

Sound Research: Our Town at ECC

Basic Information

- **Playwright:** Thornton Wilder
- **Year:** 1938 (premiered at the McCarter Theatre, Princeton, NJ, later Broadway)
- **Form:** Metatheatrical drama in three acts
- **Awards:** Pulitzer Prize for Drama (1938)

Structure

- **Act I: Daily Life** – Introduces Grover's Corners, NH. Ordinary routines, small-town details, introductions of the Gibbs and Webb families.
Act II: Love and Marriage – Focuses on Emily Webb and George Gibbs, their courtship and wedding.
- **Act III: Death and Eternity** – Takes place in a cemetery, with Emily's death and her realization of life's fleeting beauty.

Style & Innovation

- **Minimalist Staging:** No elaborate sets, few props (often pantomimed). Chairs, tables, ladders stand in for houses, windows, streets.
- **Stage Manager:** Narrator, guide, philosopher, sometimes actor within scenes. Breaks the fourth wall and frames the story.
- **Universality:** Though set in Grover's Corners (fictional NH town), it's meant to represent all towns....."our" town.

Themes

- **The Everyday as Sacred:** Ordinary life is extraordinary if seen with full awareness.
- **Transience of Life:** Life is short, fleeting, often unnoticed until gone.
- **Community & Human Connection:** The town embodies shared experience, routine, and bonds across generations.
- **Death & Eternity:** Act III emphasizes that the dead understand life's preciousness only too late.

Historical & Cultural Context

- Written during the Great Depression (1930s). A yearning for simpler, stable, community-focused life permeates the text.
- Wilder wanted to strip away realism and force audiences to see *the universal* in the everyday.

- Rejected elaborate sets that dominated Broadway in the 1930s. His choice of minimalism was radical and influential.

Critical Reception

- At its premiere, it was both praised (as profoundly moving and poetic) and criticized (some thought it too sentimental).
- Now considered one of the greatest American plays. Frequently performed in schools, community theatres, and professional companies.

Our Town – Research from a Sound Design Perspective

1. Wilder's Scripted Sound Cues

Even though the play is famously minimalist, Wilder did include a handful of concrete sound moments:

- **Rooster crowing** (Act I, morning in Grover's Corners).
- **Train whistle** in the distance (Act I).
- **Church organ** and hymn singing (Act II wedding).
- **Cemetery stillness** (Act III – silence becomes its own sound).
- **Clock chimes / town hall bell** (Stage Manager references time passing).

Wilder deliberately leaves everything else blank, so sound becomes one of the only tools to *paint the town*.

2. Historical Soundscape of Grover's Corners (1901–1913)

The play spans this early 20th-century period. Some sound research:

- **Rural New England town:** farm animals, chickens, dogs, wind through trees, distant river/creek.
Transportation: horse-drawn carriages, wagons on dirt/gravel, occasional automobile (by Act II/III, cars are emerging).
- **Trains:** very present...New England towns were connected by small rail lines. The whistle marks time and connectivity.
- **Community sounds:** church bells (daily markers), school bells, town band/music, hymns.
- **Household sounds:** screen doors creaking, clocks ticking, milk bottles clinking, well pump or water basin.

The sound palette is simple, earthy, cyclical—reflecting daily life rhythms.

3. Theatrical Tradition & Sound

- Wilder wanted to strip away realism in **sets**, but he **allowed sound** as a way to evoke place and time.
- Sound is the compromise between “bare stage” and “immersive realism.”
- In many productions, sound is used sparingly to avoid breaking the minimal aesthetic. Too much underscoring risks making it sentimental.

4. Symbolism in Sound

Sound in *Our Town* often functions symbolically rather than literally:

- **Train Whistle:** Passage of time, the world beyond Grover's Corners.
- **Church Bells/Organ:** Communal rituals (birth, marriage, death).
- **Silence:** Most important sound of all...especially Act III, where the quiet is nearly unbearable.
- **Everyday Foley (milk bottles, dogs, roosters):** Life's unnoticed soundtrack, only recognized when gone.

5. Production History & Sound Innovations

- **Original 1938 Production:** Sound effects done live offstage—basic foley (train whistle, rooster).
- **Modern Productions:**
 - Some use **recorded local sounds** to anchor the play in the community where it's staged.
 - Others add **ethereal textures** in Act III (choral humming, vibraphone, drones) to contrast with everyday realism.Minimalist and immersive productions often emphasize **silence as a soundscape**...audience coughs, shuffling, and breath become part of the design.

6. Sound Themes to Explore

1. **Time & Cycles:** Clocks, bells, trains...markers of passing time.
2. **Community vs. Isolation:** Shared voices (choir, town gossip) vs. the loneliness of silence.
3. **The Ordinary Made Extraordinary:** Everyday sounds elevated to poetry.
4. **Life vs. Death:** Vibrant, layered sound in Acts I–II → stark minimalism in Act III.

