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SAA 2026 Seminar: The Sonic Laboratory of the Renaissance Theater  
Abstract

Due to the ephemeral and often culturally specific nature of musical sound, coupled with the purely verbal transmission of Shakespearean drama, it has remained for scholars from William Chappel in the mid-nineteenth century through Ross Duffin and Tiffany Stern in the twenty-first to draw attention to the paradoxically tacit textual residue of the vibrant and wide-ranging musical practices of original performances. The situation is further complicated by loss of aural contact with the sounds and sonic values of Elizabethan and Jacobean voices and instruments, textual editorial practices that tend to overlook the sonic significance of instruments mentioned in the plays, the trend to update music along with costumes and scenery, and the ongoing dismissal of period ensembles from theater companies. It is also significant that most scholarship on music in Shakespeare's original performances has focused on song, largely because its texts make it easier to recover than more abstract instrumental pieces. An unfortunate result has been that a number of pivotal scenes tend to be omitted from performances and that even the most meticulous scholarly apparatus in textual editions often fails to point to the importance of such scenes. Furthermore, lack of familiarity with certain sounds, musical practices, and their cultural ramifications from an era in which music signified not only audible sound but also unheard forms of harmony and discord limits modern understanding of lines borrowing musical terminology that would have been understood by original audiences. This paper reexamines the importance of musically rich, but often overlooked, scenes and references from such plays as *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Pericles* to demonstrate how original aesthetic acquaintance with, and cultural understanding

of, instrumental sounds, construction, and social uses provided meanings in the sonic laboratory of the English Renaissance theater.

‘As you sing pricksong’: Music as Intersemiotic Metastructure in *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1 Scene 1

After Chorus delivers a stirring Prologue in sonnet form, two of Capulet’s servants arrive onstage to banter intensely with one another in bawdy language, as they gird themselves up for the famous brawl scene with which Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* begins. The servants’ interchange initiates the first of three fight scenes that become progressively more violent over the course of the play. Yet, for all its structural importance, this crucial moment when the play’s action begins is often cut in productions. In this paper I argue that the scene has special dramaturgical significance as the first of several instances where Shakespeare treats music as a metastructural device. Later in the play Shakespeare signals his metaphorical use of music in Mercutio’s quip that his rival duelist, Tybalt, “fights as you sing pricksong” (Act 2 Scene 4) and a close look at Act 1 Scene 1 in this light shows that Shakespeare carefully controlled the sonic elements within the dramatic action via a special rhetorical application of diacope (word repetition in different contexts) and paronomasia (puns). I begin by briefly summarizing Shakespeare’s professional relationship with chorister-actors and other musicians in the orbit of the composer William Byrd. I then analyze the pre-brawl dialogue through the comparative lens of intersemiotic translation—a linguistic-based theory that treats translations across media as culturally embedded processes. Patterns of motivic interplay in published settings of Petrarchan-styled sonnets by Byrd, this research reveals, have striking correlations with the wordplay in Act 1 Scene 1, especially in the way the motives intensify through stretto, distortion, and condensation. These findings suggest a new way of staging a notoriously difficult scene. Finally, to explore further how metastructural thinking itself was recognized in the creative arts of late 16<sup>th</sup> century England, this project ends with a discussion of related works by the poet/lyricist Thomas Watson and William Segar, the painter.

“And thou, all-shaking thunder”: Music, Sound, and Violence in Shakespeare’s Tragedies

Whether it is Feste singing in *Twelfth Night* or Edgar’s mad snatches as Poor Tom in *King Lear*, Shakespeare used music to instruct audiences as well as to heighten drama. Besides the ballads, music accompanies dances by characters serving as archetypes of rural and lower-status people, or staged battles where noise accompanies and punctuates the spoken word as a type of musical performance. What, then, does power sound like in his enduring tragedies, particularly those centering on politics and dynastic succession? Furthermore, if power requires violence to sustain or reproduce itself, then what does such violence sound like? This paper explores the intersections of music, sound, and violence in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. Through textual and music analysis, along with some history of musical and theatrical performance practices, I will discuss how music and sound both connect to the violence enacted in the pursuit of power in these three plays and serve as emblems of violence in the pursuit of power in the broader context of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. In examining representative music from each play, I will demonstrate that expressing violence and power through music is not solely contingent on disorganized sound or noise. Musical violence occurs in different forms, especially when involving high-status characters and when speaking to elite audiences. This will then shed new light on how power is enacted through musical means in others of Shakespeare’s plays and perhaps even offer new insights into such intersections of music and violence or music and politics in other contexts.

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## ABSTRACT

### Acousmatic Sound in Shakespeare's Renaissance Theater

This is a work in progress that springs from my dissertation, aspiring to become at some point perhaps a publishable introduction to my tentatively first scholarly book. This is then like a simulacrum or simulacra: an abstract of that potential first scholarly book. I focus primarily on acousmatic sound (sound that is heard but whose source(s) remains unseen) in some of Shakespeare's plays (e.g., *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*). Particularly, I trace how acousmatic sound manifests in various malleable shapes (i.e., acousmatic voice, acousmatic music, and acousmatic noise). In this way, acousmatic sound, be it as voice, music, noise (or a combination of these), is like an unruly element of nature at play in Shakespeare's theatrical works that can inform various discourses in the field of literature and theater studies.

## Mariachi Shakespeare

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This paper considers the ways in which Shakespeare uses the public theater in London to recreate the musical culture of the family home. At these moments, Shakespeare identifies a type of music that embodies the overlapping senses of “kin” and “kind”—i.e., a music that is shaped and transmitted through familial connections. Scenes of musical kinship are prominent in *Pericles* and *Othello*, but they are especially featured in *Cymbeline*, a play that is obsessed with filial relationships and their legibility. By creating such scenes of familial music, Shakespeare demonstrates the extent to which the public stage—for all its noisiness and heterogeneity—could recreate the experience of an intimate, personal musical performance. In addition, as a way of connecting Shakespeare to modern musical cultures, I consider (briefly) the affinities between Shakespeare’s representation of “familial” music and mariachi music, another kind of music that is marked profoundly by familial relationships while simultaneously being staged for a public audience.

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#### Abstract

My paper explores concepts of sound and music as comprehended in the new science that emerged in the seventeenth century. It not only focuses on how contemporary natural philosophers investigated the nature of sound through their experiments conducted in laboratory but also discusses how they developed their views of the “theater of the world” through their studies of music. It will also explore the relationships of the sonic and musical laboratory of seventeenth-century sciences and religion.