What did Shakespeare Know about Music?

My title, I know, sounds impertinent: but it was intended as an act of homage, as in: ‘What did Shakespeare know about music’; ‘what did he know that we might have forgotten?’; ‘how did he exploit the power of music in his plays?’ I didn’t mean to suggest that we need to test Shakespeare, to see whether he would have passed his Grade 8 Lute or his Grade 5 theory—not at all a fitting thing to do in a centenary year.

It is just occasionally possible to catch Shakespeare in something that looks like a musical mistake, the sort of thing we might shake our heads and tut about. As in Sonnet 128, where the sonneteer tells us how much he envies his mistress’s keyboard instrument:

How oft, when thou, my music, music play’st
Upon that blessèd wood whose motion sounds
With thy sweet fingers when thou gently sway’st
The wiry concord that mine ear confounds,
Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap,
To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,
Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap,
At the wood’s boldness by thee blushing stand.
To be so tickled they would change their state
And situation with those dancing chips,
O’er whom thy fingers walk with gentle gait,
Making dead wood more blest than living lips.
   Since saucy jacks so happy are in this,
   Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss.

According to the OED, a jack is: ‘In the virginal, spinet, and harpsichord: An upright piece of wood fixed to the back of the key-lever, and fitted with a quill which plucked the string as the jack rose on the key’s being pressed down. (By Shaks. and some later writers erroneously applied to the key.)’ (OED 14). But a jack is also: ‘a lad, fellow, chap; esp. a low-bred or ill-mannered fellow, a “knave”’ (OED 2a). Presumably it was the irresistible possibility of this play on words that led Shakespeare into error. A quibble, as Dr Johnson said, ‘was the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it’.

This sort of thing is rather exceptional. Usually, the shortage of knowledge is not Shakespeare’s but ours. For while his plays are full of music and song, to try to talk about these things makes us aware of our ignorance of much of what went on the
Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. Despite the successes of the Globe and the Wanamaker, no time machine exists that can allow us to find out how music was executed in performance. Stage directions in printed plays are skeletal: they call for music whilst offering very little in the way of detail. To a large extent, music and song were extra-textual; like most elements of performance, they were a matter for private arrangement and tacit knowledge, and they left precious little trace in the historical record.

The problem is especially acute with Shakespeare’s songs, which suffer from all kinds of vagaries. The songs are often at once a part and not a part of the plays that they feature in. Like prologues and epilogues, it is likely that songs came and went from playtexts according to shifting circumstances. Often, perhaps, things were simple: Shakespeare composed a song for a particular play and the company commissioned a setting for that song. But just as often, Shakespeare might have borrowed a song that was already familiar to his audience, perhaps adapting it to his immediate purposes, or might have engaged in the very common practice of setting new words to a familiar tune. In most cases, we cannot be sure what exactly has gone on. We have Shakespeare’s words, but no contemporary setting, or we have words that may or may not be Shakespeare’s, in settings that his company may or may not have used. Songs would have been added and deleted from playtexts whenever they were revived, according to the personnel that were available to the playing company. This sometimes leaves scars on the text, as in Twelfth Night, where Viola vows to present herself to Orsino ‘as an eunuch ... for I can sing / And speak to him in many sorts of music’, but subsequently never sings. It may be that Shakespeare simply changed his mind about the role. But it has long been suspected that the boy player’s breaking voice forced a change of plan.

To think about music in Shakespeare is thus to realise that theatre is collaborative; that Shakespeare was not an abstracted genius who could simply set his vision down on paper for eternity, but was working with the messy materials of London’s playhouses. To service this entertainment industry, Shakespeare became an expert in borrowing: making old stories new; splicing together a plot from here, a subplot from there; recycling character types and narrative tricks; patching his plays together from an extraordinary array of cultural materials. His songs are in this sense symptomatic of his plays more generally, but a shade more mysterious. We know that Shakespeare took the plot of As You Like It from Thomas Lodge’s Rosalynde; but we
don’t know how the song ‘It was a lover and his lass’ relates to the setting that Thomas Morley printed in 1600. Songs are unfixed. They enter into the communal subconscious, becoming the property of society rather than of any one writer.

