

Mark the Music

A Look at Shakespeare and Musical Adaptation

Musical adaptations have flowed harmoniously from Shakespeare's plays, from the first Shakespeare opera, Henry Purcell's 1692 *Midsummer Night's Dream*-based *The Fairy Queen*, to rocking contemporary works like *These Paper Bullets!*. It's a mutual musical love affair: while Shakespeare urged "If music be the food of love, play on" (*Twelfth Night*, 1.1.1), shows like *Kiss Me, Kate* (based on *The Taming of the Shrew*) have returned the favor by allowing audiences to "Brush Up Your Shakespeare." Here are several reasons why composers, lyricists, and librettists in the theatre and opera house have so often heeded Shakespeare's call to "mark the music" (*The Merchant of Venice*, 5.1.97).

Music in Tudor and Stuart Plays

If music seems a natural addition to Shakespeare's plays, the Elizabethans would have agreed with you: song and dance were integral elements of Shakespeare productions in the Tudor and Stuart eras. While Shakespeare frequently used musical references in his plays, often as metaphors for the delights and discords of romantic love, he also studied his plays with dozens of songs that create mood, illuminate character, and comment on dramatic situation. Shakespeare incorporated folk songs in such pieces as Desdemona's haunting "Willow Song" in *Othello* and Balthasar's lilting "Sigh No More (Hey Nonny Nonny)" in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Other times, as in Ariel's enigmatic "Full Fathom Five" in *The Tempest* and "Take, O Take Those Lips Away" in *Measure for Measure*, he set lyrics to original lute songs by King's Men composers Robert Johnson (1583–1634) and John Wilson (1597–1674). Dancing, too, appealed to Elizabethan theatre audiences. Will Kempe, the actor who originated many of Shakespeare's clowns, won fame for his "merry jigs" and danced in semi-improvised burlesque afterpieces at the Globe, where musicians accompanied actors to such instruments as the trumpet, flute, recorder, and shawm (an early oboe).

Shakespearean Verse and Soliloquies

The lyrical "measures" of Shakespeare's language—the Bard's glorious rhymed and blank verse—incline his plays to musical adaptation. Similarly, the heightened expression of the Shakespearean soliloquy finds parallels with musical theatre song numbers. In both of these highly theatrical devices, characters break through the "fourth wall" and project their deepest thoughts and emotions directly to the audience. While Cole Porter created soliloquy-like numbers to hilarious musical comedy effect in *Kiss Me, Kate* (i.e. Katherine's "I Hate Men" and Petruchio's "Where Is the Life that Late I Led"), Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, in their *Romeo and Juliet*-based *West Side Story*, wrote the rapturous "Maria" as a solo number for Tony, who sings of "the most beautiful sound I ever heard" after meeting his star-crossed lover at the dance at the gym.



Genre Conventions and Dramatic Structure

The natural affinities between opera and tragedy, and between musical theatre and Shakespeare's comedies, have also suited the Bard's plays to adaptation. Shakespeare's tragedies have long inspired operas (as well as musical plays like *West Side Story*) because of their shared elements of tumultuous emotion, psychological depth, and unhappy endings.

In the nineteenth century, Romantic composer Giuseppe Verdi (often with librettist Arrigo Boito) used music to enlarge emotional climaxes, and fill the spaces of dramatic subtext, in a number of famous Shakespeare operas including *Otello* and *Macbeth*. By contrast, Shakespeare's comedies and American musical comedy both draw upon the mistaken identities, gender confusions, and youthful ardors of the classic boy-meets-girl plot. While *Much Ado About Nothing* finds new musical life as *These Paper Bullets!*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Love's Labour's Lost* (adapted by Alex Timbers and Michael Friedman in July 2013 for New York City's Shakespeare in the Park) have all inspired musical comedies filled with romance and festive, colorful spectacle.

Shakespeare's Characters

The conventions of Elizabethan performance, verse, and theatrical genre all provide compelling reasons to set the Bard's plays to music. Above all else, however, there are Shakespeare's characters — infinitely dimensional and dynamic, and as poignantly intimate as they are grandly larger-than-life. In its power as a universal language, music has much in common with Shakespeare's world of characters to evoke the full scale of human experience. Music and Shakespeare form a natural relationship, and as theatre composers and writers continue to coax their "concordances of sweet sounds" (*The Merchant of Venice* 5.1.92) from Shakespeare's plays, one can only agree with Don Pedro (addressing Balthasar) in *Much Ado About Nothing* (2.3.37): "Come...we'll hear that song again."

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OPPOSITE PAGE: A WOOD ETCHING DEPICTING WILLIAM KEMPE, 1600.

THIS PAGE, ABOVE, FROM LEFT: A SHAWM, A LUTE, AND AN ELECTRIC GUITAR