



JAMES NEVIUS

MACBETH

A MACBETH SOUNDTRACK

VOLUMES 1+2

SOUND+FURY: A MACBETH SOUNDTRACK

These pieces began as an experiment in time.

I set out to compose a contemporary dance score inspired by *Macbeth*, but with a constraint that quickly became the project's engine: I would not write the scenes in order. Instead, a random number generator chose which moment came next—an approach that felt truer to the play's psychology than a straight march from beginning to end.

The music, then, isn't an adaptation in any literal sense. It's a set of vignettes—sometimes narrative, sometimes atmospheric, sometimes overtly theatrical—each one a sonic response to a particular hinge in the drama. Some movements lean into melody; others pull toward loops and processed sound. Field recordings recur throughout—weather, birds, bells, footsteps—keeping the piece tethered to specific places even when the story spins into chaos.

Under the influence of Brian Eno and John Cage, I allowed random chance to dictate the order in which these pieces were both composed and released. There are twenty-eight scenes in *Macbeth*, and rather than simply going through them from start to finish, I used a random number generator to pick the next scene I would tackle. This method kept me from falling into too many patterns. I didn't want any piece to necessarily relate directly to the one before it or after it, and writing them out of order served that purpose. Plus, life is random. We impose order on it, but it's more chaos than anything else—and *Macbeth* is all about chaos. Thus, I write chaotically. I will be the first to admit that this whole project is a little weird. But they are the Weird Sisters, right?

If there's a through-line in these notes, it's this: *Macbeth*'s tragedy is not simply that he does terrible things. It's that once he begins, each new action demands a justification, and each justification requires a new action. Soon the story is driving him, not the other way around. The only way out is death.

(I'm fun at parties.)

James Nevius
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1. Thunder and Lightning: Enter Three Witches

Although this movement was originally sketched to fall later in the arc, it now functions as a kind of overture. Built around Johann Sebastian Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, the piece is a round, in which passages loop and chase each other—much like the fates do in the play.

2. When the Hurly-Burly's Done

When the randomizer paired the closing scene of the play with the opening scene, I took it as an omen. This movement is rooted in the witches' first appearance, but I wanted their energy to feel brisk—almost cheerful: mischief rather than menace. Here, buoyancy becomes unsettling in its own way, because nothing is more frightening than a force that treats human ruin as light entertainment.

3. What He Hath Lost, Noble Macbeth Hath Won

This is Act 1, Scene 2 of Macbeth, and we haven't actually met our title character yet. He's been mentioned in the first scene by the Three Witches and now, in this scene, King Duncan of Scotland receives news of Macbeth's bravery in battle. A wounded captain describes how Macbeth killed the traitor Macdonwald by slicing him from "the nave to the chaps." Ross and Angus arrive and add that Macbeth also helped defeat the invading Norwegian king and the traitorous Thane of Cawdor. Duncan decided to elevate Macbeth to become Thane of Cawdor, ending the scene with the title of this piece, "What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won."

4. So Foul and Fair a Day (Sueno's Stone)

This is the first direct encounter between Macbeth and the Weird Sisters, and it's also where the weather becomes a character in its own right. The piece is anchored in field recordings I made in Forres—an alleged spot where this encounter took place—including a seagull cry that frames the music. Behind the instruments, rain I captured near Loch Morlich in Cairngorms National Park swells and recedes.

5. Stars, Hide Your Fires

Here, Macbeth senses that to achieve what he wants, he may have to do what he fears: kill the king. It's an idea that, once thought, can't be ignored.

6. Unsex Me Here

Lady Macbeth asks to be remade into something incapable of pity—in other words, a man. Musically, I treated her presence as a tonal distortion: a repeated phrase presses against the tonic, living a half-step below and only reluctantly resolving. That push-pull becomes her signature—desire that refuses to rest. Throughout, birds recorded at Cawdor Castle flicker through. Partly, that's a grounding detail—she has just learned Macbeth is Thane of Cawdor—but it's also a premonition: the next scene famously marvels at how welcoming the castle seems, how the air recommends itself. The birds are a veil of hospitality laid over a trap.

7. Twice Done and Then Done Double

Here is the terrible politeness of Act 1, Scene 6: the king admiring the castle, the hostess radiating grace, the audience aware of the knife already being sharpened offstage. This movement leans into that doubleness—the sweetness that is “twice done,” the warmth that is, in fact, camouflage.