The question ‘Where does a song come from?’ often applies not just to academic questions of provenance and authorship, but also to the internal world of the song—who is singing these words, when and where? ‘Come away, come away, death. / And in sad cypress let me be laid. / Fly away, fly away, breath, / I am slain by a fair cruel maid’. Who is slain? Not Feste, who sings this song in Twelfth Night. Perhaps Orsino, who calls for ‘that old and antique song we heard yesternight’, which ‘did relieve my passion much’; certainly the song seems to fit with his posturing as the melancholic lover. But Orsino also describes how ‘the spinsters and the knitters in the sun / And the free maids that weave their thread with bones / Do use to chant it’. It is hard to see how these nameless women, leavening their labour with song, might relate to the lover ‘slain by a fair cruel maid’. The song proposes an ‘I’, a first-person singer, who is ambiguously placed in relation to the characters on stage and the audience in the theatre. We first see Measure for Measure’s Mariana listening to a boy singing ‘Take, O, take those lips away’, and we have to transfer the words from the boy to Mariana; we might imagine her rebuking Angelo in exactly these terms, and asking for her lost kisses to be returned to her as ‘seals of love, but sealed in vain’. Mariana didn’t write the words, and she isn’t singing them, but they fit her situation. There is
often a sense of the uncanny in Shakespearean song, as words borrowed from somewhere else come to fit new circumstances. Thus Desdemona, undressing for bed and for her death, tells her maid Emilia that she has a song stuck in her head:

My mother had a maid called Barbary:
She was in love, and he she loved proved mad
And did forsake her. She had a song of ‘willow’.
An old thing ’twas, but it expressed her fortune,
And she died singing it: that song tonight
Will not go from my mind: I have much to do
But to go hang my head all at one side
And sing it like poor Barbary.

Which then, of course, she goes on to do. Desdemona is not quite Barbary and nor is she the ‘poor soul’ who ‘sat sighing by a sycamore tree’, weeping over her abandonment, in the song. But the situations are full of echoes. Nobody knows where this song came from—Barbary sang it, but ‘an old thing ’twas’—or when it will stop echoing. Ophelia, who goes to her death chanting ‘snatches of old tunes’, ‘as one incapable of her own distress’, is another tragic heroine who borrows a voice from song to express the inexpressible.
The first thing that Shakespeare knew about music, in my analysis, is that its unfixedness could be powerful. *The Tempest* is perhaps his fullest exploration of the weird placelessness of sound. ‘Where should this music be? I’th air, or th’ earth?’ asks Ferdinand, as he follows the song of the invisible Ariel towards Prospero’s lair. ‘Come unto these yellow sands’ issues instructions to dancers, taking hands, curtseying, footing it featurally, but it is not clear who the dancers are, and the song dissolves into mocking animal noises: ‘bow wow, bow wow’, ‘cock-a-diddle-dow’. These noises are billed as the ‘burthen’ or burden of the song, sung by ‘sweet sprites’. A burden is either a repeated refrain or a bass part or drone. So when Ferdinand asks whether the songs are in their air or in the earth he is perhaps asking about the relationship between treble and bass, or between spirits and animals, or between airy Ariel and earthy Caliban; the song seems to come from the elemental universe of the play. Later on, Ariel will terrify the low-lifes Stephano and Trinculo by playing the tune of their song invisibly on a tabor and pipe, prompting Caliban’s beautiful lines:

Be not afeared; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.

We can of course see Ariel, and can see that his use of music is purposeful. But the poetry of these scenes comes from the invisibility of song, its ability simply to be in the air. Something similar happens with wordless music in that magical scene in *Antony and Cleopatra* set on the eve of battle:

FIRST SOLDIER: ’Tis a brave army, and full of purpose.
*Music of the hautboys is under the stage.*
SECOND SOLDIER: Peace! What noise?
FIRST SOLDIER: List, list!
SECOND SOLDIER: Hark!
FIRST SOLDIER: Music i’th’air.
THIRD SOLDIER: Under the earth.
FOURTH SOLDIER: It signs well, does it not?
THIRD SOLDIER: No.
FIRST SOLDIER: Peace, I say! What should this mean?
SECOND SOLDIER: ’Tis the god Hercules, whom Antony loved,
Now leaves him.

