

Italian Music in Dakota

The Function of European Musical Theater
in U.S. Culture

V&R Academic

Passages – Transitions – Intersections

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Introduction

Did I do wrong in going [to the opera]? There are those who regard a theatrical representation as wrong, *per se* and on principle, but that view I have always thought quite unreasonable [...] I have found myself today none the less able to control my thoughts and feelings at Church or at home for having heard Weber's magnificent music last night.

(George Templeton Strong, 1845)

The title of the book is an explicit tribute to Walt Whitman, who, as it will appear evident in Chapter three, is the central figure in this volume. His extraordinary – and undervalued – poem “Italian Music in Dakota”¹ was published in the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. At first, the title sounds (and sounded to a large majority of readers in the 1880s) paradoxical, provocative, almost oxymoronic: what did the idea of “Italian” opera, as opposed to opera generally, have to do with the cultural wilderness and the one hundred per cent “Americanness” of such a remote territory as Dakota, which was not yet a state, and not yet divided into North and South? The success of the text lies, instead, precisely in the apparently striking juxtaposition of the two terms. I will later discuss in detail its interpretation, because its lines deal with the poet's passion for opera (Italian opera in particular), but also use opera as a structural principle, and as a repertoire of acoustic images that greatly enrich the poem's language and the echoes with which it resounds in the reader's consciousness. The effectiveness of the text is, in fact, multiple: it is appropriate from the point of view of the content (the message it intends to convey and its ideological background), the linguistic

1 The poem was written between 1879 and 1881, after Whitman's trip to the West which, strangely enough, did not include Dakota. It would be interesting to see why, among other equally “wild” places that Whitman *did* visit on that occasion, he decided to mention a corner of the plains he did *not* visit. The name of the territory is of native origin and refers to the name of the Sioux (Lakota or Dakota) nation, that was introduced to the awareness of the average American of the East Coast as early as the 1830s through the paintings of George Catlin. The striking juxtaposition of the two terms (Italian vs Dakota) evidently sounded to Whitman effective and paradigmatic. And so it does nowadays.

strategies and sophisticated rhetorical devices it offers us, the cultural context it represents, and the author's capacity to control an intense network of transatlantic themes. It demonstrates, in my opinion, how those who insist that Whitman's best lyrical production must be found in the limited span of time between 1855 (first edition of *Leaves of Grass*) and 1865 ("Drum-taps") are incorrect. It also demonstrates the coherence and consistency of Whitman's taste, his devotion to some basic issues, as well as his progress towards a deeper and deeper awareness of some basic experiences and ideas, around which his imagination and his production (both in verse and in prose) unflinchingly revolved.

As far as his "sympathy" for – and expertise of – opera is concerned, a wealth of literary criticism has shown that it dated back to his first years of journalism in New York, a period of intense theater going, of reviewing performances of different intellectual significance, that he, however, regularly considered worth commenting, and that never ceased to fascinate him. Whitman's life, poetry, and rich and intriguing memoirs in prose also testify that opera, already in the 1840s, and of course much more so in the following decades, was not a marginal phenomenon in the culture of the United States. Far from being considered an imported good, which could be of some relevance only to the communities of recent immigration from Europe, and far from being limited to theaters of major cities along the East Coast (plus New Orleans), it had acquired a status and vast geographic diffusion (from New York, through Philadelphia, to Charleston, from Chicago, through St. Louis, to San Francisco, spreading, finally, even in the cultural "wilderness" of Kansas City, Dallas and Denver) and a wide popularity among all social classes. This fact could indeed astonish (and preoccupy) only members of what was rapidly becoming a minority, that is, the heirs of the Puritans in New England.

The history of opera in America (both the influence of European opera and the slow, contradictory growth of a thoroughly *American* opera) has already been told and recent criticism has investigated almost all its aspects.² In this book, as a European scholar of North American literature, I propose to concentrate on the intersection between European opera and some major figures in the literature of the United States – how it was received, what it meant, how it was textually "exploited" – in other words, its literary function and the role it played in helping some great masters of the canon to express themselves, their ideas, their feelings, and their *Weltanschauung*. I will, in addition, try to identify and explore the reasons why such diverse writers as Poe, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, Lanier, James, Wharton, Santayana (as well as a number of 20th century poets and prose writers) occasionally, or regularly, found a priceless instrument

2 John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History*, New Haven, CT, Yale U. P., 1993.

in opera that, precisely because it belonged to a different epistemological field and used different codes of expression, enabled them to say things that their language and the world of words *alone* would not allow them to say. This book will therefore contribute to re-affirm Jakobson's theory not only of the possibility, but of the extraordinary use of intersemiotic translation.

