

Rethinking the Conditions of Music in British Aestheticism

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by

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Despite continued critical interest in British aestheticism, scholarship has been much slower to respond to the context of music. This is in spite of music featuring centrally in one of aestheticism's most oft-cited formulations, Walter Pater's statement from "The School of Giorgione" (1877): 'All art constantly aspires to the condition of music.' In fact, this thesis advances from the premise that these two items might be connected; and that our occasionally indiscriminate critical application of this phrase tacitly forecloses the debate, thus shutting our ears to the conversations between music and aestheticism in their own historical moment. Accordingly, this thesis aims to open out the critical tautology of Pater's maxim by re-historicizing music's association with British aestheticism and in doing so, reveal, in ways which have yet to be recognised, the significance of their frequent convergences. In order to demonstrate the variety of these exchanges and foreground the importance of historicization, this study is framed in a very specific way through a series of case studies. This is for two reasons: firstly to draw attention to the value of adopting a long perspective on the development of British aestheticism, and secondly to draw out the common relations between the types of theoretical questions and methodologies with which music and aestheticism were mutually engaged. Whilst the interrelation of music and painting is a well-known feature of critical aestheticism, **Chapter 1** presents this relationship through a more specific sequence of exchanges, drawing attention to a cultural discourse in which the practice and critique of the emergent aesthetic school of painting was mediated through a series of references and allusions to Felix Mendelssohn's piano series *Lieder ohne Worte* (*Songs without Words*) (1829-1845). Drawing together three central figures — Mendelssohn, together with Frederic Leighton and J.A.M. Whistler — this chapter demonstrates how the complex relations between art and 'words' were dramatized contemporaneously across both painting and music in nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse. More specifically, this dialogue draws attention to the epistemological tension inherent to the act of 'naming' — the conferring of generic or descriptive titles upon the art 'work' — and the way in which these titles participated in variously enacting and problematizing its own claims for the democratisation of art. Whistler's paintings are also implicated in **Chapter 2** which considers Claude Debussy's unique critical dialogue with aestheticism in the years surrounding the fin de siècle. Received wisdom suggests that British aestheticism had no significant impact in music and this chapter counters this in two interrelated ways; firstly, by demonstrating how Debussy's interest in British aestheticism translated into his work in ways which have yet to be fully recognised; and secondly, by drawing attention to the critical reception of his music in Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century where a number of reviews and critical commentaries of his work were arbitrated through the vernacular of the 'aesthetic'. Continuing my consideration of how 'aestheticism' and 'music' came to feature increasingly as mutually-influential discourses at the fin de siècle, **Chapter 3** turns to the writings of Vernon Lee. Whilst Lee's interest in music has been the source of some important critical interest in the last twenty years, much of this scholarship has tended to converge on her resistance to the decadent affectivity of Wagner's music. Following more recent critical developments, this chapter suggests that Lee's attitude towards the nature of music might be best understood as the product of a career-long dialogue with two figures: Pater and the musicologist, Edmund Gurney, whose work, *The Power of Sound* (1880), I suggest, provided a sustained point of reference for Lee's lifelong attempts to theorise aesthetic experience. Ultimately, *Rethinking the Conditions of Music in British Aestheticism* aims to recuperate these dialogues between British aestheticism and the intellectual contexts of nineteenth and early-twentieth century music so that we might recognise the value of beginning anew our own critical conversation.

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For Mark

Contents

Abstract	Page 1
Acknowledgements	2
List of Figures	5
Introduction: Music and the Conditions of British Aestheticism	6
1. ‘Songs without Words’: Aesthetic Painting, Music and the Conditions for Criticism	20
‘[J]ust the song as it stands’: Mendelssohn’s <i>Lieder ohne Worte</i> (1829-45)	25
<i>The Triumph of Music</i> : Leighton’s necessary anachronisms	38
Aesthetic ‘Suggestiveness’: Leighton’s <i>Lieder ohne Worte</i> (1861)	49
‘Songs without words’: Whistler and his critics	55
2. Music in the ‘Condition of Music’: Claude Debussy’s Reciprocal Aestheticism	63
Recuperating Debussy’s ‘aestheticism’	68
Art for music’s sake: Debussy’s aesthetic self-schooling	74
<i>Frères en Art</i> : Debussy’s painless revolution	82
Delighting the soul of Keats: British responses to Debussy up to 1907	92
Arthur Symons and the making of Debussy	96
‘[A]n out-and-out disciple of Pater’: (Aesthetic) listening to Debussy	104
3. Rethinking the Conditions of Music: Vernon Lee (Reading Pater) Reading Edmund Gurney	108
<i>The Power of Sound</i> (1880): Gurney’s conditions of music	120
(Re)reading Gurney: Lee’s ‘double’ foci	133
<i>Music and its Lovers</i> : Lee as aesthete-analyst	144
Conclusion	152
Bibliography	157

List of Figures

1. “The Latest Fashion at Home,” <i>Punch</i> (1881)	35
2. Aubrey Beardsley, <i>Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy</i> (1896)	36
3. “Reception of the Abbé Liszt at the Grosvenor Gallery,” <i>The Graphic</i> (1886)	41
4. Frederic Leighton, <i>Lieder ohne worte</i> (1861)	51
5. Illustrated cover of Claude Debussy’s <i>La Damoiselle élue</i> (1893) by Maurice Denis	80
6. Title page from Vernon Lee’s personal copy of Edmund Gurney’s <i>The Power of Sound</i> (1880)	118
7. Detail from Vernon Lee’s copy of <i>The Power of Sound</i> (1880)	119
8. Table demonstrating Edmund Gurney’s distinction between ‘Arts of Presentation’ and ‘Arts of Representation’ in <i>The Power of Sound</i> (1880)	127

Introduction: Music and the Conditions of British Aestheticism

Music's association with aestheticism [...] seems to connect it to the whole issue of art's self-exile from the horizons of social and political contention — indeed, even from the realm of time and history as such.

— Brad Bucknell, 'Re-Reading Pater'¹

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the claims of British aestheticism were generally taken at face value, with its mantra of 'art for art's sake', in particular, being read by critics as a relatively straightforward expression of art's necessary disengagement from moral or social purpose. For Peter Bürger, who gives the most famous and frequently-cited expression of this idea in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), aestheticism was the inevitable manifestation of the institution of art's growing estrangement from 'social function' over the course of the eighteenth century. It was here, he concludes, that art's 'political character' was successfully shed in the realisation of 'art [which] wants to be nothing more than art'; a withdrawal from the world later redressed by the twentieth-century avant-garde who radically reintegrated art with that which it had, apparently, hitherto been denied by aestheticism: 'the praxis of life'.² Music's association with aestheticism has traditionally been read as an extension of this ideological premise. Indeed, as Brad Bucknell observes, music ostensibly joins in this oft-articulated figuration of 'art's self-exile from the horizons of social and political contention' as, we understand, the most inherently 'formalist' of aesthetic media; the only art capable of eradicating the distinction between content and matter and the art form least beholden to traditional rules of representation or function. In critical terms, then, 'music' would seem to collude with aestheticism's claim to transcend its own historical moment, free 'from the realm of time and history as such'; a synonym for the hieratic or elite (charges often levelled at aestheticism); self-present, agent-less and exempt from external contingencies. After all, is this not what we have historically inferred from what Walter Pater implied in his famous claim that '*all art constantly aspires to the condition of music*'?³

¹ Brad Bucknell, 'Re-Reading Pater: The Musical Aesthetics of Temporality,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 38.3 (1992), 597-614 (597).

² Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984; first published in 1977), pp. 51, 27.

³ Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," was published in *The Fortnightly Review* in October 1877 and later added to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* in the 3rd edition, London: Macmillan, 1888. The first edition (sans "The School of Giorgione") appeared under the title *Studies in the History*

This thesis begins, like so many accounts of the art-music relationship within the Aesthetic Movement, with Pater's statement on the nature of music from "The School of Giorgione" (1877). Indeed, as James H. Rubin and Olivia Mattis have recently observed, this is one of two near-mandatory introductions to this fruitful period of reciprocal exchange between the arts; along with Louis Vardot's theory of *Ut Pictura Musica* ('as is music, so is painting'), to cite Pater is, in their assessment, 'virtually *de rigueur*'.⁴ However we begin here not to oblige critical protocol but to question the practice itself. Tim Barringer has recently remarked that 'Pater's axiom [is] indelibly associated with the Aesthetic Movement' and certainly it is not uncommon to see allusions to music within aestheticism framed using Pater's maxim, something which is particularly true in relation to visual art and not fortuitously, perhaps, since this is typically where critical literature on music and aestheticism converges.⁵ Shearer West illustrates one such tendency by suggesting that: 'Whistler *attempted to realise Pater's analogy* by drawing attention to musical qualities in his paintings'.⁶ Elsewhere, Colleen Denney argues that Whistler was consciously 'evok[ing] associations with the *condition of music*' by christening his works with musical terminology'.⁷ And whilst Suzanne Fagence Cooper stops short of applying Pater's agenda directly to any particular artist in her treatment of music in aesthetic painting — including works by Whistler, together with Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Frederic Leighton — the very title of her essay, "Aspiring to the Condition of Music: Painting in Britain 1860-1900," perpetuates this sense that these artists were consciously working towards a fulfilment of Pater's musical ideal.⁸

It is not the attempt to create an ideological affinity across a number of artists linked to the aesthetic movement which is problematic here (although crucially all of these individuals use music in contexts which pre-date the publication of "The School of Giorgione" and this caveat is important), it is more specifically the way in which Pater's maxim so often features in the critical literature on aestheticism and music as an epistemological end. This

of the Renaissance (London: Macmillan, 1873). The edition used here, and throughout this thesis, is *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, introduced and edited by Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) which is taken from the fourth edition (London: Macmillan, 1893).

⁴James H. Rubin and Olivia Mattis, "Musical Paintings and Colourful Sounds: The Imagery and Rhetoric of Musicality in the Romantic Age," in *Rival Sisters: Art and Music at the Birth of Modernism, 1815-1915*, ed. by James H. Rubin and Olivia Mattis (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), pp. 1-36 (p. 4). See also Louis Vardot, "Ut Pictura Musica," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 1 (January 1859), 19-29.

⁵Tim Barringer, "Burne-Jones's *Le Chant d'amour* and the Condition of Music," in *Rival Sisters: Art and Music at the Birth of Modernism, 1815-1915*, pp. 152-166 (p.152).

⁶Shearer West, "The Visual Arts," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 131-152 (p. 139). Own emphasis added.

⁷Colleen Denney, *At the Temple of Art: The Grosvenor Gallery, 1877-1890* (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), p. 111. Own emphasis added.

⁸Suzanne Fagence Cooper, "Aspiring to the Condition of Music: Painting in Britain 1860-1900," in *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies, Volume 2*, ed. by Jeremy Dibble and Bennett Zon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 251-277.

does not so much open up the discussion as foreclose it; a tendency exemplified in the way in which Pater's approximation of music is so often cited in its most truncated variation: the so-called 'condition of music' thereof. 'Most recent critics,' Elicia Clements writes, 'agree that music does not denote pure form for Pater, although traditionally he was often enlisted on the side of the formalists in the context of musical aesthetics (usually somewhat in line with Eduard Hanslick)'.⁹ However when allusions to music in aestheticist practice are perpetually rediscovered not in the context of music but the reiteration of Pater's maxim it accrues the polemical status of what Angela Leighton calls 'an unequivocal absolute' — and we forget, she adds, that '[t]o quote the opening sentence [from 'The School of Giorgione'] is to miss the way it is quickly qualified'.¹⁰ For while 'in all other kinds of art,' Pater adds,

...it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. That the mere matter of a poem, for instance, its subject, namely, its given incidents or situation [...] should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling, that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees.¹¹

Not only, then, is the 'condition of music' an 'object of constant aspiration merely,' Leighton clarifies, 'but the rest of the passage then enacts the struggle it involves'.¹² However well-intended the unqualified appropriation of Pater's maxim can sometimes confound and obscure. And its reflexive use becomes, as Mattis and Rubin have noted, a contemporary critical short-cut; a tacit pretext which downplays the value of the nineteenth-century musical context, thereby obfuscating both the nuance and complexity which characterises the work of so many aestheticist practitioners. The critical recitation of Pater's maxim has, I contend, *conditioned* our contemporary expectations towards music in the narrative of aestheticism.

This thesis seeks to open out the contemporary critical tautology¹³ of Pater's maxim by re-historicizing music's association with British aestheticism. Thus, in its most simple formulation, it advances from the premise that fascination with music was a prevailing characteristic of nineteenth-century thinking and writing about the arts more generally. Indeed,

⁹ Elicia Clements, "Pater's Musical Imagination: The Aural Architecture of 'The School of Giorgione' and *Marius the Epicurean*," in *Victorian Aesthetic Conditions: Pater across the Arts*, ed. by Elicia Clements and Lesley J. Higgins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 152-166 (p. 152).

¹⁰ Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8.

¹¹ Pater, "The School of Giorgione," in *The Renaissance*, p. 86.

¹² Leighton, *On Form*, p. 8.

¹³ In using this term I am following Stanley Fish, and many others, in determining critical tautology as a practice in which a historically-contingent interpretation is read back into a new text and given the appearance of universality. See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980).

as Peter Vergo summarises, as the idea of music's 'abstract yet inherently expressive character' became increasingly recognised its critical appropriation by other art forms was almost inevitable, since 'when it became necessary to justify or extol a form of visual art that paid little or no attention to questions of narrative or representation, a model after which such a justification might be formulated lay readily to hand'.¹⁴ That music came to feature so prominently in aestheticism's own critical and creative justifications is unsurprising. And yet despite — or, perhaps, as I have been suggesting here, *because of* — the ubiquity of Pater's maxim the full scope of this association remains relatively unexplored, particularly when compared, for example, to the vast and ever-expanding critical output which has tended to other 'aesthetic' preoccupations such as gender and sexuality over the last thirty years.¹⁵ Indeed, as Stefano Evangelista and Catherine Maxwell observe in their 2010 special edition of *The Yearbook of English Studies*: '[m]usic [is] the art form that has tended to attract least attention from Victorianists[.]'¹⁶

Evangelista and Maxwell's anthology does much to redress this critical lacunae.¹⁷ And this, together with some greatly increased critical attention into the use of music in the work of figures such as Rossetti, in particular,¹⁸ suggest that this area of interest is gradually picking up pace. However scholarship on aestheticism has, seemingly, been much slower to respond to the critical context of music; an issue which Jerome McGann attempts to account for in his aptly-titled, 'Wagner, Baudelaire, Swinburne: Poetry in the Condition of Music,' where he presents Swinburne's poetic schema of music as a prismatic response to Baudelaire (reading

¹⁴ Peter Vergo, 'Art, Music and the Cult of Modernism,' *Art History: Journal of the Association of Art Historians* 26.4 (2003), 586-592 (587).

¹⁵ See, for example, Linda Gertner Zatlín, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997); Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Stefano Evangelista and Catherine Maxwell, 'The Arts in Victorian Literature: An Introduction,' *The Yearbook of English Studies* 40.1-2 (2010), 1-7 (3).

¹⁷ These include: Elizabeth Helsinger, 'Song's Fictions,' *op. cit.*, 141-159; Andrew Eastham, 'Walter Pater's Acoustic Space: 'The School of Giorgione', Dionysian *Anders-Streben*, and the Politics of Soundscape,' *op. cit.*, 196-216; and two articles which are of particular interest to my discussions here: Shafquat Towheed, '"Music is not merely for musicians": Vernon Lee's Musical Reading and Response,' *op. cit.*, 273-294; Phillip Ross Bullock, '"Lessons in Sensibility": Rosa Newmarch, Music Appreciation, and the Aesthetic Cultivation of the Self,' *op. cit.*, 295-318.

¹⁸ See, for example, Karen Yuen, 'Bound by Sound: Music, Victorian Masculinity and Dante Gabriel Rossetti,' *Critical Survey* 20.3 (2008), 79-96; also by Yuen, 'Music's Metamorphosis in the Life and Creative Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 2008); Elizabeth Helsinger, 'Listening: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Persistence of Song,' *Victorian Studies* 51.3 (2009), 409-421; Alan Davison, 'Woven Songs and Musical Mirrors: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Symbolic Physiognomy' of Music,' *The British Art Journal* 13.3 (2012), 89-94; and Lorraine Wood, 'Filling in the Blanks: Music and Performance in Dante Gabriel Rossetti,' *Victorian Poetry* 51.4 (2013), 533-560.

