

# Tracking the Scottish Play: The Sounds of *Sleep No More*

Glenn Ricci, Library of Congress

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## Abstract

Music is crucial to the experience of *Sleep No More*. The production features popular gongs from the 1930s and early 1940s; film soundtracks from the 1950s and 1960s; and a few contemporary works. Providing more than simply background sound, this music engages viewers actively in interpretive exercises with no decisive solution. *SNM*'s music helps to create both atmosphere and an elusive subtext to its many-layered dreamscape.

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The creators of *Sleep No More* (*SNM*) describe their production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as an "experience" rather than a show, a play, or anything that might suggest passive consumption. In fact, they prefer not to talk about it at all, fearing that doing so will harm the unique, real-time experience one has when visiting the McKittrick Hotel. When forced to describe the production, however, they often use filmic terms.<sup>1</sup> Sound is crucial to any movie production, and it is given clear prominence and respect in *SNM*. In the interview section of the show's program, Punchdrunk Founder and Artistic Director, Felix Barrett, begins by citing the soundtrack:

Q. Where did the idea for *Sleep No More* come from?

FELIX: As with most of our work, *Sleep No More* started with the score. I found an old recording of a film noir soundtrack that felt wonderfully emotive; I loved its frisson of danger and I could see an epic theatrical world within it. Our sound designer Stephen Dobbie and I then started exploring other soundtracks and began to collect musical fragments to create a sonic palette for the show. (Emursive 2011, 23)

In a lecture delivered at a StoryCode event in New York, Punchdrunk Producer Peter Higgin also emphasized just how central music was to the development of *SNM* and how he and sound designer Stephen Dobbie were both ex-DJs.<sup>2</sup>

Sixteen separate running tracks of music and sound are piped into every corner of the McKittrick Hotel (Sekules, 2011), and the results of their influence are evident. As the core

inspiration for the experience, the music is very much a conspirator — with the extraordinarily detailed set design, choreography, and costuming — in the unsettling dream world *SNM* conjures up.

The music heard during the show falls into three basic categories: popular songs from the late 1930s and early 40s; film soundtracks from the 1950s and 60s; and a handful of more contemporary works.<sup>3</sup> Each is used to create distinctly different effects. Combined, they create the atmosphere and subtext to a many-layered dreamscape. If it is true that the experience of *SNM* is like walking through someone else's dream, the music offers guidance, clues, and misdirection as to what the dream could mean, and who the dreamer might be.

The music one hears most frequently in the show is a selection of popular tunes that cluster strongly in the early 1940s. The music is at once familiar and otherworldly, as it tugs the visitor back to a nostalgic early-WWII period in U.S. and U.K. history. Glenn Miller, Al Bowlly, Billie Holiday, Vera Lynn, The Ink Spots, Benny Goodman, and Tommy Dorsey (see below, clip of "I'll Never Smile Again"), among others, all make sonic appearances. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) If listened to on its own, this set of songs is not particularly unsettling. Quite the opposite, in fact. However, the songs are not presented as simple background music, played to add historical context. Instead, the songs are meticulously assembled, along with the other elements of the soundtrack, into a pastiche that integrates deeply with the show's design and action. To understand better the intentionality of the choices made to shape *SMN*'s sound design, a brief discussion of sound engineering techniques is in order.

Depending on the desired effect, when a sound designer assembles any set of songs, a number of techniques can be employed to shape the sound. At the very least, the relative volume levels for each song are evened out to provide consistent loudness between all the tracks. In the case of *SMN*, this prevents the sound from being overly loud at times and completely inaudible at others. It is also common to employ some amount of equalization, so that the songs present an even set of frequencies to the listener's ear and so that one track does not contrast too greatly with another and interfere with the effect of the recording. These elements of sound "mastering" are as much an art as an engineering process. If one were only attempting to preserve the integrity of the original recording, one would use these techniques very lightly or not at all. If one were attempting to restore a recording to a more pristine condition, one might take further steps to remove the pops, crackles, and other artifacts that have accumulated since the original recording.

