

# Review of *Music in Shakespeare*

Kendra Preston Leonard, Silent Film Sound and Music Archive

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## Abstract

Led by Christopher R. Wilson at the University of Hull, the *Music in Shakespeare* project catalogues a range of musical references in Shakespeare's plays and poems and offers a variety of reference materials.

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Supported by the University of Hull, the *Music in Shakespeare* database seeks to "identify every music reference in each play" and in Shakespeare's poems (Wilson). The site consists of a "Home" tab, which includes an introductory paragraph and links to each play and poem; an "Introduction" tab, which provides a set of sub-tabs on topics, such as "References," "Musical Instruments," "Part-Songs," and so on; the database itself, in which users can select a play or poem and view the musical terms used in various editions of the texts; a "Conventions" tab, which explains how the terms were selected and how to read the database; and a tab for "Reference Books," which is largely outdated and does not include any relevant articles or other publications except for the database manager Christopher Wilson's article on "Shakespeare" in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* from 2001.

The database is unfortunately lacking in other ways as well. It does not offer context for or commentary on its entries, which means that nuances regarding the use of music-adjacent terms is often lost, and that literal references to music are conflated with similes and metaphors. Because of this kind of catchall approach and the lack of recent references and contexts, the database has little value for scholars; its audience is currently limited to Shakespeare enthusiasts and those interested in Shakespeare or theater trivia dealing with music.

In addition, the site is a bit clunky to use. Set up in a spreadsheet-style format, it lists sources and editions for each reference across the top, as well as the character speaking. The sources and editions include the 2008 Norton-Oxford edition, the First Folio, and the Quartos where appropriate, as well as what is listed as three "commonly used modern editions of individual plays, namely Arden, Cambridge and Oxford," but does not offer the year of publication, edition number, or editors for any of these, so it is unclear exactly which versions of these series are used in creating

the database. The header of the spreadsheet, listing the sources, characters, and line numbers, is not frozen in place, so as the user scrolls through the listings for each individual play, they must remember which column refers to what source. Because of the numerous columns involved — 14 in total — it would be helpful if this line of the spreadsheet were fixed in place. The database uses a small font (about 8 points) and calls out musical terms by surrounding them with ^ marks rather than bolding them or otherwise signifying them; it only does this in the entry for the Norton-Oxford edition. The entries do adhere to common practice in transcribing text, using "v" and "u" as they occur and forgoing the long "s." In the "Comments" column, there are asides and queries that would be better suited for other columns or for prose commentary, which could be included beneath the spreadsheet display area on the page. In the entry for *I Henry IV*, a comment on Falstaff's line "By Phoebus, he, that wand'ring knight so fair" notes "[=ballad?]."<sup>1</sup> It would be useful to know why the database managers think this might be from a ballad and what ballad that might be, with evidence.

According to the "Introduction," the database classifies anything relating to sound as "music." This includes what Wilson describes as "natural phenomenon [sic];" military cues, regardless of whether music is actually specified or such terms are used in non-musical ways; expressive terms ("sigh" and "mournful" are included), and "miscellaneous or stand-alone terms which may have only an oblique connection with music but which nonetheless support a musical context." This very wide definition of "music" may at first seem to be practical as a manner of including all possible references, but it soon becomes apparent that it is applied inconsistently and that it also creates questions about the definition of music and how Shakespeare used musical or potentially musical terms. Terms are tagged within the database by use of a double caret surrounding the reference. One use in particular is in categorizing and tagging "sonnet" as a universally musical term, when it is clearly not always intended so (despite its lexicographical origin); other examples include the presence of other ambiguous terms, including "cry," and "melancholy." For example, the database lists the stage direction "A sennet sounded" in *Antony and Cleopatra* (Arden 2.7.16, as quoted by Wilson), but in no place is the term "sennet" defined (it is a set of pitches played on a trumpet or cornet to mark the entrance or exit of several actors at once). Similarly, the database includes examples of "sounded" as a verb: "Tell me, moreover, hast thou sounded him," says *Richard II* (1.2.8). But this means "to ask" or "to probe" and is not related to music; "sound" in relation to music comes from the Middle English "sounen;" "soun" in relation to depth or questioning is from a slightly different ME verb, "sounden." ("Sound" as in "healthy" or "hearty" comes from OE "sund," related to modern German's "gesund.") Shakespeare plays with the different definitions in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, when Juliet says "There is no end, no limit, measure,

