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# “Where Words Fail, Music Speaks”: The Experience of Adapting Literature to Music

Laney J. Fowle

Kyle Bishop

Matthew Nickerson

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# “Where Words Fail, Music Speaks”: The Experience of Adapting Literature to Music

Laney J. Fowle

**“Where Words Fail, Music Speaks”:**  
The Experience of Adapting Literature to Music

by  
Laney J. Fowle

Thesis Project

Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduating with  
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Laney J. Fowle

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Dr. Kyle Bishop  
*Associate Professor of English*

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Prof. Matthew Nickerson  
*Director, Honors Program*

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*A CD containing recordings of both adapted works can be found on the inside of the back cover.*

## Overture: An Introduction

Adaptation is a relatively new yet growing academic field consisting mainly of research on the modification of book into film. This study endeavors to expand the discourse on adaptation to the modal transformation of literary works to music. By using this specific adaptive type to examine the process and functionality of adapted works, I was able to address several key aspects of modern adaptation, including the hot-button issue of fidelity to an established source text, the role of adaptor as co-author, and the ability of solitary artistic modes to augment each other when combined. The resulting personal attempts at adaptation of a short poem to an accompanied vocal composition and an unaccompanied choral work were accomplished by the practical application of adaptive theory presented in several documents on the strategies behind the adaptive process. In using an experience-based approach, this study provides a hands-on look at the complex processes involved in adaptation and contributes to the growing body of adaptation research.

This venture came about as a result of the marriage of my two academic passions: music and literature. The initial idea surrounding the project was to study modern adaptive practice through several articles on the modification of book into film as well as Julie Sanders' in-depth study of musical adaptations of the works of William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare and Music: Afterlives and Borrowings*. I began by engaging myself in the discourse of adaptation by composing responses to each article I read: Dudley Andrew's "Adaptation," "The Ethics of Infidelity" by Thomas Leitch, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation" by Robert Stam, and Glenn Jellenik's "Quiet, Music at Work: The Soundtrack and Adaptation." Thoroughly immersed in the ideas and terminology surrounding modern adaptation, I then turned to Sanders' book. My goals were to obtain a solid understanding of the many and varied musical settings of

the timeless works of Shakespeare and then to take a more focused look at a single foray into a musical adaptation of one of the Bard's works. My concentration landed on Romantic composer Johannes Brahms' *Ophelia Lieder*, a German song cycle composed of five, short unaccompanied songs to be used in practical performances of *Hamlet*. I comprehensively examined Brahms' illustration of the madness of Ophelia through musical techniques as well as his role as adaptive co-author to Shakespeare. Acquiring comprehension of the general thoughts and concepts surrounding adaptation and then delving into one particular transformation of written word into melody contributed greatly to my overall understanding of the process by which one mode is turned into another.

However, I did not merely wish to analyze how adaptation is done; I wanted to put my money where my mouth was, so to speak, and apply what I had learned of the theory into practice by adapting a piece of literature myself. Though adaptation is a recently developed field of study and little has been written on the subject of transforming literary works into music in favor of book to film modal examinations, the discourse on the subject that has already been established provided me with a solid foundation of concepts and ideologies with which to rework my chosen source text into a musical setting. Building on this experience, I then took the adaptive process a step further by arranging a choral work based on the solo composition; in essence, I adapted my own adaptation.

These two in-depth examinations of the hands-on experience of adapting provide an unprecedented look into the modal transformation of literature to music. Furthermore, the experiential approach to adaptation this study employs expands upon the growing body of discourse associated with adaptation in a different and compelling way. As adaptation between virtually all modes becomes more prevalent in our society and culture, studies will no doubt

move into the limelight of the discipline. In response to the burgeoning growth of the subject, this study aims to build upon previous adaptive research while simultaneously providing a basis for future investigation into this new and exciting field.

## Ophelia's Mad Songs: An Adaptation on Insanity

The plays of William Shakespeare have lent themselves to musical adaptation throughout the centuries, from Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* to Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*. Composers have repeatedly drawn inspiration from the timeless stories of the Bard, seeking to enhance the storylines through the added element of music by modifying and transforming them into everything from classical symphonies to musical theatre productions. This adaptive step from written word to sound is a logical one, as Shakespeare penned songs into several of his plays. Many of these songs found a place in the German *Lieder* tradition of the Romantic era, some of the most famous being those sung by Ophelia in Act IV, scene v of *Hamlet*. Johannes Brahms, one of the leading composers of the day, set the lyrics of these songs to the music of five short, unaccompanied *Lieder* to be performed in a German production of *Hamlet*. However, Brahms's added rehearsal accompaniment made possible the formation of the *Lied* group into a song cycle that has become a popular addition to concert repertoire for classical singers. Brahms's musical adaptations of the mad songs of Ophelia act as effective storytellers both within and without the context of the play as the music enhances the lyrics in the theatre and the lyrics augment the music in the concert hall.

The musical depiction of Ophelia's descent into insanity does not come about of its own accord but rather as the result of a series of Hamlet's damaging actions. In the early scenes of the play, the prince of Denmark is courting Ophelia, daughter of the King's Councilor Polonius. However, their youthful romancing is cut short when the ghost of the late King visits Hamlet, forcing all thoughts from the prince's mind but that of revenge. Hamlet feigns madness to avert suspicion from his vengeful plot. When Polonius sends Ophelia to find out what is causing Hamlet's apparent lunacy, the prince strikes the first blow against her stability. Hamlet denies



any and all affection for her and subsequently denounces women as “breeder[s] of sinners” (III. i. 131) who only serve to add to the scourge of human nature by continuing to populate the earth. He commands, “Get thee to a nunnery” (III. i. 130) to prevent her from leading any more men down the path of dishonesty and leaves her crushed and bewildered by his rejection. Up to this point, Ophelia has relied on the constancy of the men in her life and cannot understand Hamlet’s sudden change of heart. Her high hopes for their future together are dashed, and her fragile psyche cannot handle the blow. This crack in her personal world’s foundation coupled with her distress at Hamlet’s ostensible insanity begins to push Ophelia toward the brink of legitimate madness.

