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ENC 2135

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October 15, 2018

Saucy Shakespearean Songs?

When we watch a performance, we rely on music to tell us important information. Music helps to embody the tone and mood of a scene as well as cue entrances, highlight status and emphasize a certain emotion. Analyzing Shakespeare's usage of music in shows with the perception and ideology we have today of music in theatre, it seems to be no question why Shakespeare included songs and music in his production. Now, we understand that the music heightens the drama of the story and brings life to the text. Joseph Ortiz in the book *Broken Harmony* pulls from the play *Hamlet* claiming "Shakespearean drama is exemplary because it deftly uses music to enhance the text of the play: Gertrude tells us that Ophelia is mad, and the wilting music that the audience hears a few lines later makes us think (or feel) that Ophelia is indeed mad" (Ortiz). While we recognize this now, when Shakespeare wrote his plays, people considered music straying from the traditional setting to be risky. So what was Shakespeare's intent in his inclusion of music within his plays during a time in which people thought negatively about certain styles of music? How has the music evolved throughout the centuries? Shakespeare included songs in his shows to captivate the audience through music and enhance their understanding. The lack of sheet music allowed his plays to be more easily adaptable in future adaptations.

During the Renaissance time period, people perceived music differently than they do now. Theorists argued that the ideology of music embodied the nature of the world itself. It

embodies itself within the human body. During that time, artists would use musical elements as vocabulary to add a lyrical sense to their speech, thus making their poetry sound more eloquent. . They equated poetry and music together, in the sense that the lyrics in poetry helped better understand the music, but ultimately, the lyrics held more importance. They did not seem to appreciate the translation of music to stage work. The translation and perception of music held different meaning to some writers, who “ characterized certain types of music as meaningless noise comparable to the bleating of animals.” (Ortiz). While a portion of writers held their lyrics to a higher standard than the barbaric sound of music, other writers attempted to prove that music had a connection with the beauty of nature and was, in fact, a language. The distinction between music and noise became unclear, especially when in Shakespeare’s text, Hippolyta in *midsummer* describes dogs howling in a musical context: “With hounds of Sparta: never did I hear/ Such gallant chiding: for, besides the groves, /The skies, the fountains, every region near /Seem'd all one mutual cry: I never heard /So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.” (*Midsummer* IV.I.1669-1673). Hippolyta’s reference to mellifluous melodies of animals within nature in Shakespeare’s text adds to the argument of how “music’s supposed ability to evoke true sympathy in the absence of language” (Ortiz) evolves Shakespeare’s text simply beyond words. Having music within his texts allows Shakespeare to connect not only with the beauty of music but also the beauty and music of nature. This brings meaning and emotion to his work, making performances that much more engaging and more riveting than listening to any other writers’ work read aloud.

What became tricky during the Renaissance when people heard the music with action depicted on stage, they often associated the music with figures they considered to be licentious. Therefore, some theorists had specific beliefs as to what styles and modes of music should be in.

David Lindley quoted Marsilio Ficino in his book about Shakespearean music saying “Song is a most powerful imitator of all things. It imitates the intentions and passions of the soul as well as words.” (Lindley, 36). However, writers such as Plato, had a narrow and almost mathematical mindset on music. They believed “that it derived from the proper combination of words, rhythm, and musical mode, and influentially attributed a specific character to each of the modes.”

(Lindley). Beginning with the Greeks, music theory began to associate emotions with the musical structure, for example, the Mixolydian mode represented sadness. They then believed that only two types of modes were acceptable for ordinary listening: Dorian and Phrygian. Amongst those two “the former as inspiring military bravery, the latter as appropriate to the ‘ordinary voluntary occupations of peace-time’” (Lindley). Any of the other modes they considered promiscuous and promoting lusty behavior. This became true due to the English audiences’ association of bodily movement with the musical movement, thus drawing a connection to the seductive movements of dance. They interpreted some of the musical motifs with the Shakespearean text as an imitation of the mythological sirens luring men in with their song and dance to then take advantage and kill them. The people of the Renaissance period believed that dancing and music that allude to sex should be reserved for a husband, and that if seen in public, then those women create themselves as equal as those sirens. The combination of Shakespearean text with music and performance overwhelmed the sensibilities of people in the Renaissance, as they believed “just as polyphonic music ‘signifies nothing’ because it proliferates too many voices, a promiscuous woman (as the tracts imagine her) does not point to a single, masculine authority. She does not signify.” (Ortiz). That notion created a cultural assumption that music straying from the traditional style would be considered promiscuous, due to the association music and dance with the lustful sirens.

