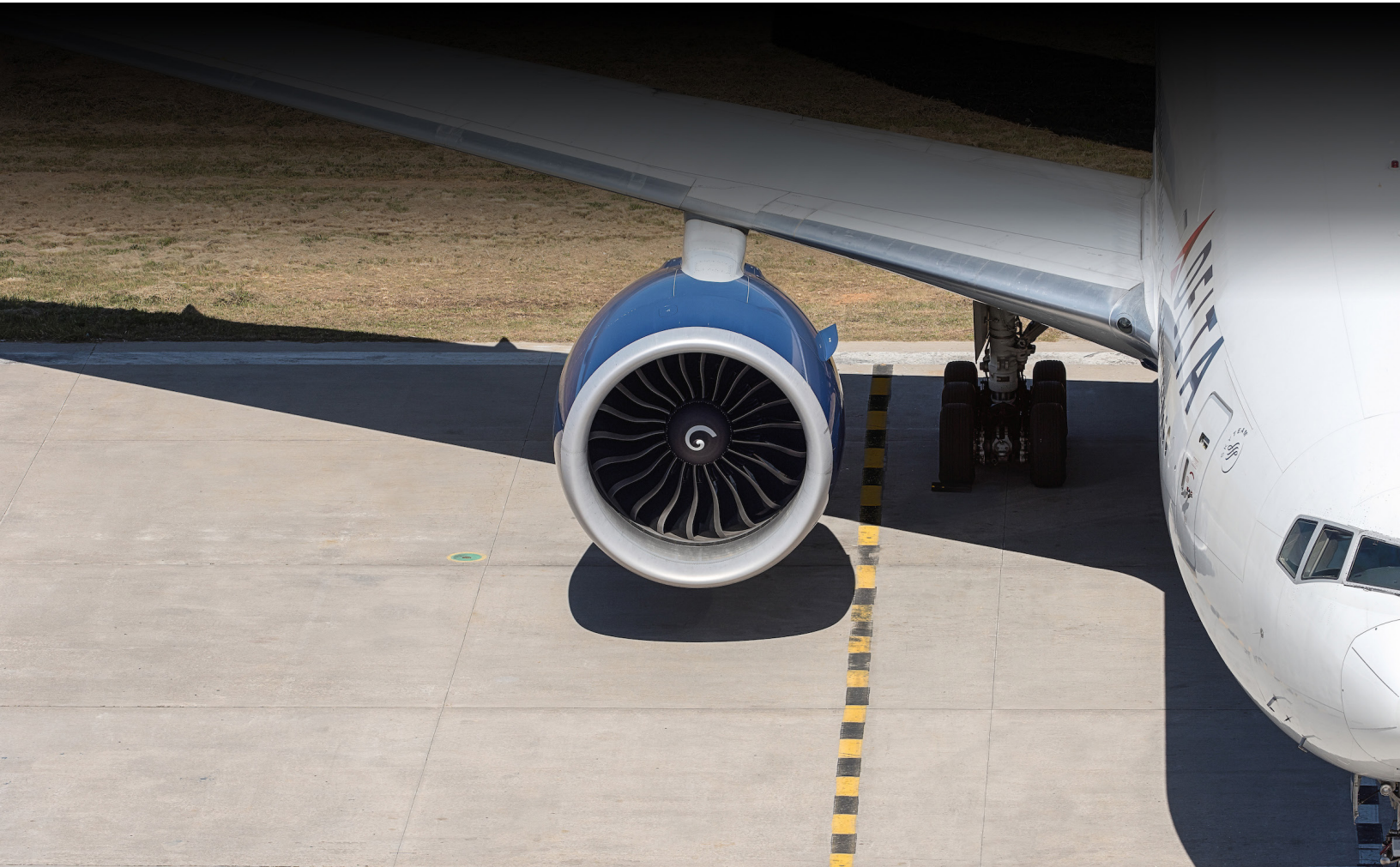
The overall effect however is that of a very spacious piece with a lullaby-like gentleness.

This music points to the idea of finding

balance in that they succeed beautifully in not overstimulating or creating any sense of tension, but this goes the opposite direction perhaps a bit too far, creating an almost melancholic air at times.

The piece is also notable for the high quality of the audio production, conveying a very lush experience when listened to through good headphones, but also giving the best chance to have its soothing impact when played through an overhead speaker system.

A theme tune or sound-track?



While these airlines have a ‘signature’ branding tune, Delta takes a very different approach. Delta has a rotating series of popular music tracks.

For example, **writing about a flight from Los Angeles to Minneapolis**, StarTribune journalist Kerri Westenburg commented “A twangy rendition of Prince’s iconic “Purple Rain” hit my ears. I was sitting in my seat at the start of a Delta flight from Los Angeles to Minneapolis, waiting for passengers to settle in.”

Previously you could find Delta’s playlist **on Spotify**, but that seems to have stopped. Instead, Delta now publishes the monthly line-up on its website, but without links. You can see the **latest line-up here**.

Comment by Juanito Pascual

The idea of a theme song versus a playlist like anything, has pluses and minuses.

Some obvious pluses with a unique theme song include the fact that is your own emblematic piece of music, which can be as much a part of the experience as the company's visual logo and other branded materials.

The music in many ways completes this set of what are otherwise regarded as standard and essential elements of branding, whereas use of pre-existing song(s) can give the effect simply that the radio is on.

The process of creating a theme song, should involve a conscious effort to capture and celebrate some essential elements of a company's character, brand promise and/or mission. You don't get that kind of specificity with pre-existing music. And like with visual branding elements, ideally the music is something that will become immediately recognizable creating an immediate association with the company anytime it is heard.

A playlist on the other hand has the advantages of variety and length without repetition. By having various songs, you come closer to the idea of "something for everyone" which has its advantages as well. Indeed, the idea of a single song

that some percentage of people are going to quickly get tired of, is something to be mindful of.

A good balance can of course be a signature theme song, and perhaps a short playlist, if the situation calls for music to be playing for a while. Another approach when considering whether to have a the theme song is to have an extended composition, so the length is not an issue.

In the case of boarding a plane people are of course focused on getting in and settled and probably not listening too closely to the music, and therefore the music is a more subliminal element, setting the mood. It seems the primary considerations are to make people feel some combination of comfortable, safe, relaxed, and generally positive.

Delta Airlines uses the approach of a curated playlist and does a good job of setting a relaxing mood through a selection of medium tempo songs, that are more or less contemporary and generally in the indie-rock and singer/songwriter realms.

Music, whether a unique theme song, or playlist can go a long way in helping achieve these things, though the theme song is going to have the advantage of adding to a unique and memorable element specific to your brand.