Punchdrunk does not present the music as either preserved or restored to its original glory. Rather, it is enhanced. For example, the scratches and pops of well-worn vinyl are prominent and

emphasized elements in the sound, as are the weathered and muffled qualities that immediately cue our minds to the fact that we are listening to music from over fifty years ago. Sometimes all that is heard is the repetitive scrape of a needle that has reached the innermost groove of a vinyl platter. The lighting has a similar mediating effect. Dark and often softened by a thin sheet of fog, the lighting places our surroundings in soft focus, requiring us to concentrate in order to verify what we are seeing. The masks worn by all guests eliminate some peripheral vision, heightening and enhancing the remaining senses. Pupils dilate as we adjust to the darkness and latch on to other familiar aspects of the show's design. A hotel lobby with period-appropriate furniture (antique to us) looks comfortable, lived-in, and familiar enough. A dining room with place settings looks like a quaint spot for morning coffee . . . but wait. At one end stands a full-sized, taxidermied deer emerging from a mountain of salt. This does not compute as "normal" in any historical sense, but by itself it can be dispatched as a singular oddity. A turn to the left reveals more such oddities in the form of a series of evenly-spaced crucifixes made out of forks set decoratively upon their own piles of salt. At this moment, the music may be punctuated by a clap of distant thunder.

A sonic analogue to the deer standing in salt can be heard when some tracks are manipulated to elevate their dream-like qualities. For instance, touches of reverse echo added to the vocal range creates a ghostly ambience in some tracks.<sup>4</sup> Although today, this technique can be created digitally with relative ease, it was used only beginning in the late 1960s, at which time it required a high degree of physical manipulation of the magnetic recording tape. The effect results in the playing of the reverb or echo of a sound before the origin of the echo arrives. Producer/guitarist Jimmy Page employed the reverse echo in a number of Led Zeppelin tracks, but a strong dramatic example can be found in the movie *Poltergeist* (1982). The effect is used on Carol Anne's voice when the girl is first heard speaking to her parents from the spirit world. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) In a modern recording, we hear the reverse echo as an intentional effect, adding an ominous and unnatural coloration to the sound. When applied to an older recording that predates the technique, by contrast, the results can be disconcerting. This doctored sound, combined with abundant visual clues, works to create the gradual impression that this world is not a historical recreation at all: it is a dream set in a familiar construction of the past.

Most of the characters' paths lead to a large ballroom for the scene in which Lady Macbeth throws a party to honor Duncan. A large share of the audience also finds its way there, making the scene a major set piece. Once again, at first glance, all is well. The performers all look attractive and well turned out in era-appropriate dress. The swingin' sounds of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman bring an air of lightness and cheer as they animate the dancing couples.<sup>5</sup> More characters

are smiling in this scene than in any other, and some performers pull audience members into the dance. Times are good. But as the music remains upbeat, one starts to notice more sinister activities. Macbeth looks on angrily from the mezzanine as his wife dances with Duncan. Macduff is becoming intimate with a seductive witch. Helpless to respond, Lady Macduff is slowly being drugged by the housekeeper until she faints. In its original historical context, big band music in the 1940s gave comfort and respite to citizens during wartime. In *SNM*, that comfort turns cold as we see it provide counterpoint to the malicious behavior that we fear will only worsen. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) The ballroom scene may seem a straightforward use of music providing counterpoint to the action. Taken by itself, however, the scene sets the stage as a production of *Macbeth* reset in a historically accurate 1939. Over time, one notices enough surreal details that the historical account gives way to a dreamworld whose narrator is by default unreliable. Punchdrunk cleverly constructs an unreliable narrator by becoming unreliable curators. In Macbeth's quarters, for instance, antique furniture is stacked up in ways you would never find in a history museum. Throughout *SNM*, music also serves to heighten the dream-like qualities of the experience by dislocating us from time. While most of the songs date to circa 1940, not all of the songs played are from the same year or even the same era. The result is a certain amount of time slippage as if the dreamer is shifting between years. Three of four songs sung by Peggy Lee, for instance, extend into the 1950s and 60s.<sup>6</sup> Jo Stafford's "Blue Moon" mimics the stylings of the earlier songs, but was actually released in 1952.