7. Resources

- Wilder's own essays (*Some Thoughts on Playwriting*, 1941): He emphasizes "removing scenery to force attention onto action and words." Sound is often the *only* sensory texture allowed.
- Scholarly analyses (e.g., Margaret Wilkerson, "The Metatheatricality of *Our Town*"): Critics note that sound bridges the gap between the real and the universal.
- Theatre history sources: Early 20th-century New England daily life, good resource for authentic ambient references.

Takeaway:

From a sound perspective, *Our Town* is about restraint and resonance. Every sound has to matter. The sound design is not there to "decorate" but to remind us of the pulse of daily life, the inevitability of time, and the silence of death.

Preliminary Sound Concept for Our Town

Overall Design Philosophy

- Sound should be transparent, organic, and ritualistic...always reminding us of the pulse of life in Grover's Corners.
- It's not about cinematic underscoring but about evoking presence: a morning in a small town, a wedding in a church, the hush of a cemetery.
- Use sound to create both intimacy (everyday detail) and cosmic scale (the eternal/otherworldly).

Act I: Daily Life

- **Ambience:** Subtle bed of morning sounds- roosters, church bells, distant train whistle, breeze in trees. Almost subliminal, but it roots the audience.
- **Transitions:** Musical punctuation between scenes could be live foley (Stage Manager strikes a triangle for the school bell, someone shakes a rainstick for a summer storm). Keeps the theatricality visible.
- **Moments:**
 - Paperboy's bicycle = faint bell, wheel creak.
 - Milk bottles clink, soft dog bark in the distance.These details ground the pantomime props Wilder asks for.

Act II: Love and Marriage

- **Tone shift:** Sound becomes slightly heightened. More emotional resonance.
- **Church Wedding:** Hymns sung live by the cast choir. Organ swell (even if prerecorded) to fill the space with ritual weight.
- **Ambience:** Rainstorm before the wedding-soft rolling thunder, then clearing skies, signaling a life transition.
- **Romantic Undercurrents:** Not underscoring, but *sonic warmth*- the natural chorus of cicadas in the evening, a heartbeat-like drum under George and Emily's conversation.

Act III: Death & Eternity

- **Ambience:** Stripped down, nearly silent. Stillness is powerful.
- **Cemetery:** Low, constant drone. Wind, almost like breath. Voices of the dead could be processed with subtle reverb, creating a hollow, otherworldly feel.

- **Emily's Return to Life:** When she revisits her 12th birthday, the sound should *burst with detail*...overwhelmingly alive. Birds louder, kitchen clatter exaggerated, laughter crisp. When she says goodbye, the sound collapses suddenly back to silence.
- **Finale:** As the Stage Manager speaks of stars and eternity, faint celestial tones (like glass harmonica, bowed vibraphone, or harmonic choral textures) can underscore the immensity without being sentimental.

In short:

- **Act I = grounded detail.**
- **Act II = ritual and heightened emotion.**
- **Act III = stillness, eternity, then cosmic scale.**
- Always subtle, always rooted in "the ordinary made extraordinary."

PRELIM SOUND CUES:

Act/Scene	Cue Description	Purpose/Notes
Act I – Pre-show	Subtle morning ambience: birds, distant rooster, breeze	Sets rural New England tone, eases audience into Grover's Corners
Act I – Stage Manager intro	Single town bell toll (7 AM)	Marks daily rhythm; ritual entry into the world
Act I – Early morning	Rooster crow	Scripted cue; anchors the "farm town" feel
Act I – Early morning	Train whistle, distant	Scripted cue; symbolizes world beyond Grover's Corners
Act I – Morning routine	Milk bottles clinking	Emphasizes pantomime props
Act I – Schooltime	School bell rings	Marks passage of time, small-town rhythm
Act I – Transition out	Subtle dusk ambience (crickets, wind)	Shift into evening; closes the day's cycle
Act II – Pre-show/transition	Rainstorm, soft thunder	Sets mood before wedding scene, life transition
Act II – Church scene	Congregational hymn, live or recorded	Ritual sound, community gathering
Act II – Church scene	Organ swell, simple chord	Underscores wedding ritual (can be live or playback)
Act II – Post-wedding	Birdsong + cicadas in evening	Romantic, natural chorus of summer evening
Act III – Pre-show	Sparse wind, low drone	Establishes cemetery stillness
Act III – Cemetery	Occasional breeze gust / distant bell toll	Time passes even among the dead
Act III – Emily's 12th birthday revisit	Hyper-detailed ambience: kitchen clatter, laughter, birds, dog bark	Overwhelming fullness of life; heightened contrast
Act III – Emily's goodbye	Sudden collapse of sound to near silence	Emphasizes loss, return to eternity
Act III – Final Stage Manager speech	Celestial tone / glass harmonica / soft drone of stars	Expands the play's scope to eternity; final meditation