As Ophelia struggles to comprehend what has driven him to mental illness, Hamlet persists in his ruse of delusion by continuing to chip away at her stability. During the play Hamlet has set up to reveal his uncle the King as the murderer of his father, the prince keeps up a steady stream of ribald commentary directed at Ophelia. As he takes his seat beside her, he asks if he may place his head in her lap, reflecting that it is “a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs” (III. ii. 114). Ophelia then asks Hamlet if the Prologue will make the meaning of the performance clear, to which he replies, “Ay, or any show that you will show him. Be not you ashamed to show, he’ll not shame to tell you what it means” (III. ii. 137-38). These suggestive comments provoke Ophelia to chastise Hamlet, but also cause her mind further torment. The prince’s remarks serve to undermine his previous rejection of Ophelia as well as cheapen the chastity he commanded her to retain in the previous scene. Hamlet’s abuse of Ophelia comes to a head when he stabs and kills her father upon discovery of Polonius eavesdropping on him. This final blow pushes Ophelia over the edge. Already weakened from hurt and confusion, the Councilor’s daughter is driven crazy by grief at the loss of yet another man she depended on.

Ophelia's psychosis is revealed through the medium of song in Act IV, scene v, commonly referred to as "Ophelia's mad scene," which reintroduces the young woman disconnected from her established characterization as the dutiful and chaste daughter. Previously a puppet controlled to do the biddings of men, Ophelia has been loosed from her strings and is given full control of her life only to find she is not capable of maintaining stability without Hamlet and Polonius to guide her. Spurred on by her mania, Ophelia uses her voice to express the feelings of betrayal and loss caused by her lover's rejection and father's death. Her legitimate insanity acts as a foil to Hamlet's artificial madness as the damage he has done is reflected in her songs about uncertain love and the loss of a maid's virginity. She begins to sing with the words "*How could I your true love know/From another one?*" (25-26). Hamlet's rejection has brought her to a state of disenchantment with romantic love. She continues to sing of a maiden who goes into her lover's home on Valentine's Day and "*out a maid/Never departed more*" (56-57). The prince's undermining of Ophelia's carefully guarded virtue has given way to bawdiness from her own lips. However, the majority of her verses illustrate her grief at her father's murder.

Ophelia's all-consuming sorrow caused by Polonius's death is emphasized by her lyrics concerning death and burial. When the Queen appeals to Ophelia to tell her what is causing her distress, Ophelia answers by singing, "*He is dead and gone, lady/He is dead and gone*" (31-32). She leaves the stage and, on returning, continues "*They bore him bare-faced on the bier/And in his grave rained many a tear*" (180-81). Before exiting the stage for the last time, she leaves the assembled listeners with the haunting lyrics "*He never will come again*" (206). Ophelia's obsessive singing of songs about death coupled with the resounding finality of her last words foreshadows her own death not two scenes later. As the Queen recounts Ophelia's drowning, she tells of how Ophelia "*chanted snatches of old tunes*" (IV. vii. 192) before she was dragged from

her “melodious lay/To muddy death” (197-98). The singing of crazed songs is the culmination of Ophelia’s madness, and the insanity imbued in them provides inherent musicality for the adaptation of written word to melody.

Johannes Brahms did not merely set music to the text provided in *Hamlet*; he became part of the theatrical production as a kind of co-author by enhancing Shakespeare’s established storyline through the addition of a secondary narrative mode. Shakespeare included many songs such as those sung by Ophelia in his plays without providing music to accompany the lyrics in stage performances. This distinct lack of melody creates the need for a composer as well as a director and causes the inevitable adaptation of written word to musical sound. Brahms’s take on the songs of Ophelia was composed in 1873 at the request of Josef Lewinsky for his fiancée, Olga Precheisen, who was to play Ophelia in a German language production of *Hamlet* (“Ophelia Lieder” 50). Brahms took theatre practicalities into consideration when composing these five short *lieder*. The first three songs in the set are sung swiftly one after the other in the play before Ophelia leaves the stage for the first time. Brahms therefore wrote the first three *lieder* in related keys to make it easier for the actress to find the starting note of each song. The same is true for the last two pieces Ophelia sings after returning to the stage before her final exit. These practical theatrical considerations, however, are second to the musical symbolism and text-painting Brahms wrote into the *lieder* to illustrate the meaning of the source text.

The musical storytelling devices included in the Ophelia *lieder* reveal Brahms’s genius in conveying emotions, symbolism, and meaning of text through a wordless source. One of his most effective compositional techniques lays in the use of strophes and refrains that permeate the cycle. As seen in Figure 1, the repetition in the first song of the cycle occurs not only between the two verses but also in the melodic material contained within each verse. The motif

established in the first three bars of the first verse is repeated almost exactly in the following three. The second six-bar phrase is then set to different lyrics, but the repeat sign necessitates an exact musical reiteration of the first. The repetitive nature of these musical elements, as well as the incessant forward motion of the strophic structure Brahms employs, inimitably captures the inescapable circumstances Ophelia experiences in Act IV, scene v, of *Hamlet* and emphasizes her descent into lunacy.

**Andante con moto**

1. Wie er - kenn' ich dein — Treu - lieb — vor den an - dern nun?  
2. Er ist lan - ge tot — und — hin, — tot und hin, Fräu - lein!

An dem Mu - schel - hut — und — Stab — Und den San - dal - schuh'n  
Ihm zu Häup - ten ein Ra - sen — grün, — ihm zu Fuß ein Stein.