Wagner).¹⁹ Here McGann suggests that attempts to identify the critical antecedents of ‘music’ informing Swinburne’s writing (and I would argue that this is equally true of many aestheticist practitioners) have been inhibited by judgments that his musical references are ‘general’ and ‘impressionistic’; and that this, he suggests, implies ‘on one hand, that we will not get anywhere by investigating Swinburne’s musical ideas; and, on the other, that their “impressionistic” critical implementation is simply fatal.’²⁰ What McGann’s research highlights is that the non-specificity of ‘music’ in (Swinburne’s) aestheticism has presented something of a practical impediment to scholarly explication, but equally that this ostensibly rhetorical gesture has, in turn, been reinscribed into our own contemporary practice; a process he suggests is ‘scholarship lost on both sides’.²¹

Fundamentally, then, as McGann infers, ‘music’ — even that which is ostensibly ‘abstract’ or ‘non-referential’ — always involves a historically-contingent idea of what music *is*. And in the nineteenth century, music was not only at the centre of aesthetic discourse, it was the contested site upon which a whole series of art concerns played out. That this debate suddenly became so urgent was the consequence of a shift in the perception of instrumental music at the turn of the century, routinely located in the tradition of German Idealism, the writings of Ludwig Tieck, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and E.T.A. Hoffmann.²² Even as recently as the late eighteenth century, music without text or ostensible ‘function’ had been deemed suspect, and critics and aestheticians had routinely favoured vocal music, reflecting the existing vogue for mimetic principles and ‘the precision of linguistic representation’ over the ‘obscurity of musical signs.’²³ Thus in the space of less than a generation, the perception of instrumental music, and its hitherto ‘vague’ musical language, was effectively transformed from a ‘liability’ to an ‘asset’.²⁴ And as John Neubauer observes, the toppling of this long-established hierarchy of the arts was a historic one, since ‘for the first time in the history of Western aesthetics, an art that subordinated didactic messages and representations of specific contents to pure forms was acclaimed as profound art.’²⁵

¹⁹ Jerome McGann, ‘Wagner, Baudelaire, Swinburne: Poetry in the Condition of Music,’ *Victorian Poetry* 47.4 (2009), 619-632 (621).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The now-standard text here is Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, translated by Roger Lustig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). See also Mark Evan Bonds, ‘Idealism and the Aesthetics of Instrumental Music,’ *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50 (1997), 387-420; and Andrew Bowie, “Music and the Rise of Aesthetics,” in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, ed. by Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 29-54.

²³ Matthew Riley, “E.T.A. Hoffmann beyond the ‘Paradigm Shift’: Music and Irony in the Novellas 1815-1819,” in *Words and Notes in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Phyllis Weliver and Katharine Ellis (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), pp. 119-144 (p. 119).

²⁴ Bonds, ‘Idealism and the Aesthetics of Instrumental Music,’ 387.

²⁵ John Neubauer, *The Emancipation of Music from Language: Departure from Mimesis in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 2.

But, of course, this was only the beginning of a new debate. Although music had managed to achieve what Lydia Goehr calls a ‘double emancipation’ (from words and from function), questions about where to locate ‘meaning’ in the musical work began anew.²⁶ By the mid-nineteenth century, a schism had emerged between defenders of a so-called ‘absolute music’ (music which maintained its independence from extramusical ideas) and those who endorsed what was known as ‘programme music’ (music which invited extramusical associations, often by way of descriptive titles or commentaries). Undoubtedly, the former’s best known representative was Eduard Hanslick, whose treatise *The Beautiful in Music* (1854) — a work implicated several times over in this thesis — became a central text in this debate. Here he forwarded that ‘the beauty of a composition is *specifically musical* — i.e., it inheres in the combinations of musical sounds and is independent of all alien, extra-musical notions.’²⁷ Yet it was Hanslick’s chief antagonist, Wagner, who had coined the term ‘absolute’ (an indication of the inherently polemic nature of this debate).²⁸ Indeed, for Wagner, as for many of the other adherents of the so-called ‘programmistic’ aesthetic, music only achieved its full potential in synthesis with the ‘extramusical’: a text, an image, a ‘concrete’ sense (and in Wagner’s case, namely poetry).²⁹ To a certain extent, all nineteenth-century aesthetic and critical thought about music was permeated by the tropes of the ‘absolute-programme’ music dialectic, whether this was directly acknowledged or not.³⁰ For ultimately, the questions this debate raised were central to the theorisation of the nature and identity of *all art*: the relationship between form and content; the vexed critical interface between artist-creator/art work/critic/reader; and, of course, the highly contentious issue of art’s role in wider society.

Phillip Meeson has suggested that ‘[a]n important feature of aestheticism is the acceptance of music as the supreme art.’³¹ There is much truth in this, as I hope to demonstrate, and yet it may be that on these oversimplified terms music is associated, too quickly, with aestheticism’s supposed ‘elitist’ tendencies — ‘its striving for the recondite through recondite means’.³² Critical understandings of the machinations of British aestheticism have come a long way since Bürger’s significant but one-dimensional, caricature; and works by critics such as

²⁶ See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 148-150.

²⁷ Eduard Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music: A Contribution to the Revival of Musical Aesthetics*, 7th edn, rev. and enlarged (1885), trans. by Gustav Cohen (London: Novello, Ewer, 1891), p. 12. Emphasis original. First published in 1854.

²⁸ See Sanna Pederson, ‘Defining the Term ‘Absolute Music’ Historically,’ *Music and Letters* 90.2 (2009), 240-262.

²⁹ See Jonathan Gregor, *Program Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 167-185.

³⁰ Thomas Grey, *Wagner’s Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 49-50.

³¹ Philip Meeson, “Aestheticism and Responsibility in Art Education,” in *The Aesthetic in Education*, ed. by Malcolm Ross (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1985), pp. 55-82 (p.61).

³² Brad Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics: Pater, Pound, Joyce and Stein* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001), p. 1.

Regenia Gagnier, Diana Maltz, and Jonathan Freedman, to name but a few, have determined that British aestheticism was, perhaps, as multifaceted and complex as the avant-garde it was said to anticipate.³³ We would be mindful, then, to see aestheticism not as a coherent movement but rather (as Freedman suggests) ‘an intricately articulated arena in which new definitions of the aesthetic and its relation to the social were negotiated and renegotiated’ and this understanding has underpinned my own readings here.³⁴ In other words, it is not the polarization of ‘art’ from the ‘social’ and/or ‘political’ spheres which determines the condition of aestheticism, but rather the continual, and frequently contested, mediation of that difference — accordingly, music becomes not the metaphorical trump card in aestheticism’s claim to transcend the quotidian but the very means through which this relationship was expressed.

By re-historicizing music’s association with British aestheticism, this thesis relocates music from the periphery to the very centre of our understanding of aestheticist thought and practice; and in doing so, reveals, in ways which have yet to be fully acknowledged, the significance, diversity and inherent complexity of this interaction. The title of this thesis suggests from the outset that critical practice has, perhaps, made certain ontological assumptions about music’s association with aestheticism, highlighting our need to reassess critical commonplaces and suggesting ways in which we might move beyond them. However this title mediates a further distinction, describing, quite literally, the ongoing dialogue between aestheticism and musical discourse in its own historical moment. Indeed, there is nothing fortuitous about the fact that my own efforts to interrogate the tautology of Pater’s maxim are anticipated by Vernon Lee, the subject of my final chapter here, who begins her long-gestated work on music, *Music and its Lovers* (1932), by undertaking this very feat: “‘All art,” wrote Walter Pater, summarising Hegel, “tends to the nature of music[,]” before adding: ‘Now what is the nature of music?’³⁵ What Lee’s acknowledgement suggests is that it is possible to draw a distinction between our own reflexive contemporary use of Pater’s phrase as a means to (perhaps too loosely) designate a particular trajectory in aesthetic painting and the way in which it was actually adopted, queried and/or revised by Pater’s own contemporaries. ‘Towards the Victorian fin de siècle,’ Andrew Eastham writes, ‘Pater’s legacy was to be manifested in surprising and spectacular ways’.³⁶ And no more unexpectedly,

³³ See Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990); Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1997); and Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

³⁴ Freedman, *Professions of Taste*, p. xii.

³⁵ Vernon Lee, *Music and its Lovers: An Empirical Study of Emotion and Imaginative Responses to Music* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932), p. 23.

³⁶ Andrew Eastham, *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity and the Ends of Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 7.

perhaps, than in music itself. Indeed, it is should tell us something about the pervasiveness of this legacy that a discussion of Pater's 'ideas' on music, penned by the eminent music critic, Ernest Newman, appeared in an anthology of essays in 1901 alongside discussions of (ostensibly) more immediate 'musical' interest such as Brahms, Schumann and Wagner.³⁷ Even so, the idea that British aestheticism might have impacted upon the field of music itself has been widely dismissed, as Sarah Collins observes:

Walter Pater's oft-quoted phrase 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music' presents an unlikely catchphrase for Victorian aestheticism, a movement that failed to register explicitly in music circles to any significant degree.³⁸

Of course, British or 'Victorian' aestheticism has no documented 'movement' in music. This should go without saying I suspect, but is important to acknowledge nevertheless because it registers its distinction from other near-contemporaneous schools of nineteenth-century art practice, such as Pointillism or Impressionism, which did in fact spawn their own eponymous movements in music. On one level, Collins is justified in her appropriation of Pater's 'oft-quoted phrase' as a means to support the notion that aestheticism's potential impact in 'music circles' is an altogether improbable one. After all, this celebrated statement was the recapitulation of an aesthetic belief, prevalent at this time, concerning the ideal dynamic between form and content in music, not in fact a mandate for all (plastic) arts to be translated *into music* — or, to borrow here a reflection from Anne Leonard, Pater's dictum was 'an observation, not a directive'.³⁹ Nevertheless, it would be wrong to infer from this that the impact of aestheticism was not felt in music, and the fact that this exchange between aestheticism and music was not just one-way is a key claim of this thesis.

In order to demonstrate the variety of these exchanges and foreground the importance of historicization, this study is framed in a very specific way through a series of case studies. This is for two reasons: firstly to draw attention to the value of adopting a long perspective on the development of British aestheticism, and secondly to draw out some of the connections between the types of theoretical questions and methodologies with which music and aestheticism were mutually engaged. In doing so, I hope to reposition music and aestheticism as mutually-influential discourses, both intertwined in the same ambient tensions about the

³⁷ Ernest Newman, "Walter Pater on Music," in *Studies in Music by Various Authors*, ed. by Robin Grey (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Kent and Co., Limited, 1901), pp. 292-301.

³⁸ Sarah Collins, 'Practices of Aesthetic Self-Cultivation: British Composer-Critics of the "Doomed Generation",' *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 138:1 (2013), 85-128 (98).

³⁹ Anne Leonard, "Musical Metaphors in Art Criticism," in *The Routledge Companion to Music and Visual Culture*, ed. by Tim Shephard and Anne Leonard (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 209-218 (p. 215).

aesthetic potential of art more broadly. As such, the initial discussion of aesthetic painting is intended not just to delineate a much more specific and hitherto unacknowledged discourse concerning the ‘language’ of non-representative arts in the second half of the nineteenth century. Rather, we begin here in order to understand how and why these particular tensions and concerns in art practice emerged at all; and moreover, how these implications were taken up, in different ways, by the subjects of the subsequent chapters. Since each chapter examines music and aestheticism as part of a wider intellectual framework, I present here a far more historically-specific and contextualised account of this phenomenon — and yet one which simultaneously establishes a far more capacious understanding of the chronological reach of British aestheticism in relation to music. The debate surrounding the periodization of the ‘aesthetic movement’, together with the inferable questioning of terminology and ‘membership’, is well-documented.⁴⁰ Although some, such as Nicholas Shrimpton, are sceptical of the use of ‘aestheticism’ as a ‘catch-all’ term for a ‘long and rather heterogeneous phase of cultural activity’, more recent scholarship has been defined by precisely that; a more inclusive vision which has in turn convalesced once-marginal figures (such as Vernon Lee, who is the subject of my third and final discussion) back into critical purview.⁴¹ Indeed, as I have already indicated, one of the specific texts I am interested in here is Lee’s 1932 work, *Music and its Lovers*; a categorically ‘late’ work but one which, Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham suggest, ‘is only likely to receive full criticism when the fields of literary criticism and musicology are in closer dialogue.’⁴² Fundamentally, then, this thesis hopes to demonstrate that when thinking about aestheticism and music this ‘long’ lens is not critical opportunism, but in fact entirely necessary.

The overall impulse behind this thesis is a response to a burgeoning field of critical study committed to exploring the historical interactions between literary and musical contexts in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. One significant recent contribution to this field is Phyllis Weliver and Katharine Ellis’s *Words and Notes in the Long Nineteenth Century*, an anthology which aims to provide a ‘meeting point’ for scholars from across the ‘word-music’ divide in the hope of ‘offer[ing] a window onto the disjunctions of culture and practice, of ideals and realities, that study of each steam separately can obscure’.⁴³ Here, they note that one of the chief objectives of their critical inquiry is to uncover the way in which ‘meaning’ is

⁴⁰ For a useful critical introduction to these issues see Ruth Livesey, “Aestheticism,” in *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Victorian Literature*, ed. by Juliet John (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Nicholas Shrimpton, ‘The Old Aestheticism and the New,’ *Literature Compass* 2.1 (2005), 1-16 (3).

⁴² Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, “Introduction,” in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-20 (p. 2).

⁴³ Phyllis Weliver and Katharine Ellis, “Introduction: Approaches to Word-Music Studies of the Long Nineteenth Century,” in *Words and Notes in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Phyllis Weliver and Katharine Ellis (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), pp. 1-24 (p.4).

‘constructed by multiple discourses, as well as by how the literary and the musical embed and are embedded within cultural history.’⁴⁴ These same objectives are central here as I consider the way in which ‘meanings’ are mediated and augmented in the exchanges between music and aestheticism. Broadly speaking, Weliver and Ellis’s aims are coextensive with the critical practice of what is variously called ‘new’, ‘critical’, or ‘cultural’ musicology; a field of study which seeks to study music in its cultural contexts.⁴⁵ In the last twenty years, this area of study has given way to a whole manner of new perspectives on music, such as performance practices, theories of listening, and reception histories, all of which variously inform my own discussions here. Although one of my intentions is to move British aestheticism’s association with music away from Wagner-studies (which has historically proved to be one of the more fruitful concentrations of critical research),⁴⁶ Emma Sutton’s *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* is nevertheless an important influence here, since her emphasis is upon, as she states, ‘cultural history’.⁴⁷

In order to demonstrate both the range and multivalence of music’s association with aestheticism I have opted to approach this interaction from several different directions. The tripartite division of this study is a reflection of this and each chapter here examines a series of contemporary dialogues between music and aestheticism in a wide variety of meeting points; from more familiar areas, such as aesthetic painting, in Chapter 1; to the elucidation of lesser-discussed musical contexts in Chapters 2 and 3. Ultimately, by viewing this dynamic through a hitherto unacknowledged contextual lens, this thesis hopes to demonstrate that in opening out aestheticism’s dialogue with the so-called ‘condition of music’, its own influence upon music comes into view.

Whilst analogies between music and painting are a well-known feature of critical aestheticism, **Chapter 1** presents this relationship through a more specific sequence of exchanges, drawing attention to a cultural discourse in which the practice and critique of the emergent school of aesthetic painting was mediated through a series of references and allusions to Felix Mendelssohn’s piano series, *Lieder ohne Worte* (*Songs without Words*)

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Ruth A. Solie, *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Ruth A. Solie, *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations about Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Francis Jacques Sypher, ‘Swinburne and Wagner,’ *Victorian Poetry* 9 (1971), 165-183; S. Sillars, ‘Tristan and Tristram: Resemblance or Influence?,’ *Victorian Poetry* 19.1 (1981), 81-86; Dianne Sachko Macleod, ‘Rossetti’s Two Ligeias: The Relationship to Visual Art, Music, and Poetry,’ *Victorian Poetry* 20.3-4 (1982), 82-102.

