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NARRATIVE

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Making Music Mean - An Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Composing Music that Reads Poetry and Narrative

Marco Katz¹

ABSTRACT

Music provides new readings of literature. Although readers expect writers to employ words while commenting on music, the first section of this report, called “Theory,” demonstrates how the *musical* text brings out new understandings from what readers can now refer to as a *wordful* text. A history of this undertaking brings together Ancient Greek philosophy, centuries of semiotics, and twentieth-century Caribbean thoughts on *filin*, with autobiographical references that show how these all synthesize into a highly personal form of Cultural Studies newly reconsid-ered as Creation-Research. “Practice,” the second section, begins with a musical epigraph and then provides references to musical scores by Franz Schubert, Johann Friedrich Reichardt, and the au-thor. Contrasting with the preceding part, this creates more hearing than reading by including direct links to sonic examples of the music discussed, turning readers into listeners who can begin to read with their ears and hear with their eyes.²

KEYWORDS: *wordful*, musical semiotics, *filin*, music and literature, Research-Creation, song cycle, musical meanings

RESUMEN

A través de la música se puede ver la literatura con nuevos ojos. Aunque los lectores esperan un empleo de palabras para hacer comentarios sobre la música, la primera parte de este reportaje, denominado “La teoría,” muestra como un texto *musical* genera nuevos entendimientos dentro de lo que ya se puede denominar un texto *palabral*. Una historia de esta empresa reúne la filosofía clásica de Grecia, unos siglos de la semiótica y unos pensamientos del siglo XX sobre el *filin* caribeño, todo con referencias autobiográficas para mostrar la síntesis de todo en una forma personal de los Estudios Culturales ya visto como la Creación-Investigación. “La práctica,” la segunda parte, empieza con un epígrafe musical y sigue con referencias a unas partituras de Franz Schubert, Johann Friedrich Reichardt y el autor. En contraste con la parte anterior con el desarrollo de más oportunidades para escuchar en vez de leer, con enlaces a unos ejemplos sonoros de la música presentada, los lectores se convierten en oyentes que pueden empezar una lectura con sus oídos y una audición con sus ojos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *palabral*, la semiótica musical, *filin*, la música y la literatura, Investigación-Creación, ciclo de canciones, el significado musical

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2 The author gratefully acknowledges wonderfully helpful readings by Morteza Abedinifard, a graduate student in the Music Department at the University of Alberta, and pianist and scholar David Atkinson, President Emeritus of MacEwan University.

Une langue qui n'a que des articulations et des voix n'a donc que la moitié de sa richesse; elle rend des idées, il est vrai; mais pour rendre des sentimens, des images, il lui faut encore un rythme et des sons, c'est-à-dire, une mélodie; voilà ce qu'avait la langue grecque, et ce qui manque à la nôtre.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues*

Musical compositions can read and comment on words. This simple statement encompasses the literary point of my current project, which demonstrates how works of music provide commentaries on poems, short stories, and novels. In a turnabout of expectations, in which writers use words to comment on music, I employ musical notes to provide new readings of texts made up of words; my compositions deliberately attempt to change the way that readers might think and feel about poetry and narrative texts. From this, readers can see how the *musical* text brings out new understandings from what they can now, in order to properly distinguish between the two, refer to as a *wordful* text.

This introduction begins with *wordful* text but then includes musical notes that eventually turn into scores only comprehensible to those who have learned to hear through their eyes. Recordings of those scores subsequently make the compositions accessible—and even, as Jacques Derrida points out, inescapable—to an expanded audience by means of aural canals and, with the volume turned up sufficiently, dermal penetration. These procedures place my methodology in a form of Cultural Studies that I recognize as a Creation-Research twist on recently established patterns heretofore called Research-Creation.

A study aiming to read novels with a combination of English words and musical notes will necessarily delve into a long tradition of philosophy that, beyond merely bringing these elements together, demonstrates the discursive diminution following their illogical sundering. From Gorgias to Lydia Goehr, prominent philosophical voices have revealed that music can mean in the manner of written and spoken words, a fact of rhetoric only controversial in relatively recent millennia, and—more crucially—that words without music mean much less, if anything at all.