*riten.*

*riten.*

Figure 1: “Wie erkenn’ ich dein Treulieb” (Saya and Walters 51-52)

This degeneration of Ophelia’s mind is further exemplified through the melodic lines throughout the songs that follow a general pattern of minimal ascension with emphasized downward motion. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate this struggling of the melody to gain height before

falling, reflecting Ophelia's desperate battle to hold onto her sanity even as she loses her wits. The irreparability of Ophelia's mind, as realized in the final line of the last song of the cycle, is cemented in the listener by Brahms's decision to melodically jump an octave before steadily descending to the tonic in this closing line as shown in Figure 2. This shaping is perfectly suited to Ophelia and her plight; though she fights to keep a grip on her mind, she slides decidedly down the slippery slope of madness. Each of the five *lieder* successfully reveals a piece of Ophelia's insanity and, when brought together, tell her tragic story in its entirety.

8

geh, er kommt ja nim - mer, nim - mer, nim - mer zu - rück.  
winn; Gott helf' ihm ins Him - mel - reich, ins Him - mel - reich!

Figure 2: “Und kommt er nicht mehr zurück?” (Saya and Walters 55)

The Ophelia *lieder* cycle can be practically divided into two parts: the first three songs and the last two. The reason for this separation is set up in the context of *Hamlet* and musically accomplished by Brahms's adaptation of the songs. When Ophelia takes the stage in Act IV, scene v, she proceeds to sing her first three songs with minimal dialogue interrupting the flow of the music. She then leaves the stage and returns shortly thereafter to complete her ramblings coupled by two final melodies. Because Ophelia exits in the middle of the scene, an inherent break in the musical continuity of the songs occurs. Brahms masterfully took this theatrical pause into consideration when composing music for the maddened lyrics. The first three songs are

written in a “tightly interwoven tonal sequence” (Van Rij 163). Though the first song, “Wie erkenn’ ich dein Treulieb” (“How Should I Your True Love Know”), begins in Bb minor, it cadences firmly in Bb major, which transitions seamlessly into the second song in F. This tonic – dominant relationship of keys has such a strong musical connection that the second piece, “Sein Leichenhemd weiß” (“White His Shroud”), feels almost as though it is an extension of the first. The third song, “Auf morgen ist Sankt Valentins Tag” (“Tomorrow Is Saint Valentine’s Day”), begins in Bb major, sealing the first three songs into a musical unit distinct from the remaining two.

The fourth song of the cycle, “Sie trugen ihn auf der Bahre bloß” (They Bore Him Bare-faced on the Bier), is most indicative of Ophelia’s mental state; the music as a whole remains determinedly unstable throughout. The piece’s opening motif struggles to repeat itself, but is interrupted twice by outbursts set to falling tritone intervals, as is shown in Figure 3. Brahms made an especially prudent adaptive decision with this technique: Ophelia twice interrupts this song with spoken dialogue in the context of *Hamlet* (IV. v. 182, 185-56), and the instability and unease of the diminished fifth interval makes the listener feel as if the continuity of the piece has broken momentarily. The melody does not return to the tonic at the conclusion of the piece but instead ends with a repetition of the opening motif that does not resolve, as seen in Figure 4. This non-ending reflects Ophelia’s maddened state; she can find no resolution to the wrongs that have been done her and so cannot end her song on a note that gives closure to those listening. The lack of tonal return imbues feelings of uncertainty, discomfort, and longing for resolution.

*p dolce*

Sie tru - gen ihn auf der Bah - re bloß, lei - der, ach

*p dolce*

4 lei - der! Und man - che Trän' fiel in Gra - bes Schoß.

*più p*

7 'Nun - ter, hi - nun - ter! und ruft' ihr ihn 'nun - ter. Denn

Figure 3: "Sie trugen ihn auf der Bahre Bloß" (Says and Walters 54)



11

traut - lieb Frän - zel ist all' mei - ne Lust.

Figure 4: "Sie trugen ihn auf der Bahre Bloß" (Says and Walters 55)

However, the fifth and final song of the cycle, “Und kommt er nicht mehr zurück?” (“And Will He Not Come Again?”), returns to a tonal center in the same key as the fourth as though it is continuing along in the same vein. The ending of this concluding number cadences strongly in F minor, reflecting the finality of Ophelia’s last lyrics, “He never will come again...God a mercy on his soul” (206, 211). The cadence in F minor, as shown in Figure 5, brings the cycle full-circle; the first song of the group began in Bb minor with F acting as the dominant. This “striking degree of continuity” (Van Rij 167) across the cyclical whole is a testament to Brahms’s conception of these pieces as a group and intention for them to be performed thus.

Con moto

1. Und kommt er nicht mehr zu - rück? Und kommt er nicht mehr zu -  
 2. Sein Bart war so weiß wie Schnee, sein Haupt dem Flach - se

poco *f*

Figure 5: “Und kommt er nicht mehr zurück?” (Saya and Walters 55)

Despite the high level of unity between the pieces, no evidence suggests Brahms ever intended the Ophelia *lieder* to be published as a standalone cycle for concert performance. He composed the group at the request of a friend for a single actress in a specific performance. His minimal piano accompaniments were not included in the actual performance but rather were purely intended to help Olga Precheisen learn the pieces. Furthermore, the cycle was never



published in Brahms's own lifetime: the manuscripts were discovered in Precheisen's possession following Brahms's death and were posthumously catalogued as WoO 22. Regardless of all this, the Ophelia *lieder* cycle has "become a *tour de force* for a singer/actress who can portray the madness of Ophelia as interpreted through Brahms's minimal, melancholic vision" (Ophelia Lieder 50) due to his masterly execution of the added mode of music.

