

# The Past is a Foreign Country: World Musics Signifying History in/and Elizabethan Drama

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## Abstract

Research on global Shakespeare has focused on the ways in which the plays have been adapted for indigenous languages and customs. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which non-British directors have treated the Elizabethan drama. Yet there are a number of works that create direct musical dialogues between Elizabethan drama, history, and the cultures of England's colonies. In Tim Supple's 2003 *Twelfth Night*, Indian music signifies the divide between Viola and Sebastian's origins and a British Illyria; a 2006 Danish *Ur-Hamlet* uses music from former British colonies and a faux-medieval score that serve as "an exchange of cultural manifestations." And both the BBC's *Virgin Queen* (2005) and Kapur's 2007 *Elizabeth: the Golden Age* use Indian music to represent the empire's colonial enterprises. I examine how these musics function in the context of screen works, and what their use might signify in Elizabethan drama and historical pieces overall.

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As my title suggests, filmmakers trying to capture the past have often treated it — or perhaps found it — to be as challenging as representing a place that is exotic and new to them. In re-creating the past in cinema or on stage, directors and music directors construct what Umberto Eco terms a doxastic world. This is a fictional world created not whole cloth, but rather as "*parasitic* on the real world. A fictional possible world is one in which everything is similar to our so-called real world, except for the variations explicitly introduced by the text" (Eco 2001, 81, emphasis in original). The creation of an equally rich musical world, both within and outside of a work's diegesis, plays a large part in identifying and representing a particular fictional world. As much as a director might want to create an "authentic" aural environment, doing so is impossible; the closest re-creation will owe some of its details to speculation, albeit by experts, and be affected by the interference of modern sensibilities and technologies. Thus, music scores for cinematic Shakespearean adaptations and works set in the early modern period can and do include meaningful musical materials from a wide variety of times and places. Although music, using a common language of modern signifiers, is most often used in film to establish the chrono- and geo-locations of the settings, it can also function

as a means for understanding the interpretations of the events being depicted and viewpoints of the work's creative agents. The use of musics from outside the period and place depicted — especially "world music," that which is not from a Western art tradition — are frequently used to emphasize difference: the general differences between the present and past as well as the differences of class, gender, and religious practices, both between the present and the past and within varying groups in the past. Here I present four cases in which the musical traditions, materials, or sounds of British colonies or other "exotic" locales are used to signify the past and difference in adaptations of early modern dramatic works or biopics set in the Elizabethan period.

### An Alternate-World *Twelfth Night*

In director Tim Supple's 2003 *Twelfth Night* the action is set in a Britain in which Elizabethan beliefs, behaviors, and codes for gender performance and representation are still in effect, but in which small cultural and material artifacts of a more modern world are also present. Supple and musical director Nitin Sawhney use music to create what Katherine Rowe and Thomas Cartelli call a "citational environment": a "habitation" for adaptations that references "cultural and generic fields that incorporate specific stances towards source materials and rules for handling them" (Cartelli and Rowe 2007, 28-29). In this case, those references are to two particular doxastic habitations. The first is the music and culture of a very generalized twentieth-century India, from which Sebastian and Viola escape after their parents are assassinated in a political coup, which, in the adaptation, still apparently owes some allegiance to Britain. Sebastian's bilingualism in Hindi and English, the use of multicultural music, design, and class hierarchies, and the interaction of Shakespearean text with Indian musical styles and instruments all contribute to what Dennis Bartholomeusz calls "distinctive mutuality," a historical condition between India and Britain that Supple and Sawhney exploit in creating their own world for this film (Trivedi and Bartholomeusz 2005, 22). The second is that of a post-World War II Britain, signified visually through Sebastian's print copy of *London A-Z*, Toby's use of turntables in music-making, and the costuming of Illyrian characters.

