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## HAMLET AS MUSIC: A STUDY IN THE SEMANTICS OF SYMPHONIC POETRY

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*HAMLET AS MUSIC:*  
A STUDY IN THE SEMANTICS OF SYMPHONIC POETRY

by

Mckenzie C. Alons

Submitted to the School of Honors Committee

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for University Honors Scholars

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## Abstract

Symphonic poetry, a widely overlooked genre in musico-literary scholarship, provides a unique focal point into the relationship between music and extramusical texts. Invented by Franz Liszt in the mid-19th century, symphonic poems (or ‘tone poems’) interpret literary texts or ideas through short orchestral works. Thus, the symphonic poem invites close analysis of the semiotic relationship between music and literature. Using Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Liszt’s Symphonic Poem No. 10 (“Hamlet”), this thesis examines the relationship between the Shakespearean tragedy and Lisztian symphonic poetry. This focus is a microcosm for the musico-literary relationship and, henceforth, an undiscovered niche that involves disciplines as diverse as intertextuality, semiology, musicology, literary criticism, and neurophilosophy. By bridging the gaps between literary criticism and musical analysis, this thesis provides a fresh glimpse at the relationship between these two different but complementary fields.

**KEY WORDS: SYMPHONIC POETRY, SHAKESPEARE, LISZT**

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## METHODOLOGY

This research uses the analytical theories of New Historicism, New Criticism, New Musicology, Adaptation, and Translation. While musicologists focus primarily on the musical form of symphonic poetry and literary critics on musical features in Shakespeare's works, this thesis studies *Hamlet* as a basis for analyzing Liszt's symphonic adaptation. This comparative analysis will explore how the semantics of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are expressed – or transposed – by the symphonic poem. This research is organized into two chapters: the first analyzes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in light of its musicality, and the second analyzes Liszt's symphonic poem through the interplay between music and program. The conclusion views these interpretations through neuro-philosophical analysis to theorize on how literature and music are related.

## PURPOSE

This thesis is guided by the following objectives:

1. To determine the relationship between music and program in symphonic poetry
2. To explore possible connections between literature and music
3. To understand the operability of language

The research questions are as follows:

1. How can symphonic music be used to adapt literary material?
2. How clear is the relationship between literature and symphonic music?
3. Can music be interpreted and understood as language?

CHAPTER 1: MUSIC IN *HAMLET*

## Introduction

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, composers began to introduce literary narratives and figures into their orchestral compositions. Opera had been doing this since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but with the emergence of Liszt and the New German School, symphonic works – including the concert overture, the program symphony, music drama, and symphonic poetry – were now used to merge story and character with music. Among other writers, inspiration was found in the plays of Shakespeare, whose works reached particular prominence during the Romantic era. *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, elicited a plethora of orchestral and operatic adaptations, inspiring composers such as Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev. As early as 1826, Mendelssohn composed his Overture for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Yet few music and literary scholars have addressed the symphonic adaptations of *Hamlet*. The scarcity and general obscurity of these compositions is perhaps the reason: starting with Berlioz's *Funeral March* in 1852, the tragedy has inspired two concert overtures and three symphonic poems. Few have realized that these short, seemingly insignificant works have bridged the gap between drama and what is known today as incidental music, which accompanies films and live performances. Since the focus of this study is the genre of symphonic poetry, I will address the most prominent symphonic poem written on *Hamlet*: Liszt's Symphonic Poem No. 10 ("Hamlet"), published in 1858.

Perhaps even less attention, however, has concentrated on the musicality of the play itself. In 1896, Edward W. Naylor wrote in his seminal book *Shakespeare and Music*, "[N]o subject in literature has been treated with greater scorn for accuracy, or general lack of interest,



than this [Shakespeare] of music” (15-16). Since then, scholarship in this area has increased, but there remain considerable gaps. Almost a century after Naylor’s research, musicologist Nan Cooke Carpenter wrote, “The largest unwritten book on Shakespeare and music, perhaps, is one long overdue – a thorough and definitive discussion of the poet’s musical imagery and allusion” (243). This mission was pursued in 2005 by Christopher R. Wilson’s book *Music in Shakespeare: A Dictionary*, the most comprehensive summary of the over 300 musical terms found in Shakespeare’s works.

However, this seminal research is only a springboard for deeper analyses of Shakespeare’s individual works. Furthermore, as Carpenter argues, there remains a “wealth of unexplored materials in the incidental or program music written for or based upon Shakespeare’s plays by many of the nineteenth-century composers” (222). This thesis, by studying *Hamlet* and Liszt’s 10<sup>th</sup> symphonic poem, explores these areas. Thus, the following chapter analyzes the musicality in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. First, it considers the musical world of early modern England, the possible musicality of Shakespeare himself, and how Shakespeare’s style is conducive to musical adaptation. The remaining sections focus on textual analysis, examining how music operates both structurally and metaphorically in the tragedy and how these elements establish a basis for symphonic adaptation.

### Shakespearean Music

Wilson states, “The practical and metaphorical functions of music and sound often serve important structural and thematic purposes, and are an integral part of Shakespeare’s dramatic technique and poetic language” (1). Both literary critics and musicologists have addressed the musical aspects of Shakespeare’s works and their musical adaptations, but less research has

explored Shakespeare's possible musical experience and early modern music. This risks performing analysis through modern understandings of music and intermediality, which, as Mike Ingham observes, differ considerably from the "dynamic" and more "fluid" interplay between songwriting and poetry in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (222). Thus, this section will contextualize *Hamlet* to establish an informed basis for exploring its musical aspects and grounds for musical adaptation.

Elizabethan England encompassed a rich variety of musical genres, composers, and instruments. As Suzanne Lord observes, "The Elizabethan Age was one of the rare times in history when the arts, the patrons, and the audience coalesced" (5). The Renaissance was the driving factor, most notably its transformation of musical form. Counterpoint and polyphony flourished, and the correlation between music and text strengthened. Josquin des Prez, for example, advanced the development of motets (compositions combining chant and song) and the use of music to express both mood and idea. After the Council of Trent's initial rejection of this new concept for concerns of semantic clarity, Italian composer Giovanni Perluigi di Palestrina proved that contrapuntal music could operate without obscuring the text. Although Elizabethan England was Protestant, this shows that developments in early modern music were marked by an increasing sensitivity to text and language.

This period of musical growth in England was epitomized by King Henry VIII, who not only enjoyed music but played it himself – notably the recorder, 77 of which he owned by the time of his death (Lord x), in addition to lutes, trumpets, sacbuts, drums, viols, fifes, and keyboards. He even composed his own instrumental and vocal pieces, 34 of which are extant (xi). He promoted England's acquisition of music, collecting manuscripts from France and the Netherlands for performance and research, and his denouncement of Catholicism in 1532

prompted a dramatic renovation of English church music (xi). Perhaps most convincingly, as Lord points out, the number of musicians on the court payroll mushroomed from five during Edward IV's reign to 58 by the end of Henry's reign (x).

King Henry's musical legacy was first sustained through his daughter Mary, who may have demonstrated even greater musical inclination. As a toddler, she was taught to play the keyboard by the acclaimed European organist Dionysius Memo, and she soon began performing publicly on the virginal (a variant of the keyboard). She was known for her skillfulness in both speed and articulation, and her reign coincided with the introduction of French and Italian music into England (Lord xix).

Finally, Queen Elizabeth herself was a passionate patron of music. She promoted the advancement of both religious and secular music and encouraged musical development in all strata of society. According to Lord, "[b]etween the secular music at court and the sacred music at her chapel, Elizabeth employed about 60 musicians at any one time" (3). Musical forms such as the ballad and the madrigal were developed and refined. Singing became a favorite pastime for all social classes, manifesting in popular tunes such as "The Carman's Whistle" and a genre known as Barbershop Music.

Most importantly, Elizabethan England saw the unprecedented recognition of instrumental music. Vocal music was originally the preferred medium, but toward the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign, instrumental music became a legitimate rival. Francis Bacon, a contemporary of Shakespeare, mentions the "Virginal," "Bell," "Wind Instruments," and "Organs" (50, 207) in his work *Sylva Sylvarum*. The lute, a popular stringed instrument in Europe, became the modern equivalent of a guitar (Lord 29). Instruments even entered into England's cultural capital – with a cittern, for example, becoming a reference to an "unfaithful

woman” (29). Literature was intertwined with music through forms such as the oratorio, a large-scale work that combines song with symphony, and the ballad, which tells popular stories through memorable tunes. Some examples of ballads are “Greensleeves” and “Walsingham,” which are still used today. “Walsingham,” interestingly, is the tune of Ophelia’s song “How should I your true love know” in Act 4 of *Hamlet*.