Even without the surrounding literary context, the intent of Ophelia's mad scene remains intact as a result of Brahms's skillful integration of the story in his *lieder*. The cycle is enriching on different levels: listeners who are unfamiliar with the plot of *Hamlet* and Ophelia's role within it are able to grasp the overall continuity, structure, and message of instability the music conveys while the subtle integration of story into song creates a privileged layer of meaning for those who are versed in the narrative of the source text. However, even if the those watching know the story of *Hamlet* and the characterization of Ophelia within the context of the play, the experience of hearing her songs removed from the surrounding plot provides a vastly original experience. In his essay "The Ethics of Infidelity," Thomas Leitch explores the process of adaptation from book to film and argues if the "audience in question has already read the novel or story or seen the play on which the film is based, surely they expect a different experience; otherwise, they would not be watching the movie at all" (63). The same can be said for Brahms's Ophelia *lieder*. The cycle can either enhance *Hamlet*'s narrative or stand alone as a complete story in and of itself.

Whether presented within the confines of a theatrical production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or in a concert hall as a standalone cycle, the setting of the performance determines the nature of Brahms's Ophelia *lieder*. In a stage setting, Shakespeare takes the spotlight and becomes the main focus of the piece while Brahms acts as a mere co-author. The context,

storyline, and lyrics of Ophelia's songs are all products of Shakespeare, and Brahms simply augments them with his music. This addition of melodies can be considered adaptation only in a loose sense of the word. Julie Sanders defines adaptation as "those works which retain a kind of fidelity to the source-text but consciously rework it within the conventions of another alternative medium or genre" (2). Although the musical mode Brahms employed does emphasize certain ideas and themes inherent to the play, nothing about his setting adds additional elements by reworking the source-text; Shakespeare's lyrics are followed exactly. However, when the cycle is removed from the context of *Hamlet*, an entirely new performance is created.

In contrast to stage productions, concert performances of the Ophelia *lieder* allow Brahms to metaphorically push Shakespeare out of the spotlight and take center stage. Rather than the music enriching the lyrics, the inverse takes place: Shakespeare's verses serve to enhance the musical experience Brahms created. Sanders defines the appropriation of Shakespeare's works as "deploy[ing] Shakespearean texts as springboards for more contemporary themes as well as settings" (2). The merit of this definition notwithstanding, the shift into contemporariness as the defining factor of appropriation is too limiting to encompass its broad scope. Appropriation certainly uses a source text as a starting point, but the setting needs only to change to somewhere outside the original, much as Brahms's musical representation of Ophelia appropriates her onto the concert stage. Sanders further argues the "process of adaptation that theatre music undergoes when being reworked into a classical concert piece is often revealing...the dramaturgic chronology that drives the music for a performance of a play can be sacrificed for an alternative narrative of central themes and characters" (35-36). The themes of madness and loss of innocence inherent to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are still replicated within the concert performance of Ophelia's songs, but all that remains of the

surrounding context is mere homage to the Bard. Ophelia becomes the one and only character and her plight the single complication of the production. This symbiotic relationship between author and composer highlights the myriad intertextual possibilities of adaptive works.

The inherent musicality of Shakespeare's works has created a rich musical tradition of afterlives. As Sanders states, "Shakespearean dramaturgy...is peculiarly open to musical interpretation and adaptation" (96). Within works such as *Hamlet* that call for a secondary author to add to the established text, adaptation is an inevitable occurrence. However, different types of adaptation are required according to the intended goal of the performance. Brahms's setting of the songs of Ophelia brilliantly adapts Shakespeare's maddened lyrics so as to reflect the themes and intent of *Hamlet* no matter the nature of the performance. As Ophelia's struggles unfold, whether within the context of the play as an integrated storytelling device or separate from it as a standalone concert cycle, listeners of Brahms's interpretation of her songs are able to recognize the underlying madness through his seamless marriage of text and music.

### Someone Else's Story: Adapting a Poem to a Solo Work

I recently watched a fairly silly yet surprisingly entertaining reworking of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in which the classic tale of forbidden love is shifted from Italy of old to a modern animated world of garden gnomes. At the start of the film, a gnome acting the part of the Prologue states, "The story you are about to see has been told before. A lot. And now we are going to tell it again. But different" (*Gnomeo and Juliet*). Throughout the numerous scholarly articles, books, and websites on the subject I have perused in the course of my research, I have yet to find a more concise and accurate definition of adaptation than the one laid out in this children's movie. Defining adaptation, as it turns out, is simple. Putting that definition into action, however, is one of the more difficult processes I have gone through. Taking a piece of literature and endeavoring to retell the narrative in the wordless mode of music not only provided me with unexpected insight into the adaptive discourse I had studied, but also yielded surprising twists and turns in the process. As a result, my attempt to recreate the themes and ideas of Shel Silverstein's poem "Forgotten Language" through the medium of song was simultaneously exactly what I was expecting and nothing like I had anticipated.

Before beginning the process of adapting literature into music, I first had to find a literary work to adapt. Several factors came into consideration during this undertaking: my practical aim in literature selection was to choose a fairly short poem that could be set for single voice and accompaniment and later expanded into a choral work for mixed voices. However, I also sought a piece that spoke to me emotionally for the simple purpose of enjoyment while reworking it. After several days of combing through poetry collections by numerous great authors, these two goals came unerringly together in the form of Shel Silverstein's "Forgotten Language."

Silverstein's poetry, though marketed to children, often carries a deeper, hidden meaning within the seemingly innocent words. "Forgotten Language" is no exception. The poem begins with the narrator recounting childhood memories when he "spoke the language of the flowers/...understood each word the caterpillar said/...[and] smiled in secret at the gossip of the starlings" (lines 1-3). The innocence of youth is clearly conveyed in the wondrous and carefree nature of these remembrances. However, the happy recollections of bygone days soon give way to those of a more melancholy nature in which he "joined the crying of each falling dying/flake of snow" (8-9). Something within the speaker has shifted, causing the replacement of the beatific childhood occurrences with troubled reflections on the past. The poem concludes with a repetition of the first line, "Once I spoke the language of the flowers..." (10), followed by the heart-wrenching plea for remembrance, "How did it go?/ How did it go?" (11-12). The ellipses separating these two thoughts is telling in its fragmenting of the poem's flow. The speaker has somehow forgotten the magic of his childhood and despairingly attempts to grasp onto the quickly fading memory. The poem, lighthearted in tone at first, takes a surprising atmospheric turn into the unsettling territory of forgetting something of great personal import.