Sawhney, whose other works include the soundtrack for Mira Nair's film *The Namesake* and the Cirque du Soleil show *Varekai*, is known for pieces that mix Indian classical music with jazz, dance beats, and electronica. Over the course of *Twelfth Night*, Sawhney develops four distinct musical cultures: an Indian-influenced music for Viola's transformation into Cesario and for her appearances with Orsino; Western art music, often Mozart, associated with the aristocrats Orsino and Olivia; rock, played by the hard-living Toby; and a variety of early art music/folk music played by Feste that both stands on its own and later bridges all four musical worlds. These delineations and their combinations and overlaps serve as markers of class, gender, and space throughout the

film. Music with obvious Indian influences connects the film's imaginary Britain with an equally imaginary India; despite their fictitiousness, though, the two have a relationship obviously similar to that of our own world. The use of Indian musical elements at once frames the twins' positions as refugees and Others in relation to those with whom they interact in the play.

Supple begins his adaptation of *Twelfth Night* by rapidly establishing the film's ethnicities and classes, focusing on Viola after an introduction that compares her status and location prior to her landing in Illyria with Orsino's home, identified as the height of urbanity and sophistication, in contrast to the chaos of Viola's initial geographic locality. The film opens with a view of Viola and Sebastian at sea and the sounds of an Indian melody played on a bansuri, or flute, accompanied by traditional drums. The scene then cuts away to Orsino, commanding a singer and pianist in his home, "If music be the food of love, play on." The film cuts several times between these characters in rapid succession; the soundtrack likewise also moves abruptly from Viola's non-diegetic Indian soundscape to the musical diegesis in Orsino's home, where the musicians perform an aria from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Immediately, the audience has two disparate soundscapes and environments to absorb: a clearly Eastern one, marked by indigenous instruments playing in a recognizably Eastern style, and a Western one, signified by a composer whose music has come to be what Melanie Lowe calls one of the most ubiquitous codes for "affluence, superior intelligence, and especially 'civilized' behavior" on screen (Lowe 2002, 103). The diegesis of Orsino's private concert begins to cover the bansuri and drums, becoming non-diegetic for the scenes of Viola and Sebastian in hiding. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) As the music shifts, so does the location, and the audience is clearly meant to understand that it is *from* the music of India and *to* the music of the West — in particular, a West that has long colonized and usurped the art of the East — that Viola and Sebastian travel, and that despite their geographical shift, they remain associated with the East (Leonard 2014a).

### The Fantasy Past of the *Ur-Hamlet*

The 2006 *Ur-Hamlet* created by the Danish Nordic Theatre Laboratory/Odin Teatret uses the music of former British colonies and a score of faux-Northern European medieval sounds, intended as "an exchange of cultural manifestations" that suggests a view of Shakespeare from outside of the Anglophone world. The production was designed to bring together different acting traditions from across the world; in doing so, it also incorporated music from these cultures. The *Ur-Hamlet* uses Asian musics to suggest the complexities of the story and the Latin narrative of Saxo Grammaticus to emphasize its age and history. However, despite claims from director Eugenio

Barba that the cultures of this production are not in tension with one another, the music suggests otherwise, signifying race and character in disturbing ways.