8. Upon This Bank and Shoal of Time

This line is taken from one of Macbeth's most famous soliloquies, in Act 1, Scene 7, where he says: "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well It were done quickly. If th' assassination / Could trammel up the consequence and catch / With his surcease success, that but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all here, / But here, upon this bank and shoal of time, / We'd jump the life to come."

Macbeth is cognizant of the consequences of his plan (spoiler alert) to kill King Duncan. He realizes that if he kills Duncan and receives the reward promised to him by the three witches/weird sisters, he will likely be sacrificing his eternal reward in heaven. Is that a chance he's willing to take? The source music for this piece isn't Scottish--it's Irish, though the connections between the Gaels and Scots are well documented. It's a mournful traditional tune called "Sad Is My Fate." I've taken the primary melodic line and turned it into a round that keeps getting faster and faster and faster, thus mirroring Macbeth's growing anxiety. The piece starts at 30 beats per minute and by the time it's over, we're cooking at 180 bpm. (I am imagining this as a solo dance for Macbeth whenever the choreographed component of this project get underway, where there dance repeats the same phrases in an ever-faster, ever-more-chaotic manner.)

9. Dagger of the Mind

This is Macbeth alone with his imagination. Structurally, the piece is built almost entirely from loops, and the aesthetic nods toward the lineage of tape and digital repetition—part Robert Fripp and Brian Eno, part Philip Glass and Steve Reich. Appropriately, much of this piece was composed on a flight between Europe and the United States, suspended in that uncanny nowhere. The only non-loop element arrives at the end: church bells recorded in Passau, Germany, standing in for the bell Lady Macbeth rings to summon Macbeth to Duncan’s chamber.

10. Will All Great Neptune’s Ocean Wash This Blood Clean from My Hands?

After the murder, Macbeth realizes, to his horror, that no amount of water or time can rinse away what has been done. The piece leans into the title line repeated over and over—first Macbeth alone, then joined by Lady Macbeth. From here onward, Macbeth’s world spirals toward its bloody conclusion.

11. Porter of Hell-Gate

The porter scene is often treated as comic relief, but comedy in Macbeth is never actually relief. As I began to envision the play in a noir context, I imagined the porter as a doorman: a working stiff with a few jokes, holding court in the lobby because it’s the only stage he’s got.





12. Your Spirits Shine Through You

By Act 3, Macbeth has moved from guilt to paranoia. This is the scene where the new king tests Banquo's schedule with fake casualness and then hires murderers to track him down and kill him. (As is the case in a couple of instances in this song cycle, this scene is presented here out of order, but this is where I would put it if I directed the show.)

13. Hours Dreadful and Things Strange

Act 2, Scene 4 is eerie: darkness in daytime; predators behaving like prey; horses turning violent. Ross and a nameless old man try to assess the terrible state of the world—and this is where it becomes clear that Macbeth is what's rotten in the kingdom of Scotland.

14. O, Full of Scorpions Is My Mind

As Macbeth confronts his inner demons, the sound is restless and prickly. In the play, Macbeth is no longer simply driven by prophecy; he is driven by paranoia and fear, which is even more corrosive.

15. Fly, Fleance, Fly, Fly!

This is a fantasia on the melody of "The Skye Boat Song." In Shakespeare's political context, the Banquo lineage matters because it flatters the Stuart claim; Fleance's escape is, in that sense, a seed for future kings, including Shakespeare's patron, James VI of Scotland (later James I of England). But musically, what interests me is the escape itself—motion under pressure, survival as a kind of frantic counter-melody. The harmony veers into unexpected keys to keep the listener unsettled. Even when someone gets away, the air still tastes like murder.

16. Blood Hath Been Shed

Banquo's death and Fleance's flight bleed directly into the banquet scene, where what is supposed to be a public celebration becomes, instead, a private haunting.

17. Men Must Not Walk Too Late Alone

Lennox and another lord speak obliquely about what everyone suspects: Macbeth killed Duncan, and no one—as the title suggests—is safe.

18. Double Double Toil and Trouble (Something Wicked)

I approached this scene with Dada on the brain. The words are so famous they risk becoming background noise, so I broke the language apart—treating it as a Dada-esque collage of syllables and fragments.

