

Approaching sound design for period plays

by Richard K. Thomas

Theatre sound has come a long way since the days when a disassociated chorus would plead with the audience to imagine the full auditory ambience of a military war. Today, it is possible to create a war of startling realism using surround sound, multi-tracking, and mega-watts of power. And if today's sound system is pushed too far, there is little fear that there will be a recurrence of a Globe Theatre fire precipitated by a misguided cannon (another Great Moment in Sound Design?). When undertaking the production of a Shakesperean play for 1982 theatre audiences, a performance can be given that Shakespeare could only have dreamt. Or can it?

Designing sound for period plays

Approaching the sound design of a period drama is a real dilemma. Should this particular play be presented as closely to the original performance as possible, so that the audience receives the kind of sensory stimuli the original audience received? Or, should the production be constructed to communicate the same fundamental meanings the original audience received? These are two extremely different things. The "broken consort" used on the Elizabethan stage would sound very crude when compared to the same music performed on modern instruments. Yet, there is little doubt that Elizabethans perceived the characteristic timbres of the instruments as neither crude or defective. The music in *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay was largely based on folk tunes that were widely known in England at the time. Obviously, a performance of the same music would not engender the same familiarity in a modern American audience. On the other hand, if one chose to rewrite the ballad opera based on such well known American folk songs as "Home on the Range," "Swanee River," or "Little Brown Jug," the transformed play would probably bear very little resemblance to the original.

There are two principle schools of thought on the question of how musical meaning is communicated to listeners. The first group believes that musical meaning lies exclusively within the work itself. The second contends that music also communicates meanings which in some way refer to the extramusical world of concepts, actions, emotional states, and character. If the meaning of the music is entirely self-contained, it should translate from generation to generation with little change in the audience's perception of that meaning.

But what if the total meaning of the music is not self-

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Thomas is sound designer for the department of creative arts at Purdue University.

contained? In any production, sound design can make clear (in a way no other design or performance elements can) the themes of a dramatic work. The more we find that musical meaning is relative to a given period, the greater is the possibility that the use of period music can obscure the very ideas the play attempts to communicate.

If the theatre sound designer does not accept the idea that meaning in music is, at least, partially referential, then, in the case of sound effects, thunder could only be used to communicate atmospheric conditions, and not as a period convention which depicts the wrath of the gods, impending doom, or fate taking a turn—all of these conventions refer to a particular context in which thunder might be heard. Yet, it is widely accepted that a particular sound can be funny in one scene, and sad in another, depending on the context in which it is used. A particularly good musical example of this idea is Debussy's "Syrinx." This piece of music can be used in a wide variety of dramatic situations; the meaning it communicates will be different for each one. It can be haunting, soothing, mysterious, peaceful, or mournful depending on the context. It may not be going too far to say that music in the theatrical production is always partially referential.

It is possible that period music may be tied to a musical meaning that is different for audiences separated by several generations or centuries. The Greeks used a scale system in which each scale (mode) connoted a different

emotion. The scales and intervallic relationships were totally different from those used in modern music, and to hear them today, one can only imagine what they once meant. The musical meaning was bound to the culture and ethos of the society. The combination of musical meaning that is relative to the other elements of the performance and musical meaning that is different for varying cultures and periods makes the sound designer's job difficult at best. What's a sound designer to do?

Working with directors

The sound designer must first of all, discern the director's approach to the period play. This is no small feat, as directors themselves find their approaches and concepts evolving as the script develops. There are extremes that the sound designer will inevitably work between. At one end is the historical pageant, where authenticity is everything, at the other end is the philosophic or psychological, where the ideas embodied in the work are everything. I have found in my work that directors generally start close to one of these extremes and progress to a middle ground.

The following is an example of how this type of decision can affect the design of sound for a show. I recently designed sound for two shows: *The Show-off* and *The Glass Menagerie*. The decision of how to deal with the period of *The Show-off* was almost the opposite of the approach we used for *The Glass Menagerie*.

For *The Show-off*, we tried to duplicate the period (the 20s) exactly. All of the sets, props, and costumes were

authentic; the acting style and delivery was of the period. Our approach to the show would be, in a manner of speaking, absolute. What the audience saw and heard was designed to psychologically transport them through time.

The pre-show and intermission music chosen for the play was all from the period—mostly early Paul Whiteman recordings. Just as important as the music was the sound quality—the scratchy record surfaces, monophonic sound, and unevenly balanced recordings of the orchestra—it was important to make the music sound like the recordings of the era. The recorded sound effects were carefully used to simulate realism, and the live mechanical sound effects, such as the car horn and doorbell, were closely matched to the period. The general effect the play created was one of nostalgia—a gentle longing for the “good old days.”

