

The Studio

The Stage – Creative brief 1: Create music for King Lear scene

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King Lear: full synopsis

King Lear is set in the court of an ageing British monarch. Shakespeare probably wrote it in around 1604, sandwiched between two other great tragedies, *Othello* and *Macbeth*.

This synopsis is by Rebecca Lenkiewicz and is drawn from the Royal Shakespeare Company's Education resource. You may want to have a look at the RSC website for more information about the play:

<https://www.rsc.org.uk/king-lear/>

King Lear is old and has decided to give his power over to his three daughters so that he can live his last years untroubled. His eldest daughter, Goneril, is married to the Duke of Albany. Regan is next, her husband is the Duke of Cornwall. Cordelia is the youngest and is Lear's favourite. The King of France and the Duke of Burgundy are at court each hoping to marry her. Before the division of lands Lear asks his daughters who loves him most? Goneril and Regan praise him to the heights. But Cordelia has nothing to say. Lear tries to persuade her but she refuses to play this game. Lear is enraged: 'Nothing? Nothing will come of nothing.'

The Earl of Kent, Lear's loyal adviser, defends Cordelia. Lear banishes him. He must leave within ten days or die. There is no dowry to be had from marriage to Cordelia. Burgundy retracts his proposal. But the King of France steps forward and claims Cordelia. Lear storms out. The King of France and Cordelia leave the court. Goneril and Regan discuss their father, they must act carefully to gain power.

Although banished Kent is still loyal to the king and worries about his power hungry daughters. He disguises himself as a servant and calls himself 'Caius'. He works for Lear and defends his honour when the sisters or their servants are belittling the king.

The Earl of Gloucester is another of Lear's advisers. He has two sons. His eldest is Edgar who will inherit his title and wealth. Gloucester's younger son Edmund was born outside of marriage. Gloucester loves him but

Edmund is still plagued by the fact that he is illegitimate, a “bastard”, and will therefore inherit nothing. Edmund studies the stars and the constellations for prophesies. He shows his father a letter, supposedly written by Edgar. In which Edgar suggests the killing of their father. Gloucester does not realise that Edmund has faked the letter and is angry and puzzled and hurt. Edmund warns Edgar that he must leave or he will be killed. Edgar runs away . Edmund cuts himself and tells his father that Edgar did it to him. Edgar disguises himself as a beggar and calls himself 'Poor Tom'. He lives in a hovel on the heath and covers his naked body with mud and dirt.

King Lear, now powerless, tries to negotiate with his daughters how many of his knights he can bring with him to their two homes. Goneril and Regan question why he needs even one knight? Lear is outraged, fuming: 'O question not the need!'

Both daughters refuse to house his men. Lear is livid at their refusal. He travels with his Fool who keeps reminding him of how he abandoned his only truly loving daughter. Lear fears that he is losing his mind. He takes off his clothes and runs onto a heath in the rain. He shouts at the wind and challenges the storm and ignores Kent and his Fool who urge him to find shelter. They encounter Edgar in his naked muddy state and Lear feels close to him, both ragged, fragile in their minds. They spend time in a makeshift shelter where Lear imagines his daughters in court and his trial of them.

Gloucester arrives and wants to help Lear. Edmund tells Regan and Cornwall of his father's attempts to help him. Gloucester's allegiance to the King is seen as treachery. Regan and Cornwall tie Gloucester up. They torture him and put out his eyes.

Lear is taken secretly to Dover. Cordelia has landed there with a French army. The blinded Gloucester meets his son Edgar whilst wandering. Edgar is hugely distressed by his father's condition but disguises his grief and continues to be 'Poor Tom'. He leads his father to Dover. Gloucester wants to kill himself. Edgar leads him to what he describes as a cliff. It is really just flat beach. Gloucester throws himself off but survives as there was no real fall. **Lear and Cordelia are wonderfully reconciled. She forgives him and he is so happy to be with her again.** But now there is a battle and they are captured by Goneril and Regan's soldiers. Lear comforts Cordelia: 'We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.'

Goneril and Regan are both in love with Edmund. He has promised himself to both women. Albany discovers this and accuses Edmund of treachery. An unknown visored knight challenges Edmund. They fight. Edmund is fatally wounded. The knight reveals himself to be Edgar.

Goneril poisons Regan and kills herself. Edmund is dying but repentant. He tries to stop his order to hang Cordelia. But it is too late. Lear enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms. His Fool too has been hanged. Lear holds Cordelia. He dies, broken. Edgar takes over power and breathes hope after so much despair.

The scene in detail: Act IV, Scene 7 (extract)

The Creative brief invites composers to create music for an extract of this scene. The scene is highlighted in red text in the full synopsis above, so you can see how it fits into the whole play. A more detailed description of exactly what is happening in this scene is below:

King Lear has taken leave of his senses in earlier scenes, having been banished to the heath during a storm, and remains in a trance or deep slumber. The Doctor tells Cordelia that her father is ready to be woken up. They have music played for him, and Cordelia talks about how his other daughters have betrayed him. When Lear wakes up, he is confused and doesn't know where he is at first – he thinks he might be dead. Slowly, he recognises Cordelia, and father and daughter are reunited for the first time since he unfairly banished her. Lear expresses his humility and asks for forgiveness. Cordelia reassures him that she bears him no ill.