Contrasting with these popular music selections are the film scores used during key moments of action and drama. These scores are borrowed primarily from three movies by Alfred Hitchcock: *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956). All three are composed by Bernard Herrmann and feature a familiar symphonic instrumentation. Herrmann's work on those soundtracks was highly influential, and a similar instrumentation and style is often used in modern films. Many audience members may simply perceive that the movie music is playing at a higher volume accompanied by unique lighting cues to focus their attention on the action at hand. The fact that the films were released between 1956 and 1960 adds to the time slippage for anyone attempting to make meaning out of the dream-like events they are witnessing. Is it possible that the dreamer is sleeping in the 1960s and dreaming back to an earlier time? The production does borrow a great deal from the movie *Rebecca*, which is told as a flashback: "We can never go back to Manderley again. But sometimes, in my dreams, I do go back to those strange days" (Hitchcock 1940), the narrator begins, and each night a few select visitors to the McKittrick may hear those very words as they begin their journey.<sup>7</sup> Every single visitor enters the hotel after feeling her way through two

dark hallways while she hears a clip from the soundtrack to *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. This passageway, filled with Herrmann's music, marks the transition between our present reality and the 1939 McKittrick bar that awaits when you emerge from the darkness.<sup>8</sup>

Integrating the *Vertigo* soundtrack so thoroughly and naming our hotel the McKittrick evokes one of the more curious scenes in the film. As Alice Dailey discusses in her contribution to this cluster, the protagonist in *Vertigo* sees a woman he is following enter the McKittrick hotel and then spots her in the window on the second floor. Upon entering the hotel, he discovers that she has vanished from the building and her car outside is gone. The movie never explains how she disappeared, and no ready explanation is available. It is fitting that the space containing the undefinable experience of *SNM* takes this unusual and unexplained scene as its namesake. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

The third category of music — a few contemporary pieces used during pivotal sequences — adds yet another layer of time dislocation and sonic contrast. The soundtrack to David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (Angelo Badalamenti, 2001) and a mix of two pieces of electronica from 2005 and 2009 are used in two pivotal scenes in the production.<sup>9</sup>

David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* also contains a great deal of dream imagery and slippage in time. Most of Lynch's films go in and out of dreamspace (or from dreamspace-to-dreamspace) with complete fluidity. As in the case of *SNM*, you may ask yourself whether it was only partly, or completely a dream. The soundtrack to *Mulholland Drive* borrows genres from a variety of the decades between 1940 and 1970, with some modern synthesizer and sound effects added to skew things further. The banquet scene in *SNM* uses a melding of three tracks from *Mulholland Drive* (mostly a track called "Diner") as the lighting and action slowly shift from dream to nightmare. Macbeth envisions Banquo's ghost as his guests move literally out of time (in slow motion) and point accusatory fingers in his direction. The track is largely an ambient drone of low strings and other sound effects, accented with cymbals and a slide of violins. The symphonic instruments we heard in Herrmann's work for Hitchcock are deconstructed and reconstructed into layers of sound that give the track a much more contemporary feel. At best, the track occupies a place outside of recognizable time periods.

The electronica comes in at the most arresting scene of show: a series of visions presented to Macbeth by the witches. The music cuts through the scene like a tear in the temporal fabric. Strobe lights, nudity, sex, a man wearing a goat's head, a bloody newborn child, and frenetic dancing provide visuals to a track that pulses and clatters along at a breathless 180 beats per minute. The

synthetic pulse of the kick drum and the prominent, distorted synth bass makes clear that the track is from our current era and no other. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Where is our dreamer now? During the two scenes mentioned above that are the most removed from any extant, temporally specific reality, the soundtrack is pulling us into the present. Could we be in a dream that begins in the 60s and reaches back to the 40s while the dreamer lies in the present day?

*SNM* gives us no easy answers, but there are clues. In *Rebecca*, we have a narrator/dreamer from the present (contemporary to the film) looking back through a gauzy lens of memory and dream. *Mulholland Drive* could very well be completely a dream, or a series of dreams. Also telling is the importance of the two scenes above to Shakespeare's work. One sets in motion Macbeth's string of killings and the other marks his unraveling. At the very least, the contemporary music suggests that the dreamer herself is working through some weighty thoughts of her own.

