

imitating the dog: Music and Sound Design

James Hamilton and Rory Howson on music and sound for imitating the dog

introduction

James Hamilton composes music and designs sound for imitating the dog. His work with the company includes *Macbeth, Frankenstein, War of the Worlds* and installation pieces such as *Dear Joan...* and *Homeward*. Here he explains how a sound world is built for a production, how the score is shaped in the rehearsal room, and how it stays alive once a show is touring, with contributions from Rory Howson, ITD's sound designer and technical manager, on the sound design side of the process.

This document is based on a written interview. James's and Rory's answers have been edited into continuous prose; the words are their own. A short glossary at the end explains the technical terms.

Read this alongside the companion document: Music and Sound Design – Technical Plan



James Hamilton and Rory Howson in *Frankenstein* (2024) rehearsals

the sound world

Building the sound palette

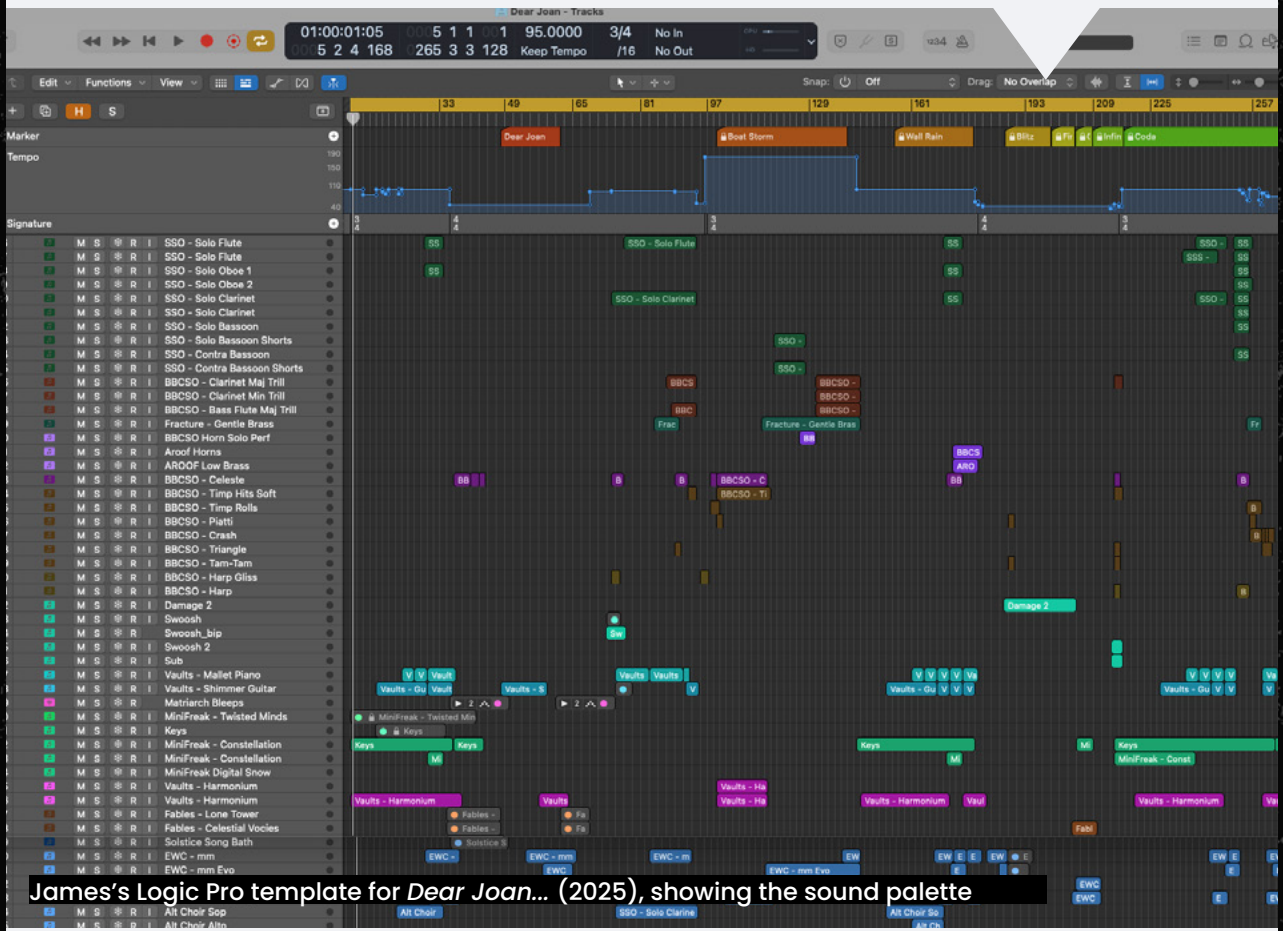
ITD productions largely fall into one of two camps: work for the stage, or outdoor projection-mapped installations. While these can have different creative and technical approaches, for me both start with building a sound palette, or template. This involves discussion with the other creatives about specific sound and music references. In the case of *Macbeth*, it was a hip-hop/neo-soul style soundtrack; with *Frankenstein*, we wanted to remix a Mahler song cycle. The brief can also be more general, as in *Dear Joan...* ('it should convey a feeling of wonder') or *Dear Einstein...* ('upbeat, playful and fun').