This scene is a quiet, touching moment, and the most peaceful and calm scene up to this point in the play.

Composing for the scene

Functions of music in the theatre productions

Live or recorded music in theatre productions (as opposed to opera or musical theatre) is there for a variety of reasons, and to fulfil different functions – you might want to think about these while you're composing. Music could be there:

- **to underline the mood or emotion of a scene.** This could be something the text tells the audience already, or it could be a hidden mood that may not be explicit in the text, but that the director has decided for the scene. What is the emotional mood of this scene? Is it the same throughout?
- **to establish the time or place of the play.** For example, using instruments indigenous to the country or authentic to the period the play is set in. This would depend on the production – for example, directors often set Shakespeare's plays in different eras and places, not just 16th century England! Our version of the scene has no set or costume, so it is up to you whether you want your music to reflect a certain time or geographical place, or if you would prefer just to focus on other elements
- **to fill time during a scene change** – either for practical purposes for any scenery moves, costume changes or for actors to move to the right position, or to allow breathing space between scenes
- **to provide realistic atmosphere/setting** for a scene that has music in it that can also be heard by the actors, for example if the scene is set at a party, where there is music. Music that the audience and characters can both hear is called **diegetic**. Music that only the audience "can hear" is **non-diegetic**. In this scene, music is mentioned by one of the characters (see note below about clues in the text)
- **to turn text or lyrics into songs.** Shakespeare wrote many song lyrics in his plays, which composers have created music for. This isn't relevant to this scene, but could be useful to think about for any future theatre composing

The sounds that make up the entirety of any theatrical production (or film) can be thought of as four distinct elements:

- The spoken text or dialogue
- Non-spoken sounds such as sound effects or natural sounds, such as footsteps, doors, weather sounds, breathing, a gun shot
- Music
- Silence

When composing your music, remember that it is one of four elements and bear in mind that all four will need to form a balance... and remember that sometimes silence can be very powerful!

Before you start:

- Watch the scene and read the text and play synopsis, so you know what is happening in the story
- Think about **what instrument(s)** you will compose for
- **Think about the structure** of the scene and how much music you need – you don't necessarily need to have music playing throughout. Shakespeare tells us that there is music playing at the start of this scene, but from then it is up to you.

You could decide to have:

- Music at the start and end of the scene only
- Music coming in and out at key moments – will this be fading in and out, or more abrupt? Will it be linked to a specific cue in the text?
- Music playing throughout

Key things to consider:

- **Volume.** Your music must not drown out the actors. Unlike in film music, where dialogue and music are mixed in a studio to ensure correct sound levels, in live theatre and with live music you need to make sure your music isn't fighting with the actors' text. In [Simon's video](#), he suggests using no more instruments than actors in the scene, to keep a good balance
- **Frequency.** More subtle than volume, but think about the actors' voices. King Lear speaks in a deep voice, and Cordelia speaks in a higher voice. You may want to make sure that the pitches you choose in your composition complement rather than compete with the actors' voices in this way... but still keeping it musical!
- **Clues in the text.** We hear the Doctor say "louder the music there" – which implies she is speaking to musicians playing music somewhere. What kind of music would they be playing? Do you want to use this cue in your composition, to create a big musical moment there?
- **Mood.** What kind of mood do you think this scene is? What is King Lear feeling? What is his state of mind? What is Cordelia feeling? Do you want to reflect any of this in your music?

Things to try:

Try playing lots of different music alongside the clip – this could be you playing an instrument, or playing existing music. What happens to the scene? Does the music affect the mood or meaning of the scene? If you record yourself and play back what you've made, with the scene, which versions do you like best? You can then finesse your improvisation to create your final soundtrack.

Before you get complicated with your music, try a couple of simple musical things and play them along with the scene. What can you do with just a drone? Or a simple pulse or heartbeat rhythm? Can you play with volume or dropping in and out, with just these simple elements? This may help you build your composition.

What next

Share your composition:

When you have created your composition, we would love to hear it and showcase it on The Studio. You can send an audio file to education@lpo.org.uk if you would like us to add it to our video playlist, so The Studio community can watch the scene with your soundtrack. Please send audio files by email or wetransfer, along with how you wish to be credited (your name, school/college if relevant, age, instrumental line-up or name of anyone performing on your track if not you, any comments on your process or other comments you think would be interesting to include). We can't perform any written scores, so please just send audio.

Explore more:

- For more information about Shakespeare's Globe 2017 production of King Lear, for which Simon Slater composed the music, visit <http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/theatre/whats-on/globe-theatre/king-lear-2017>
- For general advice on composing, take a look at our playlist of composers' top tips for aspiring composers on The Studio homepage: <https://www.lpo.org.uk/education/lpo-soundworks-studio.html>
- A lot of the functions of music for the stage cross over with functions of narrative film music. Dr Vasco Hexel, composer and academic, summarises this on our "Introduction to narrative film music" playlist on The Studio Film page: <https://www.lpo.org.uk/education/lpo-soundworks-studio-film.html>
- If you are interested in what goes into becoming a professional theatre composer, Michael Bruce has written a really interesting blog: <https://nickhernbooksblog.com/2016/07/13/michael-bruce-how-i-became-a-theatre-composer/>