Drawing from this vast body of thought, I begin with a mid-twentieth-century philosophy of music that never garnered any type of meaningful appreciation within academic discourse: *filin*.

This term, well known among speakers of Caribbean Spanish, sometimes appears on the page as feeling even though this change in orthography has no effect on the pronunciation. As the Royal Spanish Academic Dictionary notes, the first spelling, which I mostly employ here while keeping it in italics to avoid confusion, provides a graphic emulation of the English word known as *feeling*. The dictionary’s lexicographers point out, however, that the definition of *filin* differs from the *sentiment* that *feeling* expresses in English. As a first example, the dictionary defines this false cognate as a “romantic style of music that arose in Cuba in the middle of the twentieth century”³. *Español Avanzado*, a digital journal for advanced language learners, adds to this definition by offering a more common employment of the term, noting its similarity to Spanish terms for *chemistry*, *bond*, and *rapport* (for which we have the suggestive scan *compenetración*). The journal’s educators present *filin* as a desirable sensation “between two or more people,” particularly seen in a “special relationship that arises unexplained by any specifiable reason”⁴ (“Feeling”). Restricted to small groups, say two or three people, this might sound like another way of describing a love affair (an event that some readers might stereotypically expect songwriters to exalt and scholars to diminish), so we must keep our eye on that reference to *more* people. With larger groups in mind, we can better comprehend short story master George Saunders when he responds to reading by asking, “What did we feel and where did we feel it?” (6). For Saunders, no coherent intellectuality can commence without that crucial first impression, the *feeling*—not always easily definable in *wordful* employments—that makes engaged readers want to know more. In verse, e.e. cummings wrote, “since feeling is first / who pays any attention / to the syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you”. However expressed, the *filin* that leads readers to pursue further intellectual studies will produce scholarship more fascinating than projects that reverse this order.

My research into semiotics and philosophies of music and literature came later than my comprehension of *filin*. That scholarly chapter, due to appear in a forthcoming monograph on this topic, began as an attempt to justify what I had come to understand from my earlier mode of reading novels, which always involved hearing but eventually turned, as useful research should, to

3 “un estilo musical romántico surgido en Cuba a mediados del siglo XX.”

4 “...entre dos o más personas; relación especial que surge sin ningún motivo concreto que lo explique.”

self-discovery. Beginning with Alejo Carpentier (a founding figure of the Latin American boom who made music and literature inseparable in essays and novels) and going back through studies of semiotics and philosophy, these scholarly readings opened my eyes to what my ears had been hearing. Recently, the twenty-first century enunciation of Canadian Research-Creation validates methodologies employed by pre-Socratic Sophists, notably Gorgias, who never came up with reasons for separating those two terms or the activities they imply in their discussions or employments of rhetoric. For Gorgias, observes Debra Hawhee, a prominent historian of rhetorical theory, “music does not serve merely as an analogue for speech, but is a critical force in discourse production as well” (81). In this historical context, the addition of musical scores and recordings to a literary study does not create a new academic genre any more than would the inclusion of visual images in a monograph lead to a revolutionary mode of art history.

As a working musician playing, arranging, producing, and composing music in New York City and later in Northern California, I created and recorded musical works long before engaging in doctoral studies in Literature. Moving into Cultural Studies, the methodology of my publications relies on careful attention to the art and craft of both of my primary fields of endeavor; I hope to always write words with the tools that a musical formation has provided even as I employ my more recent acquisition of literary knowledge to new understandings of the music I create. For me, creation comes first.

An explanation of Creation-Research takes me back to *filin* and my earliest memories of reading and listening. Living with Kip and Ginny Gaylor, my theatrical parents in Greenwich Village, I heard music everywhere, including at home. My father played his drum set every week, and although both he and my mother sang and played a bit of piano, neither of them thought it necessary to teach me how to write down the notes as I sang along with them. My father also decided that I should not learn to read before attending public school because he had read that this type of pushiness—an accusation that chilled him to the marrow of Jewish bones—would prove detrimental to my young mind. Not permitted into this world, I began to pick up the books he read to me and, to his initial astonishment, recited them word for word. Pedagogies of songs and stories thus became fused in my early experience.

