

‘FOR EVERMORE’: AN EXAMINATION OF MUSICAL EKPHRASES OF EDGAR ALLAN POE’S “THE RAVEN”¹

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the transfer of poetic language into music, focusing on Edgar Allan Poe’s celebrated poem “The Raven” (1845). After a theoretical study on poetic language and theoretical questions regarding transmediation, I look into different pieces of instrumental music directly inspired by Poe’s lines. To this end, I draw on groundbreaking research regarding media transformation by authors such as Lars Elleström, whose work provides the theoretical framework, and, most especially, Siglind Bruhn, who has written about the relation between poetry and music, and who coined the term “musical ekphrasis”. Finally, I argue that these composers transmediate Poe’s “The Raven” by using musical devices similar to those employed by Poe in his poem. Particularly important for this analysis will be compulsive repetition and variation as strategies of the musical ekphrasis, and the re-presentation of the uncanny in music.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el trasvase del lenguaje poético a la música, con el conocido poema de Edgar Allan Poe “The Raven” (1845) como foco de atención. Tras un breve estudio teórico sobre el lenguaje poético y cuestiones teóricas sobre transmediación y adaptación, se examinan

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diferentes piezas musicales instrumentales directamente inspiradas por los versos de Poe. Para ello, me baso en las innovativas investigaciones sobre transformación de medios de autores como Elleström, cuyo trabajo proporciona el marco teórico, y, especialmente Bruhn, quien ha escrito sobre la relación entre poesía y música y quien acuñó el término “musical ekphrasis” (écfasis musical). Finalmente, sostengo que estos compositores transmedian “The Raven” empleando mecanismos musicales similares a los utilizados por Poe en su poema. Especialmente importante para este análisis serán la compulsión por la repetición y variación como estrategias propias de la “musical ekphrasis”, así como la re-presentación de lo siniestro en la música.

INTRODUCTION

Literature and art have shared a strong connection throughout history. In that sense, poetic language can be transmediated into other artistic means such as music or visual arts. This creative transposition from the verbal into music or painting, which is seen as a natural or even spontaneous act, has frequently taken its origin in English literature and many examples can be found, from romanticism to modernist poetry. Such is the case of Edgar Allan Poe’s well-known poem “The Raven,” which has been edited several times together with illustrations, and which has inspired many musicians since the moment of its publication.

Poe is one of those authors who have haunted popular culture for almost two centuries: from American football teams to The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club* album cover, from musician Bob Dylan to *The Simpsons*, which paid tribute to Poe’s “The Raven.” His face and words appear and reappear in the most unlikely places. Mark Neimeyer argues that the “presence of Poe in popular culture is so strong that it seems to have spawned a popular culture of its own” (206), a popular culture with strong ties to commercial exploitation. Modern fascination with Poe stems from his works, but also from his life, around which the myth of Poe as a mad genius has been built. Alcoholic, drug addict, sexually deviant, maniac, are just some of the descriptions most frequently featured in the legend fabricated around his life and mysterious death. His works have been seen by many as echoes of Poe’s own life, leading to a complete confusion between his biography and his works. An illustrative example is Poe’s first “Memoir,” written by his literary executor R. W. Griswold, where, among other numerous exaggerations, the author claims “The Raven”

to be a reflection of Poe's own life and story, a cue subsequently taken by other writers such as Charles Baudelaire (Neimeyer 211).

Unsurprisingly, many of Poe's tales and poems have been the inspiration for many composers, as numerous musicians, such as Philip Glass, Queen, The Alan Parsons Project, or Lou Reed, have paid homage to the poet by setting to music his poems and well-known tales. As Scott Peeples argues, "Poe's greatest contribution to arts and literature, popular or otherwise, has been delivered through artists who refer to or interpret him as they challenge established forms" (144). The musical adaptations of his texts include all kinds of genres, from symphonic music to folk, from rock to jazz, and many of them are by Gothic and metal bands. For instance, Poe's portrayal of violence, power, and madness has attracted many heavy metal bands, as explored by Sederholm. He argues that heavy metal music "questions the cultural and psychological dimensions on human power, particularly as it manifests itself in madness and violence" (194), and, hence, there is a link to be found between this type of music and Poe's writings. What is more, Poe's essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) would inspire composers such as Maurice Ravel in his *Boléro*,² and his concept of "unity of effect" would later be embraced by Debussy (Duarte 152). Pollin (qtd. in Sederholm 195) concludes that there "has been probably a greater variety of musical forms for the works of Poe than for those of other American writers" due to his varied writings and remarkable aesthetics.

Poe's name is always associated with the Gothic, and many of the songs inspired by "The Raven," which is the focus of attention of this article, make the listener think about Gothic settings through the use of minor chords —associated with darker sounds—, specific instruments, or sound effects. In that sense, this paper will explore how this influence takes shape, analyzing instrumental pieces which have Poe's "The Raven" as a source of inspiration and which conform to Siglind Bruhn's definition of musical ekphrasis. Engaging with recent scholarship on Poe's influence on music, such as the studies by Michael Allis (2014), Iain Halliday and Mariateresa Franza (2017), or Carl H. Sederholm (2012), and taking Bruhn's concept of musical ekphrasis as a basis, this article aims to provide an analysis of obsessive variation and repetition as strategies that are characteristic of these musical ekphrases in their varied forms. For that purpose,

² Michael Lanford wrote an insightful analysis of the influence of Poe on Ravel in "Ravel and The Raven": The Realisation of an Inherited Aesthetic in 'Boléro.'"

three main illustrative case studies will be examined in order to see how composers translate the uncanniness and the prominence given to repetition and variation as structural elements by Poe in his poem into musical terms.