⁴⁷ Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 17.

(1829-1845). Drawing together three central figures — Mendelssohn, together with Frederic Leighton and Whistler — this chapter demonstrates how the complex relations between art and ‘words’ were dramatized contemporaneously across both painting and music in nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse. More specifically, this dialogue draws attention to the epistemological tension inherent to the act of ‘naming’ — the conferral of generic or descriptive titles upon the art ‘work’ — and the way in which these titles participated in variously enacting and problematizing its own claims for art. By presenting ‘Lieder’, a popular nineteenth-century song genre for piano and voice — ‘without words’, Mendelssohn subverted the expectation that the ‘meaning’ could be located within the traditional framework of language. When approached to supply lyrics, Mendelssohn refused; not because he necessarily prohibited the listener supplying their own imaginative meaning to his pieces (a sanction more commonly associated with Hanslick’s ‘absolute music’) but because, as John Michael Cooper observes, this would have been counterintuitive to his conviction that ‘every individual should be free to construe an artwork’s meaning in terms of the individual’s own experiences and assumptions rather than those dictated by the composer’.⁴⁸ Mendelssohn’s belief that the individual stood as the arbiter of their own critical understanding was, I suggest in this chapter, shared by Frederic Leighton, whose lifelong commitment to music has been the subject of some recent critical attention by Michael Musgrave who writes that ‘[n]ext to his own profession, music was the greatest passion in [Leighton’s] life’.⁴⁹ Despite this, however, relatively little critical interest has been given to considering how this interest translated into his art practice, specifically his 1861 painting *Lieder ohne Worte*.⁵⁰ Indeed, with specific reference to this particular work, Suzanne Fagance Cooper suggests that ‘the inclusion of music in [Leighton’s] paintings does not seem to be part of a deliberate project’.⁵¹ By considering a selection of paintings, letters and public lectures, I demonstrate how Mendelssohn and Leighton’s *Lieder ohne Worte* are coextensive in what they advocate about musical subjectivity, but also how ‘music’ permeated Leighton’s theory and practice on a number of unacknowledged levels, connecting this to what he would call ‘the Special Function of Art’; its ability to formulate the ideal conditions for aesthetic experience, freed from written sanctions. Part two of this chapter extends the discussion of ‘songs without words’ to Whistler.

⁴⁸ John Michael Cooper, *Mendelssohn’s ‘Italian’ Symphony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 195-196.

⁴⁹ Michael Musgrave, “Leighton and Music,” in *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*, ed. by Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 295-315 (p. 295).

⁵⁰ See Suzanne Fagance Cooper, ‘The Liquefaction of Desire: Music, Water and Femininity in Victorian Aestheticism,’ *Women* 20.2 (2009), 186-201; also Cooper’s, “Aspiring to the Condition of Music: Painting in Britain 1860-1900,” *op cit*, pp. 265-267; and Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation and the History of the Body* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), in particular his chapter, “Aspiring to the Condition of Silence (The Iconicity of Music),” pp. 213-234.

⁵¹ Cooper, “Aspiring to the Condition of Music: Painting in Britain 1860-1900,” p. 265.

Although Whistler would never name any of his paintings *Songs without Words* (his were famously *Nocturnes*, *Symphonies*, *Arrangements* and *Harmonies*), a number of his critics did refer to them as such. For some, following Mendelssohn, this title carried positive connotations. Whilst for others, this designation was used with negative import — one which recapitulated a critical undercurrent in nineteenth-century music discourse whereby Mendelssohn's compositions were perceived by some to have been initially conceived with a definite text only for it to have been removed afterwards. Here I draw attention to the criticism of the painter William Powell Frith, whose aversion to aestheticism found its most memorable apogee in *A Private View of the Royal Academy, 1881* (1883); a work which exhibited his flagrant disapproval of the so-called 'aesthetic craze' and 'the folly of listening to self-elected critics in manners of taste, whether in dress or art'.⁵² Much less discussed, however, are Frith's written critiques of the aesthetic movement and the chapter closes with a consideration of some of these texts, with specific regard to his appropriation of the term 'songs without words' as a means to deride the ambitions of aesthetic painting. Here, I suggest that the appellation functions as a coded intervention into the debate surrounding the painting of the aesthetic school; a means of withdrawing art away from Pater's Giorgionesque-aesthetic and back towards the 'condition of words'.

Chapter 2 considers Claude Debussy's unique critical and creative dialogue with British aestheticism in the years surrounding the fin de siècle. Following from Collins's observation that British aestheticism had no significant impact in music, this chapter counters this in two interrelated ways; firstly by demonstrating how Debussy's interest in British aestheticism translated into his work in ways which have yet to be fully recognised; and secondly, by drawing attention to the critical reception of his music in Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century where a number of reviews and critical commentaries of his work were arbitrated through the vernacular of the 'aesthetic'. Whilst Debussy scholarship has long been aware of the composer's investment in the visual and literary arts, it has historically been riven by a deeply-embedded critical dialectic; one in which Debussy's 'extra-musical' interests have typically been treated as characteristic of either Impressionism or Symbolism.⁵³ More recently, however, commentators such as Leon Botstein and Richard Langham Smith have contended that we must look beyond this irrevocable dichotomy; not only because

⁵² William Powell Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences and Further Reminiscences*, 3 vols. (London: Bentley & Son, 1887), II, p. 256.

⁵³ For a critical overview of this scholarship see Jann Pasler, 'Debussy the Man, his Music, and his Legacy: An Overview of Current Research,' *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 69.2 (Dec 2012), 197-216. On the dialectic between Debussy as 'Impressionist' vs. Debussy as 'Symbolist' see Tristan Hons, 'Impressions and Symbols: Analysing the Aesthetics of Debussy's Practices within His Fin-de-Siècle Mosaic of Inspirations,' *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology* 3.1 (2010), 15- 33.

Debussy himself denounced these affiliations, but because his work might be more profitably viewed as neither one nor the other but rather as a complex and multivalent response to a number of near-contemporaneous nineteenth-century art movements. Responding to these critical developments, this chapter recuperates a reception history of British aestheticism in France (an area of research which has so far generally focussed on individual figures, such as Wilde and Pater);⁵⁴ and in doing so, considers the extent to which Debussy's correspondence, critical writing and music can be read as receptive to this phenomenon. In some instances, these interests were manifested directly in his work. These include a cantata setting of Rossetti's poem "The Blessed Damozel" (1850), entitled *La damoiselle élue* (1888); and a three-piece orchestral suite entitled, *Trois Nocturnes* (1897-1899), which, as Debussy makes plain, is indebted to Whistler's *painterly* namesake, not those 'nocturnes' more commonly associated with Chopin or John Field. These settings, though well-known in Debussy studies, are seldom noted on the other side of the word/note divide.⁵⁵ More than this, however, I explore how certain claims made by the aesthetic school influenced, and were appropriated by, Debussy more broadly and how these gestures were inscribed upon his work on a number of critical levels. That Debussy's interest in Whistler and Rossetti was noted by the British press should hardly be surprising. However, in the second part of this chapter I demonstrate how these aesthetic touchstones for the explication of his work expanded to include a series of related figures, such as Beardsley, Burne-Jones and Pater. Although this critical practice featured in a number of musical publications, this specific framework can, I suggest, be traced to the intervention of one particular individual: Arthur Symons, who published a series of articles on Debussy between 1907 and 1908 in *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*. Despite being better remembered today as a Wagnerian, Symons wrote extensively on a whole repertory of contemporary music; and his essays on Debussy can, I suggest, be seen to have played a hugely significant — an almost entirely overlooked — role in promulgating Debussy's music within the tradition of fin-de-siècle aestheticism.⁵⁶

Continuing my consideration of how 'aestheticism' and 'music' came to feature increasingly as mutually-influential discourses at the fin de siècle, **Chapter 3** turns to the

⁵⁴ See, for example, *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe*, ed. by Stephen Bann (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004); and *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*, ed. by Stefano Evangelista (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2010).

⁵⁵ The fact that Whistler's *Nocturne* series influenced Debussy's orchestral suite of the same name typically only receives acknowledgement in biographical studies. See, for example, Daniel E. Sutherland's most recent biography *Whistler: a Life for Art's Sake* (Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 268-269.

⁵⁶ For Symons' interest in Wagner see Anne Dzamba Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English* (London: Associated Press, 1979), pp. 101-105; Mark Cumming, 'Wagner, Verlaine, and Arthur Symons' 'Parsifal', *English Language Notes* 25.1 (1987), 66-72; and Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley*, pp. 71-72 and 127-129.

musical writings of Vernon Lee. This chapter suggests that Lee's theories concerning the nature of music might be best understood as the product of a near career-long dialogue with two key figures: Pater and the aesthete of music, Edmund Gurney. Over the last twenty years, music has formulated an important area of interest in the critical recuperation of Lee's work, the majority of which has been directed toward her short story, "A Wicked Voice" (1890), and its scathing exploration of affective Wagnerism.⁵⁷ However as more recent discussions by Shafquat Towheed and Phillip Ross Bullock have demonstrated, Lee's musical engagement extended beyond her polemic anti-Wagnerism. Responding to these developments, this chapter considers the extent to which Gurney's *The Power of Sound* (1880) — by far the most heavily-annotated tome in her musical library — was itself re-inscribed upon her work. By tracing Lee's response to Gurney through personal correspondence and published reviews, I examine how she both drew and distanced herself from his claims through the prism of her own critical negotiations with aestheticism. One of the central tenants of Gurney's thesis was his understanding that the nature of music might be most profitably understood through a consideration of what he calls 'the aesthetics of Hearing', leading him to conclude that musical attentiveness negotiates between two states of hearing: 'definite' and 'indefinite'. The chapter therefore concludes by considering the extent to which Lee's *Music and its Lovers* and the distinction she makes between 'hearers' and 'listeners' — this being very nearly the title of the final work — might be an unacknowledged encomium to the power of Gurney's ideas.

Taken together, the following exchanges between music and aestheticist discourse can be understood as a mutually-constructive means of decentring 'meaning' away from the prescription of language. In various and sometimes surprising ways they reveal an interminable questioning of the 'critic'; and in a related way, the role of the listener, a figure which emerges with particularly clarity as we move into Lee's early twentieth-century work. All of the individuals discussed here were formulating their approaches to art at a time when musicologists, music theorists, music aestheticians were redefining the act of listening. And it is by listening into their dialogues that this thesis enhances our understanding of the frequent encounters between music and aestheticism.

⁵⁷ See Carlo Caballero, "'A Wicked Voice': On Vernon Lee, Wagner and the Effects of Music," *Victorian Studies* 35.4 (Summer 1992), 385-408; Patricia Pulham, 'The Castrato and the Cry in Vernon Lee's Wicked Voices,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30.2 (2002), 421-437; Catherine Maxwell, 'Sappho, Mary Wakefield, and Vernon Lee's 'A Wicked Voice',' *The Modern Language Review* 102.4 (2007), 960-974; and most recently, the chapter "Haunted by Sound: Vernon Lee, 'A Wicked Voice'," in Sylvia Mieszkowski, *Resonant Alterities: Sound, Desire and Anxiety in Non-Realist Fiction* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), pp. 41-114.

1.

‘Songs without Words’: Music, Aesthetic Painting and the Conditions for Criticism

There is another eccentricity in the air which seems to call for observation and warning. I hear that *subject* in a picture is not only of no consequence, but it is better avoided. Pictures, according to this novel theory, should be “songs without words;” they should be beautiful in colour, light, and shadow, tone, and all the rest, but these qualities should not be made vehicles of story: that is to be left to literature.

— William Powell Frith, “‘Realism’ *versus* ‘Sloppiness’” (1889)¹

On the subject of Whistler’s paintings, Oscar Wilde once observed that ‘their titles do not convey much information.’² Referring to Whistler’s well-documented tendency to christen his canvases with musically-inspired titles, it would appear that Wilde had astutely identified the artist’s intentions. If Whistler’s choice of nonmenclature was ‘uninformative’, it was precisely because he had intended it to be so. Or at least that is what we understand by a letter he addressed to his patron Frederick Leyland: ‘I can’t thank you too much for the name “nocturne” as a title for my moonlights. You have no idea what an irritation it proves to the critics, and consequent pleasure to me — besides, it is really so charming and does poetically say all I want to say and *no more* than I wish.’³ Critical responses ran true to form. For some, they were nothing more than an attempt to veil art in ‘the garb of profundity’ by not just cynical but potentially lucrative means: ‘A musician is not elevated in his art by being called a tone-poet,’ the *Examiner* cautioned, ‘[n]or is a picture improved in value when it is termed a “Harmony in Blue”, a “Symphony in Red”, or a “Polka-Mazurka in Tartain Plaid”.’⁴ Others were more optimistic in their dismissal, for in spite of finding the titles to be unbearably modish they would take solace in the fact that, like all trends, they would be destined to die out; ‘the

¹ William Powell Frith, “‘Realism’ *versus* ‘Sloppiness’,’ *The Magazine of Art* (January 1889), 6-8 (7). Emphasis original.

² Oscar Wilde, ‘The Grosvenor Gallery’, *Dublin University Magazine* 90 (July 1877), 118-126 (124).

³ James Whistler to Frederic Leyland, undated letter, cited in Robin Spencer, “Whistler, Swinburne and art for art’s sake,” in *After the Pre-Raphaelites, Aestheticism in Victorian England*, ed. by Elizabeth Prettejohn (Manchester: Manchester, 1999), pp. 59-89 (p. 73). Emphasis original.

⁴ ‘A Symphony in Bronze,’ *The Examiner* 3696 (30 November 1878), 1516-1517 (1516). Interestingly, the reference to ‘tone poet’ here invokes Liszt, the most prominent proponent of this programmatic form in the nineteenth century. The tone poem or symphonic poem was a piece of instrumental music, in one continuous self-contained movement which sought to illustrate or direct outwardly towards an extra-musical content, e.g. a poem, novel, landscape etc. See Hugh MacDonald, “Symphonic Poem,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second Edition* (London: Macmillan, 2001), XXIV, pp. 802-804.

affectation of calling pictures by musical titles,’ *Mayfair* magazine forecasted, ‘will go out of fashion.’⁵ And at the ill-fated Grosvenor Gallery exhibition of 1877, catalyst for the (in)famous Ruskin libel trial, the conflation between music and painting was deemed to be a defining feature of the ‘aesthetic’ school: ‘It is the pet-folly of the Affected school to confound music with painting, and to transpose the terminology of the two arts [...] no doubt the adorers of Mr. Whistler and his fellows think they know what he means [...]’⁶

The interrelation of music and painting is an important and long-recognised topic in British aestheticism and no better recalled, perhaps, than in the work of Whistler, whom many commentators have taken as a focal point for this particular discussion.⁷ For although the notional convergence of music and paint was by no means his sole preserve, his sustained convention of affixing music titles to his paintings has undoubtedly earned him the status of one of the most ubiquitous and provocative practitioners of the so-called ‘new Laocoön’.⁸ Indeed, if Pater’s “The School of Giorgione” has since come to represent the manifesto for the theoretical formula of music in aesthetic painting, then Whistler was their most prominent practitioner. In fact, as several commentators have posited, there is little fortuitous about this connection either (even if, as I suggested in the introduction, their affiliation is often misleadingly inverted) — for all of Pater’s ostensible concern with historical subject matter, “The School of Giorgione,” published in the wake of the critical controversy of the 1877 Grosvenor Gallery exhibition, was almost certainly a coded intervention into popular, contemporary debate about aesthetic painting.⁹

Whistler’s use of music has occasionally invited comparisons with practitioners such as Baudelaire,¹⁰ however as Elizabeth Prettejohn observes, Whistler’s appropriation of music

⁵ *Mayfair* (December 1878), cited in Linda L. Merrill, ‘The Diffusion of Aesthetic Taste: Whistler and the Popularization of Aestheticism, 1875-1885’ (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1985), p. 195.