On a socio-historical plane, I will deal with other, equally fascinating, transcultural themes, such as the paradoxical phenomenon according to which not only the low middle classes and the non-wasp section of American society but also the upper middle classes and members of the establishment often assimilated the heritage of Elizabethan theater and of British, German and French Romanticism going to the opera house for productions of Rossini's *La donna del lago*, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, von Weber's *Oberon*, Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* and *Robert le diable*, Bellini's *I Puritani*, Auber's *Fra Diavolo*, Verdi's *Ernani* and *Macbeth*, Gounod's *Faust*, Boito's *Mefistofele*, Thomas' *Hamlet*, rather than getting in touch with the original sources of the "stories", that is to say Sir Walter Scott's novels, Goethe's poem, or Shakespeare's, Victor Hugo's and Schiller's plays.

The subject of the book is limited in scope but very ample in chronological terms and will therefore allow the survey of a long period in the history of Anglo-American culture, by scrutinizing its different phases, currents, ideological attitudes and moods according to an unusual perspective. The complex phenomenology of its manifestations – the discourses it gave origin to at different periods in time – can, in fact, be described and understood not only by underlying the major forces, the most evident dialectics, the patent recurring debates and the basic documents that punctuate the context but also by adopting an "eccentric" viewpoint, in search of what Carolyn Denard³ calls "what moves at the margin" in her edition of Toni Morrison's "non-fiction". These "moves" are leitmotifs that do not necessarily come to the foreground but surface now and then, under given circumstances, in the works of men of letters and texts of a "secondary", minority canon, or in less closely examined corners of the great texts of the canon. In this sense, the reader of this book should not be surprised if he/she finds out that, after dealing with major poets or novelists and their masterpieces, I include in my "scenario" names of writers who have long been "reshuffled" and no more occupy the position of center stage. Or if I re-visit some neglected pages of their works with almost monomaniac attention (and intention) – trying not to lose, in the meantime, the sense of perspective. Reshuffling the canon has been a favorite pastime in recent decades; why shouldn't we feel authorized to reshuffle proportions within a single text (or macrotext), a

3 Toni Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Non-Fiction*, ed. by Carolyn C. Denard, Jackson, University of Mississippi P., 2008.

literary genre, the story of an author's life, or his/her ideas, production and poetics?

American studies have comprised the analysis of all facets of the prismatic, multicultural, transnational and fluid American identity, including the dialectics between national and local issues, the civilization of the East and of the West Coast, such major confrontations as idealism versus realism, Transcendentalist optimism versus the decline and fall of the American dream, Puritan heritage versus frontier culture, religion of progress versus ecological awareness, machine versus garden (capitalism versus Arcadian myths)⁴. But acute observers of intellectual phenomena and artistic events know that, more often than not, their perceptiveness can be fruitfully applied in following the apparently stray, episodic and uneven streams of little rivulets, after having contemplated the grand flow of a powerful river, especially if one meets such rivulets as Whitman's "Autumn Rivulets"⁵. Rivulets flow into large waterways, join major and minor tributaries, and contribute to the overall design of their course. A series of seemingly idiosyncratic steps can lead to unforeseen discoveries of some importance or can confirm, with the strength of their novelty, ideas that were taken for granted in the past and, being questioned no more, sounded banal. The minutest tesserae of a mosaic, in sum, are often the most precious ones. This is the method I have chosen to pursue in the present book, allowing myself the liberty to leisurely follow the connections and intertextual references that my experience of the thick network of pertinent associations suggest, authorize and support.

Lorenzo Da Ponte, Salieri's protégé and court poet for Emperor Joseph II in Vienna (1781–1790), an acquaintance of Casanova's in Dresden (1790–92) and great impresario for the King's Theatre in London (1792–1805) after Mozart's death (1791), had collaborated in the early 1790s with Stephen Storace, an English composer destined to great success first in London, and then in New York. Storace's most popular comic opera *No Song, No Supper*, first produced in 1790, remained a favorite of both European and American audiences through the 1840s. A "man for all seasons" and of many gifts, Da Ponte arrived in America in 1805, carrying in his somewhat light luggage several priceless manuscripts of Mozart's, among which those of the three major operas in Italian, for which he had written the libretti: *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *Così fan tutte* (1790).

After a stay in Philadelphia that did not prove particularly successful, Da

4 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, Oxford U. P., 1964.

5 Walt Whitman called the cluster of poems added to the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass* "Autumn Rivulets". His "Two Rivulets" are, instead, a group of pieces added to the 1876 edition of the book.

Ponte settled in New York, where in 1825 he was appointed Professor of Italian Language at Columbia College (afterwards Columbia University). Apart from teaching and promoting Italian culture, dealing in imported books, keeping in constant touch with Italy (following Gioacchino Rossini's rise and fortunes as if he were in his native land), he was busy writing his memoirs (published in three volumes between 1823 and 1827) for over twenty years.⁶ In 1828 he met Manuel García (who had been the interpreter of Count Almaviva at the premiere of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in Rome, February 1816). In the same year he became an American citizen and decided to enter the challenging (but dangerous) world of the American performing arts. In 1833 he founded the Italian Opera House, premiering Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra* and producing *La Cenerentola* in Italian. His financial successes, unfortunately, were very short-lived; his enterprise failed in 1835. In 1838 he died.⁷