19. Whither Should I Fly?

Even though no blood is shed in this scene, it's among the play's most brutal: Lady Macduff realizes her life—and that of her child—are in danger, and she has nowhere to turn.

20. Hell Is Murky

For Lady Macbeth's famous sleepwalking scene, I chose this title because it feels like the truest summary of her interior state: not fiery punishment, but confusion. The movement is a waltz, meant to feel somnambulant. Tonally, it lives mainly in B ♭ minor, but Lady Macbeth's motif—a recurring shift between A minor and B ♭ minor—reminds us of her instability.



21. All My Pretty Ones (Bleed, Bleed Poor Country)

In this scene, Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty, and they discuss what kind of king Scotland can bear after being plagued by Macbeth. Then Ross arrives with the devastating news that Macduff's wife and children have been murdered. The title gestures toward the link between the geopolitical landscape—which can seem abstract and diffuse—and the personal.

22. To Dew The Sovereign Flower and Drown the Weeds

In Act 5, Scene 2, the Scottish nobles Menteith, Caithness, Angus, and Lennox rally their forces near Birnam Wood to confront Macbeth. They describe him as a diseased ruler, “some say he's mad; others that lesser hate him do call it valiant fury,” acknowledging that even those who remain with him are compelled by fear, not loyalty. Caithness declares that their cause is to cleanse Scotland, to “dew the sovereign flower and drown the weeds,” with Malcolm as the rightful heir. They resolve to march on Dunsinane, presenting Macbeth's tyranny as a sickness that can only be cured by his removal. The track is tonally chaotic. The arpeggios on the synthesizer are purposefully a hair out of sync with the rest of the instruments, providing an underlying sense of unease. (The arpeggio pattern is also a bit of a holdover from the first draft of this movement, which was written in 5/2, which I abandoned once I realized that was untenable.) The drum beat is martial, as befits the subject matter, and at the very end you'll hear a timpani come in to join the snare -- that's a nod to the drum pattern in Gustav Holst's “Mars, the Bringer of War” from “The Planets.”



23. Some Sweet Oblivious Antidote

Macbeth, barricaded in his fortress, reaches for medicine that doesn't exist. He wants a cure both for his wife and for himself—a way to erase what he's done and find a way forward.

24. The Wood of Birnam

In fulfillment of the witches' prophecy, Malcolm's army camouflages itself with branches, and Birnam Wood seems to spring to life. The music has a rat-a-tat quality meant to evoke the army chopping down trees—or, in my noir reimagining, the burst of a Tommy gun.

25. Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow

This soliloquy is so iconic it can intimidate any composer: how do you set some of the most famous words in English to music? My answer was to let the words remain themselves—layered, overlapping, and fragmented. Multiple voices repeat the opening line, and the palette is spare, somber, and deliberately unheroic. It's the sound of a man realizing that tomorrow may never come.

26. Let Us Be Beaten if We Cannot Fight

The antepenultimate scene is remarkably short—a final tightening of the net—and it's so brief that I've included the entirety of its dialogue within this composition. It's a short conversation between Malcolm, Macduff, and Siward: Malcolm's army has just reached Dunsinane, and he's about to meet Macbeth in battle.

