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MUSIC

SOS

BY ELIZABETH MOONLIGHT — 2024-10-07



Beethoven? Abba? Morse? Help! SOS.

A [previous blog](#)¹ describes how Beethoven's Fifth Symphony starts with the famous rhythm *ta-ta-ta-taaa* (), which in [Morse Code](#)² symbolises the letter 'V'. Of course, Beethoven did not use the Morse Code to inspire his composition, as Morse Code was invented some 30 years after Beethoven wrote this symphony.

Probably the most recognisable example of Morse Code is the code for the letters [SOS](#)³. These letters, and the code for them, **... — — — ...** () have for a long time been associated with the international distress call. So in 1975 when the [ABBA](#)⁴ songwriters wanted to write a song where the lyrics are a plea for help when love seems to be dying, they called the song 'SOS'.

¹<https://thehiddencircle.com/v-for-victory/>

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse_code

³<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SOS>

⁴<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ABBA>

Where are those happy days, they seem so hard to find. I tried to reach for you, but you have closed your mind. Whatever happened to our love? I wish I understood. It used to be so nice, it used to be so good.

So when you're near me, darling can't you hear me S. O. S. The love you gave me, nothing else can save me S. O. S.

But they did a little more than just use the letters SOS. They also used the Morse Code rhythm for the first 9 syllables of some lines in the song. So listen to the song carefully and you will hear **••• — — — •••** that is, short short short LONG LONG LONG short short short, on the notes for:

Where are those HAP PY DAYS they seem so I tried to REACH FOR YOU and you have It used to BE SO NICE it used to

That is, the first 9 syllables of those lines (lower case = short, **UPPER CASE** = long). Moreover, now listen to the chorus and the words:

So when you're NEAR ME DAR-ling can't you The love you GAVE ME NO-thing else can

There is that rhythm again on the first 9 syllables. As if that wasn't enough, the rhythm also appears in the short instrumental keyboard break in the middle of the song. Was this a conscious move by the songwriters? Absolutely yes!

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKXAN-bcwRo>

This song has always been the favourite of mine from ABBA's output. But not just me! [Pete Townshend](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pete_Townshend)⁵, singer and lead guitarist from the band [The Who](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Who)⁶ has said how much he admired the song. He is alleged to have told ABBA's Björn Ulvaeus that it 'is the best song ever written.' Whether or not you agree with that, I find the rather brooding, minor key melancholy of the verses coupled with the more upbeat chorus, produces a very well constructed, perfectly balanced and enjoyable song.

A Google search for another song using the 'SOS' theme produced 'Stop Her On Sight (S.O.S.)' by Edwin Starr, from 1966.

Hey, hey, hey, I'm sending Out an S.O.S. Hey, hey, hey, I'm sending Out an S.O.S. I'm sending out an S.O.S. Because I'm in so much distress And if you see my baby If you see my baby, stop her on sight.

I listened to this with great anticipation, hoping to hear that **••• — — — •••** rhythm, and for a second I thought that they had used it right at the start with that repeated piano motif. But alas, it was not so. Although it initially sounds promising, closer listening reveals it not to be the famous SOS rhythm, but this one: **—•• — ••••**

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3DebcxhLmE>

One more interesting use of Morse Code is in the theme tune for the British TV series Inspector Morse. Here, composer Barrington Pheloung uses the code for M.O.R.S.E, repeated three times, at the very beginning of the theme. The next video clip shows this rather nicely:

Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u20sVtCxf_8

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pete_Townshend

⁶https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Who