The dynamic switch in moods Silverstein's "Forgotten Language" makes was the driving force behind my emotional investment in the poem and what prompted me to use it as a source text for a musical setting. The poem's appeal lies in its relatable subject matter. Everyone, no matter what age, can recall a happier and more wondrous time in their past. Conversely, everyone can also remember when his or her life took a turn towards more troubled waters. The memories of better days are sometimes the only things that keep us as humans going. The inability to remember the magic of the past, then, is a frightening thought. "Forgotten Language"

explores this haunting possibility with grace and subtlety, and my adaptation attempts to capture the overwhelming feelings of the poem with the same artful delicacy.

The journey Silverstein makes from carefree happiness to anguished yearning in “Forgotten Language” was also my main focus in the execution of musical techniques with which to tell the story. I chose to begin my composition with a foreshadowing of the darker tone that accompanies the conclusion of the poem by repeating its final phrase, “How did it go?” (12), three times without accompaniment. The desperation of this cry is reflected in the wail-like melodic pattern of ascension followed by a steadily falling line. Furthermore, the lack of accompaniment supporting the voice gives the melody a haunting feel, leaving the listener wondering what has happened to bring the singer to this distressing point. The piano accompaniment then quietly enters with a melodically repetitive musical idea. Its rhythmic consistency and lack of phrasing is indicative of a music box melody. Some of the first musical experiences many children have come about in the form of an uncomplicated, tinkling melody from a music box. I personally have several youthful memories surrounding a particular music box and sought to include this significant part of my childhood within the adaptation.

Several times throughout the piece, the piano line is used to conjure up images conveyed through the language of the poem. Following the introduction, the piano melody continues in a simplistic and repetitious melodic strain through the first two lines of the poem, and then ascends steadily as the vocal line sings, “Once I laughed in secret at the gossip of the starlings” (3). The piano’s upward motion illustrates the flight of the songbirds the poem refers to. The poet then recalls a “conversation with the housefly in my bed” (4-5), and the piano line shifts to a higher range and thicker texture to convey the rapid beating of a housefly’s wings. The mood shift occurs soon after as the speaker “join[s] the crying of each falling dying flake of snow” (8-9)

accompanied by an obvious feeling of descending in both the piano and vocal lines. The restatement of the opening line of the poem, “Once I spoke the language of the flowers...” (10), does not come to any tonal conclusion but rather wanders melodically, reflecting the forgetful casting about of the speaker. The piano line shifts at this phrase to a quicker rhythmic pattern, denser texture, and more complex harmonic structure, indicating to the listener that the speaker has made the transition away from childhood and left behind the happier times.

The final phrase, “How did it go?” (12) is repeated seven times to the conclusion of the piece, growing ever more frantic in melody before the concluding repetition of the words and abrupt ending of the piano line on a single sustained tonic note. I chose to repeat the final phrase several more times than the poem specifically lays out to evoke a more desperate and, ultimately, defeated sentiment. Additionally, the same melody is used for this ending as was used for the repeating of the same line at the beginning of the piece, adding satisfying continuity to the song by bringing it full circle. In general, the song begins with a childishly high timbre and simplistic musical structure and progressively moves to a lower and more complex melodic range. The song “grows up” along with the poem’s narrator, completing the evolution from carefree childhood to troubled adult life.

Adaptation in general and musical adaptation in specific is a deeply personal process unique to each individual who ventures to tell an old story in a new mode. The way I chose to approach the thematic material of “Forgotten Language” by highlighting key phrases within the melodic lines, for example, is deeply rooted in my individual musical experience. Sanders argues, “we must...add into our interpretive frame for musical adaptations the critical scholarship in which composers may have been trained or at least exposed to during their educational or compositional careers” (54). As a voice student, my personal music education has

been steeped in the musicality of vocal and pianistic lines and the ways in which they work together to tell the story of the words they are set to. The method of text painting, a compositional technique in which the meanings of a song's lyrics are literally translated into the music, has been used to artfully marry the lyrics with the melody of a poem's setting throughout song-writing's history. My own employment of this story-telling strategy, then, is a direct reflection of the instruction I have received and did not come as a surprising step in the process of setting "Forgotten Language." This expected utilization of my own educational experiences, however, did not hold true for the entirety of the adaptive experience.

One of the most unexpected results of setting this poem to music was the song's development of a life of its own, so to speak. After I had formed a basic idea of what I wanted the music to say and how I was going to get there with it, the song almost wrote itself. Not to say setting the poem was easy; as I previously mentioned, this is arguably the most involved project I have taken on. However, I slowly but surely came to realize my role as co-author to Silverstein. The story was already there; all I had to do was provide it with a medium in which it could tell itself. After all, according to Jellenik, music "has the capacity not simply to highlight or underscore the meanings constructed by the...verbal narrative, but to generate an intertextual discourse in ways...dialogue cannot" (223). Actually experiencing the action of adaptation rather than purely indoctrinating myself in the theory put forth by others proved to be the most enlightening aspect of this venture. Like so many other things, to understand adaptation truly, it must be attempted as well as studied.

Much of the foundational theoretical groundwork laid out in the articles and books I read prior to my adaptation attempt proved particularly relevant to my composition. While Andrew takes the stance "adaptation is possible, though never perfect" because of the inherently



distinctive elements of separate art forms (33), Robert Stam provides the view that “each medium has its own specificity deriving from its respective materials of expression” (59).

Andrew seems to argue against the very act of adaptation by asserting art forms such as literature and music cannot intersect, as their means of communicating meaning are too different. Stam, however, acknowledges the specific nature of separate arts, but allows the possibility that two can work together, each serving to intensify the emotional conveyance of the other. This position was more applicable to my personal adaptive experience.