⁶ ‘The Grosvenor Gallery,’ *London* (5 May 1877), 328.

⁷ See, for example, Catherine Carter Goebel, ‘The Brush and the Baton: Influences on Whistler’s Choice of Musical Terms for his Titles,’ *Whistler Review: Studies on James McNeill Whistler and Nineteenth-Century Art* 1 (1999), 27-36; Aileen Tsui, ‘The Phantasm of Aesthetic Autonomy in Whistler’s Work: Titling the White Girl,’ *Art History* 29.3 (2006), 444-475; Arabella Tenniswood-Harvey, ‘Whistler’s Nocturnes: A Case Study in Musical Modelling,’ *Music in Art: International Journal for Music Iconography* 35.2 (Spring-Fall 2010), 71-83; and Arabella Tenniswood-Harvey, ‘Music in Colour: Whistler’s Six Projects and Schubert’s Moments Musicaux, Op. 9,’ *British Art Journal* 15.1 (2014), 27-34.

⁸ Peter L. Schmunk, “Artists as Musicians and Musical Connoisseurs,” in *The Routledge Companion to Music and Visual Culture*, pp. 256-274 (p. 269).

⁹ See, for example, Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Walter Pater and Aesthetic Painting,” in *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England*, pp. 36-58 (p. 39); see also Rachel Teukolsky, “The Politics of Formalist Art Criticism: Pater’s “School of Giorgione,”” in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, ed. by Laurel Brake (Greensboro, University of North Carolina: ELT Press, 2002), pp. 151-169.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ron Jonson, ‘Whistler’s Musical Modes: Symbolists Symphonies, Numinous Nocturnes,’ *Arts Magazine* 55 (April 1981), 171-173.

is not ‘a full synaesthesia, or union of auditory and visual experience’ (à la Baudelaire’s ‘correspondences’, for example, where music is placed in an evocative and reciprocal relationship with scent and colour).¹¹ Rather, Whistler looked to music as an ‘analogy *tout court*’; a comparison between ‘on the one hand, an art form striving to rid itself of intellectual or moral content and, on the other, musical forms such as pure instrumental music, seen to be without verbalisable content’:

In Continental aesthetic philosophy, music had sometimes been classed as the purest or most autonomous of the arts; ‘music that is not set to words’ is one of Kant’s examples of ‘free beauty,’ and the German phrase ‘Lieder ohne Worte,’ or ‘songs without words,’ was sometimes used in English texts (and the title of [Frederic] Leighton’s painting [...]) to refer to the idea of a pure art. Thus the point of the musical reference in a painting’s title may be, not that painting can produce the same aesthetic response as music (synaesthesia in the strict sense), but rather that it differs from convention, ‘representational’ art in the same way that absolute music differs from programme music, or music set to words.¹²

Indeed, this much Whistler confirms in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890) where he challenges those who would question his musical nomenclature: ‘Why should I not call my works “symphonies,” “arrangements,” “harmonies” and “nocturnes”? [...] As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour. The great musicians¹³ knew this. Beethoven and the rest wrote music — simply music: symphony in this key, concerto or sonata in that.’¹⁴

Prettejohn’s commentary is important because she is, I believe, the only contemporary commentator to bring aestheticism into conversation with a particular musical form: that of ‘songs without words’, which just so happens to be the topic of discussion here. Firstly, however, it is necessary to elucidate to a slight distinction. Although Prettejohn’s reasoning is entirely sound in equating ‘music that is not set to words’ with ‘songs without words’ as designations of instrumental, non-vocal musical forms, it is a mistake to assume that they are precisely the same thing (indeed, as we will discover, this very distinction had a particular resonance in nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse). Furthermore, Prettejohn does not properly acknowledge the latter’s indelible association with one particular composer: ‘Songs

¹¹ Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art’s Sake*, p. 190.

¹² Ibid., pp. 190-191.

¹³ As Peter Dayan remarks, the past tense here is revealing: ‘The “great musicians” to whom Whistler refers — “Beethoven and the rest” — belong to a period before his own. Whistler’s perception, and it was a common one at the time, was doubtless that “pure music” was no longer being produced. Wagner was regarded as the archetypal modern composer; and his music, thanks to the way in which Wagner pulped words and music together, was not “pure”. Wagner, after all, at least as far as Whistler can have known, never wrote a “symphony in this concerto or sonata in that”.’ See Peter Dayan, *Art as Music, Music as Poetry, Poetry as Art, from Whistler to Stravinsky* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 9 n.2.

¹⁴ James McNeill Abbott Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: Heinemann, 1890), pp. 126-128.

without words' were not instrumental music merely, but rather a form which had subverted the expectations of the traditional format of 'song' (as the combination of music and words) by removing the lyrical component. Moreover, they were invented and popularised in the nineteenth century by the German composer, Felix Mendelssohn.¹⁵

Indeed, this is acknowledged explicitly in the first recorded comparative allusion made between aesthetic painting and this particular form — by Coventry Patmore, who in his review of Rossetti's mural decorations for the new Oxford Union debating hall in 1857, wrote: 'It is no skillful balance, according to academical rules of recipes by Mr. Owen Jones, of a red robe here, with a blue one there — it is "like a stream of rich, distilled perfumes," and affects the eye much as one of Mendelssohn's most unwordable "Lieder ohne Worter" [sic] impresses the ear.'¹⁶ Several years later, in 1861, Frederic Leighton would ratify this affiliation by naming his own painting *Lieder ohne Worte*, after Mendelssohn's musical namesake. And in 1889, the English translation would be used by William Powell Frith to refer to, or rather dismiss, the qualities of aesthetic painting (though almost certainly in tacit reference to Whistler).

Accordingly, this chapter contends that not only were 'songs without words' far more conceptually central to aesthetic painting in the nineteenth-century imagination than has previously been acknowledged, but that our better understanding of this association can illuminate our understanding of the interrelation between music and aestheticism in the nineteenth century, on a number of different levels. As such, this discussion traces a critical dialogue surrounding 'songs without words' beginning with Mendelssohn, through the painting strategies of Leighton, before ending with a final word on Whistler and his critics. To do so, I suggest, is to see how the relationship between non-verbal art forms and 'words' were dramatized contemporaneously in nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse and how these debates encoded certain dynamics between the 'artist', the 'listener-viewer' and the 'critic'. In a related way, this dialogue draws attention to the inherent logocentricism of 'naming' and the way in which titles for non-verbal arts variously enact and problematize its own claims for art.

¹⁵ Although many contemporary commentators use the phrase 'song without words' without directly referencing Mendelssohn, one might assume that the composer had been in mind, as R. Larry Todd remarks: 'With the *Songs without Words* [...] Mendelssohn developed the musical genre to which his reputation as a composer of piano music became inseparably attached [...] Attempts have been made to trace the origins of the *Songs without Words* to various character pieces of Schubert, Dussek, Tomasek, and Mendelssohn's teacher Ludwig Berger — thereby diminishing the scope of Mendelssohn's contribution — but with limited success. The documentary evidence, though scanty, firmly indicates the term and concept of *Lied ohne Worte* originated with Mendelssohn or his circle sometime during the late 1820s.' See Todd's "Piano Music Reformed: The Case of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy" in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), pp. 178-220 (p. 192).

¹⁶ [Coventry Patmore], 'Walls and Wall Painting at Oxford,' *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 4.113 (26 December 1857), 583-584 (584).

Thus beginning with an elucidation of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, I draw attention to both his specific intentions for his compositions and their critical reception. By naming his pieces as he did, Mendelssohn baffled his commentators who, in reaction to the *Lieder*'s flagrant renunciation of 'words', attempted to 'read' against them; to make them legible by supplying them with lyrics and descriptive titles. Mendelssohn's defense of his practice has since come to be a *locus classicus* to the expressive power of music over the indeterminacy of words; far from being 'definite', he suggested, words were too *indefinite*. Moreover, as John Michael Cooper observes, Mendelssohn's celebrated statement was an affirmation of his belief that 'every individual should be free to construe an artwork's meaning in terms of the individual's own experiences and assumptions[.]'¹⁷ When Frederic Leighton elected to (re)name his painting *Lieder ohne Worte*, anticipating Whistler's own practice of giving paintings musical nonmenclature by several years, he would no doubt have been aware of his painting's namesake. And yet despite this the painting's title has often been dismissed as ancillary, partly because it was not conceived with the name in mind but equally (or *because* as Suzanne Fagance Cooper infers here): 'the inclusion of music in [Leighton's] paintings does not seem to be part of a deliberate project.'¹⁸ Although this is a remote experiment with musical titling in Leighton's practice, the impulse behind it is not. More than this, then, what I hope to demonstrate through their common nonmenclature is the coextensiveness of Mendelssohn and Leighton's ideas concerning the expressive, and specifically non-linguistic, power of music; and the way in which its specific non-legibility decentres aesthetic experience away from 'the literary' towards the appreciation and authority of the listener. The final part of this chapter traces a development in the dialogue between aesthetic painting and 'songs without words' by turning to Whistler. He, of course, would not use this particular designation for any of his paintings — instead preferring the generic forms: "symphonies," "harmonies," "arrangements," and "nocturnes". Yet a number of his contemporaries did refer to them as such. In this way, this final discussion draws attention to the flexibility of this trope; and not only in relation to its application to painting but the way in which its 'meaning' has been mediated over the course of the nineteenth century. Thus for some, following Mendelssohn, the comparison carried positive connotations. Whilst for others, this designation was used with negative import and here I draw particular attention to Frith, whose usage of the term can, I suggest, be taken as part of his own coded *re*-intervention into the debate surrounding aesthetic painting — one which attempts to turn the tide against Pater's school of the Giorgionesque-aesthetic; and reinscribe art's dependency back towards the 'condition of words'.

¹⁷ Cooper, *Mendelssohn's 'Italian' Symphony*, pp. 195-196.

¹⁸ Suzanne Fagance Cooper, "Aspiring to the Condition of Music: Painting in Britain, 1860-1900," p. 265.

When Mendelssohn introduced the first volume of a new genre of piano music in 1832 to an unsuspecting English public it failed to register much success. *Original Melodies for Pianoforte* sold a mere 114 copies in four years and its underwhelming reception was attributed to the unrefined taste of the native consumer, who, it was alleged, was unable to appreciate the form. 'Difficult music on the Continent is so much more valuable to a publisher,' Mendelssohn's publisher, Nicholas Mori, deduced, '[h]ere the difficult music is only purchased by a few professors who are able to combat with it in order to enhance their own talent'; as such, 'the sale of this style of music is thus limited'.¹⁹

Happily for Mendelssohn, however, Mori's initial assessment would prove to be incorrect. In the years that followed, a further seven volumes were issued, each received with mounting anticipation and acclaim. Of the eight total volumes published, Mendelssohn was alive to see six of them to print: Op. 19 (1832); 20 (1835); 38 (1837); 53 (1841); 62 (1844); and 67 (1845). Although the first two volumes bore alternative titles in their initial run of publication, these eight volumes would be known collectively under their later title *Lieder ohne Worte*, or *Songs without Words*, and would come to be some of the most popular music in nineteenth-century Britain.²⁰ Indeed, by 1845 Mendelssohn was even being urged to fast-track his compositions for print sale. His publisher, Edward Buxton, proprietor of Ewer & Co., expressed his desire for another *Song without Words* to meet public demand: 'Make me up another book — do it at once. I know you have got plenty ready. You need not be afraid of the people getting tired of them, they are the very things which have made you so many friends.'²¹ Such was the public appetite for his *Songs without Words* that two further publications were issued after Mendelssohn's death in 1847: Op. 85 (1850) and 102 (1868), editions which largely comprised of miscellaneous pieces from his unpublished works. Even with a lack of new compositions to hand, the public appetite for Mendelssohn's works would not abate and savvy publishers would capitalise upon this demand by variously redistributing and repackaging already published material; a commercial enterprise which began in earnest in the late 1860s before declining, somewhat sharply (and not, as we will see, without due cause) around the turn of the century. Thus forty years after its debut, Mendelssohn's Op.19, his inaugural collection, would be rereleased in 1872. However this time it was accompanied by

¹⁹ Letter from Mori to Mendelssohn, 27 December 1834, cited in Peter Ward Jones, "Mendelssohn and his English Publishers," in *Mendelssohn Studies*, ed. by R. Larry Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 240-255 (p. 244-245).

²⁰ Op. 20 was originally published as 'Six Romances for the Piano Forte'.

²¹ Letter from Edward Buxton, 14 January 1845, cited in Ward Jones, "Mendelssohn and his English Publishers," p. 253.

effusive (and arguably somewhat revisionist) fanfare in the general press, including the following newspaper advertisement:

This most beautiful composition was the first we ever heard from the repertory of gems by the well-known artistic jeweller, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. It introduced us to that charming world the *Lieder ohne Worte*. [...] That time was some years ago; seeming now what a time! In that time we looked upon the world, not exactly the same that we now regard it.²²

The growing popularity of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* was facilitated and conditioned by several factors, the most pertinent of which to outline presently is that which Dorothy de Val and Cyril Ehrlich call the expanding 'piano culture' of the second half of the nineteenth century.²³ Although piano manufacturing had been a mainstay of British industry from the late eighteenth century, industrialisation and mass production in the nineteenth century made not only pianos but their all-important accoutrements — stools, metronomes, sheet music etc. — more affordable.²⁴ Contemporaneous to the increased efficiency of machine-led production were developments in technology which intervened to make the piano more pitch-stable and, along with the addition of dampener and *sustenato* pedals, 'capable of greater depths of expression and lyricism.'²⁵ By the mid nineteenth century the piano was entirely 'user-friendly' in that it no longer required the owner to tune it which, in turn, provided a huge boost to the growing field of musical amateurism in England.²⁶ Remarking on the pianos on display at the Great Exhibition of 1851, the popular composer Sigismond Thalberg would observe:

The social importance of the piano is beyond all question far greater than that of any other instrument of music. One of the most marked changes in the habits of society, as civilisation advances, is with respect to the character of its amusements. Formerly, nearly all such amusements were away from home and in public; now, with the more educated portion of society, the greater part is at home and within the family circle, music on the piano contributing the principle portion of it. In the more fashionable circles of cities, private concerts increase year by year, and in them the piano is the principal feature.

²² T.T.A., 'Notices,' *The Musical Standard* 3.425 (21 September 1872), 184-185 (184).

²³ Dorothy de Val and Cyril Ehrlich, "Repertory and Canon," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Piano* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 117-134 (p. 118).

²⁴ Susie L. Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), p. 7. Steinbach also observes the impact on piano ownership that was made by changes in financing, such as the hire-purchase system.

²⁵ Cyril Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History* (rev. edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 79.

²⁶ Leon Botstein, 'Listening through Reading: Musical Literacy and the Concert Audience', *Nineteenth-Century Music* 16:2 (1999), 129-145 (136). Botstein adds: 'Once tuned, it could stay in tune long enough to need only periodic attention, giving rise to the separate profession of piano technician and tuner'.

What is more, he suggests that the piano had democratised musical experience across all strata of society: ‘this influence of the piano [...] extends to all classes; and while considerable towns have often no orchestras, families possess the best possible substitute, making them familiar with the finest compositions.’²⁷ As the market increased for pianos, so too did the desire for a repertoire of music: ‘the piano established its own institutions, treatises and taste-publics,’ Jim Samson observes, ‘and like them it built its own armoury of idiomatic devices, partly in response to the demands of those publics.’²⁸ Mendelssohn’s *Songs without Words* would meet the needs of an increasingly piano-repertoire hungry public, finding their way ‘on [to] everybody’s pianoforte desk’ and demanding to be heard: as one commentator writing in 1845 urged, ‘the whole of these sterling works should be in the hands of every pianoforte player in the kingdom, and any person who *cannot* play should get somebody to play them to him.’²⁹

However Mendelssohn’s *Songs without Words* were not just popular: they also sparked lively debate regarding their aesthetic implications. The Lied (plural: *Lieder*) emerged in Germany in the late eighteenth century and had originally referred to a poem, either with or without music. But by the nineteenth century, with the firm addition of music, the genre came to represent principally an ‘art song’; a vocal piece accompanied by piano, popularized by composers such as Franz Schubert who wrote some 600 settings over the course of his lifetime.³⁰ *Lieder ohne Worte*, Mendelssohn’s own intervention into the established genre was a marked departure, then, having removed its essential (and in some sense, given its etymology, primary) feature: words. Unsurprisingly, this new ‘invention’ led some, such as Moritz Hauptmann writing in 1832 (despite not having heard any pieces from the collection at this particular point) to express a concern for the aesthetic implications of a Lied which had been denied its defining feature: ‘What is it all about? Is he really in earnest? To be sure, in strictness, pure Lyric has no words, but that means no intelligence — no form, therefore no Art [...] Still, *Songs without Words* must be uncanny, I think.’³¹ Writing in his enormously popular *Music and Morals*, first published in 1871 and already in its twentieth edition by 1903, the Rev. Hugh Haweis — husband of Mary Eliza Haweis, the era’s most visible ‘aesthetic’

²⁷ Cited in *Musical Instruments in the 1851 Exhibition: A Transcription of the Entries of Musical Interest from the Official Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Art and Industry of all Nations, with Additional Material from Contemporary Sources*, ed. by Peter and Ann Mactaggart (Welwyn, 1986), p. 97.

