

Scoring the Bard :: Alexander Sovronsky on Treading, and Tuning, the Boards

by Kilian Melloy
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edge

Is it just me, or is original music for Boston's theater scene -- even the smaller productions -- becoming more common?

Either way, it's a good thing for live theater. Whether the music is performed live or is recorded, an original score tailor-made to a particular production's style, emphasis, and vision adds immeasurably to the experience.

Such is certainly the case with Alexander Sovronsky's score for Actors' Shakespeare Project's "Henry VIII," playing through Jan. 5 at the Modern Theatre at Suffolk University, in Boston's Theater District.



The New York-based Sovronsky has rare working insight into the power and place of music in live theater, being both a composer and an actor. Indeed, he has an extensive resume on both counts, having served in multiple capacities on numerous productions.

"The music came first," Sovronsky recounted. "Since I was 3 years old I've been a classical violinist. When I got into high school I was introduced to Shakespeare, and I was looking for a way to combine my two loves."

Not that there was necessarily a dearth of opportunities: Sovronsky went on to note, "Every single Shakespeare play has many dances and songs and references to music. Shakespeare was a genius at utilizing music as a core element of his storytelling and it is present in every one of his works."

The joining of the two arts, theater and music, came about naturally -- and at the behest of others.

"With me having been cast as an actor in a lot of classical plays when I started my career, people would find out that I was also a musician and ask me to play music in addition to acting in the shows. There's always a musician under a balcony somewhere," the composer jokingly told EDGE, "and in some cases I ended up writing music for the shows. That's how I got started as a composer."



In the course of his career, Sovronsky has scored other period pieces such as "The Three Musketeers" (for the Connecticut Repertory Theatre, where he also played two roles onstage), "Cyrano de Bergerac" (on Broadway, in a production starring Kevin Kline) and "Les Liaisons

Dangereuses," (for Shakespeare and Company). He's even picked up some experience with the deeply American genre of bluegrass (for the Atlantic Theatre Company's production of "Bottom of the World").

Sovronsky has also acted onscreen in a number of productions; sharp-eyed viewers might note him playing a violin at the big wedding scene in the movie "Sex and the City 2." EDGE wondered whether the composer -- whose breadth of

geographical range calls to mind a troubadour from the days of the historically-set plays towards which he gravitates -- might ever take on musical genres such as rock, pop, soul, blues...

"I love all music, but I am definitely more drawn to styles that utilize live instruments rather than electronically-generated sounds. I haven't had the chance to score a show with rock or pop music, but if the opportunity were to come along, I'd certainly give it a shot. I think I could bring something unique to pop music with my background in string instruments," Sovronsky reckoned.

Indeed, the composer would know all about the heart and soul of music, playing such a large collection of instruments. His website provides a lengthy rundown that lists "violin, mandolin, flute, tin whistle, ukulele, guitar, piano, ocarina, melodica, laouta (turkish lute), basic accordion, tenor banjo, fife, recorder, glockenspiel, bodhran, hand percussion, whistling" and, the catalogue teasingly adds, "others." But he doesn't play brass instruments, and that, Sovronsky told EDGE, exerts some influence on how he approached the score for "Henry VIII," which uses both original material and preexisting music.

"When the play called for a flourish of trumpets or coronets, that's when I turned to something prerecorded," Sovronsky said. "It is immensely helpful to be a composer that can also play a slew of instruments, but I'm not a one-man full orchestra, unfortunately. Depending on the budget of the production I try to either hire other musicians (who can play instruments that I can't) to record original music or I will utilize a prerecorded track and edit it to make it fit the needs of the production. I am also able to add instruments [to preexisting music recordings], as I did by adding a solo violin line to a solo trumpet recording for the baptism of the Princess Elizabeth at the end of the play."

One striking example of how Sovronsky adapted a preexisting composition is his use of Monteverdi's "Prologue" from "L'Orfeo" for a moment of pomp in Henry VIII's court. The piece is lush,

regal and ornate, a perfect pick for the moment -- and bright with brass.

"Monteverdi premiered 'L'Orfeo' in 1607, which is just a few years before the first performance of 'Henry VIII,'" Sovronsky pointed out. "Shakespeare himself utilized music in his plays from a variety of sources -- everything from contemporary songs to old ballads and folk tunes. I think the most important thing to him was making the music support the stories being told onstage and connect to the audience, and that is exactly what I try to do with my designs. Shakespeare didn't care about anachronisms, and I try not to let it get in the way of my design ideas either, though I do like to start the process with a period-inspired foundation of sound."

One of the most important elements of Sovronsky's composing process for "Henry VIII" was attending rehearsals and improvising live, as the actors spoke their lines and moved around the stage. Tina Packer's direction and the actors' interpretation informed the composing process, but so did Susan Dibble's choreography:

"There was one dance during Cardinal Wolsey's party scene when Henry comes in with his men and they do a dance for the guests," Sovronsky explained. "Because I am tailoring the music to what's happening on the stage, Susan doesn't have to coordinate her moves solely with music I have already written; I can write the music to suit the action and we can work together to create something that fits the moment of the play. It's exciting to see what the actors and the choreographer can come up with and then I can figure out how to



write something to support it."

"All of this is improvised and rough, of course, but that gives me a starting point to work out something more refined and polished," the composer added.

Could those rhythms also key into his inspiration thanks to Sovronsky's extensive expertise as -- get this! -- a fight coordinator?

"I was a sport fencer all through high school and my undergraduate years in college, but it was being cast as the title role in a production of "Hamlet" when I was 18 that made me see how my sport training could assist me on the stage," the actor/composer related. "I trained for years with various fight directors in NYC and took many classes. I still fight direct when the opportunity presents itself though."

An example: Sovronsky recently fight directed, and simultaneously sound designed, a production of "The Beauty Queen of Leenane," directed by Matthew Penn at Shakespeare & Company this past summer, with Packer in the lead role of Mag.

"Whether I'm acting, composing, or doing fight work, it's all storytelling," Sovronsky added. "It's really just a question of what tools you are using to express yourself."

Sovronsky's presence during the rehearsal process also offered the actors a chance to take inspiration from what they were hearing.

"Especially in a rehearsal process with so little time, me being there in person for the rehearsals was very valuable," Sovronsky recollected. "We only had a few weeks to rehearse, and it's a huge play. And there are only ten actors taking on what amount to dozens and dozens of roles."

It really brings a new meaning to the actors' creed that the body

is a performer's instrument.

"I can sympathize with the actors' process," Sovronsky said. "My background being as an actor, I can imagine their perspective as they are hearing the music and it's sparking new ideas for their performances, just as their performances spark new ideas for my music. It's wonderful to be in a room where simply listening to one another can be so inspiring and creative."

You can sample Alexander Sovronsky's music for "Henry VIII" [here](#).

Kilian Melloy serves as EDGE Media Network's Assistant Arts Editor, writing about film, theater, food and drink, and travel, as well as contributing a column. His professional memberships include the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association, the Boston Online Film Critics Association, the Independent Reviewers of New England (IRNE) and the Boston Theater Critics Association (Elliot Nortons).

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