This article will concentrate on a genre of music which continues to be largely underexplored in Poe's scholarship, compared to vocal music, such as rock and metal, for instance. In other words, this paper will give attention to instrumental music which can be labelled as musical ekphrasis, according to Bruhn's definition. The three case studies examined here³, therefore, pertain to this genre, as this article will demonstrate through the analysis of the structure of the musical pieces, the techniques employed by the composers, and the devices applied to transmediate Poe's celebrated poem. This examination will allow us as well to perceive the manner in which musicians transfer that Gothic atmosphere into music, and, more generally, how these musical ekphrases reconcile both sister arts — poetry and music; or, as Bruhn explains, how these musical ekphrases re-present the source text, by transferring poetic language into musical language, paying special attention to "the choice of *what* is chosen to be musically transposed" (Bruhn 565). The article opens with a theoretical study on the musicality of poetic language and its transmediation into music, in addition to defining "musical ekphrasis," the concept which provides the basis for this examination. After that, we will examine the musical qualities which can be observed in Poe's "The Raven," offering an exploration of the poem in search of the devices employed by the poet to conflate his poetry and music. The following sections analyze these three pieces of instrumental music which transmediate Poe's well-known poem by using musical devices similar to those employed by the poet, such as repetition and variation, and we will observe the importance given to the re-presentation of the uncanny, one of the most common characteristics which becomes transmedial to a great extent.

MAPPING THE FIELD: INTERACTION BETWEEN POETRY AND MUSIC

Poetry is an art that combines both visual and acoustic aspects. Poetic language can convey a certain rhythm and sound

³ *The Raven* by Joseph Holbrooke, *Nevermore* by Eugeniusz Morawski-Dabrowa, and two tracks from the album *Shadow of the Raven* by Nox Arcana.

which renders it with a sonic quality, which is why poetry has been a form of literature highly apt to be adapted to music throughout time. Poets have at their disposal figures of speech and techniques to create sound effects. In retrospect, the long-established connection between both arts becomes evident; examples of that are the German *Lied* or the *mélodie* in France. Going back to the origins of the English language, there are instances of what is generally called art song, but there also examples in operas and musicals. Nonetheless, not all music compositions based on poetry are vocal music.

But what gives poetry its musicality? As several poetic movements have proved, most especially among them Symbolism, musicality in poetry can be attained by using several devices and figures of speech, such as *métaboles*: alliteration, assonance, rhyme schemes, repetition, and onomatopoeic creations, among others. Rhythm, stress, and intonation could be applied to literature as well to render poetry closer to music, as well as devices such as harmony—between different parts—and melody, which is “one of the components of the music of words” according to T. S. Eliot (315), a poet and critic who paid much attention to the music of poetry. Repetition and variation are structural elements both in music and in poetry, variation being a consistently different version of a theme. In fact, Eliot stated that the use of recurrent themes is a natural device both in music and in poetry (321). All these characteristics are especially important when bearing in mind that poetry, in most cases, is written to be read aloud, and, therefore, to be heard, for, as Minoru Yoshida points out, “[t]he value of a poem as a work of art can best be appreciated when it is recited, for poetry uses as its medium linguistic sounds which have also musical effects” (151). Yoshida’s words will be highly important to consider when analyzing Poe’s “The Raven,” as the poet proves to be well aware of all these features.

Music and poetry have several similarities, which, at the same time, distinguish them from other arts. Form and content are especially relevant in both arts, and they are indistinguishable in music. Furthermore, music and poetry are auditory arts, whereas painting and illustration are visual arts. This sonic quality and the fact that the sense of hearing is requisite in order to reach comprehension is closely connected to temporality, which is again a common feature both in music and poetry, as both arts are dynamic and develop in time. In Cluck’s words, music and poetry are in “a continual state of becoming” (vii). Perception takes place in consecutive order, as it cannot be perceived as a closed form at a single moment. Memory and

anticipation are required from the audience so as to understand both poetry and music as a whole when all of it has been perceived. Additionally, both music and poetry share a similar compositional structure. That is to say, the organizing principles in poetry are rhythm and rhyme, whereas in music there is pitch and rhythm. Lastly, both music and poetry present a climax—or several climaxes—which is the highest point or level of intensity and emotional response, for there are in both arts moments of transitions in intensity and emotion. In Eliot's words, "there must be transitions between passages of greater and less intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole" (315). Unsurprisingly, Eliot concluded that, in fact, a poet "may gain much from the study of music" (321), especially as regards rhythm and structure, to which Poe pays great attention in "The Raven."

Before examining our case study, we will briefly see the processes which underline transmediation from one medium to another. Interestingly, these types of adaptation combine both repetition and variation. At this point, it is noteworthy to remember that transmediations do not merely copy or replicate, but they express things differently from the original source, as they are employing a different medium, involving a form of creativity. Just as fidelity should not be the guiding light when analyzing a translation, it should never be the governing rule to study these processes, as, in Julie Sanders' words (38), "it is at the very point of infidelity or departure that the most creative acts of adaptation take place."

For her part, and of great interest for this article, Siglind Bruhn coined the term "musical ekphrasis" to refer to musical compositions inspired by art and/or poetry. Musical ekphrasis should not be confused with program music, understanding the latter as an instrumental music genre with explicit reference, that is, which attempts to present a narrative just through its title or program notes. In contrast to program music, musical ekphrasis "re-presents," that is, presents the content of the source but also some other aspect such as "style, its mood, [...] details, etc." (Bruhn 554). If visual arts have in themselves the ability to re-present the content of another artistic medium, so does music. In this case, there is a transformation of verbal language into musical language, and, therefore, according to Lars Elleström, a "transmediation of nonmusical media characteristics into musical pieces" (34), understanding transmediation as the "repeated mediation of equivalent sensory configurations by *another*

technical medium" (14). Poetic language is, thus, transformed into musical language by transmediating some of the source's aspects.