Although it is not correct to consider Da Ponte's arrival in the United States as the birth date in the history of opera in North America, it is true that the presence of such a distinguished (however controversial) figure in the following three decades and his association with the Havana Company of Manuel García marked the beginning of a substantial change in the musical scene. It promoted the transition from the predominance of English traditional opera (sung in English by – generally speaking – rather modest and naïve companies) to the triumphs of “continental” European (French, German and Italian) operas, either sung in English translation or in their original languages by real stars and staged by professional entrepreneurs.⁸ The vogue of Italian opera reached an acme from the late 1840s through the 1870s, when libretti of famous French and German operas, curiously enough, were translated into Italian in order to meet the taste of the snobbish public. Audiences, in fact, started considering that listening to – and “understanding” – *bel canto* in Italian was a sign of intellectual distinction.⁹ This is how Edith Wharton's fine irony describes the situation in retrospect (New York in the 1870s, opening page of *The Age of Innocence*, 1920):

6 Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Memorie*, a c. C. Allasia e E. Malaspina, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 2005. *Memoirs*, transl. by Elisabeth Abbott, ed. by Arthur Livingston, pref. by Charles Rosen, New York, The New York Review of Books, 2000. The section pertaining to Da Ponte's American stay runs from p. 340 through p. 472.

7 Rodney Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice: The Remarkable Life of Lorenzo da Ponte*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2006; Anthony Holden, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, London, Orion, 2007; Luciano Paesani, *Porta, Bertati, Da Ponte*, Milano, LED, 2012; Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Storia della lingua e della letteratura italiana a New York*, a c. Lorenzo della Chà, Milano, Il Polifilo, 2013.

8 June Ottenberg, *Opera Odyssey: Towards a History of Opera in Nineteenth Century America*, Westport, CT, Greenwood P., 1994.

9 Another interesting datum is the fact that Italian operas – sung in Italian – first became popular in New Orleans, not in New York or in other major cities of the East Coast.

Christine Nilsson was singing in Faust at the Academy of Music, in New York [...] She sang, of course, “M’ama!” and not “he loves me,” since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences. This seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded: such as the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole.

In the first half of the century the context in which the first authors whom I am going to consider lived and wrote was more diversified and very stimulating: already cosmopolitan and, somehow, transcultural *ante litteram*. The 1820s and 1830s were the years of the vast posthumous popularity of Charles Brockden Brown’s novels, derived from Friedrich Schiller’s Schauer-romantik Gothic theater,¹⁰ of James Fenimore Cooper’s pirates, noble savages and pioneers and of his well known and much emphasized rivalry with – and emulation of – Sir Walter Scott (*The Spy* was published in 1821, *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1826).¹¹ Cooper was a great fan of opera. He followed, for instance, the seasons of García’s Havana Opera Company from 1825 onwards and was often seen at the Park Theater in New York City (in that period the most elitist of North American theaters) together with Da Ponte and other internationally well-known figures, such as Joseph Bonaparte, former king of Spain. In Washington Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820)¹² European sources were easily recognized and accepted without embarrassment.

The heirs of Puritan New England, as I was saying, were gradually becoming a marginal cultural force and, except in Boston, could not counterbalance the hunger for entertainment which invaded the *nouveaux riches* and the upper class need to be out at night. In New York churches of all denominations offered sacred music not only on Saturdays and Sundays but also on week days. Concerts halls were almost as many as churches and promoted both sacred and lay instrumental music, as well as choirs and recitals by famous singers. New theaters opened incessantly, though most of them enjoyed financial success only for a season or two (like Da Ponte’s Italian Opera House). The night scene was, in sum, rather lively; certainly more than we would expect in a still small city.

10 For the importance of music in Charles Brockden Brown’s novels, see Annalisa Goldoni, “Charles Brockden Brown e la seduzione della musica”, in *La questione romantica*, 11 (2001), pp. 13–23.

11 Cooper’s novel *The Spy* became the first Italian opera with an American setting, when it was transcodified by Italian composer Luigi Arditi in 1856 during his fruitful stay in the United States.

12 The transcodification of Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle* into a thoroughly American opera occurred as late as the 1930s (music by Edward Manning, New York, 1932). *Sleepy Hollow* became a successful Broadway musical even later (1948).

To be fair, the Pilgrim Fathers and the members of Puritan theocracy who, no less than their counterparts in England, were suspicious of the theater, had imported from across the ocean the tradition of both sacred and profane music. Not only Sunday services and other religious meetings were accompanied by choirs singing Biblical or contemporary hymns; political assemblies and conventions of different kinds also included musical (above all choral) moments. What could not properly flourish in their context, however, was the concept of music as “spectacle” and complex, heterogeneous performance. This explains why the theatrical element implicit in so many musical genres could not find so full an expression as in Catholic baroque music or even in European Reformation music, from Bach to Händel.