Erik Exe Christofferson notes that much of the group's work deals with "'foreignness' as a fundamental condition in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (Christofferson 2008, 107). In their *Ur-Hamlet*, foreignness is present both in the plot and metadiegetically in the production. The program for the production notes that, "Diversity is the basic matter of theatre," and the citational environment created for the *Ur-Hamlet* includes music influenced by Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, Balinese Gambuh theater, Indian theater and dance, Noh theater, Nankuan opera, and popular American music forms. Christofferson writes that the multicultural approach "creates a reflexivity in the 'form of otherness,' since anyone can be 'foreign' in the social context" (122). But the citational environment is a confused and confusing one. Although the creators' desire seems to have been a cultural and class-based switch of the too-often historic reality of white European hegemony and its oppression of non-whites, instead the play offers audiences an Indonesian upper class that is corrupt beneath its layers of gold; an Amleth who is played by one of the only black actors to appear and who is dehumanized through his forced play-acting as a dog and the removal of his voice and its replacement with animalistic bird noises; and a presentation of the medieval East and West as, respectively, the epitome of louché savagery and the height of sophistication for their times (Leonard 2016, 85). In trying to discard the hegemonies of the past, as described in literature, the creators nonetheless have re-inscribed inequality and bias in an unwritten form. Saxo Grammaticus, played in bald pate by a white woman, is backgrounded by faux-European Medieval music; Hamlet's father and mother are accompanied by Balinese music and dance forms, while Hamlet, shown here as assertive, aggressive, and warrior-like, is depicted by a black Brazilian actor who performs movements drawn from capoeira to the accompaniment of heavy drumming. When he feigns madness, his screams mimic animal calls over intense drumming — tropes not unlike those that have been used repeatedly in the past to symbolize the exotic and primitive in Western music. The "plague rats," or foreigners, who have invaded the realm celebrate with Western harmonies and a mariachi trumpet, but when Hamlet returns to take power, he is derided by the crowd, which now sings and performs Balinese-style music. Hamlet, in modern clothes, fights with those in Balinese garb, and then, over a bluesy backbeat and a melody played on an Indian flute, he "proclaims the rules of the new order," again by mimicking animal or bird sounds. Hamlet himself never speaks or sings, and he returns the kingdom to its Balinese origins. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

While this is not, to be clear, the story of the student from Wittenberg, and is about brutality, the character of Hamlet is overtly racialized as the uncontrollable, animalistic black, set against those

outside of his race. He alone of the major characters is stripped of his voice and allowed vocalicity only through the imitation of the sounds of non-humans — beasts and birds. The instrumental music that is used to signify him, the only example of black music used in the piece, is in striking contrast to the Balinese and Indian music used to accompany those of the court and the Western music that accompanies the foreigners. Hamlet is often accompanied by drums alone, the traditional cinematic musical signifier of primitivism, used in the past to indicate the presence of "Indian braves," and "African savages." These signifiers place Hamlet the character in a sphere of Otherness not applied to other characters in the saga.

This is not to say that other non-Western musics get a free pass: the glitter and opulence of Balinese costume and music represent corruption and the complexity of court politics: everyone is on the take, and no one notices the incoming "foreigners" until they have spread their pathogens. The Western music of these "plague rats" is itself a condemnation: they steal everything they can, including musical materials; when at the end of the production they try to rise up against the court, they do so to the sounds of blues, music with many parents much assimilated. The *Ur-Hamlet*, then, does not give us multiculturalism working in harmony, or even amicably side-by-side, but instead, reiterates past musical tropes of exoticism and racial stereotyping. Perhaps everyone here is "foreign," but the musical practices of the production make this less unifying and more alienating. The reification of white privilege and Eurocentrism, along with the positioning of a quasi-fictional Balinese culture in a doxastic setting, brings to mind George Orwell's self-contradictory concept of one culture being "more equal" than another.

### Musicking Elizabeths, Her Peers, and Her Places

The use of global music as a signifier of difference also extends to screen works about and set in the Elizabethan period itself, particularly biopics about major figures such as Elizabeth I. The exemplification of Elizabeth I as a representative of the English early modern is not a new phenomenon, and her numerous meanings and identities, as scholar Susan Frye has discovered, "continue to be constructed and contested, whether she is portrayed by Glenda Jackson [in *Elizabeth R*] in all the dignity of a BBC production, [or] by John Cleese cross-dressed as the Fairy Queen with a heavy mustache" (Frye 1997, ix). This iconic status has made Elizabeth a favorite figure for filmmakers, rendering every element of her identity available for musical interpretation. Indeed, as countless screen works about Elizabeth demonstrate, the Elizabeth I biopic as a genre functions as a doxastic-world sandbox in which writers and directors can try out new theories, suppositions, and projections about Elizabeth's life, politics, beliefs, preferences, and personality. Indeed, as Barbara Hodgdon has written, Elizabeth I "is and has been a construction — certainly one whose time has

come round again but nonetheless one who had to wait for a critical practice that could re-produce her" (Hodgdon 1998, 111).