27. Tyrant, Show Thy Face!

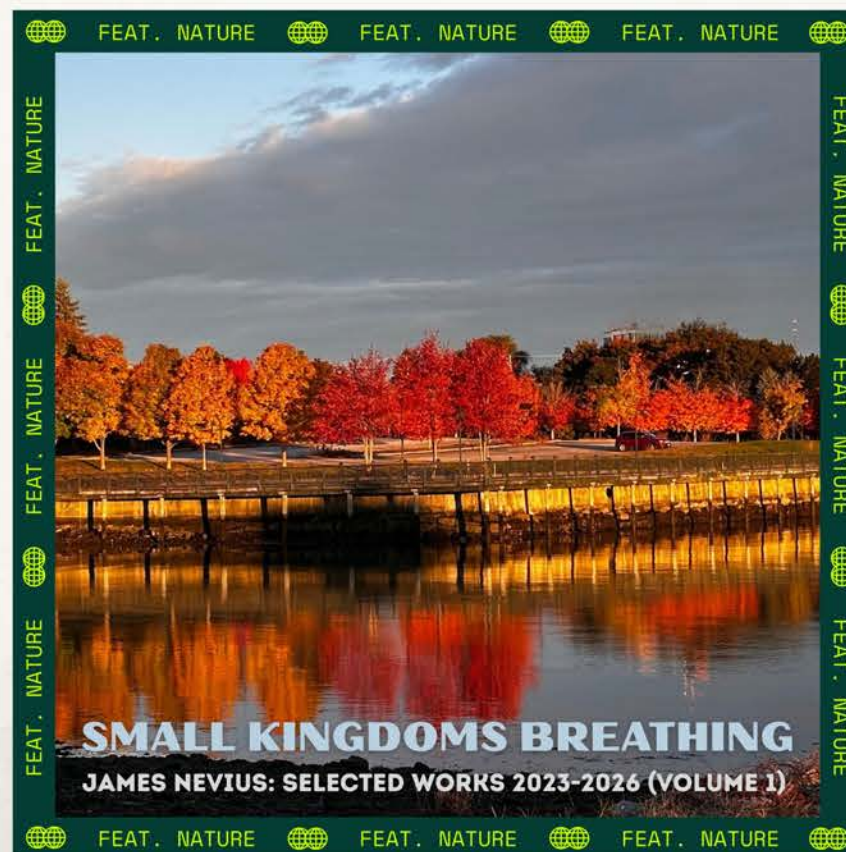
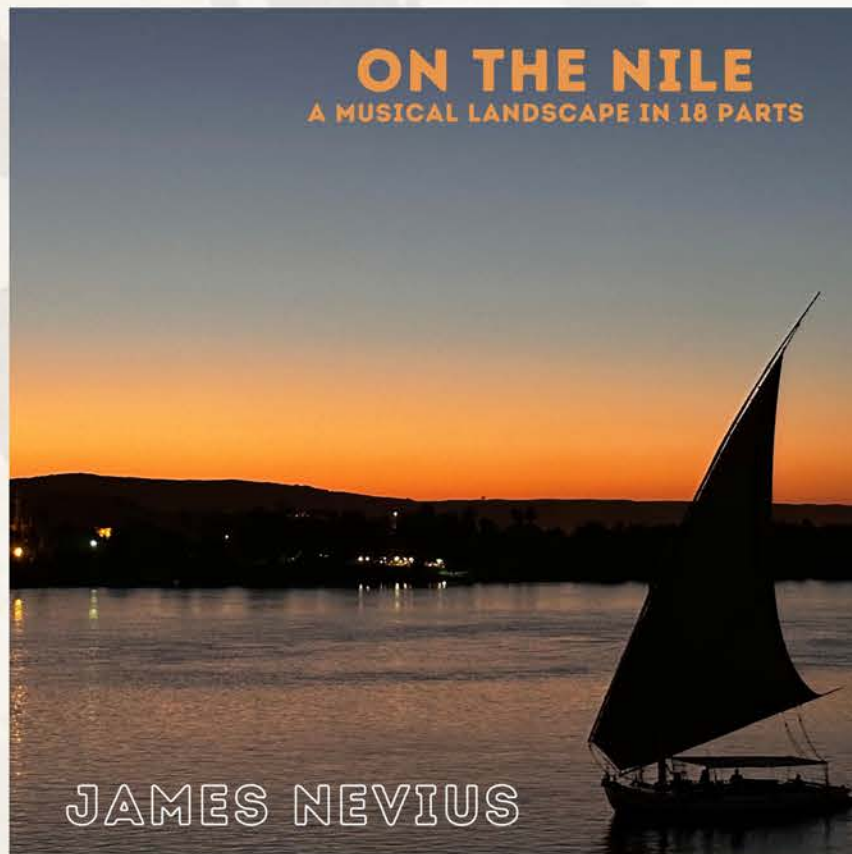
Here, I replaced the play's "alarums" with hoofbeats and brought back the same bell tone used at the end of "Dagger of the Mind." In the earlier movement, the bell summons Macbeth to murder; here it marks the inevitability of his own reckoning.

28. The Time Is Free

Macduff's line arrives as a double-edged benediction. Yes, Macbeth is dead and Malcolm is hailed as king, but the cost has been staggering, and the relief feels like standing in the ruins. Because this project was written out of order, the ending also carries a meta sense of restoration: time, dislocated by prophecy and obsession (and a random number generator), returns to its normal parameters. The movement leans into melancholy rather than triumph. It is less a victory hymn than a mourning song.