From where is the music coming? There is a large radio visible in the speakeasy bar that has a fondness for the Ink Spots,<sup>10</sup> and some smaller, period-appropriate radios can be found in other rooms. You can sometimes hear the sound of the dial flitting between stations, as if it were being moved by an unseen hand. At other times, the radio music is subsumed completely by ominous drones that could not possibly be a product of any era. In fact, much of the sound could be considered non-diegetic, or at best ambiguous as to its source. In the graveyard, you can hear crickets and in the forest, wind. The performers themselves emit sounds, and some distant thunder can be heard now and then, but that is about it for in-world sound.

Even in the two scenes in *SNM* that feature characters lip-syncing, the source of the music is notably absent; the performers are conspicuously alone on stage, positioned near musician-less instruments. In both cases, they are lip-syncing a voice of the opposite gender. This adds to the haunting quality of their performances. Are we hearing the music in their heads? In the mezzanine overlooking a ballroom dance, a piano and record player also remain inanimate as several characters dance to the music of an unseen band. If *SNM* were simply following the rules of a musical, in which the source of musical accompaniment need not be justified, the inanimate instruments near the performers are making that leap difficult. In most other cases, it is unclear at best whether the characters can hear the music, even as they move to it with great synchronicity.

In *Mulholland Drive*, there is a scene in which the two female leads attend a show at "Club Silencio." There, as the announcer on stage tells us, "There is no band. And yet we hear a band . . . It is all an illusion." A woman comes on stage and appears to sing, a cappella and in Spanish, Roy Orbison's "Crying," then faints and is carried off as the music continues without her. (If you

have seen *SNM*, you may draw several parallels between that scene and a number of moments in the production.) Lynch — a director who personally labors over the details of his soundtracks — is overtly toying with the formal aspects of the typical film soundtrack. What is the source of the sound? Who is controlling it? Why is the music familiar yet foreign? Why are we hearing thunder inside a theater? Could it all be dream? (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

If so, *SNM* is no typical night of dreaming, but one in which the dreamer may fear waking life as much as the dream we are sharing. When the final loop ends with the hanging of Macbeth, we are escorted out of the hotel with the sweetest song of the night: 1939's "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square." Following the death of our tragic hero, the sentiments expressed in this song seem disjunctive, unless a certain freedom is achieved in his death. Some guests are escorted back to the bar by members of the cast, relieved of their masks, and given a sincere kiss on the cheek before the cast finally leaves the stage. The Glenn Miller arrangement we hear throws the melody to the instruments during what would be the biggest lyrical giveaway:

When dawn came stealing up  
 All gold and blue  
 To interrupt our rendezvous  
 I still remember how you smiled and said  
 "Was that a dream or was it true?" ("Nightingale" 1940)

Deprived of this verse, we are given, in a more surreal *SNM* style, these indicators:

That certain night, the night we met  
 There was magic abroad in the air  
 There were angels dining at the Ritz  
 And a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square. ("Nightingale" 1940)

Whether or not you believe in angels, you are unlikely to see them dining at fancy hotel restaurants, and wild birds are not likely to respond to our emotional states any more than the woodland nightingale would be found serenading couples in a city square. The singer is dreaming, but at this moment it is an unabashedly happy dream.

The hopeful read is that the dark dream has resolved into revelatory clarity and happiness. The cynical read is that the dreamer is dwelling in a saccharine state of denial as she wakes or, worse, a state of serious mental illness. A tragically poetic read could have our dreamer dying in her sleep, but feeling a sense of nostalgia and relief as she cuts her worldly ties.

It is easy enough to construct the most cynical interpretation possible — with all the murder, corruption, film noir darkness, and with the looming onset of WWII in the air — that a more hopeful read could be easily overlooked. "The Nightingale" (1843) by Hans Christian Anderson may point the way. Anderson's fable ends with an emperor on his deathbed, tormented by visions of all the good and bad he has done, as well as by the specter of death itself. A particular nightingale, who thankfully holds no grudge, sings a song beautiful enough to ward off death, and the emperor emerges from the dream wiser and happier than ever. Malcolm, the new King of Scotland by *Macbeth's* end, clearly has an obsession with birds, and bird imagery can be found throughout the show. Are we then allowed to believe that the dreamer will emerge from her inner struggle renewed by this hopeful "bird song" that leads us out of the dream world? (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

The above exercise in interpretation is just that — an exercise — and Punchdrunk wishes us to keep exercising. In providing no simple answers or resolution, Punchdrunk forces us to focus on the moment. The experience of moving from room to room, chasing after each character's story and piecing together events, is heightened by the fact that we know, on some level, that the mystery will never fully be resolved. If it were, would we be so tempted to return? Would we continue turning it over in our heads, discussing it with friends, sharing stories on the internet, if the answers were laid out for us so clearly? Rather than force an ending, Punchdrunk wants us to dwell in the experience. As of this writing, they are designing experiences that can extend for days, weeks or longer.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, *SNM* provides that extension by living on in our heads.