Whereas program music narrates or represents scenes from the source material from the perspective of the composer, musical ekphrasis relates not only to the content of the source material, but it makes a direct correlation to some distinguishing aspects of the mode of the source material. Consequently, musical ekphrasis is not only about setting a piece of literature to music, but also about including the source medium in re-presentation. Bruhn offers diverse examples of program music, such as Richard Strauss's *Aus Italien*, inspired by the composer's visit to Italy, or Holst's *The Planets*, based on the cosmos and astrology. This genre "narrates or paints, suggests or represents scenes or stories [...] that may not exist out there but enter the music *from the composer's own mind*" (Bruhn *Musical Ekphrasis* 28). In other words, program music rather evokes a narrative or reference outside the musical realm, whether alluding to historical characters or nature, but always from the composer's perspective. Program music has a longer tradition than musical ekphrasis. On the other hand, musical ekphrasis "narrates or paints a fictional reality created *by an artist other than the composer* of the music: by a painter or a poet" (Bruhn *Musical Ekphrasis* 29). Such an example can be found in Respighi's *Trittico botticelliano*, a musical transmediation of three paintings by Botticelli, or in Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melissande*, inspired by Maeterlinck's drama.

According to Bruhn, as regards musical transmediation, there are several elements which can be used to transform poetry into musical re-presentation: rhythm, pitches, and timbres of different instruments, for instance, as well as other musical parameters—intervals, harmony, meter, tempo, texture, structure, motifs, tone. The crucial point is not only to see how something is re-presented, but also *what* aspect of the source material is being re-presented. In her analysis of musical ekphrasis (*Musical Ekphrasis* 55-80), she offers different categorizations: transposition, supplementation, association, interpretation, and play. In a transposition, there is a recreation of content as well as other significant aspects of the source—such as undertones, structure, or details, for example—, while in a supplementation there is an addition of dimensions that were not available to the source material. For its part, association does not imply replication of content or form, but rather a reaction inspired by the source, provoking new personal thoughts or connections. Association could be easily mistaken for interpretation, though the

latter does not entail personal connections, but familiar implications known to the general audience. Lastly, play is a witty and humorous reaction to a source.

THE MUSICAL QUALITIES OF E. A. POE'S "THE RAVEN"

To begin with, in order to understand the musical transmediations examined in this article, it is necessary to look into the composition of "The Raven" as a—musical—poem and see what structural elements and devices are used by Poe. First published in 1845, "The Raven" became an immediate sensation and introduced Poe to the New York literary society. "The Raven" is a narrative poem made up of eighteen six-line stanzas, generally with a trochaic meter. Its portrayal of grief and loss resonates with the feelings and experiences of readers. As has been noted by previous scholars (Hayes 374), "The Raven" proves to be an excellent illustration of a poem devised for oral recitation, for its meter is insistent, it has a strong rhyme, and even quite a complex internal rhyme scheme. Hayes (374) points to its "pounding meter, the rhyme and internal rhyme scheme of fiendish complexity, Poe's use of alliteration [...], and the catchy refrain" which "invite oral recitation and memorization." Interestingly, musician Lou Reed said of this poem that, after having read it several times, he only completely understood it when he heard it read out loud (qtd. in Halliday and Franza 193). Reed's insightful statement points to the performative aspect of poetry, which can be linked to music, as another performative art.

The immediate success of the poem when first published is the result of its refined writing process, which Poe explained in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), as shall be later seen, and which will provide the foundation for the analysis of the musical transmediations. In 1849 John Moncure Daniel, executive editor of the *Richmond Examiner*, stated that "The Raven' has taken rank over the whole world of literature, as the very first poem yet produced on the American continent" (qtd. in Walker 145). Daniel went on to observe that the versification of the poem was "indescribably sweet and wonderfully difficult," reminiscent of a Beethoven overture, and that "[t]o all who have a strong perception of tune, there is a music in it which haunts the ear long after reading" (qtd. in Walker 147). Walter Pater later said that "[a]ll art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" (106), which is what Poe strived to do in his poetry, as can be seen: there is no didacticism behind what he writes, the poet is

more concerned about the aesthetics, the effect, i.e., about language itself. As a matter of fact, the poet would pen: "I would define, in brief, Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*" (Poe "The Poetic Principle"). Poe, indeed, criticized the assumption of the didacticism of poetry in his essay "The Poetic Principle" (1850), and advocated the "poem written solely for the poem's sake" (Poe "The Poetic Principle"). For Poe, there is a strong emphasis on how poetry should sound, as he argues in his essay "The Rationale of Verse" (1850). Here he explains that

[t]he object of what we call *scansion* is the distinct marking of the rhythmical flow. [...] the object is the distinct marking of the rhythmical, musical, or reading flow. There *can* be no other object and there is none. Of course, then, the scansion and the reading flow should go hand in hand (Poe "The Rationale of Verse").