Music also played an important role in Elizabethan theatre. It was only mentioned in foreign accounts of English dramas, showing just how common and expected it was amongst Elizabethan playgoers (Lord 41). Music regaled the silence between acts, signaled the entrances of central characters, and controlled the overall dramatic atmosphere. It was also used before and after each performance for entertainment. Lord notes that Shakespeare’s plays, in particular, “show evidence of including quite a bit of music” (41). This is true, as the texts frequently elicit music from either the stage musicians or one of the characters. In *Hamlet*, trumpets and drums herald the entrance of the Royals (Shakespeare 1.2.s.d; 1.4.6.s.d; 2.2.s.d; 3.2.87.s.d; 3.2.130.s.d; 5.2.209.s.d), the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes (5.2.273.s.d; 5.2.275.s.d), and the march of Fortinbras’s troops just before Hamlet’s death (5.2.354.s.d). Earlier on, the grief-stricken Ophelia plays a lute while singing snatches of popular lyrics (4.5.23-66).

The evident musicality of Shakespeare’s plays prompts the question: how musically experienced was the playwright himself? This is an important query because it investigates whether the musicality of his plays – particularly *Hamlet*, for this study – is inherently connected to the text or attached as an afterthought. In other words, is music tied to the semantics of the play, or is it just the ‘bells and whistles’ of the performance?

Given the ever-growing popularity of music in Elizabethan England, it is likely that Shakespeare was familiar with popular tunes, instruments, and musical genres. According to

Wilson's research, his works include at least 300 musical terms. However, this number is not entirely significant since Shakespeare did not author every word attributed to him. Although little is known about Shakespeare's education, scholars appropriately look to his societal context and the musical features of his works. For example, in "Shakespeare's Musical Background," Louis Marder conjectures that Shakespeare was influenced by musical acquaintances and music played in places he would likely have frequented, such as churches, taverns, bawdy houses, and private homes (501-503). This rings true when one considers the musical references in his plays, which, like his use of language, appealed to the lower class. For example, Ophelia's performance of old ballads clashes with her royal setting to such an extent that she is deemed mad (4.5.175).

These musical terms are not superficial; rather, they serve an integral purpose in the text's linguistics, plot, and character development. Close analysis of his language proves that Shakespeare was well attuned to both the aural and symbolic functions of music. Carpenter even suggests that we can distinguish Shakespeare from Marlowe by this trait: "Anyone who has isolated and studied the few musical references in Marlowe's plays knows the almost complete polarity in musical usage of the two dramatists" (244). This is a valid claim, for Shakespeare's plays contain a significant amount of musical terms, stage commands, imagery, and metaphors. Marlowe, on the other hand, is known more for character development than musical references.

Furthermore, as with most of Shakespeare's plays, the role of music in *Hamlet* is more than just an audible flourish. John Long argues that "the performed music is aimed primarily at characterization and, to a lesser extent, at setting" (105). Long dismisses the dramatic role of music in *Hamlet*, but I would argue that music provides both dramatic and symbolic enhancement in the tragedy. The trumpet fanfare Long correctly associates with Claudius is, first and foremost, a dramatic experience for the audience; its startling aural quality is somehow

connected to Claudius and his ubiquitous position of power. However, this correlation is complicated by the audience's awareness of Claudius' corruption before the fanfare, highlighting that things are not always what they sound like – a crucial theme in the play, from the ambiguous Ghost's call for revenge to the libertine Laertes' lectures on maiden modesty.

Ultimately, music is both structurally and metaphorically evident in the text of *Hamlet*. It emerges through the play's meter, sound, and literary design as well as its songs, instrumental accompaniment, and implicit musical references. Shakespeare's poetic voice is inherently musical, as the following section will discuss. His use of music is also symbolic; for example, music slips into Hamlet's coded speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (3.2.348-56), and, as Christopher Wilson observes, it establishes a connection between death and silence (386). Recent scholarship interprets the character of Ophelia through associations between madness, music, and femininity. For example, Cameron Hunt analyzes how the terms "mad," "maid," and "made" in *Hamlet* are related through their homophonic pronunciations (211). Finally, as Long observes, instrumental music and vocal song both play specific and separate roles in the tragedy. These metaphorical, or symbolic, implications will be explored in the third and final section of this chapter.

### Shakespeare's Style

Shakespeare's style is particularly conducive to musical adaptation – not only in the Romantic era but in popular culture. His plays have inspired musicians from Liszt to Taylor Swift and musicals from *West Side Story* to *The Lion King*. As Julie Sanders argues, the improvisational quality of Shakespeare's style is analogous to the genre of jazz (12). Sanders further observes that "Shakespeare established his own precedent in the theatre for the rich

tradition of providing musical settings of his lyrics and verse” (29). Thus, Liszt’s selection of *Hamlet* for his 10<sup>th</sup> symphonic poem is no coincidence, and the reason can be traced to the indelible and unique musicality of Shakespeare’s voice.

Furthermore, Liszt’s 10<sup>th</sup> symphonic poem demonstrates how music is an especially effective medium for adapting Shakespearean plays. Cecília Nazaré de Lima and Thaïs Flores Nogueira Diniz, for example, compare Henry Fuseli’s painting, *Hamlet and his Father’s Ghost* (1785) to Liszt’s symphonic poem, finding that Liszt’s work displays a “relationship with the source text [that] is much more comprehensible” through its “[w]ell defined musical motives” (101). This does not necessarily denounce the merit of the painting, but it shows that music is especially conducive to Shakespearean adaptation.

Like refrains in music, Shakespeare is known for returning to particular words or phrases. This is evident not only in singular plays but across multiple works – ultimately revealing a unique and consistent part of Shakespeare’s style. Caroline Spurgeon, a leading scholar of Shakespeare’s imagery, notes that “recurrent images play a part in raising, developing, sustaining and repeating emotion in the tragedies, which is somewhat analogous to the action of a recurrent theme or ‘motif’ in a musical figure or sonata” (3). Spurgeon’s pioneering research identifies specific recurrent images in Shakespeare’s plays, leading to conclusions not just about Shakespeare’s style on the page but the operation of his mind: she argues that the playwright subconsciously catalogued a “floating image or images” (4) that would then be “called forth” by the “particular play” (5) he was writing. This stylistic element is found particularly in the tragedies, making this study especially relevant to the musical analysis of *Hamlet*. Thus, the following section will analyze its structural elements – particularly motives and other features of repetition and variation – and how they contribute to the tragedy’s musicality.

### Music as Structure

As previous scholarship shows, the musicality of Shakespeare's style has garnered attention over recent years. Moody E. Prior suggests that the imagery in Shakespeare's texts is distinguished by an "unusually high degree of sensitivity to music" (384), and Lawrence J. Ross argues that Shakespeare had the ability to "turn such trite indecent patter into symbolic expositional use" (117-118) through the use of musical motives. In his analysis of the symphonic imagery in *Richard II*, Richard D. Altick – much like Spurgeon – comments on the structural significance of the text, observing that "certain words of multifold meanings are played upon throughout the five acts, recurring time after time like leitmotifs in music" (339).

These musical patterns also appear in *Hamlet*. Altick speaks of Shakespeare's artistic "method," which involves "the tricks of repetition, of cumulative emotional effect, of interweaving and reciprocal coloration" (365). Since *Richard II* predates *Hamlet* by at least four years, this technique is further refined in the latter. Two prominent motifs in *Hamlet* – theatre and hearing – have a common semantic purpose: to expose the corruption of Claudius and the court.

Theatrical references, for example, mirror the underlying truth of the tragedy. For example, in one of his first utterances in the play, Hamlet declares, "I have that within which passes show, /These but the trappings and the suits of woe" (1.2.85-6). When giving directions to the actors for the *Murder of Ganzago* performance, Hamlet commands, "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, ... For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, ... to hold ... the mirror up to nature" (3.2.17-22). These references, culminating in the mousetrap



scene itself, break the ‘fourth wall’ and create a new perspective through which to view Claudius and the murder mystery.

However, these references also challenge theatrical representations of reality. Is life really a ‘stage’ as Shakespeare suggests? Perhaps truth emerges not through the theatrical references themselves but the reactions they elicit. The same applies to music, which communicates through first aural stimuli and then emotional impression. In *Hamlet*, it is not the play but Claudius’ reaction to it that reveals the secret. In other words, Hamlet aims to “catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.592) through a metatheatrical lens. Therefore, theatre and music are not just aesthetic; they both have semantic significance, and this significance lies in the *reaction* to the aesthetic.