From these starting points I can make decisions about which musical sounds, instruments and voices feel appropriate to use, and whether we need to record some instruments or voices for the production. In *Frankenstein*, we recorded an opera singer for the Mahler song cycle; we also created a playable instrument from samples of her voice and used it to underscore scenes. In *Homeward*, we recorded the church bells of Selby Abbey, creating a playable instrument from them to use in the soundtrack. We also took an impulse response of the Abbey, a technique for recording the sound of a physical space so its natural reverb can be added to recordings.



James's synth collection

From here I build a template in Logic Pro that includes these sounds and a selection of others that feel appropriate: orchestral instruments, synths, electronic drums or big percussion sounds. I may also select some physical instruments from my collection of synths, modular gear and drum machines. Having the sound palette built creates a playground where I can start to sketch musical ideas quickly; the physical instruments are connected and ready to record, so everything is easily accessible. There's nothing more frustrating when you're mid-flow than having to hunt around for a cable to connect something or go menu-diving to find the specific kick drum sound you always use. As soon as that happens, it distracts you and takes you out of a creative mindset, so taking the time to have everything organised and ready to go can save a great deal of time further down the line.



James's Logic Pro template for *Dear Joan...* (2025), showing the sound palette

Rory Howson, ITD's sound designer and technical manager, begins from the other side of the sound world — the effects rather than the score:

The sound design and sound effects world of our shows has multiple layers that I work through. I begin by noting and gathering effects that link to location and environment: where the show is set, where each scene is set, and what's happening around the action. Is there traffic? Rain? Something else? This is the first layer I consider.

The second layer is a continuation of the environment or setting: things that set the scene but are less obvious, things you might associate with a place but that wouldn't spring to mind until you hear them. The buzzing of a light, the ticking of a clock, the creaking of a tree. These can all add to the depth and atmosphere, and pull the audience into the world we are trying to create.

The next layers primarily come in the room through the development of the show. These are effects that directly relate to something visual in the video, or an action on stage. In *War of the Worlds*, I added foley to all the actions the actors gestured: a glass being smashed, a door opening, picking up a paper. In *The Train*, there was a filmed section where I did similar, adding the sipping of drinks and the hitting of a table.

