

Developing the Concept and Design

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While I was resident sound designer for the National Shakespeare Company, I had the opportunity to work with many different directors and their interesting concepts every season. During the first meeting with the array of new directors one year, the discussion turned to our upcoming production of *A Comedy of Errors*. The director said he planned to do it in the style of Italian *commedia dell'arte*. It occurred to me that the musical counterpart of this style might be *opera buffa*, a very broad form of comic opera. I mentioned this to the director and the idea appealed to him immensely. I knew it could sometimes be distracting to have music with lyrics for background underscoring, or even for leading into or out of a scene. However, in this instance, I could isolate some of the sillier sounds and use the voices as though they were the instruments. It was painstaking editing. For example, I had a chase scene accompanied by a frenzied quartet of hysterical sopranos, angst-ridden altos, tedious tenors, and booming, buffoonish baritones. For one specific cue calling for a knock on a door, the director wanted to have a very loud, stylized sound to accompany the action. I found a melodic phrase of an enthusiastic bass joyously proclaiming “Dinga-donga-dinga-dong.” This was repeated several times and became a *lazzi* (a set bit of comic business used by *commedia Zanis*). Later, the same character had to ring a doorbell, and the sound that answered him was a distinct, burlesque knock on woodblocks. The actor playing against the cues enjoyed these novelties and wanted as many preposterous effects worked into his bits as possible. —DK

Imagine that you're finally hired to design a show for a theatre at which you've been anxious to work. However, you're quite disappointed when they tell you that you'll be doing their annual production of *A Christmas Carol*. Even though they've done this show every

year, they're excited to finally have a sound designer working on the play. At first, you might feel like you're walking into a creative dead end. But just imagine *A Christmas Carol* without sound—what did they do about effects until now? Look at this as an opportunity to make the sound in this production the best that the company has ever experienced, and they'll wonder how they were ever able to do this show *without* a sound designer.

Start work on any show by finding a hook. If the director is undecided about a style of music, or if the script doesn't indicate where to start a design, then suggest a time frame, a composer, an instrument, or a type of music—a starting point for giving the production continuity and focus. Is there something about one of the characters that makes you think of a certain piece of music?

In *Sisterly Feelings*, a broad English farce by Alan Ayckbourn, one of the characters is constantly whistling Mozart melodies off-key. There are lines in the script indicating his sometimes-annoying habit. For our production, we decided to use Mozart's *Ein Musikalischer Spass* (*A Musical Joke*) for framing cues and bridging the scenes. With its whimsical, exaggerated air, this piece reflected the tone of the play very well. The playwright indicated many cues necessary to the action; one included a hapless picnic invaded by bees. Because many character reactions depended on intruding bees, we chose to broadly stylize the buzzing in an almost cartoonish way. The audience heard an annoying, amplified swarm swirling around the stage, dive-bombing the characters until they had no choice but to abandon their plans for a peaceful outing. Both the music and the effects in this production captured the sense of farce and fun that the playwright intended and that the director wished to carry through. —DK

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WORKING WITH THE SCRIPT

Actors often begin to work with their scripts by highlighting all of their lines. In early rehearsals, they may mark down their blocking and make notes about motivation or character traits. As a sound designer, you have similar information to retain, and you will often refer to your script when developing your design.

On the first read-through, try to absorb the play without taking too many notes. You could, however, note each occurrence of sound indicated in the script. If you feel ambiance or a sound cue not indicated

by the playwright rising out of the pages, pencil notes in the margin or make notes on a separate pad. If you're making a list, write down page numbers and brief comments—just enough to jog your memory. Figuring out exact cue placement is not important now, nor is how or where the cue will begin or end. If you're unfamiliar with the text, the first read-through is the only time the material will be entirely fresh to you, so use this vantage point to put yourself in the position of the audience. Notice what takes you by surprise—could the surprise be supported with sound?

During the second read-through, look at your notes in context. If you were keeping notes during the first read-through, write all of your cueing notes into your script before you start reading it the second time. Try to hear in your head the sounds you want, fleshing out your original notes. Anything that occurs to you at any point in the process is worth exploring or mentioning to the director. If you've marked up your script, clean up your writing so that if you go back to the notes in a few days or weeks, they'll be clear enough to remind you of your original ideas. The margin of your script doesn't allow for much room to write, so keep more detailed notes and ideas separately. Eventually, much of this information might find its way onto your initial sound plot (see Chapter 5). When the playwright has indicated a specific piece of music to be played at a particular time, or has called for a sound to be part of the action, these *indicated* cues should be incorporated into your notes. Always make the director aware of such cues, because as she has worked through the script, sound and music may not have been foremost on her mind. Cues implied by the script may not have registered with her. It's part of your job to make her aware of what is both indicated and suggested in the script.

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STAGE DIRECTIONS

Some stage directions will describe actions that will need your attention. If the script has a character going over to a jukebox, making a selection, and playing it, determine what sound is needed to interact realistically with that action. Consider the mechanics of the onstage equipment. Is it an old jukebox or a modern one? If the prop onstage is not practical, does the director want to add some realism by including the sound of the machinery? If so, determine how complex the cue needs to be to support the action onstage.

Perhaps the stage directions indicate "Vera exits stage left to mix cocktails." The questions you must answer as a designer are: Should we hear Vera making the drinks? If so, when do we want to hear her?

