Gothic structures and musical compositions: Fiction, criticism, and early romantic music

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Background in musicology. In recent years, musicologists have begun to study prose texts by composers, novelists, and poets. This focus is part of a broader trend toward the study of linguistic metaphor to explain musical phenomena. Such pioneering studies as Burnham’s discussion of A.B. Marx’s use of the masculine/feminine metaphor in sonata themes and Bonds’s study on rhetorical paradigms as a means of explaining musical structure demonstrate how dominant cultural paradigms affected writing on music in 18th- and 19th-century Germany. Another important branch of musicology, represented by Chantler’s dissertation on aesthetics and hermeneutics in Hoffmann has widely studied the aesthetics of various composers. However, these discussions have been thus far mainly limited to general topics such as choice of affect or mood setting, and little work has been done to compare narrative structures in prose with musical structures or form.

Background in literary studies. Scholars of British Romanticism working on literature and music have focused their studies on the relationship between music and poetry, neglecting to consider the relationship between music and fiction. Despite the fact that Ann Radcliffe’s gothic novels contain numerous scenes of musical performance, they have received little attention from interdisciplinary scholars in this field. Radcliffe was one of the most celebrated gothic writers of her time. However, her works have not been put in conversation with the musical gothic fictions of continental writers like E. T. A. Hoffmann. And although scholars have begun to consider how Victorian and Modernist novels incorporate ideas from 19th-century musical discourse, they have not connected Radcliffe’s novels to Romantic-period musical writings.

Aims. Our paper explores how musical structure is treated in two different types of texts: British and German gothic fiction, and early Romantic critical essays on music. We begin by examining patterns of musical description in Radcliffe’s Mysteries of Udolpho and Hoffmann’s early critical essays, demonstrating that Hoffmann adopts gothic narrative structures when describing musical structure. Next, we discuss how Hoffmann translates the gothic aesthetics of his critical essays into short stories like “Beethovens Instrumental-Musik” and “Die Fermata.” We conclude by suggesting how perception of music in narratives may have influenced perception and composition of musical structures.

Main Contribution. This study contributes to the burgeoning interdisciplinary dialogue between musicology and literary criticism. It brings into conversation two major Romantic Period figures who were interested in translating musical ideas and experiences into prose. It also suggests that the aesthetics of gothic narrative discourse is part of a tradition of Romantic writing on music that encompasses novels, short stories, and critical essays.

Implications. The implications of the link between early German romanticism and British gothic literature of the late 18th century are wide-ranging. First, it creates dialogue between scholars of British women writers and scholars working on German literature and music. It also expands the acknowledged web of influence on 19th-century composers to include British and gothic literary sources. It furthermore suggests a reciprocal exchange between the fiction and music criticism of the period. Finally, it permits a broader understanding of how narrative and descriptive engagements with music and sound in fictional prose have a direct impact on compositional practices.

As the quintessential example of a composer-novelist-critic, E. T. A. Hoffmann is an ideal subject for thinking about the interchange of discursive strategies between the narrative fiction and music criticism of the early nineteenth century. His collected musical writings—ranging from short stories and novels, to essays, operas, and instrumental pieces—have naturally lent themselves to interdisciplinary scholarship. With his characteristic sense of irony, Hoffmann describes music of all sorts, in textual forums we could characterize as either “fictional” or “non-fictional.” However, it is the lack of distinction between these narrative categories
that ultimately becomes the most distinctive feature of Hoffmann’s musical prose. His writings defy typical modes of classification, unsettling boundaries between “fiction” and “music criticism,” as well as their respective fields of inquiry, literary studies and musicology.

The liminal status of Hoffmann’s writings is replicated by the liminal status of his own aesthetics. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, so the story goes, a younger generation of German artists and composers began to reject neo-classical ideals, instead choosing to embrace a newly articulated “romantic” aesthetic. As a result, mainstream historical discourse, not only pedagogical but also scholarly, has frequently claimed that the principal characteristics of the music and fiction composed during the first half of the nineteenth century are anchored in a rejection of the principal qualities valued by composers of the previous generation: balance, clarity and regularity. In musicological literature, the concept of Romanticism has been linked from its beginning with a particular set of stylistic traits. The German phrase “Nacht und Nebel” is used metaphorically to portray the aesthetic espoused by musical Romanticism: harmonic and formal ambiguity, allusions to irrationality and the search for individual expression, often through the expression of negatively-connoted emotions such as fear, anxiety, melancholy and unrequited desire. Put another way, Romantic aesthetics are referred to as Dionysian, as opposed to the Apollonian aesthetics of the classical period, which is characterized by simplicity, balance and rationality. These aesthetics are also linked in many ways to a paradigm shift described by Mark Evan Bonds. This is a shift away from a rhetorical music paradigm—wherein the structure of a musical composition is understood to imitate the pattern of a speech or written work—toward an organicist musical paradigm—in which a musical composition is described in quasi-botanical terms as growing out of a limited number of “seeds” or “cells”.