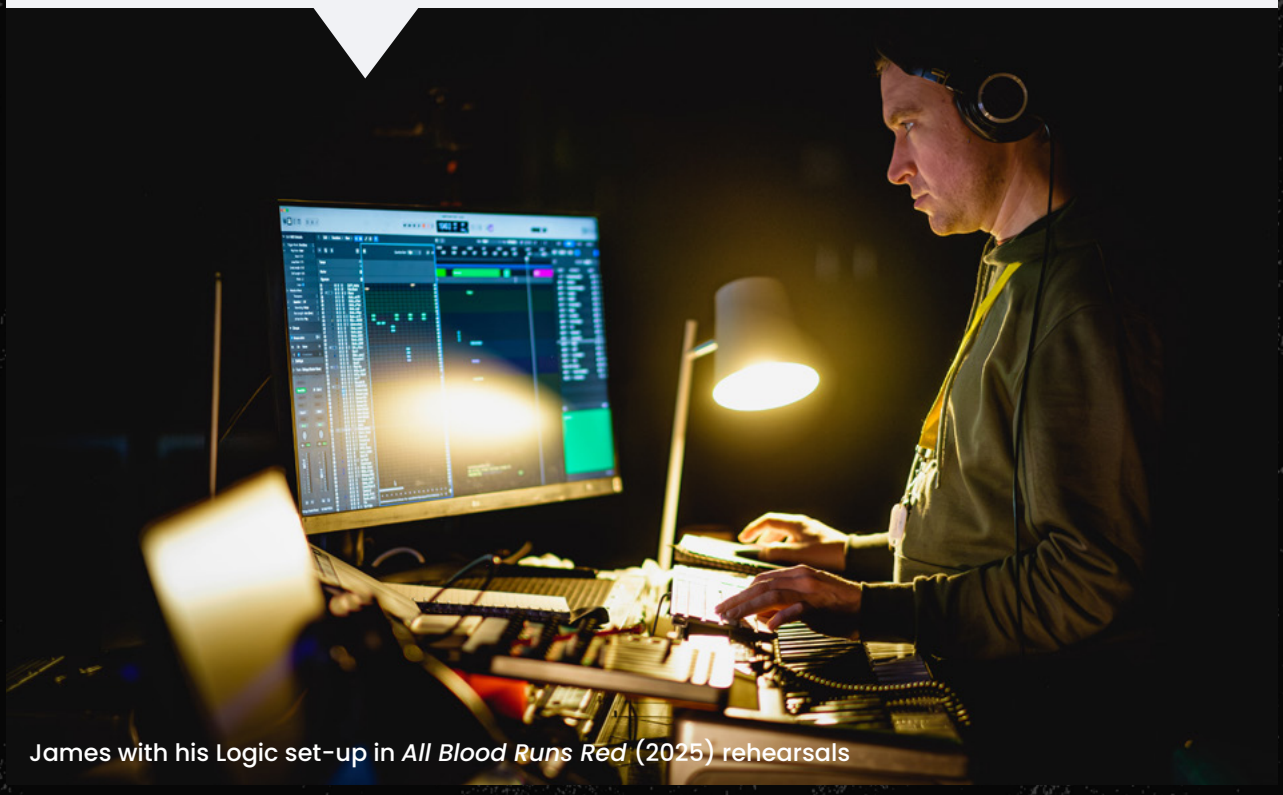
I aim to work with what is happening musically as well, sitting in balance with the music. I tune into what James is doing on and the tone of what he's doing.



Rory at a *War of the Worlds* (2026) rehearsal sharing in Lancaster

Composing in the rehearsal room

In the case of the theatre productions, where I'm working in collaboration with a sound designer, we do some pre-preparation around what some of the key sound design elements will be. Are there any clear recurring sonic themes? In the case of *War of the Worlds*, a huge part of the soundscape was the sound of the Tripods. When underscoring those scenes, it's important that the Tripod noises are clearly heard and that the music doesn't get in the way. When we're working in the room, we generally work scene by scene, so there's a brief discussion about what's needed from each of us. For instance, if there's a loud action scene with explosions and lots of low-frequency rumbles, I may choose to avoid those frequencies in the soundtrack so we don't get sonically jumbled. If there's a lot of dialogue in a scene, I'll make sure the underscore doesn't contain any vocals or instruments occupying the frequency range of the human voice, so the dialogue can be clearly heard. If the scene has a constant high-pitched room tone throughout – say, the electrical hum of a strip light – I'll avoid music in that range. Most of our decisions are initially based on the script, but you really get a feel for things once the actors are on stage. A scene may take considerably longer than you expected, and a constant room-tone loop can become annoying or distracting. Over time, you develop an instinct for what will work and what won't.



James with his Logic set-up in *All Blood Runs Red* (2025) rehearsals

Building responsiveness into the cues

Long scenes with several emotional shifts can be the trickiest to score in theatre. You want the music to change with the mood, as it would in a film, but you can't guarantee that the actors will perform it in exactly the same way each evening, and pace and timings change over the course of a tour as performers settle into their characters. Music for scenes like this is built up of several cue points that crossfade between pieces of music, or add layers on top of what's already there. This helps shift the mood of the score without having to commit to a timeline that may end up a bit out of sync with the actors. An imitating the dog show can have a huge number of cue points, but usually when there's a shift in tone, everything shifts – lights, sound and video – so on a single button push you can make a big impact, with everything moving together.

specific challenges

Serving the room and the screen

Sound has to serve both the live audience and the camera footage being projected on screen at the same time. Balancing dialogue in loud scenes – battles, chases, explosions – can be tricky. A great deal of time is spent sculpting the background sounds so they don't interfere with the frequencies of the dialogue.