²⁸ Jim Samson, “The Musical Work and Nineteenth-Century History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century Music*, pp. 3-29 (p. 26).

²⁹ ‘Mendelssohn’s “Songs without Words”,’ *The Musical Times* (1 March 1845), 79. Emphasis original.

³⁰ For the development of the Lied form see Lorraine Gorrell, *The Nineteenth-Century German Lied* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus, 1993); and *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Rufus Hallmark (New York: Schirmer, 1996).

³¹ *The Letters of a Leipzig Cantor*, ed. A. Schone and F. Hiller, trans. A. D. Coleridge. 2 vols. (London, 1892) I, pp. 96-97, cited in R. Larry Todd, “Piano Music Reformed: The Case of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy,” in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, ed. by R. Larry Todd (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 192.

taste makers — summed up the alternative responses to Mendelssohn's ostensibly paradoxical premise:

The titles "Songs without Words" which Mendelssohn has given to his six books of musical idylls, is full of delicate raillery, aimed good-humouredly enough at the non-musical world. "A 'song without words!' What an idea! How can such a song be possible?" cries one. "What more perfect song could be imagined?" exclaims another.

Echoing Hegel who had remarked some forty years earlier on the close association between philistinism and the need for 'intelligible expression [and] a topic' in music,³² Haweis observes that those 'who know and care little about music are always very particular about the words of a song'; '[t]hey are naturally glad to find something they can understand; *yet all the while the open secret which they will never read lies in the music, not the words.*'³³

Both Hauptmann and Haweis alight upon a central issue in nineteenth-century debate here; and one which, as we will see, is by no means exclusive to music. The idea that one was supposed to 'read' an art work, interpolating it for a clearly determined 'message' or 'meaning', was a contentious issue across all non-verbal art forms; and no more so, perhaps, than in the dialogue surrounding instrumental music with its pretence to being understood in 'its own right'. For most of the eighteenth century music's sense of functionality and purpose had been expressed partly by the context in which it was being performed (such as in church or any such other ceremonial setting) but more explicitly by its 'verbal' cues, such as lyrics and title, which were supposed to communicate, in linguistic terms, the 'meaning' of the musical work.³⁴ At the turn of the century, with the trans-valuation of music's 'meaning' and concomitant ascendancy of instrumental music, these literary determinants were increasingly rejected in favour of generic titles (such as symphonies, nocturnes etc.) which reflected the desire for a 'pure music'. Thus listeners were encouraged not to take the meaning from any extra-musical source but as inherent to the work itself, as was the claim for 'absolute music'.

Or at least, this was the theory. In practice, this transition was not, as one might expect, quite as straight-forward. On the simplest level, this was because music, like all non-verbal art media, remains subject to the mediation of language, even whilst being resistant to it. But in

³² For Hegel see *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art (1835-1838)*, trans. by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 953: 'Laymen like most in music [...] the intelligible expression of feelings and ideas, something tangible, a topic'.

³³ Rev. H. R. Haweis, *Music and Morals* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1906), p. 37. Own emphasis added.

³⁴ See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, pp. 176-189; also Bellamy Hosler, *Changing Views of Instrumental Music in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), pp. 210-213.

the nineteenth century certain cultural factors foregrounded this association — even whilst, in many cases, concomitantly arguing for music’s self-sufficiency. This was illustrated by the rapid transformation in musical ‘literacy’, the reading and writing *about* music, which grew rapidly over the course of the nineteenth century; and no more so than in England where the number of music journals and articles in the general press on musical subjects grew exponentially.³⁵ Leon Botstein argues that this process, whilst intended as a means of cultivating musical appreciation, may in fact have had an ulterior consequence insofar as the listener’s continual deference to musical literature ‘triggered the subordination of the musical to the linguistic’ in listening audiences.³⁶ Indeed, as Thomas Grey agrees, despite the rise of instrumental music, concert audiences remained in some sense conditioned by their own ‘literary expectations’, adding that the ‘dominating culture role of opera, drama, poetry and novels [...] lead consumers of “absolute music” to listen against the grain of its autonomous appearance, so to speak, to listen for cultural, literary, or otherwise fictive meanings.’³⁷ Titles, of course, played a key part in dictating meanings. Writing at the end of the century, one English commentator suggested that music ‘depend[s] for its true existence upon a first cause of Idea’ and as such ‘[i]t therefore becomes essential that every composition should bear the title of the Idea, in order that a true comprehension of the work should follow’; ‘[w]ho,’ he surmises, ‘is any wiser after hearing a Symphony in A or a Concert-Overture in D? One might as well attend a performance of *Hamlet* in the dark.’³⁸ Here the non-specificity of a title is a musicological failing since without a titular reference to an explicit subject the audience is unable to listen for the ‘meaning’ the composer intended. Moreover, the listener may get the meaning ‘wrong’; as Lizst, one of the key purveyors of programme music, claimed, the very purpose of embedding some sort-of semantic clues in the musical work was in order ‘to guard the listener against a wrong poetical interpretation’.³⁹

But there is, perhaps, a much more specific tension at work in relation to Mendelssohn’s musical nomenclature. Earlier we saw Prettejohn equate ‘songs without words’ with ‘music that is not set to words’ as unequivocal designations of nineteenth-century instrumental music. However there is, as I suggested, an important distinction between the two. As Richard Leppert observes, a ‘*song* without words’ is distinct from other designations

³⁵ See Leanne Langley, ‘The Musical Press in Nineteenth-Century England,’ *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 46.3 (1990), 583-592. Langley counts, conservatively, some two hundred music journals in circulation in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century.

³⁶ Botstein, ‘Listening through Reading,’ 144.

³⁷ Grey, *Wagner’s Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts*, pp. 9-12.

³⁸ G. Ransome, ‘The Idea in Music,’ *New Quarterly Musical Review* 3:12 (Feb 1896), 184-188 (185).

³⁹ Cited in Roger Scruton, ‘Programme Music,’ in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 29 vols, ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), XX, pp. 396-400 (p. 396).

of instrumental music such as ‘symphony’ or ‘nocturne’ since it is an appellation which ‘announces a text-subject but refuses to state it’, thus:

The titles in effect attempt to undercut Mendelssohn’s own renunciation of words, as if to render objective, and objectively visible, what he determined to leave unspoken. It is arguable, of course, that Mendelssohn’s lack of interest in supplying titles generally for these pieces was political in effect, if not necessarily by intention, insofar as the resulting semantic openness produced what Roland Barthes termed the “writerly” text, which the reader in effect “re-writes” out of her own interests and experiences, unlike the closed, “readerly” text, which, comparatively, disempowers her: “the readerly is controlled by the principle of non-contradiction.”⁴⁰

Indeed, Mendelssohn’s refusal to wed concrete sentiments and titles to his *Songs without Words* in order to ring-fence this so-called ‘semantic openness’ gives way to his most famous declaration of music’s preeminent nature. In 1842, Marc-Andre Souchay wrote to the composer with his own suggestions for associative descriptions for the pieces. Some expressed single word emotive qualities such as ‘Contentment’, which he assigned to Op. 38. No 4., or ‘Melancholy’, to Op. 19 no.2. Elsewhere the titles were excessively rhetorical; Op. 30 No. 1 was a ‘Depiction of a devout and thankful person who has been sought after’; Op. 30, no.2. was a ‘Strong desire to go out into the world’, and Op. 38, no. 1. was the particularly verbose ‘Boundless but unrequited love, which therefore often turns into longing, pain, sadness, and despair, but always becomes peaceful again’.⁴¹ Mendelssohn’s response to Souchay has since become a *locus classicus* in making the case for the limitations of language in the face of music’s superior expressive powers:

There is so much to talk about music, and so little is said. I believe that words are not at all up to it, and if I should find that they were adequate I would stop making music altogether. People usually complain that music is so ambiguous, and what are they supposed to think when they hear it is so unclear, while words are understood by everyone. But for me it is exactly the opposite — and not just with entire discourses, but also with individual words; these, too, seem to be so ambiguous, so indefinite, in comparison with good music, which fills one’s soul with a thousand better things than words. What the music I love expresses to me are thoughts not too *indefinite* for words, but rather too *definite*.⁴²

⁴⁰ Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (California: California University Press, 1995), p. 214. For Barthes’ conception of the ‘readerly’ see Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), pp. 154-156.

⁴¹ Letter from Marc-Andre Souchay to Mendelssohn, 12 October 1842, cited in “An Exchange of Letters,” trans. by John Michael Cooper in *Source Readings in Music History*, ed. by Oliver Strunk (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), pp. 1198-1201.

⁴² Letter from Mendelssohn to Marc-Andre Souchay, 15 October 1842, Letter from Marc-Andre Souchay to Mendelssohn, 12 October 1842, cited in “An Exchange of Letters,” in *Source Readings in Music History*, p. 1201.

As John Michael Cooper observes, ‘Mendelssohn’s refusal to provide such titles indicates [...] his mistrust of verbal discourse (including descriptive titles) and, more importantly, his conviction that every individual should be free to construe an artwork’s meaning in terms of the individual’s own experiences and assumptions rather than those dictated by the composer.’⁴³ In other words, Cooper adds, this was not necessarily the claim that be might associated with the polemics of Hanslick’s ‘absolute music’ which locates meaning at a single point, namely, the music ‘work’, but one which maintained a more ‘open-ended conclusion’ between the listener and the music.⁴⁴ Accordingly, Mendelssohn did not prohibit the listener from discovering their own personal, extramusical associations when attending to the *Lieder ohne Worte*, should they so choose. However he refused to supply descriptive titles to his pieces since he believed that the very democratic potential of music would be undermined if it was anchored within a conventional semantic framework. Thus whilst considerate towards Souchay’s desire to add lyrics and titles to his work, Mendelssohn could only decline. But this was not his fault, he assured his correspondent,

...but rather the fault of the words, which simply cannot do any better. So if you ask me what I was thinking of, I will say: just the song as it stands there. And if I happen to have had a specific word or specific words in mind for one or another of these songs, I can never divulge them to anyone, because the same word means one thing to one person and something else to another, because only the song can say the same thing, can arouse the same feelings in one person as in another — a feeling which is not, however, expressed by the same words.⁴⁵

Mendelssohn believed that language obscured, rather than abetted, understanding in music and in doing so he authorised the primacy of the listener in the act of musical experience. Attempts to supply lyrics to his *Lieder* would prove to be futile because the clumsy ineptitude of language does a disservice to the potentially limitless expressive potential of music; as the painter-musician Johann Peter Lyser discovered when he himself attempted the ‘foolish’ feat: ‘I soon noticed the Mendelssohns’s *Lieder ohne Worte* could be more correctly labelled “Empfindungen wofür es keine Worte gibt” (“Feelings for which there are no words”), and I gave up the idea of ever wanting to set words in such an ethereal manner.’⁴⁶ Indeed, as Botstein writes, Mendelssohn believed that it was through music that the ‘subjective and objective could be reconciled’:

⁴³ John Michael Cooper, *Mendelssohn’s ‘Italian’ Symphony*, pp. 195-196.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ *Allgemeine Wiener Musikzeitung II* (1842), No. 154, pp. 617-668, cited in Larry R. Todd, ““Gerade das lied wie es dasteht”: On Text and Meaning in Mendelssohn’s *Lieder ohne Worte*,” in *Musical Humanism and its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Claude V. Palisca*, ed. by Nancy Kovaleff Baker and Barbara Russano Hanning (Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon Press, 1992), pp. 355-380 (p. 361).

The lure of music as a path of subjective expression existed not only for the composer, but also for the musician who reproduced it and for the listener. In contrast to the propositions of language, which had to be tested against the ‘objectivity’ of reality or against arguments concerning truth or logic, music permitted a purely subjective experience without ever triggering a contradiction with reality or a set of claims or propositions. A wide range of subjective engagements was rendered coherent with a shared objective experience — the witnessing of music performed. As a social phenomenon, music was therefore unique: fixed but limitless in its interpretive references. It was a public act of the imaginative faculties and purely personal, yet free of grounds for the sort of disagreement and conflict associated with the dissemination of ideas through ordinary language, the dominant instrument of the public realm of the 1840s.⁴⁷

His *Lieder ohne Worte* were so named because words would only detract from the expression of human experience in musical form; it is ‘just the song as it stands’ because this music is, in effect, capable of supplying each individual listener with their own ‘words’. Unlike Liszt, then, Mendelssohn proceeds from the belief that there is no inherently ‘wrong’ interpretation of the musical ‘text’.

One of Mendelssohn’s greatest champions was Robert Schumann; and the fifth book of *Lieder ohne Worte*, Op. 62. (1844), would even be dedicated to his wife, Clara, one of the most popular pianists of the age who undoubtedly played no small part in popularising Mendelssohn’s pieces at recitals throughout England and the rest of the continent.⁴⁸ For Schumann, it was in the *Lied* form that his Romantic philosophy of self-affirmation found its truest articulation, the idea that music was a ‘language of the soul’⁴⁹:

Who of us in the twilight hour has not sat at his upright piano (a grand-piano would serve a statelier occasion), and in the midst of improvising has not unconsciously begun to play a quiet melody? Should one happen to be able to play the cantilena along with the accompaniment above all, should one happen to be a Mendelssohn, the loveliest ‘songs without words’ would result.⁵⁰

For Schumann, *Songs without Words* were to be celebrated as the direct communication of the subconscious which could never be translated faithfully into words. It was not only the listener authorised in the act of musical experience but the would-be composer who could effortlessly translate their own interiority into music form. And yet as he continues his glowing report,

⁴⁷ Leon Botstein, “‘Songs without Words’: Thoughts on Music, Theology, and the Role of the Jewish Question in the Work of Felix Mendelssohn,” *Musical Quarterly*, 77:4 (1993), 561-578 (573).

⁴⁸ See Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 77-79.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of Schumann’s Romantic philosophy in relation to the *Lied* see Beate Julia Perrey, *Schumann’s ‘Dichterliebe’ and Early Romantic Poetics: Fragmentation of Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 52-59.

⁵⁰ *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* II (1835) 202, in Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, ed. by K. Wolff, trans. P. Rosenfeld (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946), pp. 210-211.