In screen works about Elizabeth, music plays an important and often prominent role in this process of construction. The music for these works has multiple functions, of which setting the period is only the beginning. Frequently, music signifies Elizabeth's gender, gender performativity, and gendered spaces; the expectations or restrictions placed upon her; and her social position, education, and religious beliefs, as well as those of the characters around her. The music of such screen works contributes to the citational environment in a variety of complex ways, creating references to the English early modern, intellectualism (for example, the use of Mozart in Shekhar Kapur's 1998 *Elizabeth*), the United Kingdom as a single realm (Elgar's "Nimrod" from the *Enigma Variations* in the same film), political conflicts with Scotland and Ireland, and concepts less precise: a sense of an era long past, an exotic world of wealth and adventure, and the strength of individual characters. And, as I have written elsewhere, music previously known to audiences can create "ghostly" resonances, in which the original context of the music bleeds through into the new use (Carlson 2003, 6). Viewers with previous musical knowledge of Mozart or those who have seen *Amadeus* will recognize Mozart's requiem in D minor at the end of Elizabeth, signifying the end of one period of Elizabeth's life. Music can guide an audience through the space that separates creator and consumer, mapping the multitudes of musical/visual relationships in what Richard Burt dubs the "cinematographosphere" (Burt 2008, 24; Leonard 2014b, 170).

*The Virgin Queen*, a 2005 BBC biopic mini-series, has an original score by Martin Phipps. Phipps combines a number of modern and non-western instruments; his choice of instruments also nods to England's colonial acquisitions and aspirations. The mix includes the Hardanger, a Scandinavian folk fiddle; the Indian sarangi and Persian kamancheh, both bowed string instruments that can sound remarkably like the human voice; the Celtic harp; the duduk, an Armenian wind instrument that produces a deep, buzzy sound; and a wide variety of percussion instruments. The low, almost ambient sound of the duduk has been used to signify the dangerous Other in films such as *The Brotherhood of the Wolf*, *Hotel Rwanda*, and *Munich*; in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *JAG*, and *The Path to 9/11* and the video games *World of Warcraft*, *God of War*, and *Mass Effect III*. Here it represents danger from any non-white or non-Protestant person or faction. The habitation created by the combination of Anglophone and Indian musics develops from Bartholomeusz's distinctive mutuality, suggesting nations equally dependent on and dangerous to one another, even if it is white privilege and a sense of Otherness on the part of white Britons (and, metadiegetically speaking, audiences) about all things Indian that allows for the signification of non-Western instruments in this way.

Indian instruments and music imitating various genres from the subcontinent are used primarily when Elizabeth is in danger. Instances in which this music is most obvious include when Mary Tudor is believed to be pregnant; immediately following Mary Stuart's execution, when Elizabeth thinks that her soul is in danger of hell; and when signal fires are lit, indicating the sighting of the Spanish Armada. These aural landscapes are in direct contrast to those that surround Elizabeth when she is shown in times of happiness or victory, which usually contain her theme (an original composition for the film) and an interweaving of pseudo-Elizabethan sounds, the Celtic fiddle, and modern rock sounds. Indeed, when Elizabeth is shown giving her famous Tilbury speech, she is accompanied by Celtic-style fiddling that is apparently meant to signify the strength of her united nation and is easily identifiable as "British" music by naïve or uninformed audiences. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Unlike the use of such music in *Twelfth Night*, where it represented a recognized history of colonialism, Indian music here is a superficial stand-in for menace and malevolence. The use of non-Western music to represent danger — particularly to a white Western woman — creates a racist perspective that permeates the series. The use of Celtic music is also problematic in a classist way; England's occupation and subordination of the Irish and their nationhood makes the use of Celtic fiddling here an appropriation of the art of one group by its oppressor. It suggests that the contemporary and continued appropriation of Irish national identity by the English, even as they seek to eradicate its creators, is somehow a positive attribute of Elizabeth's reign.