With all the hype built up around the music in Shakespeare's shows, he does not include any sheet music, even for his songs he has written out. Therefore, one might question why his songs elicit an intense reaction from the public, claiming they were promiscuous, if there had not been a standard style in each performance. The difficult thing about interpreting Shakespeare's music is that, at the time, musicians did not associate as much meaning with the notes. Therefore, trying to interpret the meaning from the sound of the music won't give as much insight as to what the true meaning of the play was, especially since Shakespeare had no specificity as to what he wanted the music to sound like. Studying the status of music and musical codes at the time would give better insight, because it represents how music was used during the Renaissance and what Shakespeare's intent with the music could have been. Lindley argues that "music's ability to function as a code makes it an appealing representation of reality itself, opaque only to those who are unable to appreciate or understand it." The culture of the Renaissance during the first of Shakespeare's performances, did not have the musical literacy that we do today. During that time, music notation and theory was just becoming standardized, thus making the interpretation of musical meaning became very fluid and unstable during the time of the Renaissance (Ortiz, *Shakespeare and Music*). All they knew was whether they enjoyed it or not. That became part of the reason why music became so controversial during Shakespeare's time, because if a song sounded slightly different from what they enjoyed they might have assumed they might have interpreted it having a more immoral meaning than intended.

Just as the culture in England at the time shaped Shakespeare's intent to write his plays and incorporate music within them, the performance of Shakespeare and the usage of music have affected other cultures as well. From the late 1800's to the mid 1900's, Britain held rule over all of what we now consider modern day India. The colonization took a sense of culture away from

the natives. Theatre, however, helped to create a harmonious relationship between the two cultures. Theatre has only been introduced in Indian culture once the British maintained sovereignty over India. The Shakespearean canon and European theatre had been difficult to experience until then. Since its introduction, people in India now they have a great affinity for Shakespeare. They read the English text in their academic curriculum in addition to adapting translations in their popular culture. Their translations and adaptations became far removed from the traditional Elizabethan style of the plays. However, to draw in crowds, they played to the popularity and widely known presence of Shakespeare. Within the adaptations, translators would combine Shakespeare's texts with that of Kalidasa, a classical Sanskrit writer, on top of incorporating traditional folk tunes within the text. In the book *Performing Shakespeare in India : Exploring Indianness, Literatures and Cultures*, Panja highlights the significance of marrying Shakespeare and Kalidasa's texts towards the political climate. "The significant implication of clustering together of the translations of Kalidasa and Shakespeare in Indian languages suggests the overlapping nature of colonial modernity and Indian classicism and the hybridity that was characteristic of nineteenth-century India." (Panja). The song's style in Indian theatre "use vilambit/gamaka for verse (slow style of singing without the use of instruments,) ragas for songs (music with tabla/mridangam/dholak) and folk tunes for popular numbers". The usage of the traditional Indian music represents a desire to maintain a sense of cultural identity in the adaptations within the English text. Music acted as a bridge to bring the two cultures together rather than having one dominate, as the Indian culture felt when first colonized by the British.

Adaptations of Shakespeare remained fairly simply for the first few centuries following the initial writing of his plays. Shakespeare did not have the enormous popularity it has now until the late 18th century when he became more widely known. It wasn't until the 19th century that

there became adaptations of Shakespeare into different artforms. Marsden mentions in his book that “the nineteenth century chose to "adapt" his plays in a different manner, using them as the inspiration for different theatrical forms such as ballets and operas” (Marden). Rather than altering the styles of the songs, composers took Shakespeare’s text and composed entire operas from his lyrics and poetical text. Only on occasion would they add songs with lyrics not already in the text, therefore, the majority of the operas were verbatim Shakespeare. Because of power of Shakespeare’s work, these operas became more popular than Italian operas. These operas took the lyrical text and heightened the emotion embedded within the texts through music. “Music drama is efficient to the degree that the dramatist can rely upon, or create, a code for interpreting the music” (Albright, 11). An entire production of Shakespeare in song allowed for an easily accessed interpretation of the text as well as an intensified version of the story.

Quickly after these adaptations of Shakespeare, many productions tended to narrow in on the style of music in their production. In 2009, the Public Theater put on a production of *Twelfth Night*, in which “The handsome score is written and performed by the ‘symphonic folk-rock’ band Hem” (Isherwood). This music helped to give depth and a sense of life to each scene. Because it took on the style of popular music at the time (Mumford and Sons, The Fray etc), it ignited a personal connection within each audience member to the music. It automatically allowed the listener to enjoy the music and thus brings them into the scene more because they can relate to the scene more. The beginning of the song “Come Away Death” (Hathaway) sounded like a minor version of the song “The Cave” by Mumford and Sons (Mumford) with the guitar plucking to beginning the song and then the soft low vocals that creep into the music. Typically, just the fool sings this to reveal the truth of the play to Orsino. However, Viola, played by Anne Hathaway, comes in at the end of the song to emphasize her inner turmoil she

deals with, being in love with Orsino even though he only knows her by her disguise. The usage of different vocals and musical style aids the modern day listener's understanding of the overall play by sparking interest through style and clearly articulating a conflict through a singer's lyrics.

Shakespeare incorporated songs into his shows to intrigue the audience and to help better their understanding through music. Despite the fact that people might consider his music to be promiscuous, he decided to add music because he believed that music would heal his audience and make his shows an invigorating experience. His core intention for incorporating music was then able to remain true with the changing musical genres and adaptations throughout the following centuries. As the musical styles changed, so did the soundtrack to his work. However, rather than straying from his original message, adding in a modern sound made it possible for the modern ear to become more engaged and relate more to the seemingly foreign text. His lack of sheet music allowed his words to live on longer than he could have ever hoped.

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