The hearing motif further expounds the underlying political message in *Hamlet*. The very first line of the play establishes this motif when Barnardo asks, “Who’s there?” (1.1.1). This simple question implies that he cannot see the approaching sentinels but can hear their footsteps. Since Shakespearean plays were performed in the daytime, this opening question is necessary to show the characters’ perspective; although the audience can see the sentinels, Barnardo must rely on hearing to make sense of the surroundings. Thus, a nighttime setting is implied. This creates an undertone of distrust and murkiness that is sustained throughout the tragedy, prompting the audience to search for clarity and explanation.

Thus, the action of hearing or listening symbolizes the investigation – or perhaps even the distortion – of truth. For example, the Ghost commands Hamlet to “List, list, O list!” (1.5.22) to his tale, which it deems true. However, Hamlet can hardly trust the ghost’s testimony – especially without outside corroboration – since apparitions, in the Elizabethan era, were often perceived as either demons or souls trapped in Purgatory. For instance, 40 years after the

publication of *Hamlet*, Protestant intellectual Thomas Browne describes ghosts as “unquiet walks of Devils” that lead us into “mischief, blood and villainy” (35). On the other hand, the Catholic position maintains that ghosts are souls awaiting judgment in Purgatory – a stance popularly held by Stephen Greenblatt, whose argument relies on the text’s explicit and implicit “allusions to Purgatory” (235). The text exemplifies both viewpoints, however, further obscuring the role of the Ghost – and complicating his message to Hamlet.

The motif of listening or hearing appears explicitly at least eight more times throughout the play: “Sit down awhile, /And let us once again assail your ears” (1.1.33-4); “So I have heard and do in part believe it” (1.1.170); “Speak, I am bound to hear” (1.5.6); “Will the King hear this piece of work?” (3.2.44-5); “We beg your hearing patiently” (3.2.143); “Withdraw, I hear him coming” (3.4.6); “O speak to me no more. /These words like daggers enter in my ears” (3.4.94-5); “The ears are senseless that should give us hearing” (5.2.362). In all of these instances, “hearing” pertains more to understanding and comprehension than just a reaction to auditory stimuli. Furthermore, most of them are related in some way to uncovering the truth of King Hamlet’s death. Thus, the motifs of theatre and hearing function to expose the guilt and corruption of Claudius. This message is finalized when Hamlet kills Claudius with the peculiar double-assault of stabbing him with a dagger and then forcing poison down his throat (5.2.315-20) – a repetitive figure, once again, that emphasizes and enhances meaning.

Music also conveys meaning through motives. While literature develops motifs through repeated words or phrases, music may allude to extramusical ideas by continually employing or referencing a particular timbre, texture, or melodic feature. An excellent example is Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 5, which implicitly mirrors the heavy, ceaseless oppression of Stalin’s reign. Through musical motives, Shostakovich communicated this message clearly to the

Russian people – while only raising so much as an eyebrow from the government. Without a single word, he managed to disguise his retaliation by portraying Russia as powerful; yet, at the same time, his music clearly conveys the *abuse* of power: At the end of the finale, while the entire brass section belts out a triumphant major tune (representing power and victory), the strings play a maddening succession of E-flat eighth notes (representing the exhausting monotony of oppression). While different in usage, both literature and music rely on motives (or motifs) – the repetition of specific, memorable features through a linear medium – to both convey and enhance meaning.

Further solidifying this connection between music and structure in *Hamlet*, Jackson G. Barry analyzes the “tragic rhythm” (127) of the play to argue that it mimics the deceptive cadence employed in music to prolong dissonance. This is accomplished, Barry argues, through Shakespeare’s manipulation of the “revenge formula” (121) to sustain the suspense and tension of the second stage of the revenge formula: “struggle which ... shows a pattern of frustrations, delays, and regrets” (119). Barry interprets the stabbing of Polonius as the play’s deceptive cadence, concluding through such analysis that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a “play whose tragic rhythm differs markedly from the narrative sources on which it was based and from other revenge plays” (127).

Barry correctly identifies the stabbing of Polonius as a deceptive cadence in the play. However, while the play unfolds from the same type of irregularity introduced by a musical deceptive cadence, there are significant differences. In the play, the audience, aware of Polonius’ hidden presence, watches Hamlet experience a deceptive cadence when he plunges his sword into the arras. He expects to kill Claudius – and finally achieve catharsis – but ends up fatally impaling his love interest’s father. Thus, a metatheatrical lens separates the audience from the

deceptive cadence, which they can experience only through empathizing with Hamlet – placing themselves in his situation. In a musical deceptive cadence, the expected tonic chord is replaced with something else; thus, the deception occurs entirely with the sounding of the subsequent chord, which the audience experiences firsthand. In both music and language, a deceptive cadence is a departure from what is normal or expected; what happens after the deception would not occur without it. Just as Hamlet’s expectation of who is behind the arras is not met, the prelude to the first act of Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* opens with a dominant 7th that resolves to VI (instead of the expected i). In both cases, the deceptive cadence frustrates the expectation and defines the following sequence of events (or harmonic progression).

Ultimately, music functions structurally in *Hamlet* through motifs (the equivalent of musical motives or ‘leitmotifs,’ coined by Wagner) and cadential figures. Although these areas do not exhaust the structural implications of music in the play, they are the central elements that will help inform my analysis of Liszt’s 10<sup>th</sup> symphonic poem.

### Music as Metaphor

Music also plays a metaphorical role in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. As well as being structurally integrated with the text, music manifests in allusions, references, and stage directions. In the first scene alone, there are at least five clear references to music: “Tis now struck twelve” (1.1.7); “The bell then beating one” (1.1.42); “If thou hast any sound or use of voice” (1.1.131); “The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn /Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat /Awake the god of day” (1.1.155); “This bird of dawning singeth all night long” (1.1.165). Each of these creates a contrast with the silence of the sentinels’ night shift – and, more importantly, a semantic connection between music and life (and silence and death). It could

also represent knowledge and truth, similarly to the motif of hearing described in the previous section.

The most obvious musical uses are the flourishes that appear liberally throughout the text. Long asserts, “The instrumental music and its relationship to Claudius first claim our attention” (105). He describes the flourishes in the play – at least in Hamlet’s view – as repeated allusions to “the swaggering upstart [Claudius] whose wassail is capable of poisoning the whole state” (106). This observation is supported by Hamlet’s scorn of Claudius early in the play: “The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out /The triumph of his pledge” (1.4.11-12). The text establishes this connection between Claudius and instrumental music by aligning these “fanfares” with the stage presence of Claudius and the royal party.

The connection is emphasized by the placement of the first flourish, just after the Ghost appears to Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus. Its appearance, as well as the sentinels’ discussion, is marked by silence. Thus, when Claudius and his royal party blast into the next scene, accompanied by a ruckus of a fanfare (which, consisting typically of kettle drums and trumpets, was used to denote grandiosity – especially in government), a startling contrast is created. Thus, Claudius is thereafter inextricably associated with the flourishes in the play. Maurice Charney further notes the “dramatic irony” implicit in Claudius’ off-stage rouse “just before the Ghost appears in I, iv” (460). A similar disjunction occurs at the very end of the play when Hamlet declares his final four words: “the rest is silence” (5.2.351), followed by the fanfare of his funeral.

In this way, music functions as a ‘metaphorical assistant’ to establish complex connections between Claudius and the abuse of power and life and sound. Once again, this mimics the use of certain instruments and motives in works of music to make political statements

(see previous section). Furthermore, Elizabethan playgoers would have been familiar with the cultural connotations of fanfare; thus, as soon as Claudius makes his entrance, his position of power is established. As these flourishes are repeated in correlation with the plot's development, and as contrasts and ironies evolve, Claudius is quickly characterized as an abhorrent, and soon suspicious, power figure.

The metaphorical function of music is also displayed in Hamlet's closing line: "the rest is silence" (5.2.351). Hamlet is equating death with silence – and, on the flip side, life with sound. This dynamic has an interesting parallel in Liszt's symphonic poem, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Another metaphor is created by Hamlet's coded discussion with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in which he uses the metaphor of a pipe to say, "[y]ou cannot play upon me" (3.2.356). According to Louis Elson, "Shakespeare draws one of his finest metaphors from this instrument" (32), creating "musical sarcasm" (32) through this one reference. In the previous scene, Polonius tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to "let him [Hamlet] ply his music" (2.1.72). Once again, a reference to "music" itself is used to enhance the meaning – in this case, through puns and sarcasm. Thus, music acts as a stand-in for the characters' true thoughts and literal meaning, functioning similarly to poetic devices such as imagery and metonymy. Elizabethan playgoers would have been keenly aware of these references – and more familiar with their various nuances than the modern audience – ultimately reflecting the extent to which not only Shakespeare but Elizabethan England was musically inclined (see "Shakespearean Music"). Ultimately, this may suggest that music or musicality can strengthen semantic connections by expanding and diversifying the range of expression.