After five years of this formation, I cried after coming home from the first day of kindergarten. Having set out confidently with a book under my arm and the understanding that the teachers would show me how to read it, I felt bitterly disappointed by the day's outcome. Somehow (and this embarrasses me), I did not figure out that I could work out written language on my own, so my desired learning did not come until the first grade. At that point, my mother relented and bought the entire year's reading assignments from the lovely Pickwick Book Shop that still stands on the same site in Nyack, New York. My teacher, who apparently relished the same pedagogical dictums my father had swallowed, promptly complained after I read them all to my classmates the next week.

As struggling thespians, my parents had little money. This did not prevent them from buying books for me and keeping plenty more around even when we all lived in tiny apartments. They placed these on shelves made of raw lumber slung over evenly piled stacks of bricks, a style of interior design that my father maintained for the rest of his life. I regularly wandered these stacks and chose whatever cover struck my fancy and then, heeding the old saying about not judging a book this way, I began to read portions from wherever the pages opened in order to decide on how to dedicate my reading time. I endeavored a careful, although unsystematic, examination simply because I had gotten it into my head that a book once started should not be set aside. This mattered a great deal to me; fiction, even before I learned the meaning of that term, had become my passion while non-fiction, a word equally unknown, was to be avoided at all costs. I loved to read, but I never enjoyed it as much when made to feel as though I was learning anything.

During my early years of elementary school, adults praised me for reading quickly. Before long, this assessment proved incorrect; the fact that I eagerly read so much unassigned material made it look as though I was a fast reader, but as my peers caught up with me most of them got through books, assigned or chosen, with greater speed than I did. Given the premium North American society places on getting things done rapidly, I hated to admit what I eventually had to accept: I read slowly. I read slowly because I hear the words on the page, bringing my progress through a text down to the velocity of, at best, an audiobook. When I read for information, I can go faster, but luxuriating in the pages of a short story or a novel, I move slowly. Many years passed

before I came to the astonishing realization that other people did not read this way, that they did not have to hear a text as they traversed its pages. Naturally, they get through texts much more quickly than I do—a tempting trait for a presumptive philologist to emulate—but I cannot convince myself to forgo the pleasures of hearing my version of the author’s sounds in my head.

Hearing music in my head seemed obvious, but in this too I found that I differed from many of my peers. As a child, I heard music without knowing that those sounds could be notated, and later I would internally replay songs and instrumental compositions that I remembered. I make no claims to having a stupendous ability to recall music, and certainly cannot approach the capabilities of an abused child of the Mozart family, but once again, I later came to understand that not everyone plays music for themselves in this way, probably explaining the proliferation of Top 40 radio stations that repeat the same hits endlessly day and night.

As I learned to read words, I also sang and played music. In another place, I have discussed the use of the term *play* as an English-speaking means of making music that contrasts with the Italian *toccare* or Spanish *tocar*, explaining how readers can thus distinguish between the homonymous significations of either playing a game or engaging in physical or metaphorical touching (“Hearing”). In my case, I got what I needed before getting what I wanted: instead of purchasing a trombone, which my maternal grandfather did later, my parents forced me to take piano lessons. I hated these so much that they relented after two years, which left me hopeless at the keyboard but able to read and miraculously, it seemed to me, to write music.

Around this time, my father started talking about making a film. After long days selling vacuum cleaners (his “between engagements” day gig), he would spend evenings planning the script for the amusement of his friends, often acting out parts and reciting long bits of dialogue. As an actor and director, he had not thought a great deal about writing, and so did not take himself as seriously as I did. At the time, his project engaged my full attention, and without considering my intentions, I began to imagine a musical score for it. Sitting at an old piano, I worked out soundtracks for each of the scenes as my father described them.