As a poem, “Forgotten Language” has one tool with which to express its meaning, the written word, whereas setting it to music adds an entirely new set of expressive materials, including melody, harmony, instrumentation, rhythm, dynamics, etc. These emotionally demonstrative resources available to me in the adaptation process provided me with a myriad of ways in which to relate the story of the poem to listeners of my composition. Stam further contends the “source text forms a dense informational network, a series of verbal cues that the adapting...text can then take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform” (68). This assertion also proved true in the compositional process, as I was free to use the expressive tools of music to emphasize specific words and phrases within “Forgotten Language” that evoked particularly strong emotional responses from me while letting others fade into the background of the piece. However, as I did not write the poem, the picking and choosing of which aspects of it I wanted to highlight in my composition brought up the main point of contention in the scholarly dialogue on adaptation.

The issue of fidelity, or faithfulness of an adaptive attempt to the source text it is based upon, formed the bulk of the adaptive discourse I researched before applying the theory into practice and admittedly elicited an extreme opinion from me. My initial stance on fidelity at the

outset of this project was one of strict faithfulness to source texts. I did not see why an adapter would feel the need to alter an existing story to fit his or her own ideas surrounding it. Authorial intent remained the highest authority in my mind, and I intended to stay as true as possible to Silverstein's poem. However, as I began my own foray into adapting, I found my way of thinking adjusting itself to a more realistic position. After all, "If the audience has already read the novel or story...on which the [adaptation] is based, surely they expect a different experience" (Leitch 63). Adaptations transform a story into something new and different, and that very transformation elicits excitement from prospective audiences. Thousands of people would not line up for midnight releases of movies based on their favorite novels if they thought the experience of seeing the film would be exactly the same as reading the book, just as people would not listen to my adaptation of "Forgotten Language" if they suspected it would generate the same response as simply reading the poem. In fact, the very reason people consent to see or listen to reworkings of the stories they love is the experience will not be the same. Even if some may argue I did not observe fidelity to the source text author's intent, my role as co-author to Silverstein provided me with a certain level of authority as well. My decisions were made based on my personal interpretation of the poem and serve to tell the story in a new and different way, making them valid adaptive choices. I would never have arrived at this conclusion if I had not personally tried my hand at adaptation.

Telling someone else's story is no easy feat. Bringing new life to their words does not happen automatically, and it is not simple in the slightest, but I can say from experience it was incredibly gratifying when I finally felt as though I had succeeded in doing so. The process of adapting Silverstein's "Forgotten Language" into a musical composition proved to solidify some of my preconceptions about adaptation while simultaneously altering others completely, which,

in my opinion, is the ideal outcome of applying a theory into practice. This project, however, engendered an additional result: the reworking of my own adaptation from a solo piece with accompaniment into a full choral a cappella work. As Sanders states, “In a very practical sense the act of adaptation encourages further adaptation” (42). This study proceeds with the continued exploration of the story-telling powers of words combined with music while further investigating the academic discourse of adaptation through the experiential act of adapting.

## One Story, Many Voices: Creating a Choral Adaptation

I humbly believe choral music is the most beautiful music of all. The human voice not only has the potential to be an intensely artistic and expressive musical medium, but also has the added benefit of the utilization of language, unlike other instruments. Grouping together multiple voices into a choir only adds to the beauty and story-telling power inherent to song as harmony, texture, and vocal colors are blended into the mix. These qualities were what made me so excited to move on to the choral composition portion of my study of adaptation. The potential of the additional musical elements imbued in choral writing to tell the same story of Shel Silverstein's "Forgotten Language" in yet another new way provided me with the tools I needed to build upon the previous solo adaptation and create an effective second adaptive work.

Compositionally speaking, I expected the choral work to come together significantly quicker and easier than the solo piece simply because the already-composed accompanied solo version of "Forgotten Language" was there to use as a foundation for the unaccompanied choir version. In other words, I didn't initially see it as another adaptation project; the main melodic ideas were structured in the solo, and the skeletons of the harmonies were laid out in the piano accompaniment. When it came down to it, I originally thought all I had to do to adapt upon my adaptation was place the right notes in the right voices. However, I failed to take several of the project's distinguishing characteristics into consideration. First, simply rearranging notes is not adaptation, but rather arrangement. Musical arrangement does not endeavor to add anything new or different to the story carried within the music. Instead, it seeks only to create a unique auditory experience by adding, subtracting, or repositioning the original song's musical elements. Musical adaptation, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with imbuing an originating source's storyline with some component the adapter feels the originating source

lacks. While arrangement may be employed to achieve the goal of musical adaptation, it does not define musical adaptation.

As the composition proceeded, I realized I also failed to take into account the issues that would arise due to my own authorship of the source text, namely those centered on the ever-prevalent topic of fidelity. While composing the solo version of “Forgotten Language,” my main concern was staying true to the overlying message of Shel Silverstein’s poem while creating a unique sound and story within the music. This time, the shoe was on the other foot: would I be able to remain true to my own source material? While the obvious answer may seem to be yes, of course I would, the fact remains the pressure to be faithful was far greater than when I was adapting upon a text written by a stranger. I found myself even more tied to fidelity than with the original composition, as the source text was of my own making.

Yet another element inherent to choral adaptation I did not consider is that a large amount of the beauty of choral music comes from the hundreds of combinations even a few notes can create. Great choral composers become great because they have tirelessly studied and tested these combinations and know the best ways to order them to achieve the maximum musical effect. I, on the other hand, had only taken a few composition and arranging classes at the time “Forgotten Language” was composed. Furthermore, this work was my first foray into writing a piece that would actually be performed by a chorus. Needless to say, it did not come together as effortlessly as I had expected as there was quite a bit of experimentation involved in the process. Nevertheless, after several weeks of painstaking trial and error, I finally hit on a level of fidelity, a sound, and a song I was satisfied with.