Perhaps the most significant musical metaphor in *Hamlet* is created by the songs of Ophelia in Act 4. Recent scholarship has tried to explain the role of music in this scene, leaning

heavily toward associations between music, madness, and femininity. Joseph Ortiz, for example, links the Renaissance tendency to associate “music and women as producers of unintelligible sound” with the Romantic interpretations of Shakespeare, which “document the suppression of musical sound and the female voice” (11). Regarding *Hamlet*, Ortiz argues that “[t]o the extent that it exists outside of its representation in language, musical sound is *always* ‘mad-speech’” (44). Thus, Ortiz identifies the political underpinning of Ophelia’s songs as a semantic intersection of music, madness, and femininity.

By ‘mad-speech’ Ortiz means music that is ‘incomprehensible’ (disconnected, as he says, from language or the purpose of communication). Yet, even in her scattered patches of lyrics, Ophelia conveys meaning that is not completely obscured by her madness. In fact, she seems to be more aware of her own situation than anyone else. In the context of the play – in which she is a member of royalty and thus expected to exemplify dignity and modesty, as ordered by the moralizing lecture of Laertes and Polonius – her songs, derived from bawdy lyrics of the lower class, come as quite a shock. This effect is all the more intensified by her disheveled appearance and scrambled words. Even despite – and in fact because – of her ‘mad-speech,’ as Ortiz calls it, she is communicating her rebellion against the framework of power to which she had seemed to submit herself. Thus, the question is whether she is really mad or not.

Furthermore, this episode is only the exposition of a rebellion she had been fostering all along; like Hamlet, her responses of submissiveness throughout the play are built on irony – a fact that is all the more revealed by the receiver’s comical inability to see her insincerity. For example, in her response to Polonius’ commands to ignore Hamlet, she says, “I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (1.3.104) – ultimately feigning ignorance to hide her true but unacceptable beliefs. Later, she expresses outward submission by saying “I shall obey, my lord”

(136). This mimics Hamlet's response to his mother in Act 1, which follows a similar pattern of stating his beliefs before resigning outwardly in submission: "I shall in all my best obey you, madam" (1.2.120), to which Claudius replies with obvious misunderstanding: "Why, 'tis a loving and a fair reply" (121).

Thus, when Ophelia bursts onto the stage embodying the very image Laertes warned her against – and which she sees in Laertes himself ("like a puffed and reckless libertine,/ Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads" (1.3.49-50)) – she is expressing her retaliation against a government that is not only oppressive but corrupt. This is accomplished through music that, on the surface, seems incomprehensible. Like glossolalia (the religious practice of 'speaking in tongues'), Ophelia's songs and the method of their performance have meaning although they sound meaningless. A closer look at her context in the play reveals that Ophelia knows far more than she demonstrates. Therefore, music – a medium with even more polysemy than words – is once again used to enhance meaning by making semantic connections throughout the entire play. Interestingly, Ophelia's character also plays a significant role in Liszt's 10<sup>th</sup> symphonic poem, which will be analyzed in the next chapter.

Like the musical features woven structurally throughout the narrative, as discussed in the prior section, the symbolic function of music – particularly through puns and character development – also plays a significant role. Furthermore, the structural and metaphorical manifestations of music in *Hamlet* are not entirely separate; rather, they work with each other to convey and enhance meaning. For example, the linguistic motif of hearing (which has an implicit musical quality) works with the flourishes (which are explicitly musical) to expose the corruption of Claudius. These elements build off of each other, gradually convicting Claudius – and magnifying the gravity of Hamlet's predicament – without a direct (or literal) insinuation.



Thus, the structural and metaphorical musical details are both necessary building blocks of the tragedy's inherent meaning. Music is not just a last-minute addition to the tragedy; it is inseparable from the play's very semantic substance, making the entire work conducive to musical adaptation – particularly, as demonstrated through its motivic and interrelated structure, that of symphonic music.

## CHAPTER 2: PROGRAM IN SYMPHONIC POETRY

### Introduction

This chapter analyzes Liszt's Symphonic Poem No. 10 ("Hamlet"). Just as Chapter 1 analyzes the musicality of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, this chapter analyzes Liszt's symphonic poem through its programmatic implications. This analysis will be used to determine the semantic interplay between the literary text and the symphonic poem and, ultimately, the relationship between words and music.

Scholarship on symphonic poetry has diverged into two broad theories: one maintains that such compositions are programmatic (governed by extramusical subjects), and the other holds that they are governed by 'absolute music.' This difference stems from the initial response of music critics and analysts to Liszt's symphonic poems, which demonstrate the transition from strictly classical music (or 'absolute music') to the story-influenced compositions of the Romantic period. Traditionalists wrote scathing reviews of this new genre, denouncing its synthesis of music and program as improper and bewildering. For example, an 1857 article from *Signale fur die Musikalische Welt* wrote:

[Liszt's] denial of proper symphony and concerto form has led to complete formlessness, and without support and concision, without proportion and aim, everything whirls in confusion [in his music]. (116)

However, critics soon began to recognize such critiques as unjust evaluations of Liszt's work.

Felix Draeseke of the New German School observed:

Until quite recently the majority of musicians, almost always acting upon a set of prejudices derived from superficial study of the works which they were not to stifle, believed that [Liszt's] symphonic poems were a collection of strangeness, breakneck modulation, ear-splitting dissonance, formless accumulations of repetitions, and a confused heap of affects. (264-265)

Even today, critical analysis of the symphonic poems is preoccupied with their formal structure – whether they employ musical or programmatic elements to generate and organize their motifs, schemes, modulations, dynamics, etc.

Central to this debate is the question of whether extra-musical subjects *can* be expressed through music. Skeptics believe that such intermedial interaction is impossible – a view largely based on the traditionalist argument, which is familiar with classical paradigms and invalidates other compositional forms. The opposite argument holds that the extramusical subject *is* the form that structures the music. For example, in his analysis of Gerstenberg's *Hamlet* fantasia on Emanuel Bach's *Versuch*, musicologist Eugene Helm supports Bach's compositional philosophy on the synthesis of music and literature. Concluding that there is no definite or necessary mode of expression between word and tone (293), Helm affirms Bach's principle that music can "speak" on its own. This is true for *Hamlet* and its symphonic adaptation. As Joanne Cormac argues, "a close relationship between music and text is evident in Liszt's *Hamlet*" (45).

Yet many scholars have taken a moderate stance, suggesting that the two theories are not opposed but complementary. Steven Vande Moortele, for example, uses the theory of ‘sonata deformation’ to analyze Liszt’s “Hamlet” in terms of both “innovative” and “traditional” elements (75), suggesting that Liszt manipulates sonata form for the very purpose of expressing scenes and characters in the play – such as “the apparition of the ghost (introduction), the male and the female main character and the dialogue between them (exposition), the conflict, the fight (development), and the subsequent general dismay (recapitulation and coda)” (80). In other words, musical form and program are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can both be used to form a comprehensive understanding of Liszt’s “Hamlet.”

In his book *The Symphonic Poems of Franz Liszt*, Keith T. Johns divides these different theories into four “schools” of structural analysis: “Formlessness as a Structural Paradigm” (6), “The ‘Extra-musical’ as a Structural Paradigm” (6), “Sonata Form as a Structural Paradigm” (7), and “A Mixture of Structural Paradigms” (8). My analysis in this chapter represents the fourth school, which seeks to understand the musical text and its adaptation of the literary text through musical, programmatic, and intermedial methods of analysis. As stated in the Methodology, this study relies primarily on New Criticism, focusing on textual analysis to make interpretations. However, it also uses New Historicism and the theories of Adaptation and Translation to examine context.

### The Symphonic Poem

As Cormac observes in her thesis *Liszt as Kapellmeister: The Development of the Symphonic Poems on the Weimar Stage*, “The nineteenth century saw new levels of enthusiasm for Shakespeare sweep across continental Europe” (338). She further states that “*Hamlet* in

particular, became one of the most popular of Shakespeare's creation with both Goethe and the French Romantic school" (338). Musical composers snatched up this material, implementing it in overtures, operas, and other large-scale works. Perhaps most significantly, this period was the genesis of the symphonic poem.

The symphonic poem was invented in the mid-nineteenth century by the Hungarian composer Franz Liszt. While he was in Weimar, Liszt composed 13 symphonic poems – the 10<sup>th</sup> of which was written on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Recent scholarship on this piece has posed the question of whether it is programmatic (meaning that it closely follows the Shakespearean text) or autonomous (meaning that it varies enough from the Shakespearean text to stand alone). Although it may differ considerably from the works or ideas it adapts, symphonic poetry is inextricably linked to its foundational literary source.