Above all the members of the Calvinist community were suspicious of the power of an enchanting melody entrusted to the “arbitrary” interpretation of a voice that, with its acrobatic “arabesques” (so thoroughly enjoyed, in Europe, for example, by Chopin, and in America, somewhat later, by Whitman), ended up by expressing a more sensual than celestial musical dimension. There is, here and there, evidence of some sort of “vocal freedom”, *e. g.* in the interpretation of the *Psalms*, thanks to which the singing could, so to say, “overflow” well beyond the boundaries of the written words and of the fixed notes of the score. But the basic suspicion remained unaltered for decades and could be overcome only when a true multicultural society emerged in the North East also.¹³ This is why I shall begin my *excursus* precisely in New England, analyzing Ralph W. Emerson’s contradictory attitude towards music.

13 Gilbert Chase, *American Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present*, Urbana-Chicago, U. of Illinois P., 1987.

Chapter One: R. W. Emerson and E. A. Poe

Whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down.

(R. W. Emerson, 1844)

Music is essential, since the comprehension of sweet sound is our most indefinite conception. Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry. Music without the idea, is simply music; the idea, without the music, is prose, from its very definiteness.

(Edgar A. Poe, 1831)

1. R. W. Emerson: the music of the spheres

Emerson seems to me the most opportune figure to start with, because his doctrine and the influence it so long exerted reveal the dynamics of contradictory forces working in favor or against the progress of opera in the United States, and of the possibility to use it as a major ingredient in intriguing inter-semiotic operations. The fact is that Emerson was not only indifferent to the popularity of opera, but also ideologically suspicious of “artificial” music, produced by man in a vain, hopeless competition with the divine music of Nature. His poem “Music” offers ample evidence of his limited interest in the sense of hearing, in acoustic perception and in the realm of sounds, as well as a document of the ensuing difficulty in writing verse that could be vaguely comparable to the quality of his prose.

We know that he tried, at various stages of his intellectual growth, to convince himself (and his readers) that, in order to adequately experience reality, and thence to “understand” it, the ear and the eye are equally important. In his essay “The Poet” he writes:

Whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down.¹

But then, in his poem “Merlin I”, he exhorts the “kingly bard” to “smite the chords rudely and hard”, since “No jingling serenader’s art/ Nor tinkle of piano strings,/ Can make the wild blood start/ In its mystic springs”. The poet must be unencumbered “with the coil of rhythm and number”. The “eye” (whose phonic coincidence with the personal pronoun “I” he often stressed, thus exploiting the fact in philosophical terms) gradually became, in fact, the privileged organ of exploration of the world and of all physical and mental experience.² In his prose “superb oxymorons” combine “in a severely compacted way his idealized contraries of free imagination and ordered art”, but “the wise *counter-voice*” never becomes a musical *controcanto*.³ Emerson’s idea (and use) of the eye reminds us of the “pure eye of the reason” that he found in Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. Yet, in its transition from Carlyle to Emerson, the “philosophical eye” of the British writer underwent a substantial metamorphosis, turning into the instrument “of the pure *American vision*”, an organ that, in the New World, would gain a “more earnest *vision*” (italics mine).⁴ The long critical tradition of Emerson’s studies has explained how this organ – thanks to a frequently quoted epiphanic moment – finally became the “transparent eyeball” that allowed the subject to utter the famous sentence: “I am nothing, I see all”. In comparison, Emerson’s ear (that is, obviously, more the ear of his spirit than the organ of his sense of hearing) seems more like a modest tool, that is incapable of a direct, immediate perception – therefore an epiphany, or an adequate “understanding” – and was quickly marginalized, as F. O. Matthiessen already remarked in 1941.⁵

1 Ralph W. Emerson, *Essays: Second Series*, in *The Collected Works of Ralph W. Emerson*, ed. by Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr, Cambridge, MA, Harvard U. P., 1983, pp. 5–6.

2 James S. Cox, “The Circles of the Eye”, in *Ralph W. Emerson*, ed. by Harold Bloom, New York, Chelsea House, 1985: “The metaphor instantaneously transforms being into seeing; if it does not annihilate personal consciousness, it causes the personal experience to vanish by virtue of the expansion and uplift of the essential self into infinite space” (p. 47).

3 David Porter, “The Muse Has a Deeper Secret”, in Harold Bloom, ed., *Op. cit.*, pp. 72–73. See also Robert Hudnut, *The Aesthetics of Ralph W. Emerson: The Materials and Methods of His Poetry*, Lewiston, N.Y., Edwin Mellen, 1996.

4 Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by H. D. Traill, London, Chapman and Hall, 1896–99, 30 vols. Cf. Giuseppe Nori, “Emerson, il Mediterraneo e l’occhio americano”, in *Orizzonti mediterranei e oltre: prospettive inglesi e americane*, a c. di L. Marchetti e C. Martinez, Milano, LED, 2014, p. 146.

5 F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, London-Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1941. See also Lawrence Buell, *Emerson*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard U. P., 2004: “He never mastered the poetic line as he did the prose sentence. Too much filler, too much reliance on cliché, too much syntactical contortion to fit rhyme and meter” (p. 136). His “syntactical contortion” was echoed, in the 20th century, by John Berryman, combined, however, with a much deeper musical experience (see chapter VII in this volume).