A year later, I spent an extended time at the home of my maternal grandparents, who had recently settled outside of Longview, Texas. Escaping hot afternoons I played with (given that I was

unable to genuinely touch upon) an organ that my grandfather had acquired as part of a trade. No one else there had any use for this machine, which had been placed in an abandoned cubicle, so I was free to try each of the inviting stops and check out the seemingly endless combinations of sounds. My grandfather did not mind the time thus spent. Raised in a strictly Methodist family that eschewed “worldly” musical instruments, his teenaged rebellion had consisted of turning to the Rushford Baptist Church in upstate New York, where he was asked to work the hand pump for the pipe organ and later encouraged to augment his baritone voice with a trombone. He has since passed, so I will never know if he thought his encouragement of my musical desires would lead me down a similarly godly path.

Music and literature swirled inseparably as I began to read novels and found that I wanted ways to comment on them. Talking with others about a book I had read provided little satisfaction because most people did not want to hear a speech about a book that they had never read, and nobody I knew wanted to read the booklist that I ploughed through with such reckless abandon. In addition to the problem of audience, I had to contend with a growing sense of the complexities of responding to written narrative. My first reactions, I began to realize, were rarely my most faithful, so I began, as all literary critics must, to find ways to engage in more complicated thought processes.

Without making a conscious decision, I found myself creating musical responses to books. Just as my father’s long explications of his film had moved me to write music that would fit, novels spawned sounds in my head. Paintings at the Museum of Modern Art, human interest stories in the news, and personal accounts told to me by people I met also got music started, but nothing did so as reliably as fictional narrative, whether novel or short story. Once in a while, friends who had read a work and then heard my musical commentary told me that the sounds I created made them think or feel about the story in a new way. This made me feel happy—and also made me think that my work might turn useful.

When I finally got into university, I studied in music departments and focused on creating more notes, which included a song cycle based on *Las piedras del cielo*, a volume of poetry by Pablo Neruda. During the year spent on that cycle, it gradually occurred to me that my response to my

own response formed a commentary that revealed my own sense of what Neruda's poetry meant. At that point, the author was well beyond contributing his thoughts to that or any other literary discussion, so my work obviously had less to do with collaboration than it did with critical reading, with me responding to his words with my notes.

As I moved from music to Literary Studies, I realized that I had not totally changed disciplines. My senior project, "Salsa Criticism at the Turn of the Century," which after years of revisions became my first published scholarly article, discusses the ways that academics write about music, and set me on a path that revealed all texts as critically readable. Some of these texts were musical and others *wordful*. My continued publication of scholarly articles and an eventual monograph, *Music and Identity in Twentieth-Century Literature of Our America – Noteworthy Protagonists*, made it clear that separations of musical and *wordful* texts considered necessary by departmental administrators fighting for their share of the academic pie had little, if any, relevance for readers-composers-scholars-authors trained in both creative language systems. The trick consists in getting it down on the page in some coherent manner—and has that not always been the case?

Practice



Der Erlkönig, Franz Schubert

This musical epigraph conveys meaning. Even though abundant evidence demonstrates the impossibility of conclusively comprehending written or uttered text, scholars continue to believe in the meaning of words. Relatively few, however, attempt to explain what a specific organization of musical notes might signify. As a result, critics sanguinely employ words to describe their thoughts on, feelings about, and reactions to music while hardly anyone—except, perhaps, a few musicians who harbor a vague suspicion that these writings or utterances fail to capture any real sense of the sounds discussed—can imagine that musical notes might be equally incapable of capturing the sense of spoken words or written text. Setting forth the aim of this musical and

literary project, I state this as an equal incapacity in order to open up the possibility of a correspondingly equal capability: to the extent that words might ever express comprehensible thoughts on music, notes could convey some worthwhile sense of literature.

Still, differences remain. Authors write essays and musicians compose scores, and writing a sonnet is not like writing a sonata; having essayed both, I can testify to the contrariety between these two procedures. In spite of that difference, however, they have in common the production of a text, and that text might be employed as a commentary on another text. As a fundamental element of literature, words are regularly employed to comment on all of the other arts, but this need not remain a one-way stream of expression. Paintings and filmed adaptations of books, for example, not only offer fresh perspectives or interpretations, they allow for alternative interpellations of the texts on which they are based. “The contest of the arts has long turned on how music can be pictorial and poetic, poetry imagistic and musical, painting musical and poetic”, writes Lydia Goehr (397). This leads her to ask, “can any artwork achieve what another artwork has already achieved? The more the focus turns to connecting artworks, the less it accommodates medium specificity. If a poem can bring a painting to presence, why not a painting a poem, or a musical work a painting, a poem, or a sculpture?” (398). In this way, musical scores also function as literary commentary, as readers see in the transformations a literary work undergoes when subjected to different musical renderings.

