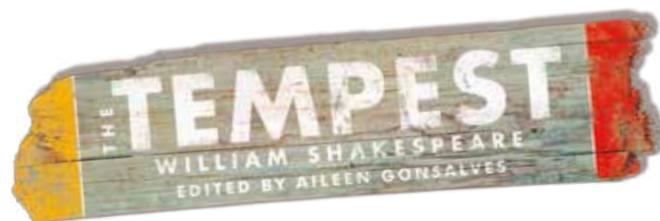


POWER AND DUTY

Playmaking Pack - Resources - Making Music



Making Music for Performance

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If you work on a Shakespeare play, music will undoubtedly be one of the production elements to tackle. This resource will hopefully help by posing some questions, as well as making some suggestions about why you might choose to have music in the first place, how to make a start, and how to develop and build the score.

Why have music?

Because Shakespeare asks for it.

Broadly speaking across the 37 plays there are around 2000 references to music, including 400 specifically musical terms, and around 100 songs. (You can read more [here](#)). This is pretty significant, and reflects not only the Elizabethan obsession with music, but Shakespeare's recognition of the powerful effect it can have on an audience.

This passage, from 'The Passions of the Mind in General' by Thomas Wright, published in 1601 (the year *Hamlet* was first performed), refers to the power of music, from the perspective of a contemporary of Shakespeare:

'It moveth a man to mirth and pleasure, and affecteth him with sorrow and sadness; it inciteth to devotion, and inciteth to dissolution: it stirreth up souldiers to warre, and allureth citizens to peace... musicke in like manner elevateth the mind to devotion and pitie, and abaseth the soule with effusion and levity.'

In other words, if you are putting on a play, and you need to affect the emotional state of the audience, music can help. It can very efficiently establish things like the location of your setting, the period, the status of a character, it can emphasise the emotional temperature and it can help to drive the narrative through thematic association (more of which later).

But aside from all that, you may just decide that music will be one of the elements you want to use to help you establish the style of your production and add to the overall theatrical experience.

So, where to begin?

Your starting point will be the indications for music actually in the text itself, such as Lucius' song in Act IV Scene iii of *Julius Caesar*, prior to the appearance of Caesar's ghost. Or, for example the music for the Banquet in Act III Scene iii of *The Tempest*.

But you may also want to use music at other moments to help establish atmosphere, location, or bridge the gap in transitions between scenes.

Shakespeare often specifically requests music at certain points in the script, in the form of songs, dances 'flourishes' or other fanfare type moments like 'sennets' and 'tuckets' etc.

In *The Tempest* for example, as well as the songs Ariel sings, there is an indication for the music he plays to send the Lords to sleep in Act II scene i, and there is also the song Stephano sings in Act III Scene ii, that Ariel then plays.

If you go through the play text methodically noting down all these moments, you'll be taking advice from someone who knows best (that's William Shakespeare, by the way, not me...) It may not always be obvious at first how you are going to make it work (for example – what 'instrument' does Ariel play?), but stick with it and you will reap the rewards.

Then there are other clues. Caliban's famous speech describing the general 'sounds and sweet airs' of the island in Act III Scene ii offers up a choice about how much you take that literally, and manifest the music Caliban describes throughout the scenes which are 'outdoors' on the island.

And you will need to make choices about including music at other points that aren't indicated in the text, but may well make sense and help to draw everything together. Scene changes are a good place to start, as well as perhaps underscoring certain sections of text that may need underlining.

Or think of a moment like the dagger speech in *Macbeth* – music can give you the dagger, in the same way that in the movie *Jaws*, music gives us the shark. If something strange or magical happens, music can often be useful to heighten the moment and make it theatrical, encouraging the audience to continue their willing suspension of disbelief.

In *Caesar* for example, the idea of a 'soothsayer' these days might be taken as seriously as a palm reader at a funfair, but if the music sets the right mood of foreboding, it helps to set up an ominous atmosphere.

How to develop the score

So you know when the music happens, but what should it be?

There are some very basic decisions to be made about the music which are dependent on practical things like resources (i.e you have one bass drum and a kazoo, so the music isn't going to be symphonic); artistic decisions (a play like *The Tempest* may need more unusual, magical sounds that conjure the strangeness of the island, as opposed to the need for more formal, military aggression in *Julius Caesar*) and whether you have a 'composer' or if the music is being devised collectively.

So the 3 broad areas here are:

- Orchestration/Instrumentation
- The 'tone' or quality/style of music
- 'Composing' versus 'Devising'

Bear in mind here that any limitations you have regarding possible instrumentation or composing ability for example can be used to your advantage. Creativity is often described using the cliché of 'thinking outside the box', but in fact the much more effective catalyst for creativity is actually making a 'box' to remain within, as endorsed by Igor Stravinsky: "The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit."

Whatever the selection of instruments you have to draw from, you can make the most of it by associating certain sounds with particular characters or locations. The audience will inevitably begin to subliminally make the connections, which will help as you progress further through the play.

Caliban for example could be signified by the weird sound of a bowed cymbal, whether he actually appears, or even if he is just referred to by another character. *Caesar* could have a particular rhythm that conjures the idea of a victorious army, which could be played in a very robust way earlier in the play (on a drum), and then in a more ethereal fashion when his ghost returns – perhaps using the sound of exhaling breath.

In this way, your 'themes' (whether they be tunes, a chord sequence, a rhythmic groove or a harmonic texture) can develop along with journeys the characters take (the thematic association mentioned earlier) and help offer the audience signposts along the way, following the arc of the play. Changes of mood can be really helped – from the festival atmosphere at beginning of *Julius Caesar* (the feast of Lupercal), through to the storm in Act I Scene iii.



Music can have a significant effect on the 'tone' of the play and the production. If you were to choose a contemporary music genre as a starting point of inspiration for *The Tempest*, 'ambient' might be a good option, and for *Julius Caesar* you could do worse than 'death metal'... By figuring out what it is within these styles that feel like the right choice, you can basically steal these elements and use them as a basis for your own score. Whether you are lucky enough to have a composer, or are creating the music in a collaborative way by devising it collectively, the choices being made should retain their integrity if they come from the requirements of the play and the vision of the director. If the music is serving the story by emphasising aspects of the narrative, and highlighting the text rather than obscuring it, then it will be doing its job and enriching the experience of both the audience and the performers.

