

Making Music for Performance - Notes from a Theatre Composer

Tarek Merchant is a theatre composer and musical director. He has worked on numerous shows at the RSC, most recently composing the music for the *First Encounters with Shakespeare* touring production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Here he provides an insight into his process and some guidance on making music for playmaking performances.

Live music is a much-valued ingredient in performances at the RSC. This is for good reason; music offers a vital tool in bringing to life the world of a performance and communicating emotion. If you are working on a Shakespeare play, there will undoubtedly be value in exploring the use of live music to support your performance. For people who don't consider themselves to be experienced musicians, that may feel like a daunting prospect, but don't worry. This resource will give you some inspiration and practical tools to work out *Why, When, and How* you can use music in performance - and some hands-on ways to start making the soundtrack for your piece.

WHY have music in your performance?

Music is an invaluable tool in performance and achieves a number of things:

- *It can convey **emotion*** - both in terms of communicating the emotional state of a character on stage and also affecting the emotional state of an audience.
- *It can establish **place*** - by using music appropriate to your setting or referencing a recurring theme whenever you return to a particular place in the story.
- *It can establish **time*** - the style of the music can imply a given era or setting in time, and it can also imply the passing of time, for example when used between scenes.
- *It can help to tell the **story*** - driving narrative by highlighting specific themes in the play for example.

WHEN can music be used in your performance?

Sometimes Shakespeare explicitly tells you where music is needed but these aren't the only places where it may be useful to you. You can also consider the following:

- 1 **SONGS:** There are many moments in Shakespeare's plays where songs occur, including Feste singing 'O Mistress Mine' to entertain Toby Belch and Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*, Ariel singing 'Full Fathom Five' to entice Ferdinand in *The Tempest* and *You Spotted Snakes* sung by the fairies to protect Titania as she sleeps in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- 2 **STINGS:** These are short musical gestures. Sometimes these are listed in the text, such as the references to a 'flourish' or 'sennet' found throughout *Macbeth* to indicate little fanfares to accompany a character's entrance or exit (e.g. Macbeth's arrival in Act II, Scene I, or Duncan's exit in Act I Scene IV). *Macbeth* also includes many references to 'alarums' (see Act V, Scene VII) - indicating a sound that establishes the coming of battle, such as a bugle call to arms. But you might also wish to add your own stings to give a character a strong entrance, or to punctuate a particular moment in a scene, such as key moment of physical action.

- 3 **UNDERScore:** This is music which runs underneath spoken text. Often, we know from what Shakespeare's characters are saying that they are hearing music. For example, we know Orsino at the start of *Twelfth Night* is speaking over music as he asks for 'That strain again!' and later silences it with "Enough; no more." But there may be other moments where you feel a speech or scene could benefit from being underlined by something musical. This could range from a simple rhythm or pulse, to a sung texture or an instrumental melody. One important thing with underscore is to ensure that the text can still be heard clearly on top of any music. Often, keeping the underscore simple, and not too loud in dynamic, will ensure that you do not distract too much from hearing and understanding the text at the same time.
- 4 **MOVEMENT SEQUENCES:** These are sequences of non-verbal storytelling that you might wish to present in order to tell your story; they might be moments of **dance** (for example the Capulet Ball in *Romeo & Juliet*), **storm** sequences (the opening of *The Tempest*), or **battle** scenes (towards the end of *Macbeth*). There may be moments in your play where characters dance, celebrate, revel, fight, or reflect and mourn, but there is no text to accompany these story-beats. You might benefit from setting such movement sequences to music to help the drama, sustain audience attention, aid the emotional temperature and support the storytelling.
- 5 **SCENE CHANGES:** Sometimes you may need to indicate that when one scene ends we are moving to a new location or bit of story. Even if you do not have any set to change between one scene and the next, sometimes it is important to maintain the energy between scenes as one set of actors leave and the next characters arrive. Using music to glue the performance together in this way is a good tool for holding the audience's attention as you prepare for the next scene. Again, it can also be doing useful work for you in terms of story - telling the audience which location we are moving to in the play, or establishing an emotional temperature for what is about to unfold. It is also important to note that you may not always need music between scenes. Sometimes, it can be effective to keep the pace up by trying to move from one scene to the next without any interlude.

HOW can we make music? Where do we start?