Schumann inadvertently highlights a fundamental critical issue in nineteenth-century musical debate:

Or, still easier: to choose a text and then, eliminating the words, give in this form one's compositions to the world. However, this would not be fair; indeed, a form of deception, unless one intended therewith to test the definiteness with which music can express feelings, and hoped to persuade the poetry whose words have been suppressed to provide a new text to the musical setting of his poem. Should this new text coincide with the old one, it would be more proof for the dependability of music expression.⁵¹

Schumann was wholly sympathetic to Mendelssohn's aesthetic project. Yet his conjecture, despite the acknowledgment that this exercise would be a cunning one to undertake, unwittingly implicates an area of debate which had plagued the reception of *Songs without Words*; the notion that Mendelssohn had composed the pieces with lyrics in place, only to subsequently remove all traces of them.⁵² Indeed, the composer's sister would even poke fun at the idea in a letter; 'Dear Felix, when text is removed from sung lieder so that they can be used as concert pieces, it is contrary to the experiment of adding a text to your instrumental lieder — the other half of the topsy-turvy world.'⁵³

This letter, light-hearted though it is, belies an important and highly topical concern. Indeed, as R. Larry Todd suggests, in alluding to the casting of words into music, she is very likely to have been referring to Liszt, whose ideas about the ideal dynamic between music and words were, as we have seen, diametrically opposed to those of Mendelssohn.⁵⁴ Mendelssohn asserted music's authority over literary concerns, defending the 'song as it stands' and its unique ability to convey subjectivity without the prescriptions of language, which he clearly believed would be a bar to this very enterprise. It was a quintessentially romantic conviction, and one which, somewhat inevitably, was subject to a radical overhaul with the onset of modernism; a process which saw 'a reject[ion] of Romanticism and the social conditions in which it thrived' and consequently, as Margaret Notley observes, a changed landscape in which 'Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* became a pejorative catchword for musical Romanticism'.⁵⁵ More specifically, this was a reaction formulated with the rise of the 'New German School', or those who we would associate with programme music, such as Liszt or

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² R. Larry Todd, "'Gerade das lied wie es dasteht': On Text and Meaning in Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*," p. 356.

⁵³ Letter to Felix Mendelssohn from Fanny Mendelssohn, 7 September 1838, cited in R. Larry Todd, "Piano Music Reformed," in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, p. 192.

⁵⁴ R. Larry Todd, "Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* and the Limits of Musical Expression," in *Mendelssohn Perspectives*, ed. by Angela Mace and Nicole Grimes (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 197-222 (p. 206).

⁵⁵ Margaret Notley, *Lateness and Brahms: Music and Culture in the Twilight of Viennese Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 162.

Wagner, who sought to re-invest music with ‘meaning’ by deferring to literature and the visual arts as programmatic texts. Indeed, with the ascendancy of Wagner’s music came the decline of Mendelssohn’s and not surprisingly, perhaps, since the latter was never far from Wagner’s critique:

He named his product “*Songs without Words*”; and very properly must songs-*without*-words be the outcome of disputes in which one could only come to an issue by leaving them unsettled. — This now so favourite “Song without words” is the faithful translation of our whole music into the language of the pianoforte, for the use of our art-commercial-travellers. In it, the Musician tells the Poet: “Do as you please, and I will do as I please! We shall get on best together, when we have nothing to do with each other”.⁵⁶

Here Wagner attacks not only the fictiveness and/or limitations of autonomy but implicates a central issue in nineteenth-century aesthetics: the seeming dichotomy between high and low art. By labelling Mendelssohn’s pieces ‘products’ he recasts the creation as a form of cunning commercial enterprise and Mendelssohn no more than a musical skill. For Wagner, pianism was ‘not a popular art but a populist one’, an art of conformity, in which this new favoured genre had something of a formulaic character, ‘moulded to the requirements of a new taste public’.⁵⁷ Reflecting on the late nineteenth century aversion to Mendelssohn’s music, Botstein comments:

The transformation of taste during the second half of the nineteenth century lent Mendelssohn’s music an undeserved and pejorative symbolic meaning. After the 1880s, in England, Germany, and also America, the tenets of cultural modernism were linked to a generational revolt and a rejection of middle-class conceits of culture and art. This triggered an aversion to Mendelssohn. His music, in part because of its affectionate refinement and the relative ease of performance and comprehension, had come to signify glib amateur music making – a facile consumption of an art of optimism by educated urban classes, an art that neither questioned nor resisted the presumed smugness of bourgeois aesthetic and moral values [...] *Elijah* and *St. Paul* and the *Songs without Words*, for example, were viewed as emblematic of a vacuous and affirmative tradition of music making, undertaken thoughtlessly within a hypocritical and exploitative world.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama* [1852], trans. by William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 130.

⁵⁷ Samson, “The Musical Work and Nineteenth-Century History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century Music*, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Leon Botstein, “The Aesthetics of Assimilation and Affirmation: Reconstructing the Career of Felix Mendelssohn,” in *Mendelssohn and his World*, ed. by R. Larry Todd (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 5-42 (p. 6).

Ultimately, Botstein concludes, ‘the triumph of Wagnerism by the end of the century created a barrier to the wide-ranging appreciation of Mendelssohn’s music’.⁵⁹ Indeed, the rather swift cultural *volte face* towards Mendelssohn’s *Songs without Words* is illustrated with characteristic derision by Du Maurier in “The Latest Fashion at Home,” demonstrating how, by the 1880s, Mendelssohn’s simple but unchallenging forms once so prevalent in the early-to-mid nineteenth century home had been usurped by a more progressive taste (Fig. 1). Here, the colonel, who entertains a conversation with his listening companions concerning the piece they are listening to, finds that what were once widely-prescribed musical tastes have been rapidly overtaken: “By Mendelssohn, is it no, Miss Prigsby!” — “We believe so.” “One of the ‘Songs without Words’!” — “Possibly, we nevah listen to Mendelssohn.” “Indeed! You don’t admire his music!” — “We do not.” “May I ask why!” — “Because there are no wrong notes in it!” (Our gallant Colonel is “out of it” again[]).



Fig. 1. “The Latest Fashion in Music at Home,” *Punch* (2 April 1881)

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Those of professed Aesthetic sensibility therefore affected to despise the sensibility of Mendelssohn's music, instead preferring the more advanced chromaticism (i.e. 'wrong notes') of Liszt and Wagner. Indeed, this much Arthur Hamilton confirms, writing the following year in *The Aesthetic Movement* (1882): 'In music the Aesthetes effect Liszt, Rubenstein, and Wagner who are all most consummately intense'.⁶⁰ Emma Sutton has recently demonstrated how central Wagnerism was to fin-de-siècle aestheticism, but it is interesting to see how these decadent tastes were caught up in, and perhaps contributed to, the contemporaneous demise of once-treasured composers such as Mendelssohn. 'The decadents,' Todd writes, 'would later reject Mendelssohn and other Victorian mores.'⁶¹ George Bernard Shaw was particularly condemning in this respect, denouncing Mendelssohn's 'kid glove gentility, his conventional sentimentality, and his despicable oratorio mongering' in an article for the *London Star* in 1889.⁶² In an illustration published in *The Savoy* in 1896, Aubrey Beardsley would further compound the Wagnerian-decadent rejection of Mendelssohn at the fin de siècle by presenting the composer in the image of a quintessential Victorian gentleman (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Aubrey Beardsley, *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy* (1896)

⁶⁰ Arthur Hamilton, *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1882), p. 33.

⁶¹ See R. Larry Todd, "Preface," in *Mendelssohn and his World*, pp. ix-x.

⁶² Reprinted in George Bernard Shaw, *London Music in 1888-1889 as Heard by Corno di Bassetto (Later Known as Bernard Shaw) with Some Further Autobiographical Particulars* (London, 1937), p. 68.

As Marian Wilson Kimber has demonstrated, Mendelssohn's demise was also intertwined in wider political and social circumstances which were 'increasingly disadvantageous to Jews', the effects of which served to transform his posthumous reputation from that of the once 'illustrious German composer' to a 'superficial, derivative, Jewish composer' at the end of the century.⁶³ Beardsley's image clearly reflects some of these late nineteenth century attitudes towards Mendelssohn's 'Jewishness'. Indeed, as Wilson Kimber observes, '[m]uch about the caricature is [...] Jewish': 'the prominent nostrils', the 'composer's dangling curls' and the overriding inference that these particular features are not those of a 'great man'.⁶⁴

Equally, the posthumous fragmentation of Mendelssohn's legacy had implications for his *Songs without Words*, where, poignantly, the very 'semantic openness' he had attempted to safeguard fell prey to music publishers who used sentimental titles to increase their sales. Indeed, as Todd remarks, 'the practice of devising fanciful titles and texts [...] increasingly common after his death, added layer upon layer of that "conventional sentimentality" to which Shaw objected'.⁶⁵ With the advent of modernism, Nietzsche, at the height of his own anti-Wagnerian phase, would refer to Mendelssohn's work as 'the beautiful episode in German music', the 'halcyon master' who 'quickly acquired admiration, and was equally quickly forgotten'.⁶⁶ For the reception history of *Songs without Words* in particular, there could perhaps be no better assessment of the acceptance and subsequent decline of a genre's popularity. For some, however, the very power of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* resided in their ability to be revisited and remembered; as this article, written in 1862 (a year after Leighton's own *Lieder ohne Worte* was exhibited at the annual Royal Academy Exhibition) testifies:

It is notorious that some of the most exquisite music of modern composition has taken the form of "songs without words". And it may be doubted whether the most perfect specimens of this class would be improved by attaching to them even ideally suitable and beautiful language. [...] *songs without words are, in truth, songs with an indefinite variety of sets of words which may be sung to them in the mind's ear, and one or other of which is of song, every time they are played, to the ear of each genuine listener.*

[...]

A crowd of persons may sit all alike rapt in positive delight through a performance of one of Mendelssohn's "Lieder ohne Worte", while every member of it is unconsciously agreeing to differ harmoniously with his next neighbour as to the exact shade of meaning expressed by each passage of the song. Mendelssohn has left every one of his million hearers to be, in regards of those songs, his own poet forever.⁶⁷

⁶³ Marian Wilson Kimber, "Never Perfectly Beautiful: Physiognomy, Jewishness, and Mendelssohn Portraiture," in *Mendelssohn Perspectives*, pp. 9-30.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-29.

⁶⁵ R. Larry Todd, "Preface," in *Mendelssohn and his World*, pp. ix-x.

⁶⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by Helen Zimmern (Maryland: Serenity Publishers, 2008), p. 127

⁶⁷ 'Words for Music,' *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 13.342 (1862), 551-552. Own emphasis added.

For Frederic Leighton there was little doubt that instrumental music was the aspirational model across the arts. He himself was not fond of Wagner, as his friend Sir William Richmond observed, finding his music ‘too strenuous, too busy in changes of key, too incomplete in the finish and development of phrases’.⁶⁸ Nevertheless he would not declare this directly himself — perhaps owing to, as Michael Musgrave has suggested, an innate artistic sympathy which prevented him from making ‘shallow comparisons between instrumental music and the dramatic compositions of Wagner’.⁶⁹

But if Leighton was never so ill-mannered as to speak out against any particular composers, he was certainly effusive about the varieties of music he did enjoy. 1859, the same year in which Leighton settled in England permanently, would also see the establishment of a new musical venture called ‘The Monday Popular Concerts’, or the ‘Monday Pops’ as they were affectionately known: a weekly concert series which endeavoured to provide a ‘serious instrumental repertoire’ for the ‘British “shilling” public’.⁷⁰ Beethoven, Bach and, of course, Mendelssohn were regular features on the programme and Leighton — often in the company of Robert Browning and George Lewes — had been a subscriber from the first; indeed, as his friend Elizabeth Barrington noted, he ‘very rarely missed being present’.⁷¹ The ‘Monday Pops’ also merited a topical tip of the hat in Arthur Sullivan and W.S. Gilbert’s aesthetic opera, *Patience* (1881), where Grosvenor pokes fun at those who favours low-class entertainment to more high-brow classical concerts, remarking: “Conceive me, if you can, An ev’ryday young man [...] Who thinks Suburban “hops”, More fun than “Monday Pops”[.]”

From the late 1860s Leighton would increasingly stage musical performances at his home in Holland Park Road, featuring performances by some of the greatest musicians of the age, and overseen by some of society’s most representative individuals, as one contemporary commentator observed: ‘The large room, always full but never crowded, everyone provided with comfortable seats. The artistic world represented: Watts, Burne-Jones [...] Millais, Alma Tadema [...] occasionally an author, member of parliament, and busy journalists’.⁷² So

⁶⁸ Quoted from W. B. Richmond, 1906, in Emilia [Mrs Russell] Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, 2 vols (London: George Allen, 1906), II, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Michael Musgrave, “Leighton and Music,” in *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*, ed. by Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 295-314 (p. 310).

⁷⁰ For a history of the Monday Popular Concerts, see Christina Bashford, *The Pursuit of High Culture: John Ella and Chamber Music in Victorian London* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 234-243.

⁷¹ Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, I, p. 216.

⁷² Cited in Musgrave, “Leighton and Music,” p. 299

significant were these events that Christina Bashford has been led to suggest that their establishment contributed to the contemporaneous demise of some of England's most prominent public concert series.⁷³ Indeed, fresh from their stints at both the Monday Popular Concerts and the Musical Union, two of the most regular performers at Leighton's home were Charles Halle and Joseph Joachim; the celebrated violinist whose close, enduring friendship with the artist would be affirmed in 1894, when Leighton, presiding over a jubilee celebration for the violinist, presented him with a Stradivarius Violin and Tourte bow; a gift for his own 'splendid gifts as an interpreter,' Leighton remarked, ever 'leading his hearers to their better comprehension.'⁷⁴

Incidentally, Leighton's admiration for Joachim was shared by Arthur Symons (whose own little-known intervention into contemporary music debate is discussed in the following chapter). Writing in his glowing obituary of Joachim, "Joachim and the Interpretation of Music," Symons remarks that: 'In Joseph Joachim we have lost a great artist, the most disinterested artist of his time. Where other violinists have played brilliant music because it was an effective means of display, he has played good music because it was good music.'⁷⁵ Like Symons, the inherent 'honesty' of Joachim's performances, which, it is inferred, he maintained in the growing face of musical showmanship, also profoundly affected Leighton who wrote to Joachim remarking that: 'It will be long indeed before I forget the impression made on me by that strange, fiery [...] stirring composition which I heard yesterday for the first time and which has given me a greater idea of the extraordinary power of Brahms than anything I heard of his before. I was especially struck by with that exuberance of idea on which you dwelt and which rivets the attention from first to last. What a genius.'⁷⁶ Though we do not know precisely what piece was being performed here, Leighton is describing his experience of listening to Brahms; and with it we get a sense of what he valued about music (and, I would suggest, of all art): its ability to impress itself memorably upon its subject and to convey an idea coherently and affectively in a sustained non-verbal language.

⁷³ See Bashford, *The Pursuit of High Culture*, p. 323: 'One serious possibility that might explain the drift away from the Musical Union is the ongoing private concerts of instrumental chamber music at the house of the painter Frederic Leighton in Holland Park Road from 1867, and his engagement (seemingly through [Arthur] Chappell [founder of the Monday Pops] of [John] Ella's lost players, Joachim, Piatti and Halle in particular. Perhaps it is coincidence, but this was the same year that Ella's subscription list, hitherto growing, began to dip.'

⁷⁴ Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, II, p. 228.

⁷⁵ Arthur Symons, "Joseph Joachim and the Interpretation of Music," in *Plays, Acting and Music* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), pp. 89-95. The article was first published in 1907, see 'Joachim and the Interpretation of Music,' *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 104.2704 (24 August, 1907), 231-232.

⁷⁶ Manuscript letter of 20 March 1875 to Joseph Joachim, *Lord Leighton: A Catalogue of Letters* ed. Curle, No. 177 (MS NO. 12501), cited in Musgrave, "Leighton and Music," p. 302.

However, Joachim was more than just a ceaseless promoter of Brahms' music.⁷⁷ His allegiance to the composer had even greater professional repercussions which are worth dwelling on here since they implicate Leighton. As we saw in the discussion of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*, questions about music were made increasingly subject to the emergent ideological schism between absolute and programme music. And this discourse found its very public corollary in the so-called 'War of the Romantics.' Both Brahms and Joachim were associates of the Leipzig Conservatoire, founded by Mendelssohn, and saw themselves very much as wardens of his more conservative tradition which advocated formal perfection over the increasingly advanced musical styles. Thus with the rise of the 'Music of the Future', and having grown disillusioned with the direction music was being taken in, Brahms and Joachim became co-signees of the infamous 'Conservative Manifesto' of 1860, a letter sent to the *Berliner Musik-Zeitung Echo*, in which they and others distanced themselves from recent developments in music, namely those 'pupils of the so-called New German School': Wagner and Liszt.⁷⁸ But by 1886 Liszt and Joachim would end the ideological rift as publically as it had been waged when, in a grand reception held in Liszt's honour at the Grosvenor Gallery, the two would signal the end of their personal differences by way of a handshake. The symbolic significance of the occasion — which had by all accounts been well known to the English public⁷⁹ — was deemed news-worthy enough to warrant a two-page illustration in *The Graphic* magazine and of over four hundred guests present it was none other than Leighton who featured conspicuously at Joachim's side (Fig 3.).