As noted previously, Moortele takes a moderate stance in the dilemma by arguing that the symphonic poem is not fully autonomous nor an exact replica of the literary text but a complex adaptation that displays both functions. He draws from the theory of 'sonata deformation' to analyze Liszt's manipulation of the 'redemption paradigm' that governs the cadential pattern of the classical sonata form, concluding that Liszt's composition clearly portrays the tragic plot progression of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Thus, although Liszt's compositional style deviates from musical conventions and emerges as an autonomous musical work in this sense, such deviations serve to more closely portray the Shakespearean text than if the classical sonata form had been followed to completion. Additionally, Moortele uses a *Formenlehre* ('musical form') derived method of evaluating the intermediality of Liszt's symphonic poems through the analysis of 'sentential' units in the musical text, which he collectively describes as the "basic building block" (*Sentences, Sentence Chains, and Sentence Replication* 155) of these poems. This method

can be used to analyze both the form and function of symphonic poetry, bridging the semantic gap between the musical expression and the programmatic feature it may reference. This chapter analyzes Liszt's symphonic poem on *Hamlet*, in light of this scholarship, to further investigate the programmatic-autonomous debate.

An obvious implication in this debate is that *Hamlet* was written for the stage; it is not intended to be read but spoken and performed. Thus, drama can be considered a mediator – as well as a separate medium that merits its own artistic analysis – between the musical text and the literary text. Joanne Cormac analyzes this interplay by examining the influence of Bogumil Dawison's melodramatic portrayal of Hamlet in Liszt's symphonic poem. She argues that the symphonic poem is based heavily on Dawison's interpretation of the text, which used melodrama to intensify Hamlet's emotions and portray him as mentally strong but tormented by his circumstances. This contrasts with the popular portrayal of a weak and indecisive Hamlet, which was promulgated by Goethe and embodied by Dawison's rival Emil Devrient. Cormac sees Dawison's portrayal clearly displayed in Liszt's symphonic poem, due primarily to the work's use of musical dynamics such as *schaurig*, *risoluto*, and *ironisch* (46-47).

Cormac's argument is supported by more general knowledge of Liszt's musical style, especially his contributions to the musical canon of 19th-century Weimar. Much like Cormac's discussion of Liszt embracing a revolutionary portrayal of Hamlet, German musicologist Detlef Altenburg argues that Liszt revolutionized the canon by declaring "the universal synthesis of literature and music as the concept of the New Weimar" (170). This synthesis is demonstrated especially in his symphonic poems, which serve ultimately as a link between literature and music.

Returning to the significance of drama in Liszt's symphonic poem on *Hamlet*, a subset within this medium might also be considered: the psychodrama. Dolores Pesce, professor of musicology at Washington University, St. Louis, compares Liszt's composition to Edward MacDowell's symphonic poem *Hamlet and Ophelia*, op. 22, to suggest that MacDowell "leaned toward the type of psychological drama that Liszt had similarly explored" (387) and, in effect, "created a psychodrama" (375). Thus, according to Cormac and Pesce, the symphonic poems of Liszt and MacDowell interact with intermedial genres such as the melodrama and psychodrama to create a piece of music that interprets the emotional and psychological elements of Shakespeare's text. The implications of drama in the development of Liszt's symphonic poem will be considered in the following sections.

### Analysis: Liszt, Symphonic Poem No. 10 ("Hamlet")

#### Introduction

The compositional style of Franz Liszt epitomized the shift from 'absolute' to 'programmatic' music in the Romantic era. He was both an admired musician and an avid reader, and his linguistic proficiency extended beyond his German tongue. He was also proficient in French and Italian, and according to Marion Bauer, he had some knowledge of English: "[in] his letters to the countess d'Agoult he often wrote sentences in English and quoted English poetry" (296). Paraphrasing the words of Liszt's friend Joseph d'Ortigue, Bauer notes that the composer "read a dictionary in the same insatiable, relentless manner with which he devoured poetry" (296). Liszt had a reputation as a highly-sophisticated individual – not just as a musician but,

more generally, as an artist. Ultimately, Liszt himself represents the intersection of music and literature.

### Context

Although Liszt had a solid base of literary knowledge, it is not certain that he read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Most scholars argue that his knowledge of the tragedy came from watching productions of the play – particularly Bogumil Dawison's performances in Weimar. However, based on his letters and the cultural context of his time, it can be reasonably assumed that Liszt had some knowledge of the text apart from dramatic interpretations of it. The 1820s and 1830s saw a massive influx of German translations of Shakespeare (Larson 20), culminating in the esteemed Schlegel-Tieck edition. Thus, by the time Liszt arrived on the scene in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, he would likely have been aware of this edition. The Schlegel-Tieck translation was groundbreaking: it informed the general German conception of *Hamlet*, coinciding with the interpretations of Goethe and Schiller and the performances of Heufeld and Schröder. Furthermore, a short piece of correspondence from Liszt to Wagner on May 14, 1859, reveals the composer's astute familiarity with Hamlet's internal conflict:

Hamlet's dilemma does not apply to you, for you are and cannot help being. Even your mad injustice towards yourself in calling yourself a 'miserable musician and blunderer' (!! ) is a sign of your greatness ... Resignation and patience alone sustain us in this world.  
(Wagner)

Liszt understood that Hamlet's dilemma was more than just a matter of life or death. He interprets "being" as not merely existing but rather embodying a specific role in the world – in Wagner's case, that of a musician. Liszt interprets Hamlet's dilemma, therefore, as a struggle or

hesitancy to be who he is or is destined to be. This insight suggests that Liszt not only heard of Hamlet but knew enough about this character and his situation in the play to make this reference.

Liszt's interpretation of Hamlet is similar to but also unique from those of Goethe and Schiller. In *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Goethe describes Hamlet as having a "lovely" and "pure" nature but lacking the "strength of nerve which forms a hero" (Book IV, Chapter XIII).

Cormac makes the sweeping argument that:

the classical acting style, Goethe's conception, and the Schlegel–Tieck translations themselves, all contributed to an interpretation of Hamlet concerned with beauty and elegance. Accordingly, critics ... expected portrayals to strive for a passive, sweetly melancholic Hamlet. (21)

Cormac further argues that this context was what made Bogumil Dawison's revolutionary representation of Hamlet stand out to Liszt (33). Dawison certainly played an important role in the development of Liszt's 10<sup>th</sup> symphonic poem, but his portrayal of the character – which, after all, it is uncertain that Liszt even saw – is not the only factor. In light of this contextual information, the following sections will explore the composition of this symphonic poem through musical and programmatic analyses.

### Form and Harmony

Liszt wrote "Hamlet," the 10<sup>th</sup> of his 13 symphonic poems, while working as Kapellmeister of the Weimar Court Theatre. This composition represents the transition between concert overtures (which introduced theatrical performances) and symphonic poetry (stand-alone works that offer an interpretation of a literary concept). Scholarship on Liszt and 19<sup>th</sup>-century music continues to debate the artistic autonomy of this piece. Does it stand alone by itself or is it



a prelude to the literary/dramatic text? The issue is complicated by the subtitle Liszt gave to the work: ‘Vorspiel [prelude] zu Shakespeares Drama,’ which, as Cormac suggests, “seemingly encouraged the listener to hear the piece as an introduction to a (probably imagined) performance of the play” (*Liszt as Kapellmeister* 336).

Cormac makes the popular claim that *Hamlet* “reflected a new approach that had its origins in Melodrama: a genre in which spoken text is accompanied by music, and its antecedent, incidental music” (336). Her argument is based on Dan Wang’s literal interpretation of melodrama – “the joining of music (*melos*) and drama” (122) – and his observation of its familiar modern connotation as a type of expression “characterized by such qualities as exaggeration, sentimentality, and excess” (122). According to Cormac, these elements influenced Liszt particularly through Bogumil Dawison, whose portrayal of Hamlet was unique for its “highly dramatic, expressive style” (*From Tragedy to Melodrama* 38). She further states that “the purpose of music in all of these manifestations of melodrama was to contribute narrative clarity, dramatic emphasis and expression – goals similar to those of the melodramatic acting style” (42). Thus, Cormac interprets Liszt’s “Hamlet” more as a precursor of incidental music than symphonic poetry.