Poe likens poetry to music when he argues that poetry can be developed to resemble musical qualities. His poetic principle is indeed music, for "Music, in its various modes of meter, rhythm, and rhyme, is of so vast a moment in Poetry as never to be wisely rejected" ("The Poetic Principle"). Poe would even define poetry as "[m]usic, when combined with a pleasurable idea" ("Letter to B--."), and he stated that "there can be little doubt that in the union of Poetry with Music in its popular sense, we shall find the widest field for the Poetic development" ("The Poetic Principle"). Interestingly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to Poe in 1846 that "Your 'Raven' has produced a sensation, a 'fit horror', here in England. Some of my friends are taken by the fear of it and some by the *music*. [...] Mr Browning [...] was struck much by the *rhythm* of that poem" (qtd. in Walker 144, my emphasis). The musicality of Poe's verses, then, seem to have escaped nobody, for that was precisely his aim, to unite poetry and music to the utmost extreme possible within his means. All these statements attest to the significance of music in Poe's poetry, and they help us elucidate the strong relationship which poetry and music shared for the poet.

As can be observed, Poe experimented with language to find ways of making poetry musical. "The Raven" is just one of his several examples of calculated musical effects in his poetry, to which "The Bells" —published posthumously in 1849— can be added; this is a poem where the poet chose words according to their acoustic qualities.

In that sense, Daniel Hoffman remarked that in “The Raven” that Poe succeeded in writing

a poem based upon the repetition of a single word, that said o’er and o’er until its meaning becomes as nothing, or legion; the mesmeric spell of the same repeated syllables overpowering the mind of the narrator, the sonorous chiming and sorrowful repetitions of ‘Nevermore’ sweeping away all propensity for independent thought (qtd. in Hayes 381).

The poet decided on the use of the refrain due to its “intrinsic value”, as it “depends for its impression upon the force of monotone —both in sound and thought” (Poe “The Philosophy of Composition”), which he would apply in various ways, without changing the refrain itself, for its “pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity —of *repetition*” (Poe “The Philosophy of Composition,” my emphasis).

As briefly stated before, in his essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe details the process of creation of “The Raven,” stressing musical qualities and highlighting the fact that writing involves a rational use of language, and, thus, a text creates the effect sought by its author. Whether what Poe says in this essay should be taken literally or if it was just another of his hoaxes has been a heated debate for years. Nonetheless, the essay gives us enough clues into Poe’s process of writing, and it had a lasting impact, above all on French symbolist writers such as Charles Baudelaire or Stéphane Mallarmé. It was Baudelaire who first translated Poe’s works into French and introduced the American author into European literature.

To finish this section, an outline of the main musical qualities of “The Raven” will be provided. It has been previously noted that, in this poem, Poe paid special attention to the rhyme scheme ABCBBB, even with occasional internal rhyme (lonely/only, uttered/fluttered/muttered, napping/tapping, among others), with a very complex rhyme pattern which constitutes the rhythm and brings the poem closer to melody and, therefore, to music. There is a constant use of alliteration (“weak and weary,” “nodded, nearly napping,” “silken sad,” “flirt and flutter,” among others), and assonance (“...of each purple curtain”), which, together with the rhyme scheme, plays an important role in the development of melody in the poem, for, as Poe said in “The Rationale of Verse,” “[i]n the construction of verse, *melody* should never be left out of view.” These uses of alliteration and onomatopoeic words (tapping, whispered, murmured, croaking,

flitting...) render the poem quite "sonorous." Rhythm is an element of great importance too; the meter is the trochaic octameter for the most part, and Poe applied a metrical pattern to enhance control on the duration of words, thus equating poetry to music.

Compulsive repetition and variation significantly contribute to the poem as principles of construction. Variations are often present: "Only this *and nothing more*" / "This is it *and nothing more*" / "Darkness there *and nothing more*"; "rapping at my chamber door" / "tapping at my chamber door;" "Tis some *visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door* / Some late *visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door*;" "Let me see, then, what threat is, *and this mystery explore*" / "Let my heart be still a moment *and this mystery explore*," among other instances. Poe, in fact, underscores the importance of variation in "The Philosophy of Composition," making numerous references to the manner in which he decided to vary the refrain and its application, as well the variation in rhythm and meter. As regards repetition, there is the use of refrain, which reiterates the single word "nevermore," which the poet "resolved to diversify, and so heighten the effect by adhering in general to the monotone of sound while [he] continually varied that of thought" (Poe "The Philosophy of Composition"). This could be compared to the musical device of the *ostinato*, which is a repeating motif, rhythm, or musical phrase in a musical composition. The word "nevermore" is of considerable significance in the creation of the mood. Poe wrote that melancholy was the preferred mood for this poem in "The Philosophy of Composition." "Nevermore" gives that melancholic mood to the verses due to its sonorous quality, with the long "o" as the most sonorous vowel in the English alphabet, according to Poe, connected with the "r," as the most producible consonant. He established the mood with its repetition, but also "variation of application" (Poe "The Philosophy of Composition"), and placement of the word at the end of the stanzas. In 1880, Edmund Clarence Stedman wrote of Poe that he was "a poet of a single mood," for whom "[e]verything was subordinate to sound" (60-61). "The Raven" is a clear example of Stedman's statement, as it can be distinctly observed that the poet emphasizes melancholy as a mood mainly through the use of melody and sound.

Finally, Poe builds tension stanza to stanza until the climax in the penultimate stanza. It could even be argued that the poet uses the musical device of crescendo in his poems and tales, as dramatic tension and rhythm gradually grow until it arrives at its final climax. In conclusion, Poe adapted literary devices to serve a musical purpose.