⁷⁷ Joachim would notably provide conducting duties for the English premiere of Brahms' first symphony in 1877. Leighton was in attendance, in the company of Browning, Lewes and Felix Moscheles. See Charles Villiers Stanford, *Pages from an Unwritten Diary* (London, 1914), pp. 173-176.

⁷⁸ Cited in Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Weimar Years, 1848-1861*, Volume 2 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 349. Walker gives a far more extensive and nuanced account of the ideological differences and events which preceded the break between the Leipzig and Weimar schools than I could possibly justify here. See in particular the chapter "War of the Romantics," pp. 338-367.

⁷⁹ Francis Hueffer had very nearly predicted the reconciliation when he suggested that: 'The exclusive admiration of Handel and Mendelssohn, on the one hand, and of the school "of the future," on the other, is gradually being merged in an intelligent appreciation of all good music to whatever school or country it may belong.' [Francis Hueffer, 'The Chances of English Opera,' *Macmillan's Magazine* 40 (1879), 57-65 (53).]



Fig. 3. "Reception of the Abbé Liszt at the Grosvenor Gallery," *The Graphic* (17 April 1886)⁸⁰

⁸⁰ From left to right the printed names read: Mr. Otto Goldschmidt; Mr. August Manns; Mr. Walter Bache; Sir F. Leighton, P.R.A.; Mr. Charles Halle; Madame Albani (top); and Mr. F. H. Cohen R.A.; Mr. Arthur Sullivan; Rev. Henry White; The Abbe Liszt; Mr. W. Shakespeare; Herr Joachim; Mr. Arthur Chappell; Madame Antoinette Sterling (bottom).

Whilst we could never claim to know the extent of Leighton's allegiance to Joachim's ideological cause, his strong attachments to Joachim and his associates might go some way to explaining Leighton's own ideas concerning the art of music from the 1860s. If nothing else, perhaps, it suggests that even if he had opted to remain impartial, Leighton would have been wholly aware of the absolute versus programme music divide which formed one of the most important chapters in nineteenth-century music history. Thus, in contrast to the Aesthetic ladies of Du Maurier's "The Latest Fashion in Music at Home," it would appear that Leighton remained resistant to the growing vogue for advanced musical chromatism pioneered by virtuosos such as Liszt. In a letter to his father of 1855, Leighton would reveal: 'I have a sovereign dislike for the *engeance* of *pianistes* with their eternal jingle-tingles at the top of the piano, their drops of dew, their sources, their fairies, their belles, and the vapid runs of futile conceits with which they sentimentalise and torture the motive of other men.'⁸¹ This disavowal of the variety of musical ornamentation inherent to the fantasias, variations, and other dramatically-derived genres which were coming to dominate public performance in mid-century Europe takes on an added significance when in the very same letter Leighton would remark on 'how beautiful' he found Mendelssohn's music.⁸² Although he does not care to name these foreign 'pianistes', we can deduce that the rise of showmanship in contemporary musical performance — this, at the very height of "Lisztomania" — was in some ways an aesthetic bar to the direct communication of 'ideas' that he would later advocate in Brahms' music. If Leighton valued 'better comprehension' in non-verbal music then the effusive trills and *acciaccatura* of the new school would only detract from the coherent articulation of a sustained idea.

Significantly, Leighton's ideas about music are at their most illuminating when he talks of matters relating more immediately to his own profession. In 1890 the philanthropist, T.C. Horsfall, would write to Leighton regarding his latest venture: an art museum for the city of Manchester. Horsfall was greatly invested in the idea that art could serve as a civilising influence upon the people of Manchester, serving as a means of guiding 'fellow citizens towards a higher life for heart and mind.'⁸³ Conscious of the poor levels of literacy in the city,

⁸¹ Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, II, p. 126. Leighton's use of the word 'motive' is especially interesting here as it appears to signal towards one of the defining features of programmatic music, the 'leading motif' or *leitmotif*. Although the term 'motif' in writing about music goes back at least as far as the *Encyclopedie* in 1765, it had not been used in connection with the school of the future (to which Leighton clearly alludes) until 1865, in an essay by A. W. Ambros on Wagner. It suggests that Leighton had a precocious understanding of the chief differences between the different schools of musical thought. For the history of the term 'Leitmotif', see Arnold Whittall. "Leitmotif." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press. Web. 29 May. 2014. <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/16360>>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ T.C. Horsfall, *An Art Museum for Manchester* (Manchester: A. Ireland and Co., 1977), p. 20.

he believed that pictures were the only form capable of executing the job because they could convey the necessary message without the need for the written word. Having already won approval for his scheme by the likes of Ruskin, Horsfall would issue further letters to a number of prominent philanthropists, educators and artists, including, of course, Leighton.⁸⁴ In his response, Leighton would applaud the efforts of his correspondent in his attempt to spread the influence of art in Manchester but he felt compelled to make several suggestions. The first was that reproductions of art works were not preferable in any context because '[t]he subtle and infinite charm which resides in the handiwork of a master [...] can hardly ever be rendered by a copyist'.⁸⁵ The second and most important revision answered to Horsfall's idea of 'refusing encouragement to any [art] work which does not commemorate a noble deed':

It seems to me, on the contrary, to be a harmful one, inasmuch as it misdirects the mind of a people, already little open to pure artistic emotion, as to the special function of Art. This can, of course, only be the doing of something which it alone can achieve. Now, direct ethical teaching is specially the province of the written and the spoken word. A page or two from the pen of a great and nobly-inspired moralist as Newman, say, or a Liddon, or a Martineau can fire us more potently and definitely for good than a whole gallery of paintings. This does not, of course, mean that a moral lesson may not indirectly be conveyed by a work of art, and thereby enhance its purely moral value. But it cannot be the highest function of any form of expression to convey that which can be more forcibly, more clearly, and more certainly brought home through another channel. *You may no more make this direct explicit ethical teaching a test of worth in a painted work than you may do so in the case of instrumental music; indeed by doing so you will turn the attention of those before whom you place it from the true character of its excellence you will, so to speak, misfocus their emotional sensibility. It is only by concentrating his attention on essentially artistic attributes that you can hope to intensify in the spectator that perception of what is beautiful in the highest, widest, and fullest sense of the word, through which he may enrich his life by the multiplication of precious moments akin to those which the noblest and most entrancing music may bestow on him through different forms of aesthetic emotion.* It is in the power to lift us out of ourselves into regions of such pure and penetrating enjoyment that the privilege and greatness of art reside. If, in a fine painting, a further wholly human source of emotion is present, and if that emotion is more vividly kindled in the spectator by the fact that he is attuned to receive it by the excitement of aesthetic perception through the beauty of the work of art as such, that work will gain no doubt in interest and in width of appeal. *But it will not therefore be of a loftier order than a great work in architecture or music than the Parthenon, for instance, or a symphony of Beethoven, neither of which preaches a direct moral lesson.*⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ruskin would write about Horsfall's proposed scheme in *Fors Clavigera* IV Letter LXXIX although he would privately express his reservation concerning the venture being laid out in a city such as Manchester, suggesting that Horsfall's efforts might be better directed towards 'pour[ing] the dew of his artistic benevolence on less recusant ground.' Letter from J. Ruskin to T. C. Horsfall, 19 November 1878, cited in Michael Harrison, 'Social Reform in Late Victorian and Edwardian Manchester with Special Reference to T.C. Horsfall' (unpublished doctoral thesis: University of Manchester, 1987), p.181.

⁸⁵ Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, II, p. 277.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 277-279. Own emphasis added.

Although Leighton does not reject the possibility that art might be in some way morally enriching, he believes it may only be so ‘indirectly’ and never as the chief, or ‘highest function’ of the work; to do otherwise would be destructive to the sensibilities of the spectator, particularly those who are most in want of ‘pure artistic emotion’. Revealingly, he twice defers to instrumental music in order to illustrate the fundamental issue with Horsfall’s proposal; painting, much like music, cannot convey a ‘direct explicit ethical teaching’ simply because that is the province of words alone.

However this brief passage is illuminating in more unexpected ways, particularly in Leighton’s deployment of the word ‘aesthetic’ in close relation to the words ‘emotion’ and ‘perception’. To contextualise this contemporary usage, it is important to recognise a spectrum of musical ‘absolutism’ from the philosophically objective to the more perception-led subjective position. Forty years earlier, Hanslick had outspokenly rejected the developments of programme music, arguing that ‘the beauty of a composition is *specifically musical* — i.e., it inheres in the combinations of musical sounds and is independent of all alien, extra-musical notions’.⁸⁷ Akin to Mendelssohn, Hanslick would reject the misrepresentative application of linguistic models to music, suggesting that it offsets pure aesthetic perception: ‘[a]s a consequence of our mental constitution, words, titles, and other conventional associations (in sacred, military and operatic music more especially) give to our feelings and thoughts a direction which we often falsely ascribe to the character of the music itself.’⁸⁸ However Hanslick’s doctrine is much more radical than the *logos*-scepticism exhibited by Mendelssohn, instead positing a variety of musical formalism which collapsed content and form: ‘sounding forms in motion,’ he contended, ‘are the only and exclusive content and object of music’.⁸⁹ Indeed, as Botstein observes of what he calls ‘The Mendelssohnian Project’, the composer’s idea of music ‘as a means of human communication [...] had little to do with the notion of absolute music associated with Eduard Hanslick,’ adding elsewhere that: ‘Hanslick took the distinct character of music, as defined in the Mendelssohnian musical aesthetic, to a radical extreme by declaring that music was a completely antilinguistic alternative, detached from any immanent religious, social, or ideological meaning or function [...] Hanslick’s extreme formalism was a species of aestheticism quite foreign to Mendelssohn’s aspirations.’⁹⁰

Some critics have even been led to suggest that Hanslick’s theory of musical formalism prefigures Pater’s own privileging of music’s ‘indivisibility of form and content’

⁸⁷ Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, p. 12. Emphasis original.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Botstein, ‘The Aesthetics of Assimilation and Affirmation,’ p. 32; Botstein, ‘Songs without Words: Thoughts on Music, Theology, and the Role of the Jewish Question in the Work of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy,’ 575-576.

with which it shares obvious affinities.⁹¹ However it becomes clear that Hanslick's theory of musical formalism carried with it an appeal to philosophical objectivism, the belief that 'aesthetic investigations must, above all, consider the beautiful *object*, and not the perceiving *subject*' and we need only recall Pater's appeal to subjectivity as a central precept of aesthetic criticism in "The School of Giorgione" to recognise a fundamental epistemological difference between the two.⁹² Leighton's own casting of music in the act of perception is in many ways reflective of those articulated in Pater's "The School of Giorgione". The value of music, as of all art, is formed in a quasi-transcendental communion with the subject; great art has the ability to 'lift us out of ourselves into regions of such pure and penetrating enjoyment'.⁹³ Indeed, as Phillip Ross Bullock remarks: 'Where, for formalists, music's abstract nature concentrated meaning at a single point, namely the work itself, for 'aesthetes', music's inability to represent made possible a greater and more unstable set of imaginative responses'.⁹⁴ Thus Hanslick's hard-line rejection of musical content is in turn revised by Leighton, as he would later suggest in an essay written for *The Musical Times*, suggesting that: '[music] is "sui generis", with an awakening influence, a method of its own, a power of intensification, and a *suggestiveness* through association which aid those higher moods of contemplation which are as edifying in their way as direct moral teaching'.⁹⁵ For Leighton, music is fundamentally egalitarian in its provocation of a spectrum of emotions across a group of listeners. By endorsing aesthetic perception in relation to music — and art more generally — he authorises a mode of subjectivity in which the listener is ultimately the arbitrator of aesthetic value.

To understand Leighton's personal investment in nineteenth-century musical debate is, of course, to understand how this deeply engrained appreciation of music informed his paintings. And although this chapter primarily concerns Leighton's *Lieder ohne Worte* it is

⁹¹ See Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body*, pp. 221-222. Also Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 97: 'There is, as far as I know, no evidence of a direct link between Hanslick and Pater. However, that music plays the leading part in Pater's attempt to integrate form with content (without, I should emphasize, totally obliterating the distinction) suggests the evident power of Hanslick's phrase and of his musical formalism, either direct or indirect as the case may be, over Victorian aesthetics. (Pater, after all, read German.)' Hanslick is not actually cited in Billie Andrew Inman's *Walter Pater's Reading: A Bibliography of His Library Borrowings and Literary References, 1858-1873* (New York: Garland, 1981), though Inman acknowledges that what can be documented likely represents only a small fraction of what Pater actually read. I would add that given the prevalence of Hanslick's work it is more than likely that Pater would have been familiar with its key principles.

⁹² Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, p. 17. Emphases original.

⁹³ Compare Pater's own description of the quasi-transcendental nature of aesthetic experience: moments of 'intense consciousness [...] that make us spectators of all the fullness of existence' and 'quintessence of life', see *The Renaissance*, p. 44.

⁹⁴ Phillip Ross Bullock, "'Lessons in Sensibility": Rosa Newmarch, Music Appreciation and the Aesthetic Cultivation of the Self,' 315.

⁹⁵ 'Sir Frederic Leighton on Art and Ethics', *The Musical Times* 23 (1882), 16. As Musgrave remarks, the inclusion of this essay in a magazine devoted to music and musicians gives an indication of Leighton's extraordinary status in the arts generally in England by the 1880s.

important to begin our investigation with one of his earliest paintings concerned with a musical subject: *The Triumph of Music*. When the piece premiered at the Royal Academy of 1856, Leighton would undoubtedly have hoped that *The Triumph of Music* would emulate the success of Cimabue's *Celebrated Madonna is Carried in Procession Through the Streets of Florence*, which had been received the previous year to universal acclaim. This painting however yielded precisely the opposite reaction. In subject matter the painting was wholly conventional, depicting Orpheus playing to Pluto and Proserpina, King and Queen of the Underworld, in an attempt to redeem from death his wife, Eurydice. Yet the treatment of the theme was anything but familiar; in place of a lyre Leighton anachronistically bestowed upon Orpheus a violin. The detail was not lost on his critics, and was perhaps the greatest bone of contention amongst the dissenters: 'an Orpheus — an extremely ill-conceived mythological Paganini *playing the violin* — is the prominent character', remarked *Art Journal*, 'but enough: never was disappointment greater.'⁹⁶ So great was Leighton's own disappointment that it was hidden from view (possibly destroyed) and remains untraced to this day.

In a letter to his father, Leighton had attempted to justify the procedure: 'About fiddles, I *know* that the ancients had *none*; it is an anachronism I commit with my eyes open, because I believe that the picture will go home to the spectator much more forcibly in that shape.'⁹⁷ As Prettejohn has cannily observed, this reasoning appears to be indebted to an important debate in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, a text with which Leighton was well-acquainted.⁹⁸ In his discussions of anachronism in classical art, Hegel defends its use where 'in a work of art the characters, in their manner of speech, the expression of their feelings and ideas, the reflections they advance, their accomplishments, could not possibly be in conformity with the period, level of civilisation, religion, and view of the world which they are representing'.⁹⁹ These anachronisms are entirely permissible against the claims of a normative realism; in fact, 'such a transgression of so-called naturalness is, for art, a *necessary* anachronism'.¹⁰⁰ And yet Hegel's theory has a clause, one which prohibits one particular historical revision: 'It is worse when Orpheus stands there with a violin in his hand because the contradiction appears all too sharply between mythical days and such a modern instrument, which everyone knows had not been invented at so early a period'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ *Art Journal* (1 June 1856), 172. Emphasis original. See also *The Times*, 3 May 1856, p. 9: 'Raphael might paint fiddles but in these days they are not considered highly poetical instruments, and Orpheus certainly plays it in a style which never will redeem Eurydice'. I would suggest that the 'poetical instruments' to which he refers are pianos.

⁹⁷ Frederic Leighton to F.S. Leighton, cited in *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, I, p. 245. Original emphasis.