The score for *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, directed by Shekhar Kapur, was written by two composers with rather disparate backgrounds: Craig Armstrong, who also created the score for *Ray*, and A. R. Rahman, later the composer of the score for *Slumdog Millionaire*. The film's three main themes, labeled "Love," "Destiny," and "Divinity," are all similar to the kinds of large, sweeping themes used in other Elizabethan and heritage productions, and which have become a common aural trope for the genre. It is within the confines of these themes that Indian music and other non-Western sounds are employed, citing the eventual reach of Elizabeth's power and legacy. Film music critic William Ruhlmann thought that the score for *The Golden Age* had "a seemingly inappropriate Indian flavor to the music" and wondered whether "the Indian or Indian-heritage artists making these films and these scores felt compelled to sneak a bit of their own culture in, whether it makes sense or not, perhaps as a claim on the Indian influence on the British Empire" (Ruhlmann 2012). However, I read this musical environment and its incorporation of Indian soundscapes as a deliberate acknowledgment of the empire Elizabeth was building, and the intercultural consequences — the cultural mutuality — that colonizing India would eventually have on the British Empire.

The opening text of *The Golden Age* contextualizes the film in terms of England's inferior status to Spain and its need to reassert itself as a strong nation. Kapur's conceit for the film is that heroic England, harassed and threatened by villainous Spain, rises to the top by dint of superior religion and leadership. At the beginning of the film, the music can be clearly demarcated into three categories based on the vocal writing — or lack thereof — included in the overall mix. King Philip II's Catholic Spain is repeatedly signified by chant, performed by low male voices. Mary Stuart, shown here as constantly plotting with Spain, is represented by wordless soprano voices, a feminine-coded counterpoint to the masculine-coded music of Philip. England and Elizabeth, on the other hand, are musically characterized with instrumental music only; Spain, in a way, has stolen the voices and power of the English.

The film shows Mary Stuart in captivity in Scotland, where her contextual villainy is orchestrated with sopranos and synthesizer as well as the timbres of non-Western instruments, signifying her foreignness in Elizabeth's kingdom. As *The Golden Age* progresses, this trope of sopranos and non-Western timbres becomes richer and denser. The arrest of Mary's supporters and the scene in which Mary receives news that she is to be executed are accompanied by soprano voices, and the execution itself is scored with non-Western winds and percussion under this wordless vocal line. The Otherness of the execution's soundscape, particularly the use of percussion, which includes synthesized sounds in the mix with Indian tabla (drums) and danda (sticks), further signifies Mary and her Catholic supporters as foreign to Elizabeth's England, although incorporated into the greater Empire. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) The use of Indian timbres and rhythms signify not only Otherness, but, as the film progresses and Indian instruments become more commonplace in the overall mix, they also come to indicate that Elizabeth's desires to exploit these locations and cultures for the benefit of England are crucial elements of her reign. They are accepted, albeit in a highly segregated manner, for the good of the whole.

## Conclusion

Examining the music used to represent early modern drama, the England of Elizabeth, and Elizabeth herself offers a number of modern viewpoints about the practices and manners of the early modern period, the ways in which the creators of screen works parse these practices, and how audiences hear this past. In the absence of authenticity, such works necessarily carry with them the mores of their own times as well as those from the past — or those thought to be from the past — that their creators wish to project. Based on a reading of shared practices in the scores surveyed here, the grittier aspects of life and the dangers of that past are cited through the use of music and

sounds that many modern-day Western audiences still find "foreign," while the glories of early modern England are broadly signified by the sound of Western art music. Music directors make it clear just how foreign the past is, and how differently things are done there.

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