Acknowledging that music can provide new ways of thinking about written text, we must recognize that this process will not merely reproduce a reversed image of an essay created with words. It can do more; music “might be assigned a verbal meaning,” observes musical semiotician Jean-Jacques Nattiez, “but it cannot be limited to that verbal explanation” (9). Or, as Friedrich Nietzsche puts it, “Our music makes things speak that before had no tongue” (130). We can, even if temporarily, adopt this stance to consider the ways in which a musical reading might uncover otherwise unutterable aspects of a poem. Creating an opposition between the pheno-song and the geno-song, concepts he credits to Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes brings the physical power of musical actuation to a significance defined “by the very friction between the music and something else”. When this occurs, he insists, “The song must speak, must *write*—for what is produced at the

level of the geno-song is finally writing” (185). The resulting confrontation resembles the type of physical writing, easily appreciable by performers, set forth in early works by Hélène Cixous, that one’s “body must be heard” (880). Taking Barthes at his word, readers can consider the possibility that critics capable of creating music not only can but in fact must read texts with notes—but differently than do those stuck with words.

For methodology, I turn here to musicology, analyzing the keys, harmonies, instrumentation, and other structural elements of a musical composition that speak to the literary structure of the poem under consideration. Although this type of analysis depends on worded explanations of music theory, it offers one way into the thoughts of a composer, especially for those who can attach the terminology to corresponding sounds. Knowing how written music will sound, musicians trained to hear with their eyes can undertake a close reading of a score. My next step, which depends more on a philosophical than musical formation, will call for a semiotic listening based on Barthes’ “The Grain of the Voice” to explore the ways in which music, already established as a critical genre, does not function in the same manner as a critical system based on words. Barthes’ essay does not attempt to describe music as criticism; instead, he calls for a new way of listening to music and for a new type of music criticism. Building from his idea, I consider what a musical critique might tell a listener that could not be easily expressed in any other form.

The madrigal, a form for unaccompanied chamber choir that flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, offers an opening into the meaning of music, an aperture made especially useful by the ways in which these works highlight similarities and differences between lyrics and notes. As Susan McClary points out, “A genre that sought explicitly to produce simulations in sound of complex interiorities, the madrigal introduced into music representations of emotions, desire, gender, reason, madness, and tensions between mind and body” (xi). Those of us who have sung madrigals know firsthand how this secular form brings out the meaning of lyrics in ways that words alone could never accomplish, and attentive listeners can also hear how this choral form signifies differently than could any text. Further, the words sung by these choirs often consist of lyric poems denominated with the literary term: madrigal. “The Silver Swan,” a

well-remembered madrigal by Orlando Gibbons, exemplifies the power of this mix of music and literature:

The Silver Swan, who, living, had no Note,
when Death approached, unlocked her silent throat.
Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,
thus sang her first and last, and sang no more:
“Farewell, all joys! O Death, come close mine eyes!
More Geese than Swans now live, more Fools than Wise.” (Qtd. in Rumens)
[Hear my participation in a performance of this madrigal at: [The Silver Swan](#)]

The lyric – attributed variously to the composer, his patron Christopher Hatton, or an anonymous source – says a great deal in just a half dozen lines. With only the words, however, a great deal remains unsaid; listeners willing to search for this easily discoverable musical work can hear how much the swan – and through her, the rest of us – might have to say about the feelings of living beings on the brink of death in Gibbons’ five-part vocal counterpoint. Having sung the baritone voice, thus writing with a combination of mind and body, I can attest to mental and physical sensations that engage the spirit and evoke meaning in ways that go beyond anything knowable to readers who have only seen these words on a page.