Each evening plays out in three one-hour cycles, which begin and end loosely, with two witches in separate locations lip-syncing to the existential pop song "Is That All There is?" The Boy Witch character sings to the 1969 Peggy Lee version that made the song famous. One floor up, Hecate syncs to a heavily doctored male vocal of the same song. The aforementioned reverse-echo effects, pitch shifting, and layering of sound make for a deeply affecting soundscape. Hecate appears to be channeling another prophecy, except this time it is for us. The dreamer is stirring, questioning the very meaning of existence and experience, just before settling into another sleep cycle:

And I stood there shivering  
And watched the whole world go up in flames  
And when it was all over  
I said to myself  
Is that all there is to a fire? ("Is That All There Is?" 1968)



If this song did not exist, Punchdrunk would have had to invent it. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

"Is That All There Is?" The answer is embedded deep within the experience that is *Sleep No More*. As the musical question lingers, the show enters another loop, allowing you to watch again the same events (or new ones) and have a completely different experience. The sequence continues to reveal new layers of complexity, so that your appreciation grows. A song that, upon first listen, comforted you with nostalgic historicity becomes foreboding once you witness subsequent events. After enough time in the unsettling dream world of *Sleep No More*, you realize the reason you are there: to pay attention. Pay attention to what is happening right now because your experience will not ever be the same again, just as if your life was looped over and over, and you would see it differently each time. Just pay attention right now, and you will reap the rewards. If not, it just might all vanish, as if it were nothing more than a dream.

### Notes

1. "Punchdrunk members talk the language of film. Long shots, wide shots, close-ups" (Sekules 2011).
2. "The sound is a very, very important level within our shows. The history of *Sleep No More* as a project— it actually came from sound, it came from old classic film noir soundtracks that actually was a birth for a lot of ideas originally. As a company, we're very much led — I'm kind of an ex-DJ and Steve [Dobbie] who does our sound design is an ex-DJ and an amazing sound designer. I think we all have a huge appreciation for music as company" ([http://www.livestream.com/transmedianewyorkcity/video?clipId=pla\\_120e0804-8c47-4695-953c-b7cc8c7534b5](http://www.livestream.com/transmedianewyorkcity/video?clipId=pla_120e0804-8c47-4695-953c-b7cc8c7534b5); comment is at 02:14:55); video no longer available.
3. The tracks referenced here have been identified by several attendees of the show who posted their findings on the internet. The author has cross-checked these lists and attempted to verify them as best he can during his own visits. Special thanks to Kathryn Yu, Evan Matthew Cobb, and others (who wished to remain unnamed) for their contributions to the knowledge pool.
4. Hecate sings a version of "Is That All There Is?" that makes heavy use of reverse echo, and Banquo dances to a version of "I'll Never Smile again" that uses the effect as it ends and segues to the next scene.
5. "Boulder Bluff" and "Tuxedo Junction," by Glenn Miller, mixed with "Sandman" by Benny Goodman.
6. "My Man" (1959), "Hallelujah I Love Him So" (1959), and "Is That All There Is?" (1969).

7. Only a few guests per night begin their experience with the sixth floor performance, which works to frame their journey with the opening monologue to *Rebecca*. Other guests are introduced to the sixth floor at some point after they have entered the show.
8. The program cover states that the McKittrick was "EST. 1939," and the release dates for the music also point to that year.
9. "Reece" by Ed Rush + Optical (2005) and "Mute" by The Brash (2009).
10. "When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano" (1940), and four others between 1940 and 1942.
11. Punchdrunk producer Colin Nightingale outlined plans for Punchdrunk Travel, in which "people have no idea what they're doing, it heightens the real world for them. They have no idea what's part of the story and what's not" (Rose 2012).

## References

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