When considering the solo and choral versions of “Forgotten Language” and their compositional processes, it is plain to see the similarities between the two firmly cement them

together as adaptive relatives while the differences create a sound distinction. A significant amount of musical and thematic material remains the same from one to the next, namely the evolution of childhood to adulthood the songs undergo in the text as well as the individual musical structures. Nevertheless, the differences inherent to the two songs, including the accompanied vs. a cappella compositional styles, the harmonic textures, and the addition of a section of song to the choral version, clearly distinguish them from one another. In his article “The Ethics of Infidelity,” Thomas Leitch asserts, “Either adaptations have a responsibility to stick as close as possible to their sources...or they have an equally strong responsibility to strike out on their own” (66). While Leitch makes a valid point, I contend adaptation does not necessarily fit into the box of an either/or situation. Rather, an adaptive work can remain faithful to a source text while simultaneously adding its own unique spin on said text. This seemingly contradictory yet entirely plausible stance was one I came to late in the lengthy process of this study but ultimately drove my compositional decision-making while writing the choral work “Forgotten Language.” When listening to the two back to back, the similitude of the solo and choral versions make them instantly recognizable as a working pair while their differences create interest and variety.

The choral version of “Forgotten Language” follows much the same thematic pattern the solo piece portrays: a movement from the bygone happiness of innocence to the uncertainty of adulthood and the future. However, the thicker texture of the layered voices in contrast to the solo composition’s single vocal line creates a heavier and more discordant sound, setting the tone of the work with greater intensity than the solo piece right from the start. The full choir sings the repeated opening phrase, “How did it go?” (Silverstein 12) with a forte dynamic, marcato expression, and dissonant chords. The urgency and instability inherent to the marked chords

coupled with the added force of all voice parts sounding at a loud dynamic level relates an unmistakable feeling of disquiet to the listener. This musical idea is followed by a sustained period of silence not originally included in the solo version. The quiet serves to contrast with the clamor of the previous chords, further adding to the uneasy feeling portrayed in the opening statement.

The choir then comes back in with the women singing the opening lines of the poem and the men supporting them with chord tones sung to a neutral syllable to achieve legato phrasing at a quieter dynamic. The multiple vocal lines inherent to choral music again prove advantageous in the portrayal of the story's thematic material in this portion of the song: the higher and lighter quality of the women's voices depicts a sense of youth and innocence, putting the listener in mind of childhood, while the men's voices carry the main melodic line as an adult might carry a child. This sudden reversal in musical character from staccato chaos to legato tranquility goes hand in hand with the shift in the poem's words while allowing the listener to differentiate between the two contrasting moods portrayed in the song.

The music continues to follow this same idea of hushed voices and flowing lines throughout the subsequent phrases while passing the melody between the men's and women's voices to create interest and variation in the sound. However, the dark thoughts that opened the piece are never far from the melodic line, illustrated by the low, adult quality of the men's voices continuously interrupting the childlike female sound. While the women of the chorus intone the happy times when they "spoke the language of the flowers" (1), the first tenors cut into the nostalgia with the uncertain question, "How did it go?" (12). A similar interaction takes place as the top three voices tell of a "shared...conversation with the housefly in my bed" (4-5) and the basses reply with yet another repeat of the unanswered, "How did it go?" (12), before blending

back into the childhood recollections with the remainder of the chorus. Later, as the song inevitably shifts back to the urgency and anguish of forgotten happiness, the top soprano, alto, and tenor voices yearn for the time when they “joined the crying of each falling dying flake of snow” (8-9), only to yet again hear the incessant refrain, “How did it go?” (12), from the basses. This time, however, the lowest voice part does not seamlessly integrate back into the group but rather remains prominent with a steady, driving beat and loud dynamic level, illustrating the unrelenting continuation of aging and, subsequently, forgetfulness of simpler times.

In response to this anguished realization, a lament figures into the composition in which all voice parts hold several sustained notes on the syllable “Oh,” depicting the sorrow of forgetting as well as the yearning to remember. This portion of the song was not included in the original solo composition for want of more vocal lines to create the dissonance necessary to relate the torment of the speaker. Several times during the five measures of the lament, the upper voices attempt to resolve the dissonance, only for their attempts to be foiled by a new discordant note in the lower vocal lines, depicting the futility which accompanies trying to hold on to something forgotten. Finally, the upper voices give up on their attempt to return the mood to carefree innocence, and the outburst of emotion ends on a sustained, unresolved chord that dissipates into nothingness.

Following the lament, a short period of quiet builds suspense and uncertainty, much as the silence at the beginning of the work did. This time, however, the chorus does not begin to sing again with a contrasting mood of calmness, but rather with a renewed sense of hopelessness that is only intensified by the density of a full choir coming in at once. All voices enter at a forte dynamic level, repeating the focal phrase, “How did it go?” six times as the texture becomes thicker and the pitch climbs, portraying the urgency inherent to the words. Finally, the singers



seem to realize the question will remain unanswered as the sopranos once more repeat the phrase, holding out the final word and executing a steady decrescendo into silence. The remaining voices continue repeating the final phrase four more times, each repetition growing quieter until there is nothing left. This irreversible fading represents the futility of recalling something long gone; the more a person tries to call it back, the less they seem to remember. The resounding finality of the silence at the conclusion of the song drives this point home and, as in the solo piece, transforms happy innocence into troubled uncertainty.

While composing “Forgotten Language,” I formed an undeniable preference for the choral work over the solo. In general, I have personally always been partial to the sound and impact of choral music. While solo compositions can indeed be beautiful, the added elements of multiple singers and increased textural density appeal to my musical training over the limited nature of a single voice. As Sanders propounds, a composer’s education has a lasting effect on their stylistic preferences (54). My musical training has always focused primarily on the structure and performance of choral music, and performing in choirs invariably took precedence over solo productions. As a result, my experience composing for a choir was vastly more to my liking than that of writing for a single voice, namely my own. Even more enjoyable was listening to my composition performed for the first time by a live choir. Hearing a creation I personally wrote, lived with, and revised over a period of several months was surreal, to put it lightly, and it was perhaps the most rewarding part of my entire adaptive experience.