When there's too much going on

Quite often the problem is that there's too much going on. Usually that's a result of how we work, in a scene-by-scene way. It's often not until opening night that you can sit back and watch the show in its entirety, and only then do you get a feel for its overall pace. You realise that some scenes simply need less, more room to breathe, and that a simple room tone or some kind of foley is all that's needed, rather than a full underscore for every scene.

for students

The most important thing to understand

Rory answers this one from the sound design pathway:

The biggest and best thing you can do is listen, really listen, and pay attention to the music you hear and the films or shows you watch. This goes for the foley and effects part of a design as well as the physical room and speaker placement. Think about what effects are in there, what they add, how they work in that moment; how big something sounds in a room; the volume, the dynamic. It's also important to consider space, quiet or silence. Sometimes it's what you don't put in. There needs to be breathing space. To highlight something and make it prominent, you need to create space around it.

As you get more involved and go deeper into things, you'll become more aware of the subtleties and of the relationship between the music and the foley. Things aren't always as they seem. I've used the sound of a paving slab being dragged to enhance the sound of a wine bottle sliding, and an aerosol to create the sound of an airlock.

Overall, with all this in mind, I suppose it's about control. That's the big-ticket item. You control how a moment is perceived, how it makes someone feel, and how it falls on the audience's ears. You have that control, and you need to manage it. An audience will jump if you make a sudden loud noise. They'll look left if there's a sound to the left. And they'll immerse themselves in the world you create if you allow them to hear everything clearly and pleasantly.

What audiences don't notice

Our productions feel tight: the lights, sound and video work together, and sometimes you don't really notice that all three move as one and complement each other. It's actually most noticeable during rehearsals, when we're still refining things, and they aren't moving together. It's almost more difficult to see things when they're working well, as they should just feel like part of the production.

When something stands out, it's usually a bad sign; everything should just feel like it's adding to the overall experience. Watch the longer scenes of dialogue: at first glance, it might look like nothing changes throughout these scenes, but look more closely at the details, and everything has subtle changes going on all the time. The lights, sounds and video are in constant modulation; there are rarely occasions where everything is just static.

Rory adds:

An echo of what James has written: there's so much subtlety in all the elements working together and moving together. Things should feel like they are meant to be there. They should almost go unnoticed, unless they are purposefully designed to be noticed. The shows are a true collaboration of the different disciplines, working together at all times, synced and considered.

A final thought

Be able to do a bit of everything

Having a broad range of skill sets is really important. If you have at least a surface-level understanding of what the other departments are doing and how their world works, this will help inform the way you approach your own work. My background is in formal music education, but without knowing how to use the technology, I wouldn't be able to do my job. I think you have to be able to do a little bit of everything, to a certain level: mixing, recording, production, editing, programming QLab and running a mixing desk. Everybody in our team has a broad set of skills, and we could all do a little bit of each other's jobs.

glossary

Sound palette/template — A pre-built collection of the instruments, sounds and voices chosen for a production, set up and ready to play so ideas can be sketched quickly.

Underscore — Music that plays beneath dialogue or action to support the mood of a scene.

Room tone — The constant background sound of a space — the hum, hiss and air that make a location feel real.

Foley — Everyday sound effects (footsteps, doors, objects being handled) created to match the action.

Impulse response — A recording of how a real space (such as Selby Abbey) reflects sound, which can then be applied to any recording to place it acoustically in that space.

DAW / Logic Pro — A Digital Audio Workstation. The software used to record, arrange and mix music. Logic Pro is the DAW James uses; GarageBand and Cakewalk Next are free alternatives.

Cue point — A programmed moment where the sound, and often the lights and video, changes. This could be crossfading, layering or shifting the score.

Frequency range — The band of pitches a sound occupies. Keeping the score out of the frequency range of the human voice keeps dialogue clear.

› Try it yourself: take the foley role in the Live Cinema Workshop (Exercise 2) in Adaptation and imitating the dog: Practical Exercises (Section 4). The Rules of the Game: How ITD Builds Its Worlds (Section 2) discusses how ITD decides when sound serves realism and when it carries meaning.

Published 2026 as part of imitating the dog's learning resources (Section 3: How We Make Work).

Photography of *Frankenstein, All Blood Runs Red* and *War of the Worlds*: Ed Waring. Photo of James Hamilton's synth collection: James Hamilton.