Although Bonds locates the shift toward the organicist model at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he is careful to maintain that the paradigm shift was gradual, and that the rhetorical model did not disappear until much later in the century. And in fact, while authors from the first half of the nineteenth century extolled the virtues of Haydn’s, Mozart’s, and Beethoven’s music, they continued to admire the qualities of Haydn’s, Mozart’s, and Beethoven’s music. Like many other writers from the period, Hoffmann would express this duality of opinion. Yet unlike most of his contemporaries, he would express this duality within textual spaces that were neither purely fictional, nor purely critical, but instead, an amalgamation of generic categories. Far from making a clean break with neoclassical aesthetics and musical structures in order to create a new “romantic” model, Hoffmann was caught between a deep admiration for the formal qualities of Hayden, Mozart, and Beethoven, and a new sense that music’s power lay in its ability to overwhelm the listener’s soul. Given these circumstances, to classify Hoffmann as a “Romantic” is to disregard his nuanced critical response to the composers of the previous generation and their musical works. Similarly, to separate his “criticism” from his “fiction” is to draw distinctions between narratives that aim to elide those boundaries.

Our paper, while attending to the relentless slippage that occurs between these narrative modes, attempts to think through Hoffmann’s complicated aesthetics by approaching them from a different vantage, and considering the correspondence that exists between his musical writings and the turn-of-the-century English gothic novel. These works frequently rely on supernatural musical encounters to create structural disruptions in the ordered flow of narrative time. Musical episodes invariably lead to a stock series of rhetorical gestures, which give structure to the listener’s response. Embodied reception, mental possession, and the effects of “déjà entendu”—listening to the already heard—are some of the narrative patterns that characterize the scene of musical listening in English gothic fiction. As we will demonstrate, the sublime musical experiences Hoffmann describes in his fictional-critical writings are part of a tradition of gothic musical listening, first established in the works of Ann Radcliffe, the most
celebrated English gothic novelist of the Romantic period. Finally, we will suggest how composers of the period may have recycled the rhetorical gestures that structure Radcliffe’s novels, translating and incorporating her aesthetic practices into the structures of musical compositions. In this way, gothic narrative structures influenced the perception of musical structure in the early nineteenth century. Ultimately, we hope our paper will open up avenues of conversation between musicology and literary studies, not to mention current criticism on British and German Romanticism.

**Ann Radcliffe’s Musical Gothic**

Known by contemporaries as “the Great Enchantress,” Ann Radcliffe was the foremost gothic novelist of the Romantic era. Within the soundscapes of her fictional works, music creates narrative tension and mystery, performing a central role in her notoriously complicated plots. Radcliffe consistently presents her heroines as active listeners, who eagerly apprehend, receive, and respond to the musical works they encounter. In fact, their sensory perceptions make it possible for musical experience to appear on the pages of the novel. Such is the case in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe’s most (in)famous work, which was translated into German shortly after its first publication in 1794.Emily St. Aubert, the novel’s principal character, is a talented musician and careful listener; her love of music figures as an expression of her exquisite natural taste and finely tuned sensibility. When Emily listens to music, it calms her spirits and provides opportunities for emotional release. Over the course of the novel, she experiences nothing more pleasurable than “[remaining] sunk in that pensive tranquility which soft music leaves on the mind.” Yet there are other times when she will listen to unearthly, haunted melodies, unable to determine their source. Such episodes leave her entranced and terrorized, her body overwhelmed by fearful sensations.

Radcliffe gives structure to Emily’s musical listening by establishing a series of rhetorical patterns, which will be repeated over the course of the narrative. Foremost among these is an account of the heroine’s embodied reception of the musical work. When describing an episode of musical listening, Radcliffe often passes over precise details of the sounds themselves, instead choosing to focus on the way the music affects her heroine’s body. During a stay in Venice, Emily encounters a series of “soft” melodies that seem to “swell on the air.” As this music fades away, she listens in “still rapture”; she sighs; her eyes fill with tears, and she weeps. Here, a description of her physical responses lends coherence and focus to a series of fading melodies.