What sounds are involved in her actions? Is she making martinis or margaritas? Should these sounds be performed live, or should they be prerecorded? Bear in mind the cue's function and focus when answering these questions.

LINE INDICATIONS

A character's lines may allude to a car approaching, or they may mention that there's a riot going on down the street. These are clues that a sound may be needed, but neither of these situations *demand*s that you include a cue. You or the director may decide that the audience doesn't need to hear these actions. Depending on the sound design for the production, it might be enough that the character just mentions the situation.

If the sound design is sparse, only the most essential sounds need to be heard. If, on the other hand, the sound is designed very cinematically, it will be necessary for the audience to hear everything happening outside the house. The car, even if only heard, may be the first introduction of a character and may be representing him before the audience ever sees him. In this case, you can have the sound of the automobile taking on the properties of a character. For example, a revving, menacing, souped-up sports car can be a useful precursor to an evil character's entrance.

Hearing a car arriving, idling, and shutting off may build suspense and tension. However, even if you've set up the convention of hearing cars, you might not include this cue because the director wants the audience to concentrate on the action onstage, or because the cue would have to occur at a strategically awkward time in the action (e.g., someone is about to get kissed, killed, or ambushed). If there's no appropriate place for the cue, it may be necessary to forego it.

HIDDEN CLUES

That same approaching car might not even be mentioned in the script. But if a character suddenly appears and announces that he parked his car in the driveway, you might decide that you want to hear the car approach. Depending on the director's decision as to how close the driveway is to the action onstage, you may even want to hear the car door open and close. If the car is directly outside the window, you might hear the motor revved before it is shut off. In most cases, if the character leaves, you must reverse the sequence of these sounds—the car door opens and closes, the car starts up, and it pulls away—unless these cues would intrude on the focus. Another

consideration is the urgency or anger of the character, and how those traits would affect the amount of time it takes him to get to the car, how fast the car starts, and how hastily the vehicle pulls away.

Make the director aware of the complexity of these cues—he may not want so much stage time devoted to a cue, and you can save yourself a lot of unnecessary work if you know how intricate the director wants an effect to be. You and the director may decide that all the audience should hear is the car driving away, or you might even decide that the car is too far away to be heard at all.

THE DIRECTOR'S INTERPRETATION OF THE SCRIPT

The director may choose to veto a playwright's indications, eliminating sounds entirely or replacing them with concepts of her own. When the director chooses to ignore the playwright's ideas, find out the reasoning behind her decision. By doing so, you'll obtain useful insight into the director's tastes. This inquiry should never take the form of a challenge. Remember that you are working on the director's interpretation of the play, and any of the playwright's concepts are subject to modification by the director.

44 Before you start researching music for a production, find out what kind of approach the director is taking with the play. Let's say you're doing a production of *Tartuffe*. You may have already started researching the music from the period in which the play is set, which is Paris in the mid-1600s. If the director informs you that this particular production is set in the antebellum South, the music you have researched will be of no use. If it occurs to you that Stephen Foster's music might be appropriate for the pre-Civil War era, mention it early on to your director, because if she's dead set against your idea, it's better to find out before you start designing.

CHOOSING SOUND EFFECTS OR MUSICAL EFFECTS

Sound effects are often regarded as purely informative and music as purely emotional. However, music and effects can have similar attributes. You may be involved with a production where you find that music would be completely inappropriate. For whatever reason, adding even the most minimal of melodic themes to this production would make a dramatic moment melodramatic. If the director wants something to underscore a scene or a transition, remember that you can use sound effects to create a moment just as effectively as if you were underscoring with music. If your idea had been to use music at

a certain point and the director feels that music would be intrusive, try to discover a sound effect that embodies some of the feeling you wanted the music to instill. For example, if your instrumentation employed light, fluttery flutes, would birds chirping quietly serve a similar function? Would jackhammers drilling in concrete cause the same dramatic tension as a piece of music utilizing heavy percussion? Depending on what the production calls for, you can evoke the same emotional pitch without music. Conversely, sound effects may be replaced by music. When stylization allows, you can choose to replace foghorns with underscoring on a tuba or a thunderstorm with the theme from *Victory at Sea*. It is your imagination, creativity, and aesthetic sensibilities—as well as the director’s—that serve as your guidelines.

CONSIDERING OTHER DESIGN ELEMENTS

The colors on the set, the timing of the lights, and even the textures of the materials used in the costumes are all important for you to take into account as you create sound and music cues. How stylized or realistic other design elements are will certainly affect how you choose to build the sound or utilize the music. You want your design to complement the overall concept that the other designers are expressing.

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When a thunderstorm is indicated, confer with the lighting designer before considering how to build the storm or starting to produce cues. You and the lighting designer should discuss every detail about developing the storm. When using real-time thunder, take into consideration the intensity and timing of the lights, because the farther away the lightning strikes, the greater the time between the flash and the thunder. In some instances, the timing of the light cues will depend on the placement of the sound cues. It’s always important for you and the lighting designer to work together and respect each other’s needs and ideas.

For a production of *Othello*, I had not been given any concrete information from the director about her concept. I found my first hint of what direction to go in when I saw the renderings for the set. The colors of Cyprus were hot and arid in contrast to the cool, aquatic feel of Venice. This suggested to me that I might find a contrast of themes. As the design developed, I employed two distinct styles of music that implied this opposition. —DK