The production of *The Glass Menagerie* was very different. Although the play is dated by many of the references made in the script, the problems and situations Tennessee Williams proposes are universal. The music was therefore aimed at subtly reinforcing associations between the characters and the audience through the special emotive powers that music alone can provide.

We wrote music for the show and recorded it using the best equipment available. Where the sound quality of old 78s was essential for *The Show-off*, clean, noise-free recordings were essential for *The Glass Menagerie*. We did not want the audience to listen to the music, we wanted them to experience it as an integral part of the play. The music was carefully timed to each scene; multiple tape

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decks were used to synchronize certain musical passages to specific moments in the action, while maintaining the musical structures established. Some of the themes highlighted by the music were man's attraction for the past, overcoming insecurity, and the frustrations of a love/hate relationship. These are universal problems; consequently the music takes on additional meaning.

Working with designers

The things that work well for one design medium (setting) may not work as well for another medium (lighting) in the same show. The wing and drop system may still work wonderfully for *A School for Scandal* but illumination of the set via candlelight may prove to be, at best, distracting. In this particular play, period music works well as a pre-show entertainment, scene change, and intermission music. A recent production featured the music of Vivaldi—the lush orchestrations, rapid scale passages, and brilliant colors worked in combination with Vivaldi's concerto grosso form to complement the high society that Sheridan was satirizing. The use of this type of period music worked in the production because it was alive and involved with the show in the present tense. To design the lighting for the show in period style would probably not have had the same effect.

In another example, Elizabethan costumes worked wonderfully in *The Tempest*. They captured the magical, mystical aspect of the characters. But would Elizabethan music? My guess was no—particularly in light of the characteristic

instrumentation of the broken consort and the predominantly homophonic orchestration style of the period. A much more fanciful and enrapturing style of orchestration belonged to the contrapuntal style developed in the Baroque period. The synthesizer seemed much more adept at creating heavenly music. Yet the feeling of the period was retained through the melodies that were based on the original Elizabethan tunes. The end result was a fantasy island that came alive and drew the audience into its mysteries.

Making the period an entity

Always keep an eye open for the moments in the rehearsal and design process that begin to bring the printed matter to life. Make sure that the sound design appears to the audience to be consistent with the other elements of the production. Call it poetic license, or what you will, but as long as the audience does not perceive inconsistencies in the way the various designs interact with each other and the rest of the performance, they will be more apt to accept the "period" style and become subconsciously involved in the show.

A particular example is a production of *Electra* I was involved with a few years ago. The director used Greek masks to experiment with how they affected a modern audience. He also used synthesized music. The problem, however, was that the effect the masks had on a modern audience was totally different from the effect the masks would have had on a Greek audience, even though the

actors made a conscious effort to duplicate the style and conventions associated with the masks. This difference of effect would not necessarily be an unwanted situation; however, the masks suggested a historical accuracy that the music did not. While the music strove to reach the emotions of the audience, the masks created a historical "wall" that sometimes worked against the emotional involvement of the audience.

Another important item to remember is that a show may be historically accurate to the period, but not be performed in period style. In a recent production of Mary Roberts Rinehart's *The Bat*, the setting and costumes were meticulously conceived and executed in period detail. The sound design was composed in the manner of many of the early film scores, with lush strings, recurring thematic lines, spooky punctuations, and a grand finale. This was not done to conform to the original production of the play, but to conform to the audience's expectations of the genre. The thunderstorm, however, was not created on thunder sheets, the wind was not done on a rotating wind machine, and the rain was not made by rolling dried peas around in a pan. These effects were high quality recordings of the real thing. The use of period detail was not to call attention to itself (as the use of the mechanical sound effects would surely have done). The goal of the production was to create a mood through the period that would allow the audience to suspend its disbelief for a couple of hours. Consequently, the thunder, wind, and rain were incorporated in the same period style as the rest of the sound design.

The playwrights of the past provide a rich history of the moral and ethical nature of a society—a history that cannot be brought to life more vividly in any other form. There are natural obstacles, however, that have been placed in our path to understanding these great plays. One of the most significant of these obstacles is the effect that time has on the conventions established in a period play.

The use of music in the period play is one such problem. Music can have meaning that lies exclusively within the work itself. Although contemporary audiences may not make the “hanging” connection when listening to “Fortune My Foe,” it is anything but a gay tune. On the other hand, music in theatre is most certainly referential, for it helps to explain the thoughts, actions, and events of the play. This is the challenge for the producer of the period: how to breathe life into an idea that has been asleep for a long time. At the same time, it is a fascinating experience for an audience when the idea does truly come alive—there is a unique feeling.