In an intense contemplative moment, during his voyage across the Atlantic, before actually seeing the Mediterranean, where he was going to visit the cradle of Western civilization, Emerson looked at the clouds and, apparently, heard “an ancient hymn” coming from above. When he described, in his journal, his experience as a sort of “vocation”, he used a quotation from William Wordsworth’s “The Excursion”, even though he thought that Wordsworth cannot be considered a master, since he is “too much a poet”.⁶ The clouds, Emerson writes, had “silent faces”, therefore their message could not be properly *heard*, but *read* (on the page of an actual book, or on the screen of his memory), as conveyed/translated by the Romantic poet in his lines. This, as many other similar experiences in Emerson’s life, can hardly be considered a *vocation* in the etymological (and Biblical) sense of the word, since it was not produced by a voice (*vox*) calling, or rather summoning him, by means of words that the subject could *hear*, but through written words, that had to be *seen* and/or *read*.

Not only in this case but, more in general, as a rule, the “American scholar” overlooked or misinterpreted the meaning of the famous passage in the Bible: “*verba volant, scripta manent*”; a dictum which, contrary to its modern interpretation, must be understood as a praise of spoken/heard words, whose capacity to fly well above the level of daily experience can produce a vaster and deeper knowledge than that obtained by means of written/read words – words that remain crystallized, inert, stiffly identical to themselves – and must be univocally, passively accepted. Emerson, in sum, reacted to things seen more than to things heard; his imagination progressed on the basis of what his eye saw. In Italy he “was enchanted by the art and music of Florence”, but began a rich relationship with a sculptor: Horatio Greenough.⁷ Only sight could apparently produce in his mind a “rational emotion” (no matter how oxymoronic the expression can sound). As his writings testify, progressing from an image or a concept to the next, abstract ideas acquire concrete meaning, and the process is made possible by *visual* metaphors, examples and associations.

But let’s confront ourselves directly with the text of the poem “Music”. As all other lyrical texts by Emerson, the three stanzas offer an explicit ideological message but do not appear adequate in terms of formal dimension, suggestiveness and capacity to present the reader with a “soundscape”:

6 William Wordsworth, “The Excursion”, Book I (1814). Cf. R. W. Emerson, *Journals*, in *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, ed. by W. H. Gilman et al., Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1960–1982, 16 vols. Vol. II, p. 106, Vol. IV, p. 104. Wordsworth and Coleridge, in Emerson’s view, were poets but not “bards” or “prophets”; they had “no idea of that species of moral truth” which he called “first philosophy” (Joel Porte, *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict*, New York, AMS Press, 1985).

7 Donald Yannella, *Ralph W. Emerson*, Boston, Twayne, 1982, p. 5.

Let me go where'er I will
 I hear a sky-born music still.
 It sounds from all things old,
 It sounds from all things young,
 From all that's fair, from all that's foul,
 Peals out a cheerful song.

It is not only in the rose,
 It is not only in the bird,
 Not only where the rainbow glows,
 Nor in the song of woman heard,
 But in the darkest, meanest things
 There alway, alway something sings.

'Tis not in the high stars alone,
 Nor in the cup of budding flowers,
 Nor in the redbreast's mellow tone,
 Nor in the bow that smiles in showers,
 But in the mud and scum of things
 There alway, alway something sings.

The music that descends from heaven and pervasively “enters” all things on earth (not only living beings), is “heard” but cannot actually be enjoyed since it must soon be “interpreted” by the subject not as a concrete, enchanting melody, but as the voice of the Oversoul that permeates the world. The poet does not make much effort to render his words smooth or harmonious, “pleasant” to hear as well as “interesting” to reflect upon, and has, therefore, difficulty in creating an acoustic “objective correlative” of his discourse. Pound would say that the message is conveyed more through *logopoeia* (and *phanopoeia*) than through *melopoeia*. Even though the text deals with the concept of a music which originates from both pleasing and unpleasing sources, its images are predominantly, if not exclusively, *visual*. In spite of a mature technical strategy which includes an abundant use of rhymes, strongly accentuated diction, the iteration of lines and half-lines (“it sounds from all things...it is not only...nor in...”) and an alliteration that is occasionally effective (fair/foul, smiles/showers, mud/scum), the poem, which should evoke a pantheistic landscape of things that “speak” or that are natural instruments through which a “superior” music is heard, paradoxically does not reach the level of “song”.