From ‘hautboys’, ‘high-wood’, comes our word ‘oboe’, but hautboys seem in this period to have been shrill, double-reeded instruments, employed here to produce what Shakespeare’s editors describe as an ‘eerie, supernatural sound’. The extraordinary coup de théâtre of placing the high sounds beneath the stage creates, as in The Tempest, a double ambiguity: the soldiers don’t know where the sound is coming from, or quite what it means, until finally it is identified as the sound of an absconding deity. For a third example of weird music in Shakespeare we might look to Henry IV Part I, where Mortimer’s wife sings to him in Welsh. The singers are spirits summoned by the lady’s father, the magician Glendower: ‘those musicians that shall play to you / Hang in the air a thousand leagues from hence, / And straight they shall be here. Sit and attend’. Lady Mortimer’s song, for which no words are recorded in the text of the play, is described as a charm, exploiting the etymological origins of ‘charm’ in carmen, song. We do know where this song comes from—it comes from Wales. Yet the alien language and magical (or demonic) accompaniment conspire to make it feel intensely strange.
Shakespeare’s interest in invisible music—music in the air that doesn’t have a clear point of origin, that doesn’t belong to anyone—sits rather uneasily with another of the things he knew about music, which is that it expresses relationships of power. It is one of the trappings of authority in Shakespeare that you can have music floating around you in the air. If, as Ferdinand says, Ariel’s music ‘crept by me upon the waters’, that was because Prospero commissioned it. Similarly, Cleopatra can imagine a fishing trip on the Nile that will be accompanied by ‘my music playing far off’, while Enobarbus tells how the ‘barge she sat in’ was powered by oars ‘which to the tune of flutes kept stroke’. The ailing Henry IV, lying on what might be his deathbed, commands:

Softly, pray.
Let there be no noise made, my gentle friends,
Unless some dull and favourable hand
Will whisper music to my weary spirit.

Warwick immediately turns his words into a command, telling a servant to ‘Call for the music in the other room.’ The sheer luxury of such ambient music must have been palpable to the play’s original auditors. Music in Shakespeare is very often explicitly procured; people don’t sing their own songs, they get others to sing them. Thus Cassio procures musicians to play beneath Othello and Desdemona’s window after he
has disgraced himself in a drunken fracas; the occasion is the opportunity for some by-play between the musicians and a clown:

CLOWN: Why, masters, have your instruments been in Naples, that they speak i’th’ nose thus?
1 MUSICIAN: How, sir? how?
CLOWN: Are these, I pray you, wind instruments?
1 MUSICIAN: Ay marry are they, sir.
CLOWN: O, thereby hangs a tail.
1 MUSICIAN: Whereby hangs a tail, sir?
CLOWN: Marry, sir, by many a wind instrument that I know.

The Arden edition helpfully glosses: ‘A joke about flatulence’ (‘tale’=‘tail’). But this bit of comic relief, with its repetition of the word ‘instrument’, also suggests the darker side of the relationship between music and power, since Cassio and the rest of the play’s characters are by this point rapidly becoming instruments in the hands of Iago. Iago himself expresses his actions through a musical metaphor when he observes Othello’s marital harmony and says

O, you are well tuned now: but I’ll set down
The pegs that make this music, as honest
As I am.

It is, however, Hamlet who is allowed to protest most vigorously against the practice of using other people instrumentally. Rightly suspecting his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of being set to spy on him, he asks them to play him something on a recorder:

HAMLET: Will you play upon this pipe?
GUILDENSTERN: My lord, I cannot.
HAMLET: I pray you.
GUILDENSTERN: Believe me, I cannot.
HAMLET: I do beseech you.
GUILDENSTERN: I know no touch of it, my lord.
HAMLET: It is as easy as lying. Govern these ventages with your fingers and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most excellent music. Look you, these are the stops.

GUILDENSTERN: But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony. I have not the skill.

HAMLET: Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass ... What, do you think, that I am easier to be played on, than a pipe?

So as well as music often being hauntingly unlocated, it is often also worryingly easy to locate. We know exactly who is paying the piper and calling the tune. Ultimately, of course, the idea that people can be instruments to be played on like pipes speaks to the very idea of drama, in which the characters of the play are the dramatist’s instruments. John Donne put this very brutally in his second satire, in which he criticized the playwright as a wretch who

gives idiot actors means
(Starving himself) to live by’his laboured scenes;
As in some organ, puppets dance above
And bellows pant below, which them do move.
Shakespeare’s fascination with schemers and with music come together in *The Tempest*, in which ‘a thousand twangling instruments’ become the instruments by which Prospero wrests power back from his usurping brother.