Yet the poet also employs musical devices in his poetry: melody, repetition and variation, and even crescendo. As a poet, then, Poe was well aware of the potential of sound repetitions when creating a mood and melody for the poem. As explained above, the constant use and diversification of the refrain is an illustrative example, but also his use of assonance and alliteration, defined by Poe in “The Rationale of Verse” as “a consonant [...] *repeated* in the commencements of various words,” among others. Particularly important, therefore, are repetition and variation, which serve as structural elements in the composition of the poem, but which also play vital roles in music. French composer Pierre Boulez argues that “a profound interest in repetition and difference [variation] is found, directly or indirectly, in most musicians, and certainly in the work of contemporary composers, since the formal articulation of music is always dependent upon their dialectical relationship” (Campbell 154). Variation is a technique frequently used in music, where some material is repeated but with certain modifications, whether in melody, rhythm, or orchestration, among others. Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988) is probably one of the best-known examples. Further, repetition figures prominently in music, where repeat signs or instructions such as *da capo* are frequently employed in scores. Sections of music may be repeated in some compositions, as in an *ostinato* or a *ritornello*, which will be explained later.

Halliday and Franza have discussed some of Poe’s musical renditions and explored “the facility with which [Poe’s] texts can be performed” (190) by different musicians, as rhythm, variations, repetitions, and the like, easily lend his poetry to musical transmediation. It has been established that Poe deliberately used musical elements in his work and poetry, of which “The Raven” with its fluent rhythm, effects, and meter is an illustrative example. Poe carefully chooses each word and element in the poem so that the whole composition is well-organized and there is complete harmony among all of them, forming a perfect final unity. In addition to all this, it is important to bear in mind the Gothic qualities of “The Raven,” which have been frequently pursued by musicians. Thompson (qtd. in Stockwell 7) credits Poe with the consummation of the Gothic as a genre with a characteristic style. Interestingly, just as psychological states—especially those revolving around dreaming—frequently feature in Poe’s Gothic tales, as pointed out by Benjamin Fisher (87), “The Raven” starts precisely with that premise (“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary, / Over many a quaint and

curious volume of forgotten lore— / While I *nodded*, nearly *napping*...). The setting of the poem is also typically Gothic: it begins at midnight during a cold winter night, and it highlights darkness, among other aspects. Similarly to several of his tales, "The Raven" depicts a protagonist who is losing his grip, who is losing control of his reality. As Stockwell argues, there is a "Gothic air of eeriness, dread and anxiety" (7), with the presence of a non-rational force as in many Gothic writings.

The uncanny is also present in Poe's poem, most especially through sound effects: the tapping at the chamber door, the rustling of the purple curtain, the beating of the heart, the echo of the word "Lenore," the flutter of the raven, or the repetition of the word "Nevermore." Ernst Jentsch first defined in 1906 the "uncanny" as a "lack of orientation" (qtd. in Allis 141) experienced when there is a sense of intellectual insecurity. However, it was Freud's "Das Unheimliche" (1919) which would become pivotal in the definition of the uncanny, an essay where he highlights features such as involuntary repetition and a blurring of the boundaries between fantasy and reality. For Freud, then, the uncanny refers to frightening things which lead to what is known and familiar. And this is what readers find in Poe's "The Raven," for the poet chooses to use the raven as an uncanny object. From an ordinary animal, the raven is, thus, transformed into an uncanny presence which will drive the narrator mad, shifting from a rational setting to irrationality and anxiety. This uncanniness present in Poe's "The Raven" will be sought by the composers whose works will be later analyzed.

It is not surprising that several Gothic and rock bands have been drawn to Poe's "The Raven" in search of the aforementioned qualities. It is Poe's employment of the motives of madness, perversity, and Gothic horror, as pointed out by Duarte (154), which have attracted several of them. Many actors have recited this poem as well, several of them associated with horror films, such as Vincent Price or Christopher Lee. As mentioned before, Poe's portrayal of violence and madness has also attracted many heavy metal bands. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the introductory section, this article will focus on instrumental music which can be classified as musical ekphrasis, based on Bruhn's pivotal definition, as a music genre still to be duly explored in Poe's scholarship.

SEEKING THE UNCANNY, OR “THE RAVEN” IN MUSICAL EKPHRASIS

From the moment of its original publication, several composers have been drawn to Poe’s “The Raven” in pursuit of its Gothic atmosphere and melancholic mood. Such is the case of English composer Joseph Holbrooke (1878-1958), an original and innovative musician who strived to develop new colors in musical composition. *The Raven* is a tone poem for orchestra, which was composed between 1899 and 1900, and then re-scored in 1912. It was premiered at Crystal Palace, London, in 1900, with some encouraging critics, but with several comments pointing out the unsuitability of Poe’s poem for orchestral music⁴. Yet Holbrooke was the first composer not only to set Poe’s text to music, but also to use it as a poetic basis for his own symphonic poem or orchestral poem, as a means of reformulating Poe in a different medium. That is to say, music is modelled on the text, for Holbrooke features quotes from Poe’s poem in his score to use them as reference points for the main articulations of the musical discourse. In other words, Holbrooke creates an orchestral transmediation which re-presents the poem, where instrumentalization, rhythm and melody are subjected to the source verses, hence the use of constant repetitions in this composition, for instance. For that reason, Holbrooke has been said to create a new genre: the “orchestral poem” (Fleury). The style is romantic, and it has rather unique and rich orchestra colors. This composition “confirmed the composer’s fascination with the supernatural, macabre and downright strange” (Dibble 35). Holbrooke said of his own composition that it contained “some of the best music [he had] ever written” (qtd. in Allis 117). For the composer, Poe was “the most modern of all modern poets” and “the most strongly musical and powerfully rhythmical of all the poets who have written in the English language” (qtd. in Allis 118). That is why he was drawn to him time after time, composing more than twenty works which take Poe’s poems and tales as source material.