Out of eight things (objects, events) introduced as examples of the source of the music that is the theme of the text (the rose, the bird, the rainbow, the song of woman, the stars, the flowers, the redbreast, “the bow that smiles in showers”), five pertain to sight (or to smell) rather than to hearing (rose, rainbow, stars, flowers, the bow): they are fascinating “spectacles”, “visions”, that, thanks to

their beauty, express a message without speaking, without uttering sounds; whereas only three can be accepted as things that emanate a music of their own (the bird, the song of woman, the mellow tone of the redbreast). The limits of Emerson's poetic imagination are also revealed by the fact that, in the list that he compiles, three "objects" are mentioned twice, with a slight conceptual variation: a movement that results in a sense that is more of redundancy than of richness or depth. The "generic" (and rather banal) rose of the first stanza (not a rhodora, a fringed gentian, or a wild honeysuckle) becomes, in the second, the vague "cup of budding flowers". The bird is specified as "the redbreast", producing a "mellow tone", and the rainbow as "the bow that smiles in showers". Other sources of the "sky-born music" are even more generic. In the first stanza we have "things old", "things young", "all that's fair" (again, sight predominates), "all that's foul". In the second stanza, "darkest [...] things" appeal, once again, to sight. Whereas, in the third stanza, "the *mud* and the *scum* of things" must be interpreted by the reader as immediately shifting from a literal to a metaphoric dimension. The "competition" between sight and sound in Emerson can be read, therefore, as a major example of what Jim Von der Heydt calls the poet's attitude to "disjunction" more than to "consonance".⁸

2. Contrastive analyses: The Aeolian harp

Emerson's idea that the best possible music is that produced by Nature, as the wind blows through the chords of the "Aeolian harp", distances him from the European romantic tradition represented, for example, by Shelley – according to whom it is the subject that wishes to be transformed into a musical instrument ("make me thy lyre...", in "Ode to the West Wind"), played by the "autumn's breath". The poetic I gives up its identity, somehow sacrificing itself, in order to *become* the music. In so doing, however, it vindicates its essential role: without man, Nature (the wind) would not be able to fill the world with the songs that mankind so intensely needs to hear.⁹ In other words, Shelley does not need what I would define a sort of "safety distance", a "chastity" that Emerson, instead, considers indispensable in order to guarantee the complete mirroring – and the impeccable operating within his consciousness – of a truth which will finally possess him. If music, as Ernst Bloch will later explain, gives voice to enigmas more than to truths, the economy of sounds interrupts the regime of the eye and

8 Jim Von der Heydt, "Emerson's Beachcombing and the Horizon of Poetry", in *Raritan*, 22, 3 (Winter 2003), pp. 113–135.

9 P. B. Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind" (1819), in *The Complete Poetical Works of P. B. Shelley*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson, Oxford U. P., 1961, pp. 577–579.

problematizes the resulting vision of the world.¹⁰ Musical sounds, powerful choirs, sensual voices that sing, were often felt as uncanny elements or events in the New World, in spite of the Puritan tradition of religious and lay hymns, which regularly accompanied all major assemblies of the community. This was due not only to the awareness of the sensuality implied in the echo of “Pan’s flute”, or of the subtle charm of the “music of the spheres” of classical heritage, but also to the suspicion towards the traumatic consequences ensuing from the ardor of faith, when it becomes voice – as in the moment of heavenly inspiration in the ceremonies of Quakers and Shakers.

When, in *An Oration Delivered before the Literary Societies of Dartmouth College* (1838) Emerson denounces the disappointing conditions of the arts in America (“The mark of American merit in painting, in sculpture, in fiction, in eloquence, seems to be a certain grace without grandeur, and itself not but imitative, a vase of fair outline, but empty”) his silence about music betrays an implicit embarrassment before something he cannot easily accommodate in the context of his *vision* of the world and of the young nation¹¹. In addition, when music and theater intertwine in a form of art (opera, melodrama) that is not only performative but *physical* and *bodily* – and therefore threatens to destabilize the balance of both Puritan and Transcendentalist restraint – the only solution is to retreat into the realm of seeing, in search not only of “clear and distinct ideas”, but of clearly perceived objects, sure outlines and the neat, comforting borders of things.

A contrastive analysis of Emerson’s “Music” and John Dryden’s “A Song for St. Cecilia’s Day” (1687) could easily seem unfair, considering the difference in the specific poetic qualities of the two authors. So I am not going to proceed too far in that direction, as if I wanted to insist, somewhat sadistically, on Emerson’s faults and on his occasional clumsiness. A brief comparison can, however, be of some use, in order to clarify how difficult it is to write good poetry if one lacks that musical ear that Charles Lamb so honestly confessed to be deprived of – in his “A Chapter on Ears” (*Essays of Elia*, 1823) – and described with a subtle sense of humor and fine self-irony. The starting point of Dryden’s ode is an idea similar

10 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, transl. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1986 (orig. III vols., 1938–47). Iain Chambers, “La musica, la memoria, l’ascolto”, in *Anterem*, XXV, 61 (December 2000), pp. 62–64. In Nicola Piovani’s words, music does not use verbs or nouns, only adjectives and adverbs, which explains why it cannot actually “tell” (in the rational sense of the word); this also explains why Emerson the thinker, the Concord sage, had an altogether modest opinion of it.

