

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

On 9 January 2024, the Shakespeare Club welcomed Dr Jen Waghorn speaking on “The Background Musician Characters in Shakespeare’s Plays”, for its 959th meeting chaired by Karolyn Brooks.

Dr Waghorn first spoke about the function of music in the theatre in Shakespeare’s period, when what we would now call background music was dynamic and live, originating from different parts of the theatre, with no volume control, often performed by musicians who were not part of the permanent company.

At the time, Thomas Wythorne defined the many degrees of musician, from composers, to those who performed in private houses, to travelling minstrels. The musical instruments used in the theatres also varied. Trumpets and drums, heard in city pageants, were used in outdoor theatres during Shakespeare’s histories, whereas stringed instruments like viols were quieter than their modern equivalents and required both performers and audience to pay attention to their music.

In outdoor theatres like the Globe, musicians could be situated around the building: the De Witt drawing shows a trumpeter at roof level, and musicians could be out of sight behind a curtain, or below the stage as well as on the stage, interacting with the actors. Music could produce a variety of atmospheric effects, such as the ethereal music described by Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice* or the foreboding music of *Macbeth*.

From around 1608 there was an important shift as Shakespeare’s company began to use the indoor, intimate Blackfriars Theatre where there is evidence that a regular group of musicians performed.

Boys were taken on as apprentices, and it is possible to see how Shakespeare wrote parts depending on the skills of the boys at his disposal. Mopsa and Dorcas in *The Winter’s Tale* do not have to be good singers, whereas in *The Tempest*, goddesses perform a much more demanding elaborate masque.

Dr Waghorn speculated that Shakespeare’s interest in the social status of performers, such as Feste in *Twelfth Night* could be attributed to his desire to improve his own status.

As well as being entertaining in its own right, music could be used to fill time: in *As You Like It*, one of the songs is introduced to allow time for one of the characters to change costume, for instance.

She ended by discussing two important musicians known to have worked with Shakespeare late in his career. Robert Johnson was a lutenist at court who by 1610 was influencing the tone of the plays, his music featuring in *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*. John Wilson began his extraordinary career as an apprentice in Shakespeare’s company in 1611. He is named in the First Folio as the musician Balthasar in *Much Ado About Nothing*, singing “Sigh no more, ladies”. He later became a court musician and wrote music for the King’s Men

before going to Oxford where he eventually became the first Professor of Music at the University of Oxford.

Dr Waghorn illustrated her talk by playing her own rebec, and by singing one of John Wilson's songs. Her engaging presentation was followed by many questions from the audience.