Although professional productions often have a Composer or Musical Director working on them, whose job it is to create or curate the music, it is very possible to generate a sound world for your performance by using the combined imaginations of those involved. Working with music and sound doesn't need to be daunting. Often the only way to explore an idea is by trying it out, so here are a few simple exercises and activities to set the ball rolling and help towards giving your performance a musical identity:

1. Soundscapes

This is a very simple activity with no right or wrong answers! Encourage the performers to sit in a circle and close their eyes. Then decide on a location or an event that relates to your performance. Take a moment to just let the location or event trigger everyone's imaginations. Then the idea of the exercise is for the group to collectively make the soundscape of the chosen idea, mainly by using their voices, and ideally not using words, though some simple body-percussion sounds with hands or fingers etc can also sometimes be effective. In the case of *The Tempest*, for example, you might decide to

create a soundscape of the opening storm. What this might sound like is entirely up to people's imaginations, but might possibly include:

- Pushed exhalations of air like a restless wind
- Using mouths to make the sounds of churning waves
- Making vocal rumbling noises like ominous thunder
- Making vocal squawks like seagulls on the wing
- Using tapped fingers or hands on the ground to create the patter of constant rain

You can shape these textures like you might a piece of music - build them up, reduce them, add more of certain texture (e.g. more rain), feature a solo contribution by making one performer or group of performers increase their volume over the top of the others. You can manipulate them until you have the ingredients in the combination you like best. It is also a lovely way of everyone contributing to making the world of scenes that they otherwise might not be performing in, as an ensemble.

Avoiding using spoken text in your soundscape often helps prevent the sound becoming too expositional (and avoids having to 'invent' lines to speak). It also helps ensure that it's a texture that might possibly work under performed text from the play, whereas words spoken in a soundscape would be more likely to interfere and get in the way of scripted lines you'd want the audience to hear.

Staying in *The Tempest*, when Caliban describes how 'the Isle is full of noises' it might trigger your imaginations to make a fun soundscape of what the island sounds like to him, but there are many other environments across the plays that could lend themselves to this exercise. For example, the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the marketplace in *The Merchant of Venice* or the Illyrian coastline where Viola washes up at the start of *Twelfth Night*. It might be interesting to try it with some less obvious locations too. What might the royal court of Theseus sound like in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the Capulet household at night in *Romeo and Juliet*?

2. Vocal Textures

This can be a fun way of building on the *Soundscape*s work by taking a small step towards more 'pitch' but still keeping a very loose texture that you can experiment with.

Ask your students to sit in a circle or lying on the floor for this activity. Keeping eyes closed and focusing on listening can be helpful.

- Ask them to inhale and then on their exhale pick a note to hum on for their outward breath; as everyone sustains their hum they will create a sustained texture - a chord, which is likely to be quite a cluster of pitches, without order. It's helpful if everyone tries to inhale at different times from each other, so as to prevent the sound cutting out completely!
- Then you, as the 'Conductor' (or you may select a student to do this instead) can instruct the group to try to listen and allow them to adjust their hum to make more of a blended sound. It might be that everyone gravitates to a single pitch and, if so, they can be gently encouraged to diverge again but with the intention of staying blended and making a peaceful, harmonious sound.
- Then the 'Conductor' can encourage the group to enjoy the clash of notes - to deliberately move to pitches that do not sound harmonious and which have a tension between them. Try moving in a controlled way between a blended and a discordant texture of pitches.

- Maybe the group can find two or three different 'chords' this way and then move between them in a pattern. This could be a useful vocal texture for some underscore to text, or the strange sounds of Prospero's Island for example. You can also shape the dynamic of the texture - bringing some voices up louder and dropping others back more quietly - add a percussive pulse underneath, or maybe layer a simple solo tune on top.

3. Instant Orchestra

Believe it or not, you can make an instant musical composition with your team of performers! This combines aspects of the *Soundscapes* and *Vocal Textures* exercises to create a short piece of music.

- To begin with, you can just set up a very simple repeating rhythmic pattern (for example, two clicks followed by a clap). Then, keeping this rhythm going as a skeleton, encourage participants to contribute their own simple, repeating idea on top, either vocally or using body-percussion. All they need to do is listen to what's there and add something of their own.
- If individuals feel self-conscious, you can get them to decide on their contributions in small groups and then contribute that together. In this way, you can build up a simple piece of music where everyone has offered something to the collective sound.

