

Much Ado About Noting: Reviewing Music in *Much Ado About Nothing*

Noting Music in the Text

Mentions of music in *Much Ado About Nothing* communicate the contrast between war and joy. When Benedick censures Claudio’s declared affection for Hero, he says, “I have known when there was no music with him but the drum and the fife now had he rather hear the tabor and pipe” (II.iii.2-13). Benedick describes the change in Claudio in terms of instrument grouping. In Shakespeare’s day, contrasting their modern uses for the art of music, the drum and fife were commonly used for the purposes of militaristic and civic signaling (Wilson 124). The drum was a necessary tool among the infantry, as it kept the rhythm of the march (Hoeniger 45). The fife, which is similar in sound and size to a modern-day piccolo, signaled a unit’s arrival (43). The pipe and tabor were used for the likes of musical art and dance (27). Most often played together, the pipe was a small wind instrument with three finger holes, and the tabor was a small, handheld, double-headed drum. Benedick’s instrumental reproach to Claudio’s development from a soldier to a lover, highlights a tension which drives the play to an ambiguous ending. Messina is a merry place where sexual and nuptial excitement mask the tragedy of the intensely gendered society. The tension is brought out by the masculine spirit of Messina which slowly seeps through the cracks of its free and luxurious exterior. Benedick’s instrumental invocations establish the existence of these contrasting spirits within the society, subtly hinting at the tragedy of the play.



Shakespearean musicians playing the pipe and tabor.



1920’s Phonograph: a device used for playing music.



Edythe Turner and her Knights of Syncopation: Jazz Band from 1925.

1920s Musical Rebellion

The 1920s was a transformative time in the world of music. Jazz was the sound of the time. It originated from the creative work of African American artists and came to dominate almost every aspect of American culture (Gushee 153). New conceptions of rhythm differentiated jazz from that of previous eras in that the lack of a defined melody allowed for much more versatility of sound. Contrary to the way these instruments were defined and used during the Elizabethan era, the drum and trumpet were central to music as an art form. Beats and brassiness were exactly what gave jazz its musicality, which posed a striking contrast to the standards for music in Shakespeare's day. Jazz symbolized power and freedom, enjoyed above all by the younger crowd. This societal concept was empowering to women in the 1920s, and propelled their liberation through the rest of the 20th century. This historical idea nicely lends itself to our production of *Much Ado About Nothing* being set in the 1920s. The play’s feminist themes are brought out in the female characters’ conversations and relationships to men, as well as in their fundamental juxtapositions to one another. The incorporation of authentic 1920s music, as well as music written specifically for this production in the style of the time, not only works to bring the world that we are creating to life, but contributes to the motif of challenging gender roles.

Song in the Play

The 1920s was a transformative time in the world of music. Jazz was the sound of the time. It originated from the creative work of African American artists and came to dominate almost every aspect of American culture (Gushee 153). New conceptions of rhythm differentiated jazz from that of previous eras in that the lack of a defined melody allowed for much more versatility of sound. Contrary to the way these instruments were defined and used during the Elizabethan era, the drum and trumpet were central to music as an art form. Beats and brassiness were exactly what gave jazz its musicality, which posed a striking contrast to the standards for music in Shakespeare's day. Jazz symbolized power and freedom, enjoyed above all by the younger crowd. This societal concept was empowering to women in the 1920s, and propelled their liberation through the rest of the 20th century. This historical idea nicely lends itself to our production of *Much Ado About Nothing* being set in the 1920s. The play’s feminist themes are brought out in the female characters’ conversations and relationships to men, as well as in their fundamental juxtapositions to one another. The incorporation of authentic 1920s music, as well as music written specifically for this production in the style of the time, not only works to bring the world that we are creating to life, but contributes to the motif of challenging gender roles.

Works Cited:

- Gushee, Lawrence. “The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz.” *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 22, Center for Black Music Research, 2002, pp. 151–74.
- Hoeniger, F. David, et al. *Concord of Sweet Sounds: Musical Instruments in Shakespeare*. Porcupine's Quill, 2009.
- Lindley, David. *Shakespeare and Music*. Arden Shakespeare, 2007.
- Phillips, Damon J. *Shaping Jazz: Cities, Labels, and the Global Emergence of an Art Form*. Princeton University Press, 2013. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2855bs>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023.
- Shakespeare, William, et al. *Much Ado about Nothing*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Wilson, Christopher R. “SHAKESPEARE AND EARLY MODERN MUSIC.” *The Edinburgh Companion to Shakespeare and the Arts*, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, pp. 119–41, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748635245-011>.