While the music of Venice has a soothing effect, other performances prove far less comforting. Throughout the novel, Emily will listen to a particular melody, performed by an unseen hand, and mysteriously coming from an unknown source. This music petrifies her with terror; it “awes” and “chills” her, leaving her mind fearful and unsettled. In these instances, Radcliffe takes her cue from Edmund Burke’s descriptions of sublime sounds in his influential aesthetic treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).x For Burke, certain sounds have the capacity to “[awake] a great and awful sensation in the mind”; they are “sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror.” In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily is frequently overpowered by hauntingly sublime melodies. At times, she loses control of her body, unable to move, nearly fainting to the ground. An extension of the rhetoric of embodiment, this rhetoric of possession appears frequently in gothic scenes of listening. Radcliffe presents Emily as a sonic receptor, always in danger of being undone—both bodily and mentally—by the sublime music she hears.

Emily listens to this haunting, supernatural melody every time she enters the environs surrounding the convent of St. Claire. The music—produced, as we finally learn, not by ghosts, but by a kind of living ghost, a woman long thought to have passed from the earth—comes into the narrative multiple times, thus functioning as the novel’s most profound engagement with déjà entendu. In these episodes, déjà entendu becomes a conspicuously persistent narrative structure,
one that promotes a series of musical repetitions in the text, ever exacerbating this sublime music’s embodied, possessive effects. Shortly after her father’s death, Emily listens to the music, and recognizes it as the same the two had previously heard together. On the former occasion, her father had been contemplating the spirits of the departed, and speculating about his own imminent departure from this earth. Now, alone, Emily listens to the music once again, “chilled with superstitious awe.”

Over the course of the novel, Emily will listen to this mysterious music several more times; often, she waits in listening expectation, “half hoping and half fearing” that the music will “return.” Each time it does, Radcliffe carefully records its terrorizing effects on her heroine’s body and mind. Notably in these cases, it is not just music itself, but Emily’s memories of musical listening that impact her so sharply. The mysterious music affects her senses not just because of its (seemingly) supernatural quality, but because it awakens memories of her father’s passing, and memories of the first time they listened to the music together. Recollecting “all that [her father] had said” on that occasion, Emily’s memories “[press] upon her heart, and [overwhelm her]” (83). Although musical experiences and their residual effects, are always transitory, Emily’s mental absorption of her various musical encounters ensures that even after sounds have faded, they are maintained within the narrative through future acts of listening and remembering. As a result, Radcliffe’s heroine becomes a vessel that retains and preserves the most ephemeral of aesthetic experiences. Long after the music she listens to dies away, her memories ensure that it will continue to resonate and be heard again; her embodied responses—presented through different rhetorical gestures—gives music a greater degree of textual presence in the gothic novel.

E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Musical Fictions

While literary scholars of British and German romanticism have claimed that Hoffmann was influenced by the gothic writings of such English practitioners as Matthew Lewis (author of The Monk) and Sir Walter Scott, they have failed to consider the possibility of a connection between the writings of Hoffmann and Radcliffe. However, there is a great deal of correspondence between the way Radcliffe and Hoffmann write music into their gothic fictions. In their works, music comes into the narrative through a series of different rhetorical gestures evoking embodiment, possession, and déjà entendu or the already heard.

In all of his writings containing some reference to music, Hoffmann foregrounds the latter art’s power, persistently making its metaphysical status evident to the reader. Indeed, his Märchen are characterized not just by elements of the fantastic, but also by their abundance of musical references. Presenting music as one of the supernatural components of his fictions, Hoffmann was drawing upon constructions of musical listening established during the 1790s in the English gothic novel.

While music is often attached to the unusual or the supernatural, Hoffmann also uses it as a means to introduce irony in his tales. In a passage of the well-known Kater Murr, the character Johannes Kreisler states: «I smile agreeably […] when the Master of Ceremonies whispers in my ear, referring to Haydn’s Seasons: “It’s tryingly boring, my dear Kapellmeister.” I listen patiently while the valet demonstrates how Mozart and Beethoven are no more capable of judging music than a blind man is of judging colors, and that Rossini, Puccitta and other such composers have gained the foremost rank among musicians.» This passage presents a trope familiar to scholars of Hoffmann’s writing: that of the artist criticizing the uneducated and blaze attitude of the upper social classes with regards to music. Two overlapping perceptions of time shade this ironic twist. The real musical event, the performance of Haydn’s oratorio, serves as a backdrop against which the reader learns of the reactions of two of the participants. The emotional turmoil experienced by the Master of Ceremonies and by Kreisler is an embodied response to the music, a rhetorical gesture used to remove the reader from the flow of narrative time in order to gain insight into a character’s feelings.
The most common rhetorical gesture linked to music in Hoffmann’s fiction is that of possession. This narrative strategy involves either the music taking over the body of the character, or the character gaining mastery over some aspect of him/herself through music. The first type is often related to the illness or death of a susceptible female character. In the story Rat Krespel, the councilor’s daughter’s singing eventually causes her death because of a strange illness. The supernatural link between the girl’s voice and a particular violin—which breaks at the moment of her death—creates a link between the most intimately physical form of musical production and an inanimate object. This link structures the entire story, supplying the background on which events in the story unfold.