However, regardless of how much Dawison’s portrayal influenced Liszt – and, indeed, much of this influence is apparent in the symphonic poem, as this chapter will soon discuss – Liszt’s “Hamlet” is still its own entity. Although it may have been inspired by Dawison’s performance, through its very nature as a symphonic composition, it creates its own layer of interpretation. Liszt himself believed that an artist’s duty is not to merely understand or mimic a masterpiece but to interpret it. As he wrote in a letter to William Mason in 1867 regarding the appraisal of his symphonic poems: “Artists who are willing to take the trouble to understand and

to interpret my works cut themselves off from the generality of their fraternity. I, more than any one, have to thank them for this” (125). In other words, artists become distinguished when they take the time to formulate their own opinions and ideas. Liszt’s symphonic poem “Hamlet” is not a replication of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century text *Hamlet*; rather, it is its own text – and as such, it offers semantic nuances with no exact equivalents in the Shakespearean play nor its various dramatic adaptations.

Cormac admits that “*Hamlet*, of course, does differ from Liszt’s Melodramas in its attempt to create a symphonic whole. Throughout the piece we encounter a struggle between the depiction of the narrative and the requirements of musical form” (*Liszt as Kapellmeister* 401). Scholarship on this piece continues to debate whether it is constructed based on program or musical form. Cormac suggests that it is not quite a symphonic poem due to its programmatic intentions (based particularly on Dawson’s portrayal), but the two are not necessarily opposed. The symphonic poem, after all, is a combination of poetry (or literature) and symphonic music; thus, it is both programmatic and musical. This new genre was controversial for this very quality – the blending of two media that had been treated separately for decades.

Furthermore, the symphonic poem may have even closer ties with the original Shakespeare text since, as discussed in Chapter 1, the Renaissance promoted the integration of music with literature. Up until – and through – the Romantic era, the two became more distinct; but with the emergence of Liszt and symphonic poetry, their relationship began to revive. In fact, Liszt’s compositions as a whole were dominated by this relationship; as James Baker notes in *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, “nearly all of Liszt’s compositions arose from programmatic associations” (Hamilton 116). He was a master of musical form; in fact, one of his projects was to apply sonata form to extramusical ideas. As Moortele notes, even *Hamlet* –

which is controversial for its supposed *lack* of musical structure – “displays at least the rough traits of a sonata form” (76). However, its deviations from sonata form do not make it reliant on programmatic intentions; like composers have been doing for centuries, Liszt simply made sonata form his own.

Thus, the following section will analyze Liszt’s *Hamlet* through Hepokoski’s widely accepted sonata theory, which is used by both Cormac and Moortele. Interestingly, Hepokoski also studied the relationship between literature and music. ‘Sonata form,’ as it is conventionally known, was developed in the 1820s and 1830s and used through the early nineteenth century as the “customary design of first movements within sonatas, chamber music, and symphonies” (Hepokoski 14). The modern understanding of this form is what Hepokoski calls the Type 3 sonata, which “consists of three musical action-spaces” (16): the exposition, development, and recapitulation. Much like an essay or literary work, these ‘spaces’ – in the broadest sense – function to introduce the thematic material (and establish the tonic, musically speaking), explore any directions this material might inspire, and return to the thesis (or ‘theme’) while offering a conclusion (or ‘resolution’).

In Liszt’s *Hamlet*, these spaces are loosely evident. What makes the piece difficult to analyze through any particular form is its tonal instability; the tonic, B minor, is never fully established since it is consistently interrupted by modulations, secondary figures, chromatic mediants, and other nondiatonic variants. For example, the opening theme starts on a chromatic B flat in the clarinet, then moves through some more chromatic tones before settling on the leading tone of B minor (bb 1-3). The very next chord introduces a secondary leading tone with a G-sharp, forming a vii<sup>o7</sup>/VII (bb 5-7). Even at the end, the chromatic mediant iii (D minor) is used (bb 348-49).

This harmonic ambiguity has led to a wide variety of interpretations. As Cormac outlines, Liszt's biographer Lina Ramann takes a programmatic approach, arguing that the piece is "structured around three key moments from the play" (403); Humphrey Searle takes the opposite approach, interpreting it as a "psychological portrait without any particularly programmatic elements" (403); and Moortele takes yet another stance by analyzing the piece through sonata form (403). Cormac herself uses Hepokoski's rotational form, constructing a hybrid model of Ramann and Moortele's work to include both structural and programmatic elements (412).

Yet all of these approaches are in some way limiting. The piece cannot be explained fully in terms of sonata theory, and nor does a strictly programmatic viewpoint do justice. Even Cormac, who combined the two, fails to recognize its complexity as a self-contained work; for according to her, it is hardly more than an embellishment of Dawson's performance.

This section will discuss how Liszt's *Hamlet* uses sonata form to create a complete, coherent, and complex adaptation of Shakespeare's play. Unlike Moortele's interpretation, I will connect these 'action-spaces' to programmatic elements; unlike Searle, I will recognize the musical structure of the piece; unlike Ramann and Cormac, I will explore additional connections between the symphonic poem and Shakespeare's text (instead of constraining it to three scenes or one actor's portrayal). This analysis relies primarily on sonata theory and connections to the original Shakespearean text.

Within the broadest scope of sonata form, Liszt's *Hamlet* can be divided clearly into an exposition, A (bb 1-73); development, B (74-339); and recapitulation, A' (340-94). Thus, the composition represents rounded binary form, which "consists of an originally binary structure often arrayed in a ternary plan" (Hepokoski 16). The development can be further divided into five sections: a (74-156); b (160-174); a (176-200); b (203-217); and a (219-339). The first

repetition of a (176-200) resembles Letter H,<sup>1</sup> which has almost identical rhythmic motives. The internal portion of the development section (Ophelia's theme, 160-217, which encompasses a-b-a) represents ternary form. Thus, the composition is built on layers of interrelated 'miniature sonatas,' each of which advances the thematic transformation of the leitmotif in bb. 1-3.

While harmony determines much of the composition's formal structure, it is not the only factor. In the Romantic era, composers began to experiment with using other musical features as the 'syntactic parameter' (the foundation of the composition's form and progression, coined by music theorist Leonard Meyer). Liszt, in particular, was known for his skillful manipulation of texture. According to Keith T. Johns, Liszt's symphonic poetry relied on all of these elements: "motive and thematic transformations, key relationships, and orchestral textures" (9). Furthermore, Johns argues that "the structural organization of each symphonic poem bodies forth a unique, hermeneutic relationship between music and program" (9). Thus, to perform a complete programmatic analysis of Liszt's *Hamlet*, harmony and form must be considered along with timbre, texture, and motives to determine how all of these elements influence the thematic transformation of the extramusical *topoi* – in this case, the character and dilemma of Hamlet, the role of Ophelia, and the themes of political strife and death.

### Timbre and Texture

A startling E-flat on the horn starts the piece, followed by the soft woodwinds. The texture is sparse and elusive, evoking a sense of uneasiness and uncertainty – much like the opening scene in *Hamlet*, which, as shown from Barnardo's question (see Chapter 2, p 11), depicts a foggy, mysterious night. The woodwinds (including the clarinet, oboe, and flute) land

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<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent references are from the symphonic poem text

on the  $\text{vii}^{\circ 4/2}$  of the relative key, D major. This is followed by the timpani and bass with the dynamic markings *schwankende* ('fluctuation') and *perdendo* ('forfeiting'). The opening theme returns, this time with a G on the horn (up a major 3<sup>rd</sup> from the starting note), followed by the same woodwind motive, up a major 3<sup>rd</sup>, and landing on the  $\text{vii}^{\circ 6/4}$  of V in D major. This dissonance, created by the tonic instability mentioned in the previous section, heightens suspense. The timpani and bass return, leading into the ominously declining scale of the celli and bass and the entrance of the violins and violas. A call-and-response pattern ensues between the celli and higher strings. This continues until Letter B, where the woodwinds, with the first violins, play 12 chords belonging to B Major (the parallel key of the tonic, B minor). These chords have widely been interpreted as the bells of Elsinore. This is followed by a bar of rest and the return of the opening theme – this time with a *sforzando* and with the whole orchestra. The strings then play parallel 32<sup>nd</sup> notes, resembling a tremolo, with the dynamic marking *stürmisch* ('stormy'), perhaps depicting the first entrance of the Ghost.

This pattern – from the re-entry of the opening theme to the tremolo section – is then repeated, but with even more dynamic force. At Letter C, the rhythmic figure from the starting note on the horn is fleshed out by the strings – perhaps signifying Hamlet's response to the Ghost. A call-and-response element is also created by the repeated rhythmic figure in the timpani. The strings end Letter C with an incomplete chromatic scale that ends on  $\text{i}^{\circ}$  in B minor. This is followed in Letter D by ominous tremolos in the celli and basses, which support the cadential figures of the woodwinds that resolve by chromatic steps. This whole section creates an eerie, wind-blown effect that depicts, perhaps, another entrance of the Ghost. Liszt, who was heavily inspired by Hungarian culture and music, often created this sound in his music, which mimics the Hungarian cimbalom instrument. This wind-blown effect is magnified by the gradual

crescendo that brings the irresolute end of Letter D – complete with a jolting *rinforzando* and instant silence that lasts three bars.