Adapting upon a source written by a well-known author was a significant undertaking in and of itself, but adapting upon my own personal adaptation provided me with a unique set of circumstances and challenges I had never before considered. However, I believe the final product maintains a distinctive sound even as it remains recognizably close to the previous solo

adaptation. Further adapting upon my own adaptation was the next logical step in the evolution of this study. As Sanders states, “Adaptation and appropriation studies...always need to be alert to complex processes of mediation, cross-fertilization, and filtration, and on many occasions...compositions...have as deep an intertextual relationship to each other as to the originating [source]” (5). Both the solo and choral versions of this work depend as heavily on each other as they originally did upon Shel Silverstein’s inspiring poem. I feel confident my personal adaptive attempts have achieved what I hoped they would: they have told the story of “Forgotten Language” as faithfully as possible with the musical tools available to me as the composer while concurrently creating a story all their own.

### Cadence: Closing Thoughts

Music has played a well-documented role throughout the history of the field of adaptation. Its versatile story-telling devices give those wishing to create a new modal experience many and varied tools with which to render their chosen tales in a pleasing manner while its universal appeal can make any story accessible to all audiences. It makes sense, then, that music's capacity to act as an adaptive instrument has made it such a popular and well-received transformative entity. Still, the process by which literature is reworked to musical settings is by no means an easy one and is fraught with difficulties and debates, not the least of which is the issue of fidelity. As my personal study draws to a close, I realize much of what I have learned about the adaptive field comes down to this controversial topic. As was previously stated, I began this project with a rather close-minded approach in regards to faithfulness towards a source text but later came to revise my original manner of thinking to a much more realistic end. In lieu of a summative conclusion, I wish to outline my newly formed opinion: the added element of a new interpretation inherent to adaptation does not harm a source text, but rather seeks to inject a varying perspective and human experience into the retelling of a respected work.

Despite my newfound viewpoint on the issue of fidelity in adaptation, it is easy to recall why I, as many still do, maintained such a strong opposing stance not so long ago. The vast majority of adaptive works utilize highly popular source texts, perhaps best illustrated by the recent profusion of films created from successful books. Since the stories were obviously well loved, I did not understand the need for adaptations to deviate from or add to the established plot. I often invoked the age-old adage, "Don't fix what isn't broken." Now, since I have experienced adaptation firsthand, I see my error in choosing such an extreme side. Adapters do not perceive slight deviations as "breaking" the source text; in most cases, they do not even think of such

changes as deviations at all, but rather as their own interpretation of the established storyline.

Furthermore, if an adapter has chosen to retell a story in the first place, it is likely he or she holds the story and its author in the utmost respect and means no harm to either. The reason fidelity remains such a hotly debated issue in the adaptive discourse is simply because there are as many interpretations as there are people, and it is impossible for an adapter to interpret a story the same way as everyone who will experience the adaptation. However, I now believe this is something to be celebrated instead of denounced, as individual interpretations are the very reason adaptation as a field continues to exist and thrive.

Of all the myriad insights this project has given me into the adaptive process, one in particular stands out above the rest: a completed and well-executed adaptation is indeed greater than the sum of its parts. This viewpoint can be easily explained through the examples of my own arrangements of “Forgotten Language.” Two artistic means of expression were utilized to create the pieces: poetry and music. Poetry’s power lies in the effectiveness of the linguistic elements a poem contains, including figurative language, word stress, punctuation, etc., while music’s potency is in the combination of tonal frequencies and the duration of sounds. Bringing these two modes together into a single work of art certainly combined the implements distinctive to both, but I found an adaptation does more than just that. What exactly the act of adaptation adds to a work may not be universally agreed upon, but I personally believe it comes directly from the adapter, be it perspective, human experience, or something else entirely. Regardless, I have experienced firsthand the certain indefinable something that is caused by a person choosing to direct the integration of two equally lovely expressive modes, and it has the potential to be not only incredible, but also altogether unexpected.

My goal in composing both versions of “Forgotten Language” began as a purely academic objective. I wanted to figure out what it was that made adaptations happen and then put what I learned into action. The fact that I genuinely enjoyed the modes I was studying and working with seemed at first simply an added perk. In hindsight, it seems ridiculous that I failed to take into account how a project can take hold of a person, especially when said person is passionate about learning and gaining new experiences. What started as a scholarly pursuit quickly transformed into something else entirely: a highly personal journey into the complex and intricate worlds of two differing art forms. With each word written and note added, the process of telling an old story in a new way challenged me to see what I could bring to the table, what distinctive element I personally could inject into the adaptation rather than just sitting back and letting the combined modes do the work for me. When all was said and done, I wanted an unmistakable quality of *me* imbued in my songs, and that became the driving force behind their composition. Whether an adaptation’s aim is academic or emotional, dramatic or humorous, relatable or abstract, I came to find the adapter’s personality will determine the final message the adaptation conveys, thus making adaptive works as many and varied as the people who endeavor to create them.

This look into the adaptation of literature to music and the insights it afforded me ultimately boils down to one thing: I experienced adaptation for myself. Understanding was gained, opinions were tested and reformed, and awareness grew all because I tried what I studied. If it had not been for that, much of this project would have been over before it started. The chance to explore an emerging field of study on which little has been written proved an enlightening experience. I am convinced much will be written on the subject here on out, but it was my pleasure to add my insights into the study of the process rather than simply the product.

What the discipline will become is still to be determined, but it has certainly carved a place for itself in our culture that cannot be discounted. Adaptation's role in the scheme of artistic fields is far from over, and I look with anticipation to what comes next.

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