In another type of rhetoric of possession, the character gains mastery of himself through music. In Die Fermate, a young German musician progresses through various stages of artistic development represented by his infatuations with two singers. An immature phase of infatuation with virtuosic “modern” music represented by the soprano Lauretta precedes a flirtation with more serious and noble religious music personified by the alto Teresina. At the end of the story, the author meditates on how the mature musician must both acknowledge the powerful but polar ideals of his youth, and distance himself from them in order to create his own personal style. Imagination and convention, brilliance and seriousness, all are available to the developed artist who can wield all tools to fashion his musical message. The dialectical progression of this story shows the young composer gaining mastery over himself by first succumbing to and then internalizing the flirtatious advances of the two opposing tendencies of music.

The rhetoric of déjà entendu appears in Hoffmann’s fiction in a particular way. Where in Radcliffe’s novel déjà entendu is the locus of the supernatural, for Hoffmann, déjà entendu follows after the rhetoric of possession. In other words, Hoffmann situates the supernatural in the moment of musical production, in the rhetoric of embodiment or of possession; the rhetoric of déjà entendu becomes a reflective moment in which a character can come to understand past events. The superstitious awe and fear experienced by Radcliffe’s characters in moments of déjà entendu are absent from Hoffmann’s texts. Rather, as in Die Fermate, the protagonist’s emotional state is usually one of faint nostalgia. Once again, two overlapping spheres of time exist. The sisters Lauretta and Teresina are performing music and experiencing it as present, whereas their former admirer, in hearing the very same performance, experiences the sense of déjà entendu, of music from the past. In this case, the young musician has matured, and the déjà entendu experienced when he meets his sibling muses after a long separation opens the way to the reverie that allows the reader to understand the effect of the passage of time on the development of the true artist.

Criticism and Aesthetics

Although it is a well-known fact that Hoffmann’s fiction abounds with moments of the fantastic, and his characters are perpetually confronted with supernatural experiences, less attention has been given to the way the rhetorical devices used to introduce these fantastic elements appear in his critical essays. In fact, Hoffmann began by translating the gothic aesthetic of Radcliffe into his music criticism, years before embarking on his own career as a writer of fiction. In fact, one of the ways in which Hoffmann blurs the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is in his recycling of material found in critical essays in his later fictional prose.

In his well-known essay on Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (1810), which would later appear in slightly altered form within the Fantasiestücke (1814), Hoffmann would exalt the profound Romanticism of the composer’s music, through which he believed we could access the sublime. He says of Beethoven’s music that it: “opens to us the realm of the immense and the immeasurable. [It] elicits in us shivers, fear, terror, pain and wakens in us that infinite nostalgia that is the true essence of Romanticism.” Commentators of this essay have frequently traced Hoffmann’s description of a musical sublime—one that is
“the true essence of Romanticism”—back to the theories of Kant, Hegel, and Jean Paul, as well as the English statesman and aesthetcian Edmund Burke.

The young music critic positions himself as the defender of the great composer, still relatively unknown at the time, and does so for very specific reasons. In his critical essay on the Fifth Symphony (1810), Hoffmann exalts the profound Romanticism of Beethoven’s music, through which he believes we can access the sublime. He says of Beethoven’s music that it: “opens to us the realm of the immense and the immeasurable. [It] elicits in us shivers, fear, terror, pain and wakens in us that infinite nostalgia that is the true essence of Romanticism.” xvii The emotional turmoil discussed in this passage, a marker of contact with the sublime, is embedded in a well-structured composition; a description of the structure of the music is implied within the structure of the essay, itself a rhetorical gesture of possession.