Expressiveness is the focus in this composition by Holbrooke, with a perpetual search for new sonic effects, which could be said to

⁴ Allis recounts many of those criticisms in his chapter. For instance, the *Monthly Musical Record* said that is was “rather a sombre subject for musical illustration” (qtd. in Allis 123), while the *Athenaeum* argued that the “gloom of Poe’s poem [...] makes it difficult [...] to sustain interest” (qtd. in Allis 123).

be a sound or musical translation of the poem. As such, the refrain "nevermore" is reiterated by the brass instruments, to symbolize the raven and its words, until it is mumbled in the end by three bassoons. The choice of these specific instruments to "represent" the raven can be attributed to their tone colors, as they are bright, but nasal and even squeaky. Repetitions, in fact, are relevant in the score, as, for instance, in the first section of the musical composition there is a motif which is constantly repeated to offer a parallel of the constant tapping sound in the poem. Just as in Poe's verses the sense of repetition is prevalent, so does Holbrooke compulsively reiterate some motifs throughout the composition; such is the case of the previously mentioned tapping motif. There is a continuous use of *ritornello* as well, which is a repeated passage in music and, therefore, a technique in music for repetition. Furthermore, there is an aura of mystery too, which is transmitted by the use of minor notes—overall, the composition is in B minor, with some modulations—, as there is here what Allis has termed a "musical exploration of the uncanny" (117). As briefly mentioned before, it is interesting to note that minor is a mode of the tonal system traditionally associated with a darker sound, while the major has a more positive or happier sound. Allis makes a detailed analysis tracing "uncanny" sounds in Holbrooke's score:

the use of the muted solo double bass at the opening, the staccato *divisi* violas and celli representative of the tapping, the inner chromatics on the clarinets, the stopped horn motif before figure 3, the sudden representation of the wind three measures before figure 10, the use of contrabassoon and bass tuba before figure 35, or the brass chorale repetitions of 'Nevermore'—initially accompanied by eerie trills or tremolos in the upper strings (Allis 134).

Interestingly, Allis underscores a repetition compulsion as one of the main elements which adds to the uncanny sound effect in Holbrooke's *The Raven*, together with other musical sounds and music structures which contribute to convey a destabilizing effect to the listener. Holbrooke uses changes of intensity and tempo throughout the music to emphasize certain moments. Eliot once wrote that "there are possibilities of transition in a poem comparable to the different movements of symphony or a quartet" (321). In line with these words, we can observe that Holbrooke marks transitions in his composition with different tempos according to the rhythm of the poem, in that sense, the movement starts as a *largo molto sostenuto*, which is a very

slow and markedly prolonged tempo. The rhythm quickly starts to change with the arrival of the raven and the tapping noise, increasing the speed towards *animato* and even *animato agitato*. In this way, the composer invites the listener to follow the emotional state of the poem's protagonist. In fact, there are several uses of crescendo in the music to reach small climaxes. These passages of climax always coincide with the presence or words of the raven in the poem, until it reaches the final culmination, after which the tempo and intensity gradually slow down.

Holbrooke's score is abundant in internal repetitions, which mirror Poe's play with repetition and variation. Further, the composer at times matches Poe's meter in its musical rhythm. An example of that is the opening of Holbrooke's composition. Allis (145) suggests that the composer might have set the text to music before eliminating the words. Literary rhythm has, consequently, been adapted to musical rhythm in this musical ekphrasis, where the composer has transposed the main literary characteristics of the poem: there is a re-presentation of the content, style, mood (the music aims to transmit sorrow), form and some of its specific aspects such as rhythm, repetition and balance of fluctuating emotions, among others. More precisely, according to Bruhn's categorizations of musical ekphrasis, this would be a transposition, as there is a recreation of content and some of its most significant aspects, most especially repetition and variation, and uncanniness through sounds. Keeping all this in mind, we might be able to observe how both artists, poet and musician, aim to construct an effect in their compositions, and they achieve it through a carefully design of repetitions and variations in similar *modi operandi*, to finally offer the audience a melancholic melody in different mediums of expressions.

Nevertheless, the impact of "The Raven" also transcended frontiers. Polish musician Eugeniusz Morawski-Dabrowa (1876-1948) composed in 1911 *Nevermore*, a dark symphonic poem inspired by Poe's "The Raven." Many of Morawski's compositions were lost in the Warsaw Uprising and *Nevermore* had to be reconstructed. The composition starts with a fugue in a low and lugubrious register. In the different episodes it presents, the musical language of Morawski is originally harmonic and expressive, influenced by the late romantic style of composers such as Richard Strauss. The atmosphere produced by the music is gloomy, as it is set in C minor, conveying the same mood of the source text, with outstanding instrumentations. Different groups of instruments develop different themes in this

composition, for specific instruments have a "capacity to 'represent'" (Bruhn 564) and their timbres "lend themselves particularly well to characterizations of suggested *dramatis personae*" (Bruhn 569). As such, woodwind instruments are in charge of introducing the main musical ideas. For instance, the bassoons and double bass seem to represent the mind and anxiety of the protagonist of the poem, for they almost always play the same melody line with the same rhythms, but in different octaves, and with an important use of chromatism, which adds a note of confusion and destabilization, reflecting the narrator's deteriorating mental state. For its part, the English horn might symbolize Lenore and her death, for, when it finally starts playing, its melody is more expressive and mainly set in slow tempo such as *lento*, *andante tranquillo* or *largo*, emphasizing, thus, melancholy. According to Bruhn, the English horn has often been seen as "closest in color to the human voice" (570), as it can capture its vulnerability. This is an interesting fact, since Lenore's voice is the only one we do not hear in Poe's poem. In this way, Morawski would add an aspect implicit but not fully portrayed in the poem, by bringing the presence of Lenore, in a similar way to visual artists in their illustrations, as the well-known case of Gustave Doré, who would include the ghostlike figure of Lenore in several of his illustrations for *The Raven* (1883). Finally, the string instruments at point seem to reflect the raven, with the use of techniques such as *pizzicato* —plucking the strings instead of using the bow— or the use of the bow-stick to add more sound effects. Moreover, they acquire importance in the fastest movements, providing passages of flurry and greater intensity, which could be imitating the raven's movements and wings, as well as mirroring the protagonist's quick descent into madness.