bound, / In that word's death, no words can that woe sound" (Folger Digital Texts 3.2.136-27). But the database does not distinguish between such instances of usage, which suggests to me that it was compiled mostly without human intervention: a Shakespeare scholar would have made the distinction here. The database could be a useful tool for finding some of the references to music and music theory, instruments, songs, dance, and other music-adjacent words in Shakespeare's plays, but its inconsistency and its omission of a number of references that it should, by its own criteria, have included, alongside a few questionable inclusions, raise questions about interpretation and bias as well as reliability.

The sources listed under "Reference Books" do not contain anything more recent than 2005 and omit essential work by Linda Austern, Amanda Eubanks Winkler, Sharon J. Harris, Seth Lerer, Lucy Munro, Deanna Smid, and many others, as well as the 2017 collection *Shakespeare, Music, and Performance* edited by Bill Barclay and David Lindley (Cambridge UP). A search on "music" in the World Shakespeare Bibliography yields dozens more from the last ten years that would, if added to the references on the database's site, make it a much more scholarly tool than it is at present.

For this review, I made a careful comparison of the database's musical references provided for *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet*, two plays in which music has a significant role; I spot-checked references for two plays in which music does not play much of a role, *Julius Caesar* and *The Comedy of Errors*; and I examined the database's findings for the poem *The Rape of Lucrece*.

Most audiences are familiar with the music referenced in *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet*: there are several identified songs in each play, and there are additional musical references throughout. For *Twelfth Night*, the *Music In Shakespeare* database finds most of the musical references, but misses a few, among them Maria's reference to "caterwauling" and Malvolio's to the singers' "squeak[ing] out" their catches (Folger Digital Texts 2.3.73, 91). More problematic is the way that the database appears to cherry-pick words as musical and non-musical. In *Twelfth Night*, "cry" is tagged as musical language in 1.5, but not 2.5; "consonancy" is not included as a musical term; "melancholy" is also identified as musical in the section on emotional language, but not when it appears in 2.5. The section on "References" holds that Act 3 of *Twelfth Night* is "devoid of music"; this is just one example of where interpretation between readers will differ, causing specific uses to go unnoticed. In 3.1, Olivia asks that the door be shut against Feste, who carries a pipe and tabor; does this not suggest that she does not want to hear him play and/or sing? Does Sir Toby's calling Maria a "wren" in 3.2.65 not suggest bird-song, or is it only to play against Maria's use of "gull" in referring to Malvolio? Does Malvolio's "nightingales answer daws" (3.4.39) not have musical meaning as defined by the "Song Birds" section? Is it certain that Sir Toby's description of "a swaggering accent

sharply twanged off" refers to music? It could be a reference to speech that mimics a plucked string, or it could refer to pronunciation in an entirely non-musical way. "Chantry," as used in 4.3.25, is tagged as musical. But it refers to a private chapel, and while the name does come from its one-time use as a space for singers, that origin does not mean that it retains musical connotations in the play.

In *Hamlet*, the database also selects terms to include and exclude that do not agree with the site's stated methodology. Based on the text that explains the terms that are included, *Hamlet's* entries for 1.1 should include the clock striking 12; the same bell "beating one" (Folger Digital Texts 1.1.46); the "squeak and gibber" of the dead (1.1.128); and the crowing of the cock in the stage directions at 1.1.151, none of which are present in the database. If military terms like "march" are included, as the introduction states, then the reference to Old Hamlet's "solemn march" (1.2.211) should be in the database, but it too is missing, as is Marcellus's reference in 1.2.172 to the cock's crowing. In 1.4.45, the ambiguous "airs from heaven or blasts from hell" should probably be included as musical references; so too should the ghost's cries of "swear" from off or underneath the stage in 1.5. Other examples include the omission of Hamlet's "sigh so piteous" in 2.1.106; Polonius's use of "harping" in 2.2.204; the "hideous crash" and "alarm" of the First Player's recitations in 2.3.501, 534; the use of "rhapsody" in 3.4.47; "discord" in 4.1.46; and others.