Hoffmann describes the powerful organicism of the symphony, through the cyclic recurrence of the famous “destiny” motif, in order to demonstrate coherence in the construction of the piece through a type of déjà entendu rhetorical gesture. To cite only one sentence as support, while speaking of the rhythmic adoption of the themes to the rhythm of the original motif, Hoffmann says: “they in fact only served to reveal with constantly growing precision the character of the whole, that the initial theme could only indicate.” xviii But recourse to the organic metaphor is not the only signal of coherence in the piece. Without explicitly discussing form or using the jargon associated with the nascent Formenlehre, Hoffmann calls upon the normative schema of sonata form. He speaks of two themes that are developed in a second section before coming back in a concluding gesture. The tonal schema of the symphony is also elucidated, and Hoffmann explains that in the recapitulation, the themes first heard in another key are reintroduced in C minor. Sonata structure is clear to those who know how to recognize it, but Hoffmann is writing for a wider audience, faithful to his own idea, of which Alain Montandon reminds us, that: "There is a way to speak of music that satisfies the initiate without being incomprehensible to the layman."xxx Hoffmann is no stranger to sonata form and its structure, and whether it is evident or veiled, he believes it to be an important element of the composition. In an 1808 outline for a planned article on sonata, Hoffmann puts to paper two ideas that are of particular interest here. He intends to describe the "Joy that art and technique can bring to a cultivated man."xvi Here again is an element of the duality of thought that will be taken up in the essay on the Fifth Symphony, where he describes Beethoven’s style as a mix of genius and rationality, of inspiration and thought. xxi But Hoffmann had also intended to develop the idea that in this form: “There must reign an apparent arbitrariness, and more this arbitrariness conceals consummate skill, more it is perfect.” Consummate skill includes, without a doubt, mastery of form and the ability to create a deep coherence in the work as a whole. Hoffmann’s essay is thus inscribed in the current of valuation of absolute instrumental music, and in the creation of a German classical tradition. The only composer named in the 1808 outline is Haydn, who is described as a “theorist”. These few notes furnish an important clue of the importance of compositional work in the internal logic and coherence of music in Hoffmann’s thought. It also allows us to confirm the importance of the implicit acknowledgement of sonata form in the later critique of the Fifth Symphony.

**Conclusion**

The music of Beethoven can help us understand how the gothic aesthetic described at the beginning of this paper comes into greater use in the music of the nineteenth century. Music of the classical period, as well as much music before it, unfolded in a fairly straightforward linear pattern, as described by Jonathan Kramer.xxii While we believe that the divergences in linearity developed in early romantic music differ significantly from those described by Kramer—whose focus is mainly on later music—the basic concept of a reordering of musical time remains key. Tonal music, as Kramer states xxiii, remains predominantly
linear, but composers began to deploy different strategies to confound or divert the expectations created by certain well-known formal patterns in music. Beethoven’s experimentation with non-tonic openings, weakened cadential structures, reordering of thematic material, and interpolation of large sections within sonata form are all examples of a composer rearranging time in his composition. Such a rearrangement cannot occur without both the knowledge of musical convention, and the deep-seated sense of linearity inherent in Western thought and music.

There is precedent for claiming that literature influenced specific compositions in this period. Hoffmann in particular seems to have had a great deal of influence on German composers of the following half-century. Yet in keeping with the notion of intermediality described by Schmidt, and more particularly with her contention that there is a reciprocal influence between literature and other cultural practices, we would suggest that Hoffmann’s music criticism, and later his musical fiction, both describe and create a new sense of musical time. In fact, music’s power to create disturbances within the flow of narrative time within the Märchen is in itself acknowledgement of composer’s efforts to rethink linear temporality within their own art, and to imagine new ways of redistributing time within a (still) linear composition. Thus the particular role of music as a structural device within Hoffmann’s fictional prose, mediated by his understanding of musical structure as seen in his critical essays, both describes a burgeoning practice and encourages its development.

References

v The first German translation was *Udolpho*’s *Geheimnisse* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1795-1796). A second translation appeared a few years later: *Adolphos Geheimnisse* (Wien: Haas, 1798).


vii Ibid., p. 175-176.

ix Ibid., p. 84.

x Bonds traces theories of the sublime current in Germany during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century back to Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry*, which “circulated widely in German-speaking lands” (*Music as Thought* 45). Burke himself drew his theories of sublime sound from the composer Charles Avison’s *Essay on Musical Expression* (1752).

xi The Mysteries of Udolpho, 84.

xii Ibid., 72.


xiv The present analysis only examines a few of the many roles that music can occupy in the literary texts of E.T.A. Hoffmann.


xvii Ibid., pp. 39-40.

xviii Ibid., p. 45.

xix Ibid., p. 7.

xx Ibid., p. 25. The following quote is on the same page.


xxii Ibid., p. 23.

xxiii See in particular ”Johannes Brahms and Johannes Kreisler: Creativity and aesthetics of the young Brahms illustrated by the Piano Trio in B-Major opus 8” (2000) and ”Robert Schumann’s Kreisleriana and double novel structure,” (1996) in which various direct and indirect influences on musical structure are derived from Hoffmann’s fictional prose.

xxiv See, Schmidt, ”Narration.”