Like in other compositions, Morawski uses recurring motifs such as tolling bells to symbolize death and oppression, as observed by Oskar Łapeta (71-73). Moreover, some direct correspondences with the poem can be established, such as the striking of the strings with the bow-stick to imitate the sound of the knocking, or the bells motif, frequently repeated in Morawski's composition in the moments of dramatic tension, and which Łapeta regards as a musical equivalent to Poe's "nevermore" (75). Three main large sections can be distinguished in the music, each with new material but also combining material from the previous sections, taking compulsive repetition and variation as compositional elements in a similar way to Poe in "The Raven." Morawski also plays with intensity and tempo throughout the music to give emphasis, together with several uses of crescendo in

order to reach the climax in this musical transposition of the poem. This climax precisely comes when part of the orchestra is playing an *ostinato* in B flat minor and ends with a repetition of the musical motif of the bell, which could be regarded as a *memento mori*—bells are associated with death— or could hint at the final death of the protagonist, offering new readings of the source poem. Morawski succeeds, thus, in creating a suffocating atmosphere, where the poem's uncanniness is transmediated through the choice of the minor mode, instrumentalizations and changes of intensity.

It is noteworthy to observe that Lapeta (79-80) has examined how Morawski reuses themes and motifs from *Nevermore* in later compositions, such as the ballet *Świtezianka* by employing variation as a musical tool: themes only change tonality or there is a change in the different instruments which play them. Lastly, in line with Poe's sonority in the poem, Morawski, as well as Holbrooke previously, employs musical devices such as *pizzicato*, *staccato*—short and separate notes—, or *tremolo*, which produces a shaky sound, to strengthen the sonority of the compositions. As a matter of fact, the use of these musical devices to convey the importance of sound effects comes very close to onomatopoeia, employed by Poe in his poem. In brief, *Nevermore* is another transposition within the different musical ekphrasis categories coined by Bruhn, for Morawski also chooses to transmediate specific aspects related to the form of the original source, such as rhythm and play with intensity, repetition and variation, mood, and sound effects.

Even in the present time musicians still strive to render Poe's verses into music. That is the case of the North American musician Scott Gendel and his composition *The Raven*, a piece of incidental music for string orchestra and timpani based on a theme by Edvard Grieg. It was written in 2013, after being commissioned by the Elgin Symphony Orchestra, a regional orchestra in Illinois founded in 1950. The piece was composed to be played live by the orchestra while reading aloud Poe's "The Raven." The source material of the musical composition is Grieg's "Aase's Death," from *Peer Gynt*, but further elaborating on the work. The composer stated that the most important addition is "a sombre 3-note timpani figure that comes back over and over again, echoing the 3-syllable 'nevermore'" (*Scott Gendel*), which emphasizes once more the relevance of obsessive repetition in musical transmediations of "The Raven." His main goal was, therefore, to create a gothic and eerie musical atmosphere to surround the reading of the poem. But there are more examples, such as American virtuoso

violinist Edward W. Hardy, who released in 2018 his music for violin entitled *Nevermore*, a short composition where minor chords stand out, and where the use of repetition is evident, especially in the main theme which might represent the raven and which is used at the beginning, throughout the composition to help develop the music, and at the very end of the piece to conclude. Or the new version of the composition by German-born musician Max Heinrich, *The Raven, Op. 15*, released in 2020 with Tiffany Heaver as narrator and Tim Kraack at the piano.

The third illustrative example which will be discussed in detail is that of Nox Arcana, which demonstrates the great appeal of Poe's poem for those musicians in search of the Gothic qualities of "The Raven." The American Gothic instrumental duo comprised of Joseph Vargo and William Piotrowski released their concept album *Shadow of the Raven* in 2007, as homage to Poe's literary works. The duo is devoted to the grotesque and macabre, and in this album, they pay tribute to Poe with spectral melodies, full of lugubrious chants. It has been termed as "Victorian" and "Gothic" on many music websites, including the band's (*Nox Arcana*). The album features symphonic instrumental music—mainly piano, violin, pipe organ, harpsichord—, as well as subtle and successful sound effects, though the band does not use actual instruments—everything is digital. Among the tracks based on poems and tales by Poe there are "The Raven" and "Nevermore." "The Raven" is a string composition, with dark and melodic tones, as it is keyed in E minor, and which combines the sounds of the mournful piano with weeping violins, together with tolling vespers and pipe organ. There is a melancholic choir at the background at certain points to represent the mournful laments of spirits as well. For its part, "Nevermore" combines piano, strings, and a choir, and its focus is on the portrayal of the descent into loss of sanity, ending with the recitation of the last stanza of the poem "The Raven" in a deep and sonorous voice, followed by eerie sound effects where ravens, bells tolling, and someone shouting for help after having been buried alive can be heard.