The potential of musical signification becomes clearer when one hears the various transformations a literary work undergoes when subjected to different musical renderings. As the first examples presented here, distinctive versions created during the past 231 years of *Der Erlkönig* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, titled “The Erl-king” in the English translation published by Edgar Alfred Bowring in 1885, illustrate the power of music to comment upon poetry from widely varied points of view. Bowring’s translation of the poem presents a father carrying his son on a horse. As they gallop home through a dark night, the young boy cries out that the Erlking has tried to take him. The father, who does not hear the Erlking, explains away the intrusion as the sounds of wind and other natural phenomena. Finally, the boy screams that

the Erlking has gotten him, and when the father arrives home his son is dead (99).

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
Er fällt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

“Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht?” –
“Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?
Den Erlenkönig mit Kron’ und Schweif?” –
“Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif.”

“Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!
Gar schöne Spiele spiel’ ich mit dir;
Manch’ bunte Blumen sind an dem Strand,
Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand.” –

“Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörest du nicht,
Was Erlenkönig mir leise verspricht?” –
“Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind;
In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind.” –

“Wiltst, feiner Knabe, du mit mir gehn?
Meine Töchter sollen dich warten schön;
Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Reihn,
Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein.” –

“Mein Vater, mein Vater, und siehst du nicht dort
Erlkönigs Töchter am düstem Ort?” –
“Mein Sohn, mein Sohn, ich seh’ es genau:
Es scheinen die alten Weiden so grau. –”

“Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt;
Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch’ ich Gewalt.” –
“Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt fällt er mich an!
Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan!” –

Dem Vater grauset’s; er reitet geschwind,
Er hält in Armen das ächzende Kind,
Erreicht den Hof mit Mühe und Not;
In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.

Who rides there so late through the night dark and drear?
The father it is, with his infant so dear;
He holdeth the boy tightly clasp’d in his arm,
He holdeth him safely, he keepeth him warm.

“My son, wherefore seek’st thou thy face thus to hide?”
“Look, father, the Erl-King is close by our side!
Dost see not the Erl-King, with crown and with train?”
“My son, ‘tis the mist rising over the plain.”

“Oh, come, thou dear infant! oh come thou with me!
For many a game I will play there with thee;
On my strand, lovely flowers their blossoms unfold,
My mother shall grace thee with garments of gold.”

“My father, my father, and dost thou not hear
The words that the Erl-King now breathes in mine ear?”
“Be calm, dearest child, ‘tis thy fancy deceives;
‘Tis the sad wind that sighs through the withering leaves.”

“Wilt go, then, dear infant, wilt go with me there?
My daughters shall tend thee with sisterly care;
My daughters by night their glad festival keep,
They’ll dance thee, and rock thee, and sing thee to sleep.”

“My father, my father, and dost thou not see,
How the Erl-King his daughters has brought here for me?”
“My darling, my darling, I see it aright,
‘Tis the aged grey willows deceiving thy sight.”

“I love thee, I’m charm’d by thy beauty, dear boy!
And if thou’rt unwilling, then force I’ll employ.”
“My father, my father, he seizes me fast,
For sorely the Erl-King has hurt me at last.”

The father now gallops, with terror half wild,
He grasps in his arms the poor shuddering child;
He reaches his courtyard with toil and with dread, –
The child in his arms finds he motionless, dead

Franz Schubert composed music for this text in 1815. This best known musicalization of Goethe’s poem begins with eighth notes in octaves that, for the first measure, establish no definite modality. In the second measure, Schubert’s score introduces a line that could be an Aeolian mode or, in the absence of a seventh, either a natural or harmonic minor scale immediately followed by a triad that establishes the diatonic key of G minor. Typically, a listener will associate the minor key employed in this manner with nostalgia; its introduction here as a rhythmically charged bass line, however, suggests ominous foreshadowing. The score moves on through a vertiginous array of transpositions that provide a commentary on the action of the three main characters: the father, the son, and the Erlking. Throughout, the driving eighth notes provide an impulsive force that underscores the boy’s relentlessly fatal destiny. The vocal

line remains clearly diatonic, with a few instances of stepwise chromatic movement passing through the established key signature, in contrast to transpositions in the piano part that evade any clearly centered tonality. A reader of this score can reasonably infer that Schubert wants the listener to hear the narrative without interference, and that this story of destiny, centered on a boy's fate and sealed by his father's fatal flaw, has important implications for the audience. A final D7 (dominant seventh) to the G minor (tonic) lends the work a finality that might only achieve further resolution through spectatorial catharsis. [Readers can listen to this selection at: [Schubert - Der Erlkönig.](#)]