In the database's entries for *Julius Caesar* and *The Comedy of Errors*, the confluence of sound with music and the lack of a more exact methodology for selecting terms for the database leads to several questionable inclusions, and there are omissions as well. The same holds for the database's entries on *The Rape of Lucrece*: many are omitted, including "dancing and revelling" ("The Argument"); "high-pitched thoughts" (line 41); and more.

In addition to the erratically chosen selections that make up the database, the database's sections lack scholarly rigor. The database offers brief discussions of the categorizations it employs, including "emotional words," "musical philosophy," "bird songs," and various other groups. However, these short sections do not provide scholarly support for the claims they make. For example, the section on "emotional words" cites as musical the "conventional melancholic 'sigh' of love-sickness characterizes Armado's emotional attempt to woo Jaquenetta, urged on by Moth, in *Love's Labour's Lost* (3.1.10-11)." But the anonymous author of this passage does not cite any of the copious scholarly literature on the sigh, musical or spoken, nor on the widespread understanding that the musical sigh functions as mimesis of the spoken sigh, rather than the other way around. The section on musical instruments is similarly lacking in citations: the (again) anonymous author of the text writes of the virginal, a keyboard instrument, that "Queen Elizabeth herself is thought to have been an accomplished player;" there is eyewitness testimony of Elizabeth I's skills with the instrument and further scholarship that should be referenced here. Similarly, the

discussion of instrumental consorts and the composition and use of "mixed" or "broken" consorts — groups consisting of both wind and string instruments — lacks any references to scholarship on instrumental music-making. The section on song birds stretches all credulity in terms of pairing references with musical meaning: the text marking the presences of owls in *Richard II* and *Macbeth* are in no way used to reference music. The "Conventions" page too is full of problematic scholarly practices: "Empty boxes [in the database] or ones containing an En-dash indicate there is no variant or that a music reference is not specified." How are users to know which has no variant and which lacks the musical reference?

The database could be significantly strengthened by offering brief definitions or commentaries on the instances in which musical terms or language is employed. Glossing words and phrases such as "passy-measures pavin," "wassail," "tabor," and others would provide readers with a greater understanding of the texts included in the database and the context in which they appear in the plays. It would also be a boon for instructors if the database included the full text of the excerpted lines from the Arden (or other popular) editions used, given their popularity in teaching. These additions, along with more scholarly and carefully cited sections, would improve the database significantly, making it a far more reliable and useful resource for users.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from plays are reproduced as they appear in the database, which keys them to the Norton-Oxford text. See the first paragraph on the "Conventions" tab, which reads "the start text is the Norton-Oxford second edition of the complete works, Stephen Greenblatt (general editor), Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2008), except for Edward III which uses the Royal Shakespeare Company edition (ed. Roger Warren, 2002) in order to keep the Cambridge and Oxford texts as the comparators" (Wilson)
2. The editors would like to acknowledge the copyediting and markup work of Ceciley Pangburn and other students in Sujata Iyengar's ENGL 4810 class at the University of Georgia in Fall 2019.

## References

- Wilson, Christopher R. *Music in Shakespeare*. Available online at: <http://www.shakespeare-music.hull.ac.uk/> [accessed 22 October 2019].
- Folger Shakespeare Library. *Shakespeare's Plays* from Folger Digital Texts. Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles. Folger Shakespeare Library, 22 October, 2019. Available online at [folgerdigitaltexts.org](http://folgerdigitaltexts.org) [accessed 22 October 2019]