In an interview, Joseph Vargo stated that, in this album, they "wanted to capture the brooding darkness and melancholia that overshadowed Poe's life" with music "haunting in a Victorian style" (Siagianni). Therefore, the album is a musical interpretation of Poe's works and life. They strive to create sound effects infused with emotional nuances. Nox Arcana appropriates Poe intending to emphasize the Gothic and melancholic atmosphere of his verses,

conveying a melody that is reminiscent of horror movies soundtracks, bordering on the uncanny. That is the reason why the duo, through the use of minor keys and the choice of instruments —pipe organ, piano, violin—, succeeds in conveying a dark and melancholic atmosphere in their tracks, incorporating, moreover, sound effects which reinforce this aspect, such as the blowing wind, the bells, the croaking of the raven, among others. As a matter of fact, the pipe organ is frequently associated with horror films and the Gothic, since it has been often used in horror soundtracks. A well-known example is the scene of the unmasking of *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925). The organ was also used for the overture in Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), and Johann Sebastian Bach's *Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor* (BWV 565) has been employed as soundtrack in horror films, videogames, and videoclips too, such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) or English pop-rock band McFly's video for their track "Transylvania" (2007).

Furthermore, the band constantly uses *ostinato*, that is, short melodies or patterns of music which are continuously repeated as a musical motif throughout the track. In the case of "The Raven" two main melodies can be identified: one played by the piano, which neither stops nor changes, the other one played by the violins, which is then mirrored by choir and organ. The string instruments which play the main melody line in the track show a little variation, especially as compared with the piano line, which remains the same. For its part, "Nevermore" frequently features *ostinato* as well, for the piano keeps playing the same melody, while it is the string instruments which play the main melody once more, with more variation. The use of bells, associated as previously mentioned with death, and background choir add to the uncanny soundscape. Nevertheless, in contrast to Poe's "The Raven" and the other musical ekphrases examined thus far, the rhythm in these tracks is steady and there is no recognizable climax, as there is no increase of tempo or intensity. This rhythmic monotony evokes a different sensation in the listener, for it increases the tension and becomes easier to remember. Yet, repetition, most especially, and variation still provide the backbone for the musical structure, together with the uncanniness of the sound effects. It is the use of *ostinato* and the repeating melodies which drive the melody forward and structure the band's tracks. In brief, Nox Arcana employs a similar method in both tracks, building their melodies around a great emphasis on compulsive repetition with the piano and variation with the violins. The dark tone of the never-changing piano line together with the eerie

and weeping sound of the string instruments is carefully combined by the composers to transmediate the mood of the source poem.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this article, it has been proved that Poe was a true musical poet who endeavored to adapt his work to the taste of his audience. It is not surprising, then, that many musicians have been drawn to his works. The musicians whose compositions have been analyzed here aspired to transpose the main qualities of Poe's "The Raven." Taking repetition and variation as principles of construction, musicians have emphasized the importance of the keyword "nevermore" in musical language resorting to different methods, such as creating recurring motifs —most especially seen in Morawski's *Nevermore*— or attributing the raven's words to a group of instruments —as in Holbrooke's *The Raven* with the brass instruments. Musical devices such as *ritornello* or *ostinato* are frequently employed in these musical transmediations of Poe's verses as structural elements to parallel the poet's interest in repetition and variation; strategies which are, at the same time, properly musical, but also used by Poe in his writings to build melody. There is, therefore, in all these works a strong emphasis on form and structure, as both poem and its musical ekphrases are carefully designed with a great control over the form and devices meticulously applied so as to convey the desired effect and invite listeners to follow the protagonist's descent into madness. It is interesting to observe as well how these compositions have attempted to transfer the sound effects of Poe's lines, which had a great impact on the sonority of the poem, as well as on its aforementioned uncanniness. For instance, it has been detailed how Morawski plays with the string instruments, making them frequently use *pizzicato* or even the bow-sticks to create a more dramatic effect. These are musical explorations of the Gothic and the uncanny, of the melancholic tone of the source poem.

Moreover, music is used in different manners as a vehicle to convey mood and themes. Artists have been drawn to the melodic and haunting verses of Poe, which can be especially seen in "The Raven," a poem full of gloominess and eeriness. The poem's portrayal of melancholy, of a speaker in despair, that is, its focus on the internal conflict of the bereaved, has attracted many musicians, for we can observe that all the musical transmediations examined convey the mood of the source through different musical devices, such as the use

of the minor mode —mainly employed by all the compositions studied, i.e., B minor in Holbrooke’s and C minor in Morawski’s score—, the tempo, or the choice of instruments with their different colors and timbres, illustrated by the pipe organ in Nox Arcana’s music, particularly associated with horror films and the Gothic. Another of the features of the poem most frequently conveyed through music, as has been noted, is the uncanniness of the sound effects, especially relevant in Nox Arcana’s tracks. Just as Poe’s poem is “sonorous,” these tracks feature sound effects through musical strategies — *pizzicato*, *staccato*, *tremolo*, chromatism, instrumentalization, among others. Modifying or playing with the linguistic material of the poem, these transmediations strive to adapt Poe’s musical devices and mood, conforming, thus, to Bruhn’s definition of musical ekphrasis, a field to which little attention has been paid thus far in Poe’s scholarship. To be precise, the examples examined are transpositions, for they all put a great emphasis on recreating the poem through the use of the uncanny and by relying on a repetition and variation compulsion as structural elements to create melody, making form and structure, as well as mood, the most frequently transmediated qualities. These compositions, thus, transmediate but also enrich our understanding of the source poem, thus highlighting the importance of exploring the ways in which instrumental music can transmediate literary texts. Unlike previous studies on musical adaptations of Poe’s works mentioned in the introduction, by focusing only on poetry and instrumental music, this article aims to contribute to further research in the field of the sisterhood of arts as regards this type of musical pieces. The examination of these three case studies proves the fruitfulness of transmediation studies and the need to pay more attention to musical ekphrasis within Poe’s scholarship, and even more generally in comparative studies.

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