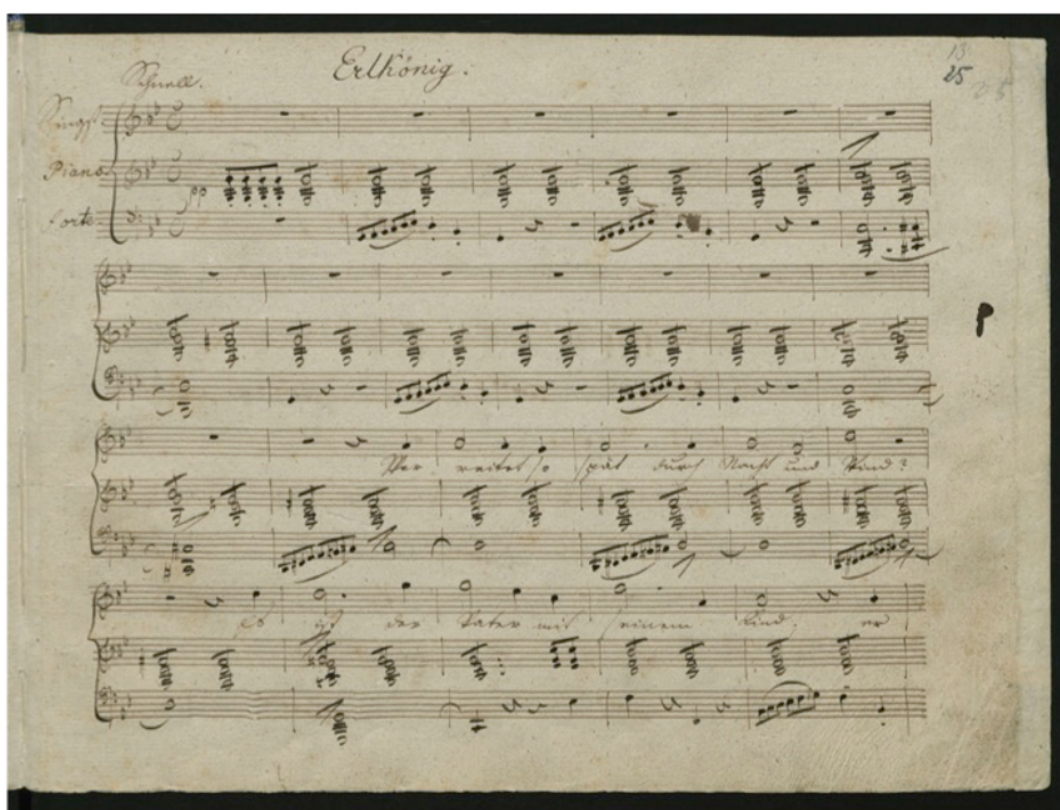


Fig. 1 "Erlkönig" score by Franz Schubert

Many formal analyses based on music theory go further with this work. Beyond that, similar analyses have examined other musical critiques of literature, including the many musical settings of Goethe's evocative text. Schubert was neither the first nor the last composer to take up this 1782 poem; the same text was musicalized—or, as I insist here, musically critiqued—by many others,

including Ludwig von Beethoven in 1795 and in the twentieth century by the Quebecois composer Marc-André Hamelin. Before Schubert took up Goethe's text, Johann Friedrich Reichardt had already composed his own song about *Der Erlkönig* in 1794. In some performances of Reichardt's version, the dotted-eighth and sixteenth-note pairs swing a bit, making this work suitable for a cabaret⁵. Reichardt's musicalization of the poem conveys none of the angst heard in Schubert's later rendering; rather than build up to a dramatic ending, the consistently tonal score presents the story as a single unified scene. Going to the [Reichardt - Der Erlkönig](#), listeners can compare versions in suggestive lines, for example, the ones that translate as "Oh, come, thou dear infant! oh come thou with me! / For many a game I will play there with thee" (Bowring 99). In striking contrast to the harbinger of destiny evoked by other composers, the Erlking has a more raffish presence here; in this setting one can imagine him having a night on the town, perhaps scouring the streets and taverns for young flesh. In contrast to the portrayal of evil conveyed by Schubert, Reichardt's music appears to strive for a modicum of empathy for a supernatural monster turned into a commonly seen perverse figure.