In Letter E, a new theme is introduced: an agitated call-and-response between the woodwinds and strings. The strings gradually climb up their registers with increasingly dissonant harmonies, building suspense. This section is also characterized by the brass section, particularly the trumpets, which seem to be in a battle with the ferocious strings. The section ends with the rhythmic features that typically define the end of a piece or movement, but the cadence is deceptive, landing on an irresolute A-flat – a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> below the tonic of the piece.

The resolution arrives in the unexpected B-flat minor of the Ophelia section (the chromatic submediant of the piece's relative major, D). This section is played entirely by the woodwinds and violins, ending with a sweet violin solo that ends on C-sharp (the leading tone of D major). Letter J returns to Hamlet's rhythmic motive, this time on the violins with *sforzando* and *marcato*, creating a scattered, almost humorous mood to reflect Liszt's dynamic marking *ironisch*. Many scholars have identified this marking as the representation of Hamlet's scorn of Ophelia, particularly the ironic line "get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.141-2). Once again, a call-and-response is formed between the strings and woodwinds, who seem to be in a battle of "one-upping" the other in their flippant – almost scorning – attempts at evoking irony.

Ophelia's theme returns after three bars of rest – this time in C-sharp minor, as if continuing in ignorance of the *ironisch* interruption. This section is a complete repeat of the first, melodically speaking, but it cadences in the relative key, E major. This is followed by a series of pizzicatos in the celli and bass and the re-entry of the opening theme – this time in C minor and with the tremolo figure and melody from Letter B and the *ironisch* figure. The bass, once again, close the section with an eerily declining scale, landing on a G-sharp tremolo.

The *ironisch* figure is then brought into full force by the entire orchestra. This culminates in Letter Q with a call-and-response between the strings and the full orchestra. Once again, this section ends on an unsettling E-flat. Letter R returns with the opening theme, this time identically replicated until Letter S, which reintroduces Hamlet's rhythmic motive varied slightly with the *ironisch* figure played whimsically on the oboe. The characteristic 32<sup>nd</sup> triplets of the *ironisch* figure are played ominously by the bass.

Letter T repeats the Elsinore chords from the beginning, combining them with the *ironisch* figure and the melody from Letter E in the bass and violas – but in a markedly slower and less ardent tempo. Letter U elevates the *ironisch* figure to a piercing register of the woodwinds, supported by the tremolos of the bass. This time, the *ironisch* figure has a somber quality, as its tempo is distinctly slower and the 32<sup>nd</sup> triplets (which initially created the playful, humorous tone) are excluded. The volume increases, closing with a timpani roll.

The bass enter, and a sparsely textured call-and-response ensues between the timpani and the rest of the orchestra. A pause follows before the celli and bass enter with an almost mocking gesture that flows into a jarring measure of trills in the string section between A-sharp and B. This closes with a final cry from the woodwinds, who finally sound the long-anticipated i of B minor. Finally, the timpani and bases close the piece with two pizzicatos on the tonic note. This is the first – and last – moment of tonic stability, perhaps mimicking the resigned end of *Hamlet* with the prince's slow death. Liszt concludes the piece with two full bars of silence (save the timpani and bass, which only serve to extend this silence before closing the piece), ultimately portraying Hamlet's death through the death of sound.

As shown, both texture and timbre play a significant role in the programmatic development of the piece. In List's world, no longer was harmony the only syntactic parameter;



texture, the layering of voices, was used to shape the composition's form – and, in this case, its literary associations. Timbre (the color of sound) was also used to subtly alter the thematic material. As the previous analysis shows, the woodwinds provide a softer sound for more melancholy sections (as in Ophelia's theme); the celli and bass – particularly through their tremolos, of which Liszt takes full advantage in this piece – create an eerie, ominous tone (perhaps signifying the Ghost); and the timpani and brass instruments evoke a sense of assertiveness and resolution (perhaps reflecting Hamlet's contemplation of action or the underlying political upheaval of the tragedy). Additionally, the sparse texture (which Liszt commonly used to signify transitions) characterizes the slow conclusion of the piece and reflects the slowly dying Hamlet. These musical elements, along with the programmatic features they enhance, will be explored in the following section.

### Thematic Transformation

The piece is distinguished by the opening leitmotif, which establishes its entire melodic structure. Furthermore, as confirmed by Liszt's biographer Lina Ramann, this leitmotif represents the character of Hamlet – particularly “the setting of Hamlet's soliloquy from Act III” (Hamilton 215). Thus, the central topos of the piece is Hamlet and his famous dilemma. However, he is not the only extramusical subject. Ophelia, interestingly, plays a significant role as well, occupying an entire section of the piece (bb 160-217). Furthermore, this section is explicitly devoted to Ophelia; the words at the bottom of the score state, “This intermediate episode (3/2 time) must pass over like a shadow and be played in the most tranquil manner. It relates to Ophelia” (Hamilton 25). As shown in the previous sections, the piece is characterized by two major categories: The ominous, gradually adamant and eventually somber Hamlet and the

melancholy but soon peacefully resigned Ophelia. Thus, rather than focusing solely on the political upheaval of the play, the piece also explores the complicated dynamic of Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship and how this relationship characterizes each of them.

Cormac argues that Liszt's representation of this relationship in the symphonic poem "parrots" Dawson's belief that Ophelia "paled into significance beside the Prince" (394). Cormac argues that Liszt's use of the term *schattenbild* ('shadow-picture') in the Ophelia section, as well as its musical nature, "correspond to Dawson's interpretation of Ophelia as weak and unequal to Hamlet" (394). This seems to be a legitimate observation, not only regarding its possible connection to Dawson, but because of the musical form of the piece: Hamlet's leitmotif undergoes thematic transformation in the Ophelia section in which its texture is reduced, its register elevated to the woodwinds and violins, its dynamic decreased to piano, and its melodic structure altered to create a simple line that seems to, at best, *strain* as a melody.

Yet, the very inclusion of Ophelia in the symphonic poem – to such an extent that her section occupies nearly a third of the entire composition – elevates her character. Furthermore, her sections, unlike the rest of the poem, are cadentially complete, landing on the tonic of whatever key they began in. Perhaps this was intended to emphasize the emotional turmoil and indecisiveness of Hamlet, whose sections repeatedly lack tonic resolution until his death (the end of the piece). Furthermore, since Ophelia's sections have closure in a major key, this may suggest that to *not* 'to be' – to finally reach the "undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns" (Shakespeare 3.1.77) – is the superior state. This is not a surprising interpretation coming from Liszt, who often included suicidal elements in his works and was heavily influenced by Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, in which death is considered the ideal.

Artistically speaking, Ophelia's sections are far from subservient. As highlighted in the previous section, her theme appears twice – and even despite the *ironisch* interruption between each repetition, each is peacefully resolved. Thus, Ophelia's sections create an important reprieve in the piece that more than anything *complete* the composition. Furthermore, Ophelia's contrasting theme to the rest of the piece is a crucial part of sonata form. Without her sections, the piece would be unstable and possibly confusing. While Ophelia may lack a certain amount of agency in the symphonic poem, as Cormac argues, she is not beneath Hamlet; if anything, she is presented as his foil and thus his equal.

Like Shakespeare does by giving Ophelia a chance – through music – to voice her rebellion (see Chapter 1, “Music as Metaphor”), Liszt awards her character with musical representation in his symphonic poem. Yet, unlike Shakespeare, Liszt does not make her simply mimic Hamlet (consider her speech for example, which is discussed in Chapter 1); rather, through his clever thematic transformation of the Hamlet leitmotif, he gives her a distinct voice that plays an important role in the entire composition. This also challenges Liszt's reliance on Dawson's interpretation of Ophelia as unequal and subservient. Rather, her sections work with those of Hamlet to explore, emotionally, the underlying question of the tragedy: can a human always be the hero? Ultimately, Liszt had enough original ideas about *Hamlet* to create his own interpretation that, although similar to the ideas of both Dawson and Shakespeare, stands alone – both musically and programmatically – and answers this question in its own way.

## CONCLUSION

This final section explores how music operates as language in light of the preceding research, using the Theory of Adaptation (the method through which an adaptation is analyzed and evaluated). As Thomas Leitch asks, “In what ways does and should an intertext resemble its

precursor text in another medium?” (168). Leitch argues that an artistic adaptation should be evaluated based on its own merit rather than its fidelity to the original text; however, both individuality and fidelity are crucial factors, and the following analysis seeks a balanced consideration of both.