There are a few bonus tracks that are only available on Bandcamp or the vinyl edition of Sound+Fury, Volume 2. Go to jamesnevius.bandcamp.com for more information.

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THE TRAGEDIE OF MACBETH.

Actus Primus. Scæna Prima.

Thunder and Lightning. Enter three Witches.

1.  hen shall we three meet againe?
In Thunder, Lightning, or in Raine?
2. When the Hurley-burley's done,
When the Battaile's lost, and wonne.
3. That will be ere the set of Sunne.
1. Where the place?

2. Vpon the Heath.

3. There to meet with *Macbeth*.

1. I come, *Gray-Malkin*.

All Paddock calls anon: faire is foule, and foule is faire,
Houer through the fogge and filthie ayre. *Exeunt.*

Scæna Secunda.

Alarm wuhin. Enter King Malcolm, Donalbaine, Lennox, with attendants, meeting a bleeding Captaine.

King. What bloody man is that? he can report,
As seemeth by his plight, of the Reuolt
The newestt state.

Mal. This is the Sericant,
Who like a good and hardie Souldier fought
'Gainst my Captiuitie: Haile braue friend;
Say to the King, the knowledge of the Broyle,
As thou didst leaue it.

Cap. Doubtfull it stood,
As two spent Swimmers, that doe cling together,
And choake their Art: The mercellesse *Macdonwald*
(Worthie to be a Rebell, for so that
The multiplying Villanies of Nature
Doe swarme vpon him) from the Westerne Isles
Of Kernes and Gallowgroffes is supply'd,
And Fortune on his damned Quarry smiling,
Shew'd like a Rebels Whore: but all's too weake:
For braue *Macbeth* (well hee deserues that Name)
Disdayning Fortune, with his brandishe Steele,
Which smoak'd with bloody execution
(Like Valours Minion) car'd out his passage,
Till hee fac'd the Slave:
Which neu'r shooke hands, nor bad farwell to him,
Till he vnseam'd him from the Naue toth' Chops,
And fix'd his Head vpon our Battlements.

King. O valiant Cousin, worthy Gentleman.

Cap. As whence the Sunne 'gins his reflection,
Shipwracking Stormes, and direfull Thunders:
So from that Spring, whence comfort seem'd to come,
Discomfort swells: Marke King of Scotland, marke,
No sooner Iustice had, with Valour arm'd,
Compell'd these skipping Kernes to trust their heeles,
But the Norweyan Lord, surueying vantage,
With furbusht Armes, and new supplies of men,
Began a fresh assault.

King. Dismay'd not this our Captaines, *Macbeth* and
Banquoh?

Cap. Yes, as Sparrowes, Eagles;

Or the Hare, the Lyon:

If I say sooth, I must report they were
As Cannons ouer-charg'd with double Cracks,
So they doubly redoubled stroakes vpon the Foe:
Except they meant to bathe in reeking Wounds,
Or memorize another *Golgotha*,
I cannot tell: but I am faint,
My Gashes cry for helpe.

King. So well thy words become thee, as thy wounds,
They smack of Honor both: Goe get him Surgeons.

Enter Rosse and Angus.

Who comes here?

Mal. The worthy *Thane* of Rosse.

Lennox. What a haste lookes through his eyes?
So should he looke, that seemes to speake things strange.

Rosse. God saue the King.

King. Whence cam'st thou, worthy *Thane*?

Rosse. From Fisse, great King,
Where the Norweyan Banners flowt the Skie,
And fanne our people cold.
Norway himselte, with terrible numbers,
Assisted by that most disloyall Traytor,
The *Thane* of Cawdor, began a dismal Conflict,
Till that *Bellona's* Bridegroome, lap't in proofe,
Confronted him with selfe-comparisons,
Point against Point, rebellious Arme 'gainst Arme,
Curbing his lauish spirit: and to conclude,
The Victorie fell on vs.

King. Great happinesse.

Rosse. That now *Swene*, the *Norwayes* King,
Craues composition:
Nor would we deigne him buriall of his men,
Till he disbursed, at Saint *Colmes* ynch,
Ten thousand Dollars, to our generall vse.

King. No