While people can procure music in Shakespeare, they cannot always control the results. The most famous connoisseur of the art in Shakespeare’s oeuvre is Orsino, who gets to open a play with music:

ORSINO: If music be the food of love, play on
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again, it had a dying fall:
O, it came o’er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour. Enough, no more,
’Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

Orsino starts off like a Tudor doctor, trying to correct his humours by administering a stiff dose of music: excess of it will lead to nausea or disgust that will cause the appetite to wane. Orsino is putting the ‘sick’ back into ‘music’. But by the end, he’s telling the musicians to give over—perhaps the surfeit has worked, or perhaps he has just lost interest. The speech dramatizes his fickleness and the unpredictability of music’s effects. Similarly, he calls for Feste to sing ‘Come away, come away, death’, then immediately dismisses him: ‘Give me now leave to leave thee’. Feste shoots back: ‘Now the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal.’ The point is replayed in *Antony and Cleopatra*:

CLEOPATRA: Give me some music: music, moody food
Of us that trade in love.
ALL: The music, ho!
*Enter Mardian the Eunuch.*
CLEOPATRA: Let it alone. Let’s to billiards: come, Charmian.
Cleopatra is, of course, Shakespeare’s most conspicuously changeable character, and her reaction to music’s ‘moody food’ is the perfect way of demonstrating her fickleness. In *As You Like It*, the melancholy Jaques asks Amiens to sing the next verse of ‘Under the greenwood tree’, confident that he can use it to boost his signature affliction: ‘I can suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs’. But a little later, someone reports that just the opposite happened: ‘Here he was merry, hearing of a song’. The banished duke comments:

DUKE SENIOR: If he, compact of jars, grow musical

We shall have shortly discord in the spheres.

Melancholy for Jaques seems to mean cantankerousness, a refusal to fit in and observe the norms of courtly politesse. He is ‘compact of jars’, argumentative to the core, so it seems strange that he should like harmony. Here is something else that Shakespeare knew about music: it operates on the emotions in unpredictable ways.

‘Compact of jars’: let’s dwell on that phrase. Shakespeare delights in debate, discord, disharmony, making his dramas out of odds that will eventually be made even. Music provided him with a rich vocabulary for thinking about the broken, fragmented and fractured. Music was divided into separate ‘parts’, and the process of providing ever faster variations over a steady ground was known as ‘division’. If a consort contained instruments from different families, such as wind and strings, this was called ‘broken music’. Shakespeare regularly resorts to these terms when composing his broken dialogue; and noticing these references can help us learn to hear the music of that dialogue. A wonderful scene in *Troilus and Cressida* that will
help to make this point. The scene begins with music playing, and a conversation between Pandarus and a servant, in which the servant’s job is simply to be obstructive:

PANDARUS: What music is this?
SERVANT: I do but partly know, sir: it is music in parts.
PANDARUS: Know you the musicians?
SERVANT: Wholly, sir.
PANDARUS: Who play they to?
SERVANT: To the hearers, sir.
PANDARUS: At whose pleasure, friend?
SERVANT: At mine, sir, and theirs who love music.
PANDARUS: Command, I mean, friend.
SERVANT: Who shall I command, sir?
PANDARUS: Friend, we understand not one another: I am too courtly and thou art too cunning. At whose request do these men play?

Eventually the servant spits it out: it’s Helen and Paris who are listening. The scene moves on. Pandarus greets Helen and Paris, and starts praising the consort that is playing to them. You need to know that the oily Pandarus has come to court with a clear purpose, which is to tell Helen and Paris not to expect Troilus at dinner tonight (because he’s arranging the tryst between Troilus and Cressida). But the louche lovers just want Pandarus to sing them a song:

PANDARUS: Fair prince, here is good broken music.
PARIS: You have broke it, cousin, and, by my life, you shall make it whole again: you shall piece it out with a piece of your performance. Nell, he is full of harmony.
PANDARUS: Truly, lady, no.
HELEN: O, sir—
PANDARUS: Rude, in sooth, in good sooth, very rude. [saying he’s not good at singing]
PARIS: Well said, my lord. Well, you say so in fits. [spurts]
PANDARUS: I have business to my lord, dear queen. My lord, will you vouchsafe me a word?
HELEN: Nay, this shall not hedge us out: we'll hear you sing, certainly.
PANDARUS: Well, sweet queen, you are pleasant with me...

And so it goes on, until 35 lines later, Pandarus is persuaded to sing. *Partly knowing* the music which is music in parts, praising the *broken* music, speaking in *fits*: the passage is powerfully alert to the relationship between the multiplicity of music—the variety of instrumental and vocal lines, the disharmonies that it creates along the way—and the way that conversation works, or fails to work.