For example, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Henryk Tomaszewski turned Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into a pantomime. Critics Halina Filipowicz and Gary Mead evaluate this unique adaptation by analyzing its deviations from Shakespeare’s text, such as the addition of the character Prologus and a scene involving Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern in a symbolic game. However, despite – and in fact because – of these differences, the critics conclude that the pantomime highlights the “perennial struggle between political will and artistic autonomy [...] without crushing the interest we have in Hamlet’s personal tragedy” (377). In other words, this nonverbal production successfully adapts Shakespeare’s literary text. According to Tomaszewski himself, the art of pantomime “involves a fusion of ballet and theatre, with movement replacing words as the means of expression” (Filipowicz 376). This shows, as with symphonic poetry, that non-literary art forms can convincingly convey a literary concept or expression, even – and especially – if it diverges from the original.

In another example, Charles Hurtgen analyzes film adaptations of *Hamlet* to evaluate the effectiveness of incidental music in Shakespearean plays. Analyzing William Walton’s orchestrations for Laurence Olivier’s Shakespeare films, Mendelssohn’s orchestrations for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and Ramon Vlad’s music for *Castellani’s Romeo and Juliet*, Hurtgen concludes that “the composer has the power to add to the effectiveness of scenes” (57). Furthermore, he adds that incorporating music in film adaptations of Shakespeare requires more “control by a single comprehensive mind” (64) than any other element of film adaptation.

Although Shakespeare's plays have proved both conducive and challenging to intermedial adaptation, these examples – as well as my own analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Liszt's 10<sup>th</sup> symphonic poem – show the effectiveness of symphonic music as an adaptive medium. Music can be used to both reference a literary text and form an original interpretation of its meaning. As highlighted by the previous chapters, Liszt's symphonic poem can be traced to specific features of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, both through its context and musical elements, but it ultimately creates its own meaning by juxtaposing the political strife of *Hamlet* with its relationship aspect, dedicating two complete and independent sections to Ophelia, and transforming the theme (or leitmotif) associated with Hamlet to explore – differently from Goethe, Dawson, and even Shakespeare – the human embodiment of the heroic.

Therefore, although music and literature are far from interchangeable, they are complementary. Liszt's symphonic poem, for example, explores the unanswered questions of Shakespeare's play. While music evokes the emotions, literature (or speech) communicates first to the intellect. Yet even this delineation is restrictive. Géza Révész, for example, argues that “[e]motions are something essentially different from musical configurations” (93-4). Although Révész's study focused more on the nature of sound (physical acoustics and auditory perception) than of music, this statement has some truth in it; after all, music is more than just an emotional stimulant.

As seen in the preceding analyses, music and literature overlap in many ways: both are sequential, both are experienced from left to right (or start to finish), and both rely on repetition and variation to convey meaning. For example, both use motivic figures and can employ the deceptive cadence to intensify dramatic intrigue and pull the audience deeper into the musical or literary work (see Chapter 1: “Music as Structure”). However, within these connections, there are

limitations to each medium. While literature can evoke greater empathy, as with Hamlet's 'deceptive cadence,' music can deepen the original meaning that gets lost in the incessant signifying of language. Additionally, language is not as metronomic as music, which specifically articulates the flow of time; while poetry may employ meter, music is dictated by a constant and highly nuanced pulse. Ultimately, each medium has unique drawbacks and advantages in the expression of meaning.

### A Scientific Perspective

A study in 2012 investigated the brain's response to "timbral, tonal, and rhythmic features of a naturalistic musical stimulus" (Alluri). While listening to a modern tango, which the researchers describe as having a "rich musical structure" (abstract), the participants' brains were scanned with functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI). The study found that while timbral features were associated with "cognitive areas of the cerebellum," sensory areas, and the default mode network (or DMN, a complex of neural regions that is active when a person is mentally absent from the external world), beat and tonality correlated with "cortical and subcortical cognitive, motor and emotion-related circuits" (abstract).

This study shows that listening to music may be connected to motor, sensory, and emotional areas of the brain. Interestingly, timbral features are shown to activate different areas than beat and tonality. The DMN connection is perhaps the most important discovery, as this processing network is associated with how the brain deals with meaning and memory. For example, the results of a 2011 study show that "well-known semantic regions are spatially and functionally involved in the DMN" (Wirth). Thus, according to these studies, music and meaning are processed in the same neurological space.

This argument has further evidence in the results of a 2000 study testing the hypothesis that music education and literacy skills are correlated (Butzlaff 167). The results of the study showed that “students studying music do in fact have significantly higher scores on standardized reading tests” (174), strengthening the argument that “music study enhances reading ability” (174). However, Butzlaff states that this correlational study does not determine causality, acknowledging the various other factors that could influence the resulting statistic. Ultimately, while more scientific research is needed to determine the neurological connection between music and language or literacy, the two media are certainly connected – and their relationship is nuanced enough to warrant new discoveries within not only musicology and literary analysis but branches of neurology.

#### A New Perspective of ‘Music’

Before continuing to extrapolate about ‘music’ based on the single genre of the symphonic poem, a definition of music itself must be sought. In his seminal book on musical semiology, Jean-Jacques Nattiez asks the vital question, “Is it legitimate to speak of ‘music’ with respect to cultures that do not have such a concept, that do not distinguish between music and nonmusic? And in this case, do we have the right to project our western categories of thought and analysis upon what *we* believe to be music?” (41). As represented by Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, even Ophelia’s ‘mad speech’ is deemed music. The Machupe genre of *tayil*, as another example, “is not music in the western sense of the term” (55) – yet, as Nattiez observes, it is characterized by “itches, rhythms, and melodic contours that in all respects are compatible with *our* concept of music” (55). Nattiez thus argues that “[t]here is not a music, but many musics – and, one

could even say, many musical phenomena” (60). Ultimately, ‘music’ cannot be restricted to any single understanding of the term.

This conclusion does not invalidate my study of symphonic poetry; rather, it supports it. Symphonic poetry merges literature with music, exploring the ‘musical’ versus the ‘nonmusical’ (or ‘extramusical’). This genre was revolutionary for Liszt’s time because it challenged the traditional conventions of ‘absolute music.’ Therefore, this thesis is a study not of a particular western genre of music but of the *idea* Liszt proposed through his symphonic poems: can music express the nonmusical? This question, of course, challenges the very definitions of these terms and prompts us to take a second glance at the conventional terminology and categories of both music and language.

Ultimately, there is no single, cohesive definition of music. As Nattiez notes, music – and understandings of music – are indelibly bound to culture. As my thesis shows, many other factors are also at play, including personal experience, education, and religion. This realization demands a more flexible view of the relationship between music and literature. If they are treated not separately but as related forms of language, this removes the restrictions of one framework. This type of analysis relies on the small, seemingly insignificant details – and this thesis dissects these details by closely examining two specific works from each field.

### Music and Words

Literature and music are deeply intertwined, and their nuanced relationship cannot be summed up in a single thesis. As Paula Johnson observes, “[t]he virginalist can use the upper and lower ranges of the keyboard to obtain contrasts and gradations of sound quality and dynamics; the dramatist can hang the heavens with black or call up spirits through a trapdoor” (16). In other



words, music is highly interdisciplinary. However, the many discrepancies between artistic media – however small – are the pathways to real discoveries.

It has been established that literature and music utilize similar semantic tools and have the ability to convey similar ideas. Furthermore, they often work well together to enhance meaning and promote new neural connections. However, their inherent divergences do not threaten their relationship. Rather, they emphasize the significance of the subtle and sometimes infinitesimal nuances of meaning – the polysemy – that exist in all forms of language. These nuances explain the wide dissimilarity regarding one work between Shakespeare (a playwright), Goethe (a writer), Dawson (an actor), and Liszt (a musician).

Language, to borrow from Saussure, is restrained by a continual and incurable discrepancy between the *signifier* and the *signified*. The *signified* – both in music and literature – is inseparable from the *signifier's* context, culture, experience, expertise, and countless other factors. Music, in the case of Liszt's symphonic poems, may come close to its literary foundation – but it can never identically articulate its meaning. Instead, it can build on these foundational ideas to create its own, perhaps even giving their meaning more depth and complexity. As Felix Mendelssohn wrote, even before Liszt and the symphonic poem, “The thoughts I find expressed in music that I love are not too indefinite, but on the contrary, too definite to put into words” (3). Thus, perhaps the most effective expressions result from music and literature when they are not exchanged but united – because, although different on page and in performance, both word and note wield semantic power.

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