To provide my own musical reading of poetry, I now turn my attention to two versions of a poem published by Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda in 1970. I composed the first version in 1996 as part of a song cycle based on Neruda's collection of poetry titled *Las piedras del cielo*; I created the other almost two decades later. A reader's view can change; similarly, a composer's idiolect will not remain the same over the course of seventeen years. Listeners will not be surprised, then, to hear how my musical reading will differ in these two versions.

The song cycle *Las piedras del cielo* includes my first reading of "Entré en la gruta de las ametistas" (I Entered the Amethyst Grotto). The shortest poem in Neruda's volume, it became the longest song in my cycle. Each of the four lines makes up a small movement in the piece, all of them connected by a musical structure indebted to studies of gamelan I had undertaken in Bali

⁵ My discussion of German Romantic dotted-eighth and sixteenth-notes as a precursor to jazz swing appears in *Music and Identity in Twentieth-Century Literature from Our America – Noteworthy Protagonists*.

four years previously. Two solemn low notes introduce contrasting piano lines, one shimmering above while the other delineates a deliberate pentatonic pattern that continues under the narrating vocalist's slow entrance into the picturesque cave.⁶ The shimmering takes a pensive turn with a Balinese pentatonic scale as the narrator briefly leaves blood upon purple thorns, and then transforms into unison lines based on the same pentatonic scheme, which moves at a faster tempo as she changes skin, wine, and outlook. Moving faster still, driving rhythmic lines in the final movement accentuate the pain violet flowers or colors (or, more intriguingly, people with a superficial tinge of arts and sciences) have caused the narrator ever since that cavernous encounter. These changes, which readers can hear at [Neruda-1 - Entré en la gruta](#), create a solemn tone that betrays a great deal of confidence in the reliability of the poem's narrative to transform a few short lines into a life changing experience.

Having let that settle in, I invite you to listen to the 2014 version: [Neruda-2 - Entré en la gruta](#), which humorously reads the lines as hyperbolic metaphors. In addition to featuring a new melody, different rhythms, and an altered harmonic structure, all based on an easily recognizable diatonic major scale, this second musicalization of the same Neruda poem employs a lower vocal range, a new accompanying instrument, and bluesy swing eighth notes. Eschewing separate movements for a unified structure, "Entré en la gruta de las ametistas II" passes more quickly and, to my ears, with a great deal more fun. Listening back, I recall a great deal of humor in some of the volume's poems while composing this cycle in the mid-1990s, and now engage with those moments more than I did at the time. Context plays a part in this as well; my first musical reading of the poem took in the words as part of Neruda's overall rumination on life and death, while the second contemplates just the four lines of the one poem without the surrounding ambience of the entire collection of poems.

⁶ In the early twentieth century, Dutch musicians worked with their Balinese counterparts to create modern musical styles that would eventually attract a tourist trade and improve the lives of the people on that colonized island. Part of this work involved tuning grand pianos in ways that would capture the shimmering effect created by the slight but purposeful differentiation of octaves in Balinese gamelans.

Taking up a trombone, my prosthetic voice, I offer yet a third musical reading of “Entré en la gruta de las ametistas,” this time without any words: [Neruda-3 – Entré en la gruta](#). This reading of the poem, with an instrument playing the melody line from my second version, brings up issues of purely musical commentaries that will receive greater attention later in this project. Leaving behind the lyrics hurtles this project toward a consideration of how music can, indeed must, be brought into subsequent chapters, in which it can, without the need for words, be employed to read entire novels. I hope that you return to see—and hear—the next phase of this project.

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