It turns out that the tongue that is the most powerful instrument in the Shakespearean consort. When Mowbray is banished from England by Richard II, he laments the imprisonment of his tongue:

MOWBRAY: The language I have learned these forty years,
My native English, I must now forgo.
And now my tongue’s use is to me no more
Than an unstringėd viol or a harp.
Or like a cunning instrument cased up,
Or, being open, put into his hands
That knows no touch to tune the harmony.

In *Hamlet*, Ophelia calls herself ‘of ladies most deject and wretched, / That sucked the honey of his music vows’, comparing a lover’s florid speech to the kind of music that is so sweet you can almost eat it. And, along the same lines, Mortimer, in *Henry IV Part I*, cannot understand his wife’s Welsh, but vows that he will learn it:

But I will never be a truant, love,
Till I have learned thy language; for thy tongue
Makes Welsh as sweet as ditties highly penned,
Sung by a fair queen in a summer’s bow’r,
With ravishing division, to her lute.
Mortimer’s language takes wing as he compares speech with the most exalted form of music. Perhaps his hyperbole is just over-compensation for the fact that he can’t understand a word she says. But such passages also remind us that music and rhetoric were close kin in this period. Music’s power over the passions was increasingly understood via rhetorical theory, and advocates for singing claimed that it was not only good exercise, and a good remedy for stuttering and stammering, but also ‘the best means to procure a perfect pronunciation, and to make a good Orator’. Defences of poetry and defences of music tend to proceed along parallel lines in this period. I don’t know whether Shakespeare would have approved of Bob Dylan’s getting the Nobel Prize for Literature, but the idea that there were any sharp dividing lines between song and poetry would have struck him as odd.

So what did Shakespeare know about music? He knew that it could be hard to pin down, hard to place, but for that reason it could also seem uncannily significant at key points in his drama. He knew that it could be used to express power dynamics, allowing him more vividly to depict a world in which some can call for music while others are tasked with providing it. He knew that music was the food of fond lovers and melancholics, and that its effects were as unpredictable as the changeable taffeta of the mind. And finally, he knew that speech has its own melody, and that his characters were his instruments in creating broken music and delicious harmonies. To push that final point a tiny bit further, we might return to Shakespeare’s great aesthete, Orsino, in his first and most famous speech:
ORSINO: If music be the food of love, play on
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again, it had a dying fall:

This is a speech about music that is itself extraordinarily musical; the first line was taken up in a song by Henry Purcell, while the ‘dying fall’ was filched by T.S. Eliot to provide one of the distinctive cadences of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’. What makes it musical is in part its rhythmic subtlety. Try reading it as though it were in that mythical rhythm, ‘regular iambic pentameter’:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If music be the food of love, play on} & \\
\text{Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,} & \\
\text{The appetite may sicken, and so die.} & \\
\text{That strain again, it had a dying fall:} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

Reading it in this clod-hopping, unmusical way has the benefit of revealing some of the real emphases in the passage, which might look something like this:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If music be the food of love, play on} & \\
\text{Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,} & \\
\text{The appetite may sicken, and so die.} & \\
\text{That strain again, it had a dying fall:} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

No two lines here have the same rhythm; instead we get a wealth of nuance, a sense of overflowing energy (‘play on/ Give me excess of it’, ‘That strain again’) and
dissipation of energy, a falling away (‘the appetite may sicken, and so die’). If Shakespeare’s distinctiveness lies anywhere, I’d argue, it’s in the subtlety with which he constructs every utterance in his plays. Ben Jonson, praising his fellow playwright, pointed to his artistry in exactly these terms:

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Who casts to write a living line, must sweat,
(Such as thine are) and strike the second heat
Upon the Muses' anvil; turn the same
(And himself with it) that he thinks to frame,
Or, for the laurel, he may gain a scorn;
For a good poet's made, as well as born;
And such wert thou.

Shakespeare’s lines are turned beautifully on the anvil. Every phrase is weighed, every sentence calibrated, and it’s the precision of their manufacture that has allowed them to lodge so unshakably in our collective memory. ‘That song tonight / Will not go from my mind’; Shakespeare’s song, 400 years later, will not go from our minds. It’s this vocal music that makes him, to quote a finely-turned line from As You Like It’s Celia, ‘O wonderfull, wonderfull, and most wonderfull wonderfull, and yet againe wonderful, and after that out of all whooping’.

This talk is indebted to work on Shakespeare and music by Gavin Alexander, David Lindley, Bruce Smith and Tiffany Stern.