11 Emerson continued to mention music at a later stage also, on several occasions. What is most relevant, however, is the absence of music as an essential expression of the spirit from the text of his most “heroic” moment: *English Traits* (1856), “Poetry and Imagination”, in *Letters and Social Aims* (1876). See Danny Heitman, “What Accounts for Emerson’s Endurance as a Writer?”, in *Humanities*, Vol. XXXIX, n. 3 (May–June 2013).

to Emerson's concept of a "sky-born music": the world ("This universal frame"), says Dryden, began from "heav'nly harmony". Such an acoustic *primum movens* has little to do with the classic idea of the harmony of the spheres, introduced in Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* (54–51 b.C.)¹² and discussed at length in Boethius's *De institutione musica* (ca. 520 A.D.): it is, in fact, defined as a "tuneful voice" that, in turn, was "obeyed" by "music's power". The traces of the old Pythagorean theory of *harmonia mundi* remain only as distant echoes and what really strikes us – since, as W. H. Auden put it, "a poem does not mean: it is" – is the fascinating progress of the poem and its broad and varied rhythm of breathing, that accompanies us and makes us "visit" the phenomenological consequences of the mythical beginning.

After the first stanza, the analogy between Emerson and Dryden ceases. The 17th century poet – thanks to his professionalism, inborn poetic sensibility and technical experience – continues for another six stanzas (plus a final Chorus) dealing with the "passion" raised by music (Bloch's voice of the musical enigma, that makes the vision of the world more problematic), the different kinds of music produced by the various instruments (the trumpet, the flute, the lute, the violin, the organ, the lyre) and the emotions that are induced, that is wonder, excitement, complaint, despair and holy love. The conclusion is what Marcello Pagnini calls an "ideophony", that is to say, an original idea which materializes taking shape in a perfect acoustic equivalent, by means of a brilliant linguistic act.¹³ In fact, the poet imagines that, when Doomsday comes ("when the last and dreadful hour/ This crumbling pageant shall devour") music (the same music that somehow created the universe and supported the world for millennia) "shall untune the sky". As one sees music becomes a sort of conductor who, with his *magic* wand, finally silences the orchestra and puts an end to the concert. The polyphonic texture of Dryden's poem includes elements of performativity and theatricality that American culture (especially in New England), early in the 19th century, had problems in accepting. Those elements are at the origins of the transcodification/translation of Dryden's poem in a piece of *real* music by Händel.¹⁴

The idea of music (or sound) as the "seed" of the universe or emblem of creation runs through the history of mankind and surfaces now and then, as an *acoustic* hypothesis, in contrast with the *visual* Biblical paradigm according to

12 The so called *Somnium Scipionis* is the 5th and last Book (the only remaining section) of Cicero's *De re publica*.

13 Marcello Pagnini, *Lingua e musica: proposta per un'indagine strutturalista-semiotica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1974; Idem, *Semiosi: Teoria ed ermeneutica del testo letterario*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1988.

14 George Friedrich Händel's *Cantata for St. Cecilia's Day* (for soprano, tenor, choir and orchestra) had its première in London on November 22, 1739 (Theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields).

which a silent God, putting order to chaos, separated light from darkness. Was the beginning, then, a “big bang”, the A note that provided tuning for the orchestra, a discreet but most significant “singing or whispering voice” that expressed the “first meaning”; the λόγος of St. John’s *Gospel*, that “single sound” that appears in the priest Tosamah’s sermon in N. S. Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1966)? Or was it a long speech that synesthetically describes an alternative creation, reconciling the visual and the acoustic dimension? Here is Momaday’s intriguing passage:

There was darkness all around, and in the darkness something happened. *Something happened!* There was a single sound. There was a single sound [...] It was almost nothing in itself, the smallest seed of sound – but it took hold of the darkness and there was light; it took hold of the stillness and there was motion [...] It scarcely was; but it was, and everything began.¹⁵

Equally (or perhaps even more) unfair, but chronologically more consistent, could be considered the comparison between Emerson’s “Music” and Percy B. Shelley’s famous fragment “Music, when Soft Voices Die”¹⁶. But, again, a rapid parallel reading can be useful in order to detect Emerson’s position in the context of English and American early 19th century culture and to trace the development of his taste as he gradually came in contact with the most important poets and prose writers of English Romanticism. I have already mentioned Wordsworth (the poet who defined the eye as “the most despotic organ of perception”) and the impact of his verse on Emerson. I could deal at length with the contradictory influence of Coleridge (more of the *Biographia Literaria*, 1817, and of other pieces of his prose than of his poetry, as it is easy to imagine). I could detect fewer points of contact/intersection with Byron, Shelley and Keats, whose verse precociously revealed the first hints of what would become the late 19th century aestheticism, that is, a “vision” of the world and of art that the Concord sage could never accept.

Shelley’s fragment (two quatrains for a total of eight short trochaic lines) has a different starting point from Emerson’s “Music”. The ensuing message, therefore, is also different. The incipit is a masterly example of the poet at his best:

Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory...

The permanence of musical sounds, says Shelley, of songs sung by “soft voices”, is made possible by memory (the great source and depository of all arts, according to the Greek myth of Mnemosyne, the mother of the nine Muses).

15 N. S. Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, New York, Harper & Row, 1966, p. 91.

16 The fragment was probably written in 1821 and published in Shelley’s *Posthumous Poems*, London, John and Henry Hunt, 1824 (pref. by Mary Shelley).