Often, nervous participants are likely to gravitate to the least exposing option and repeat very similar rhythmic gestures, so having done this, you might find that the exercise would benefit from more structure. One easy way to do this is to define three specific types of contribution:

- RHYTHM** - A short repeating rhythmic pattern, which can either be clapped, stamped, clicked, or made vocally - maybe you have an amazing beatboxer in your cast!
- SINGLE NOTES** - A very simple repeating drone; a held note or two; an "ooh", "ah" or a hum. This could be rather like the offers in the *Vocal Textures* exercise and will provide a simple harmony. It might be good to favour blending these notes with each other.
- TUNE** - Singing something that sits on top of the music. Again, simple and repeatable is good but you can also have a bit more fun and detail making up a melody to sit on top of the other layers.

Again, somebody is 'Conductor' and, with performers in a circle, they nominate individuals to contribute one of the three options above. As before, it's always good to start with some **rhythm** to give it a strong foundation to build on. After the first person contributes their **rhythm** offer and sets to repeating it over, you might get another one or two people to add their own **rhythms** on top. Then you can layer in some **single notes** and have some contributions of drones or hums, and then add some icing on top by nominating some performers to contribute some **tune**. If anyone feels self-conscious, they can work as a pair. It's important to listen to each other so that each new contribution compliments the other sounds already in place.

Like in the 'Soundscapes' activity, the 'Conductor' can shape the musical textures by altering the range and number of ingredients (e.g. more **tune**, bringing up the volume of everyone on **single notes**, drawing out a solo offer as a prominent feature, or cutting out

the **rhythm** altogether and listening to what's left) and bringing the piece of music to a neat stop when it's been fully explored. It can be useful to record your experimentations so that if you find something you particularly like, you have a reference point for recreating it (in case performers might forget what they offered when you want to return to it).

You can do this exercise any number of times, and again use different imaginative stimuli to trigger the contributions - "We want to make a piece that sounds like a 'Carnival', or a 'Fairy Lullaby'". There's no right or wrong, and you can go on shaping the music live by dropping offers in and out until you find something you feel has potential. You then have material to play with - what happens if we use it very slowed down, or take out all the **rhythm** and **tune** and just use the **single note** textures as underscore?

If it's appropriate to your team, and the performers are feeling more ambitious, you could also try incorporating some instruments into this exercise using the same process. Some hand percussion could provide some useful **rhythm** textures, a strummed guitar could provide a simple harmony layer like the **single notes** and a solo voice or flute could play a simple three note **tune** on top.

WHERE can I find further useful musical resources?

The RSC has worked with a number of Composers and Musicians over the years who have provided scores and musical themes for a range of Shakespeare plays. These resources are available to Associate Schools and may well provide you with some additional material to play with in presenting your performance.

These can be found at: <https://www.rsc.org.uk/associateschoolsresources>

On this section of the website you will find scores and musical information that you can explore freely while mounting your performance. For example, for *Romeo and Juliet* you will find scores for themes to support the characterisation of both the Capulet and Montague households. These scores exist as a range of rhythmic and melodic themes that can be used individually or layered on top of each other as required. The Capulet theme has a bass line, a tune and some percussion suggestions; any or all of these could be used as the starting point for making the music of the Capulet Ball, or for a scene change delivering us into the Capulet house.

There are also suggested melodies for songs such as the Fairy Lullaby *You Spotted Snakes*, or Bottom's song about the 'Ouselcock' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The brilliant thing is that you can blend and blur the various exercises listed above with any of this material, using any of these as inspiration as needed. For example, you could take the repeating percussive rhythm from bar 1 of *Under The Greenwood Tree* by Guy Hughes, and use that as the starting point for an *Instant Orchestra* improvisation. Or, you could create some warm hummed chords using the *Vocal Textures* exercise, and then have a solo voice sing Melody 2 from the Montague Theme in *Romeo and Juliet* on top. You might even start by trying to recreate one of the pieces of music from the RSC resource, and then build your own rhythms or tunes around it using one of the activities above, until you no longer require the stimulus music that inspired your efforts. In short, all of these ingredients are useable in a range of different combinations and relationships, all designed to help take the fear out of music-making, and reveal what a powerful ingredient it can be for you.

Hopefully this resource has sparked a few ideas about the ways in which music might benefit your performance, and how to begin to generate or devise that music. There are no absolute rights and wrongs, and one of the many riches of Shakespeare's text is the way that they continually invite new and differing interpretations of how these plays can be combined with music of many styles and rendered by all manner of musical resources. So long as your choices tie in with the directorial vision, and serve to support the text and narrative rather than obscure it, then you will be using live music to help to enrich the dramatic experience for performers and audience alike. Most importantly, have fun!