Although memory is not a passive, inert recording of things past (“the echo of a sound that is heard no more”, in William S. Merwin’s words), but a lively, vibrant intellectual and emotional exercise. As George Rochenberg observed, we listen to music “with our bodies, with our nervous systems and their parallel/serial memory functions”¹⁷.

The second couple of lines shifts from the sense of hearing not to the sense of sight, but rather of smell (and taste):

Odors, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken...

It is a survival, again, as lively as that of music in the memory of the subject. The senses are, in fact, “quickened” by odors that will not fade (Proust must have agreed with a smile, when he read these lines, if he ever did, as he began writing his *Recherche*). The leaves of the rose can have a function also when they have withered, the poet continues: “[they can be] heap’d for the beloved’s bed” (the idea of an act of love performed among perfumed petals of flowers is clearly implied, and seems to echo some exquisite pages of *Kamasutra*). Finally, the thought of a twin soul, even *in absentia*, can provide the foundations and the subject matter for Love itself, which is likely to fall heavily asleep on them:

Love itself shall slumber on.

Evidently, the communion of the poet with his partner is absolute and includes the senses (hearing, smell, taste, erotic intimacy, *not* sight) and the intellect (thoughts). The text, in sum, presents us with images of “full immersion”, that exclude both the Emersonian “safety distance” we mentioned before and the disappointing attitude epitomized in England by Wordsworth’s Christianized phase.

Shelley’s fragment underwent several musical transcodifications (not a major one, like Dryden’s *Ode*) and was felt as extraordinarily congenial, in particular in the early 20th century (Frank Bridge, 1904, Charles Wood, 1915, Samuel Barber, 1926) and in the early 21st century (Gary Bachlund, 2009, Philip Legge, 2010). The transition from words to notes, from libretto to the full performance on stage, will keep me occupied when I deal with opera proper. For the time being, I wish to anticipate, as a sort of *ballon d’essai*, two or three questions I find particularly intriguing. Do musicians and composers prefer to interpret through their music words that are already “musical”, by adding tones, nuances, refrains, variations and “colors” to an existing, though vague, or *virtual* musicality, to a secret or patent melody that is already there, fully expressed, or in a nutshell? or does such a musicality somehow hinder their intention, limit their projects,

17 Cf. Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, New York, Vintage Books, 1991, p. 212.

condition their freedom? To what extent can they “appropriate” the text and have it *sound* as a creation of their own, once it has been “processed” by their imagination, in another medium, and by other artistic codes?¹⁸ Dryden’s and Shelley’s examples seem to corroborate the former hypothesis. But the question, as we shall see, is much more complex when the final product must be the staging of a musical spectacle. That is, a work of art with a story that must be performed, played, sung, acted, and enjoyed by an audience that is *really* there and not only physically present, interested, curious, but also ready to offer a reaction, feedback and a “contribution” to the final output. The theater, in fact, is the perfect object of the reader response theory, and easily lends itself to the interpretation of the *intentio lectoris*.¹⁹

3. Acoustic strategies in E. A. Poe

A better musical ear than Emerson’s (or Lamb’s), unfortunately, is not a sufficient guarantee of a more satisfactory literary output. E. A. Poe doubtlessly had a deeper and ampler musical experience: “I am profoundly excited by music”, he wrote in a letter to a friend. “In the soul’s struggles at combination [of sounds] it is not impossible that a harp may strike notes not unfamiliar to the angels”.²⁰ He had a finer acoustic sensitivity and tried to exploit it in order to produce great “Romantic” poetry, supporting his lines with a remarkable variety of rhythms and with an evident expertise in sophisticated linguistic techniques.²¹ His idea that poetry and music were the two most intimately connected forms of art is clearly expounded in his essay “The Poetic Principle” (1848). In another letter (1831) he reveals how intimate the relationships between music and poetry are: “Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea is poetry. Music without the idea is simply music; the idea, without the music, is prose, from its very definitive-

18 See the debates implicit in such works as Salieri, *Prima la musica e poi le parole* (Vienna, 1786), Richard Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868), Richard Strauss, *Capriccio* (1942). Nietzsche’s essay on Wagner (1888–89) is extremely favorable. Later Nietzsche changed his mind and said he preferred such an “anti-Wagnerian” opera as Georges Bizet’s *Carmen*. See Rudiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, transl. by Shelley Fisch, London, Granta Books, 2002.

19 Umberto Eco, *I limiti dell’interpretazione*, Milano, Bompiani, 1990.

20 Kenneth Silverman, *E. A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*, New York, Harper Collins, 1991, pp. 167–168.

21 The starting point for all investigations on the relationship between Poe and music are the bibliographical essays of Burton R. Pollin: “More Music to Poe”, in *Music and Letters*, XLIV (1973), pp. 391–404; “Music and E. A. Poe: A Second Annotated Checklist”, in *Poe Studies*, XV (1982), pp. 7–13; “E.A. Poe and Music: A Third Annotated Checklist”, in *Poe Studies*, XXVI (1993), pp. 41–58. See also Idem, *Poe’s Seductive Influence on Great Writers*, New York, iUniverse, 2004.