⁹⁸ Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake*, p. 134.

⁹⁹ Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, I, p. 278.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

Prettejohn is undecided as to whether Leighton had accidentally misremembered Hegel's sanction on a violin-playing Orpheus or whether he had the specific passage in mind in order to highlight the inconsistency of his anachronism model.¹⁰² However I would be inclined to suggest the latter, for two related reasons articulated several years later. The first to outline concerns the subject of our final chapter, Vernon Lee, who would take this particular issue to task in 'Apollo the Fiddler: A Chapter on Anachronism' published in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1882.¹⁰³ Here she observes that 'Raphael painted Apollo [in his Vatican fresco] playing, not upon lyre or cithara, or any other imaginable antique instrument, but upon a fiddle — upon, of all things, the most modern, unantique [sic] of instruments, an instrument born of the Middle Ages[.]'¹⁰⁴ Since the appearance of the fiddle in a painting such as this is so flagrantly anachronistic, Lee surmises that one must assume that the substitution 'was certainly not without a motive'.¹⁰⁵ As such, she argues that since a picture necessarily demands 'that each part should depend upon another, and the whole produce a single logical impression' — an idea which owes much to Lee's musical reading, as we will see — to dwell on one individual (anachronistic) aspect is against 'logical realism' which is to focus on these aspects 'combined with reference only to the pleasantness of effect'.¹⁰⁶ Although Lee makes no mention of Hegel in this particular essay (a curious fact when his name appears so frequently elsewhere in her writing) it would appear that she, like Leighton, would defend the 'necessary anachronism' on this count; as for art to be good 'men can work only in the style which belongs to their race and to their generation: to ask, therefore for a correct expression [...] is to demand what no art in its vital condition [...] can by any possibility give'.¹⁰⁷

Lee is, of course, referring to an artist who would not have been aware that he would be posthumously flouting Hegel's 'necessary anachronism' but it is quite possible that Leighton was aware of the significance of his instrument swap. Even so, in the context of the nineteenth century, the substitution of lyre for violin is a highly symbolic, aesthetic gesture and one which, I suggest, Leighton makes purposefully to foreground the value of a particular type of modern music which prioritises form and suggestion over the more prescriptive nature of lyric. Interestingly, the inversion of this idea is articulated in "Letter 83" (1877) of *Fors Clavigera*, entitled "Hesiod's Measure", where Ruskin takes modern music to task by extolling the forgotten virtues of Plato's 'third choir', a pedagogical system whereby men between the

¹⁰² Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake*, p. 134.

¹⁰³ Vernon Lee, 'Apollo the Fiddler: A Chapter on Artistic Anachronism,' *Fraser's Magazine* 631 (July 1882), 52-67.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

ages of thirty and sixty educate the next generation through vocal harmony.¹⁰⁸ He quotes the basic tenants of Plato's scheme before remarking:

I think that this passage alone may show the reader that the Greeks knew more of music than modern orchestral fiddlers fancy. For the essential work of Stradivarius, in *substituting the violin for the lyre and harp*, was twofold. Thenceforth, (a) instrumental music became the captain instead of the servant of the voice; and (b) skill of instrumental music, as so developed, became impossible in the ordinary education of a gentleman. So that, since his time, old King Cole has called for his fiddlers three, and Squire Western sent Sophia to the harpsichord when he was drunk: but of souls won by Orpheus, or cities built by Amphion, we hear no more.¹⁰⁹

Incidentally, Leighton had sent *The Triumph of Music* to Ruskin for his much-vaunted opinion prior to the exhibition and not only did he fail to respond, he also omitted the exhibit from his discussion of the year's paintings in his *Notes on some of the Principle Pictures exhibited in the Royal Academy*, the companion to the exhibition. He might well have had Leighton's painting in mind when he bemoaned the substitution of musical instruments, but then again, perhaps not; as Delia da Sousa Correa has observed, Ruskin believed that 'at the heart of music's corruption lies the inversion of the proper relation of music and verbal language'.¹¹⁰ In Ruskin's scheme, 'music' is synonymous with poetry, for by 'music' he principally meant song which would ideally be wedded to words. The lyre therefore was for Ruskin the mythological fulcrum of language and music and its usurpation by the violin — its historically-debased stringed descendent — was a symbol of modernity's growing indifference to one of the once-valued foundational principles of art: education.¹¹¹ Far from embodying aesthetic advancement, for Ruskin the emergence of instrumental music is reimagined as a form of cultural decline, a stance which positions him antithetically to the Romantic idealism of unworded song.¹¹² As such, he was not a fan of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*; and writing in *Fors Clavigera* he observes that: 'Mendelssohn's songs without words have been, I believe, lately popular, in musical circles. We shall, perhaps, require cradle songs with very few words,

¹⁰⁸ John Ruskin, "Letter 83 (November 1877)," in *Fors Clavigera*, cited in *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols. ed. by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), XXIX, pp. 258-272. Own emphasis added.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 259.

¹¹⁰ Delia da Sousa Correa, "Goddesses of Instruction and Desire: Ruskin and Music," in *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 111-130 (p. 128).

¹¹¹ Such was Ruskin's conviction in the power of song that he would commission the production of a lyre 'by which very young children could be securely taught the relations of sound in the octave,' see *The Works of John Ruskin*, XXIX, p. 500.

¹¹² Correa, "Goddesses of Instruction and Desire: Ruskin and Music," p. 128. Interestingly, omitted passages from this letter contained in the Appendix to *Fors Clavigera*, indicates that Ruskin had entertained the relationship between vocal music and painting when he suggested that the art of the German landscape painter, (Adrian) Ludwig Richter 'are the only faithful imageries of divine companionship that I know of in modern art to illustrate Plato by.' See "Plato's "Music" and Ludwig Richter," in *The Works of John Ruskin*, XXIX, pp. 594-596.

and Christmas carols with very sad ones, before long; in fact, it seems to me, we are fast losing our old skill in carolling.’¹¹³ If Ruskin had been chiefly concerned with the loss of words in music it was because ‘the arts of word and of note, separate from each other, become degraded and the muse-less sayings, or senseless melodies, harden the intellect, or demoralize the ear’.¹¹⁴ Leighton, as we know, was of precisely the opposite opinion; and in this, an address to the students of the Royal Academy delivered in 1896, his sentiments would read like a retort to Ruskin’s didactic model for music:

...from time immemorial a channel of purest emotion, and Art divine, if a divine Art there be: the Art of Music. It is given to the supreme few who occupy the solitary mountain-tops of Fame to be able to express, without incurring the charge of vanity, their high consciousness of value to the world of the gifts they bestow upon it; one of these few was Beethoven, and his proud words are there to show us in what esteem he, at least, held the power of the Art on which he has risen to immortality: ‘He to whom my music reveals its whole significance is lifted up’, these are his words, ‘is lifted up above the sorrows of the world.’ And assuredly the Art which has borne up, and daily bears up, in oblivious ecstasy so many weary souls, which has lulled and cheated if only for a moment so many aching hearts, and which in its endless plasticity has a response for every mood of the imagination and a voice for every phrase of feeling, is rooted too deeply in the general love and reverence to hear the onslaughts of any logic-ridden crotch-monger.¹¹⁵

Aesthetic ‘Suggestiveness’: Leighton’s Lieder ohne Worte (1861)

If the conspicuous anachronism of *The Triumph of Music* had been, as Leighton suggested, an attempt to ‘drive home’ his intentions to the spectator then we can detect the same impulse behind *Lieder ohne Worte* (Fig. 4), the intention of which was to ‘translate to the eye of the spectator something of the pleasure the child receives through her ears’.¹¹⁶ Prettejohn has suggested that this particular painting ‘represents a transitional moment’ in Leighton’s career; a patent departure from the *Cimabue’s Madonna*-epoch of ‘historical genre painting’ and yet before his subsequent commitment to a ‘thoroughgoing classicism’.¹¹⁷ In Leighton’s own estimation, it was more particularly a retreat from the ‘realistic’, as he would inform his father: ‘I remember, it is true, telling you before I began to paint “Lieder ohne Worte” that I intended

¹¹³ Ruskin, “Letter 24 (December 1872),” in *The Works of John Ruskin*, XXVII, p. 433.

¹¹⁴ Ruskin, Preface to *Rock Honeycomb*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, XXXI, p. 107.

¹¹⁵ Frederic Leighton, *Address delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy by the Late Lord Leighton* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Tubner and Co., 1896), pp. 53-54.

¹¹⁶ Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, II, p. 63.

¹¹⁷ Prettejohn, *Art for Art’s Sake*, p. 135.

to make it realistic, but from the first moment I began I felt the mistake, and made it professedly and pointedly the reverse'.¹¹⁸

What is interesting about the reception of this painting is that praise and censure were awarded variously upon what was essentially a mutual understanding of the painting's non-representational ambitions. Thus for *Macmillan's Magazine*, its ambiguity was cause for celebration:

Mr. Leighton's "Lieder ohne Worte" [sic] (550), notwithstanding the wrongful manner in which it is placed, must carry off the crown of praise from those who look for the noble faculty of poetic imagination. The pure, luxurious, sensuousness of the theme is wrought out with feeling in design, and complete and delicate mastery of all such refinements of execution as convey the painter's ideas. With perfect taste he has not encumbered his representations with anything that is definite or positive in costume or accessories; it is truly a "song without words," in the sweetest musical sense.¹¹⁹

Whereas for another commentator,

We know that a certain refinement of sentiment, which it doubtless possesses, has won admirers; not however, happily, among the hanging committee. Here again, we have draperies, which in disposition are absolute impossibilities, and a maiden for a muse, morbid, sicklied, and woe-begone, wholly, we should hope, transcending the reach of nature. [...] These works of Mr. Leighton in style seem to be gathered from all foreign countries and times, and yet to belong to none. We recognise a distant dreamy remembrance of the Old Italian, mixed with the artificial manner of the French, mingled again in turn with the mazy abstractions of the more morbid German. And all this has been brought from afar, expressly to hang on the walls of an English Academy. We are sure that Mr. Leighton by this time must feel that his triumphs, so ill appreciated, are wholly un-English and out of place.¹²⁰

The association with 'foreignness' aligns Leighton's painting squarely with the critical tradition of aestheticism in the manner in which a number of his contemporaries, such as Swinburne, for example, were regularly accused of borrowing from non-English artistic traditions to heighten the 'sensuality' of their work.¹²¹ Undoubtedly the title of Leighton's painting contributed to the perceived manifestation of mazy, morbid German abstractionism and it is worth noting that Leighton retained the original title of Mendelssohn's pieces despite the fact that, as the first critic demonstrates, the English translation was commonly known.

¹¹⁸ Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, II, p. 62.

¹¹⁹ 'The Royal Academy,' *Macmillan's Magazine* 4.21 (July 1861), 205-215 (206).

¹²⁰ J. R. Atkinson, 'The Royal Academy and the Water-Colour Societies,' *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* XC (August 1861), 217.

¹²¹ For Swinburne see Richard Sieburth, "Poetry and Obscenity: Baudelaire and Swinburne," *Comparative Literature* 36:4 (1984), 343-53.



Fig. 4. Frederic Leighton, *Lieder ohne Worte* (1860-1861)

By observing the original title's plurality — *Lieder* rather than *Lied* — it suggests that Leighton wanted to maintain the sense of multiple response governed by the form; that in which 'every member of [the audience] is unconsciously agreeing to differ harmoniously with his next neighbour as to the exact shade of meaning expressed by each passage of the song.'¹²²

Critics like Cooper might be inclined to dismiss the significance of Leighton's nomenclature because the title *Lieder ohne Worte* had only been 'dreamt up when the painting was already finished'.¹²³ However what she overlooks is that its working title had been *The Listener*, suggesting that regardless of the revision of nomenclature it had been conceived with a musical subjectivity in mind. Like Whistler's 'nocturnes', Leighton's title was suggested to him by a patron: Mrs. Ralph Benson, whose husband had attended the artist's private view ahead of the Academy exhibition. A few days after the event, Mr. Benson had written to the artist with the following suggestion:

Dear Mr. Leighton,

Pardon intrusion. I thought of your beautiful pictures after my yesterday's visit, and I anticipated a struggle with the difficulty you mentioned of worthily naming them.

Don't think me impertinent for volunteering the result. It seemed impossible without verbal description to explain the sacred subject to the profane imagination, while a prose translation of its sentiment must be heavy and subversive of romance. I think, were I fortunate enough to own the picture, I would call it "Not Yet," and I would put some little lines in the catalogue, which, for aught any one knows, might have come from some volume of rhyme, and which should explain that it is a story of a dream, and that the rejection is not final: something in this spirit, only better:

Not yet not yet,/ Still there is trial for thee,/ still the lot,/ To bear (the Father wills it)
strife and care,/ With this sweet consciousness in balance set/ Against the world, to
soothe thy suffering there./ Thy Lord rejects thee not./ Such tender words awoke me,
hopeful, shriven,/ To life on earth again from dream of heaven./ For the beauty at the
fountain

I once thought the best title might be some Couplet like the following: "So tranced
and still half-dreamed she, and half-heard/ The splash of fountain and the song of
bird."

But my wife, from my description of the picture, suggested a name better suited to the
"suggestiveness" of the work: "*Lieder ohne Worte*": don't you think it rather pretty?¹²⁴

¹²² 'Words for Music,' 552.

¹²³ Cooper, "Aspiring to the Condition of Music," p. 265.

¹²⁴ Letter from Mr. Ralph Benson, 1 April 1861, cited in Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, II, p. 58.

That Mrs. Benson had been able to cite a potential title based only on a description no doubt appealed to Leighton, who had seemingly been struggling to articulate his intention with the application of a particular title. What is particularly interesting is that Benson's suggestion of a couplet bears an uncanny resemblance to Souchay's own proposals to Mendelssohn; an overly verbose, unwieldy description which practically speaking has no place in naming an art work. The word 'suggestive' here is particularly pertinent to Leighton's intentions because not only did he prioritise this form of anti-fixity in aesthetic response, it was also a word routinely cited in association with Mendelssohn's own *Lieder ohne Worte*: those 'exquisitely suggestive sketches which he has, as a rule, purposely left without a title,' remarked one commentator, 'have perhaps been more decisively christened than any other pieces we could mention[.]'¹²⁵

Yet there is also another implication which bears consideration and that is that Leighton was inclined to use the title as a means to court — what was at that moment — a particularly low public and critical opinion of his work. In his analysis of the relationship between social and economic structures in mid-nineteenth-century France and the rise of the 'art for art's sake' position, Pierre Bourdieu has described the situation for what he calls the 'pure artist' as a 'double bind' characterised by an inverse relationship between winning on 'symbolic terrain' versus winning on 'economic terrain'.¹²⁶ As mid-century art markets rewarded conventional academic products, innovative artists increasingly came to regard artistic value as existing in inverse relation to economic value. Artists who sought creative autonomy faced a dilemma, aiming to keep their work free from market pressures, and yet needing to cultivate sales in order to function as wage earners. In 1861, the ambitious Leighton had yet to be made a fellow of the Royal Academy and following the commercial and critical success of *Cimabue's Madonna* it had been some years since he had submitted a work worthy of praise. As *Blackwood Edinburgh Magazine* remarked in their unflattering review of his 1861 submissions, since this much celebrated work, 'the acknowledged powers of Mr. Leighton have been in abeyance[.]'¹²⁷ Given the unprecedented popularity of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* in England at the time — at this, perhaps the very pinnacle of their ubiquity

¹²⁵ Henry C. Lunn, 'Descriptive Music,' *The Musical Times* (1 December 1868), 599-601 (600). See also, 'Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words",' *Dwight's Journal of Music: A Paper of Art and Literature*, 12:10 (5 December 1857), 281-282. Even those who would be weary of the rise of instrumental music would suggest that: 'Music has furnished us with charmingly suggestive "songs without words," but singers should be ashamed to merely instrumentalise their songs upon the organ of voice, as if the music were everything and the words nothing', Alexander Melville Bell, *Essays and Postscripts on Elocution* (London, 1886), p. 38.

¹²⁶ Bourdieu writes of 'the specific contradiction of the mode of production which the pure artist aims to establish. One is in fact in an economic world inverted: the artist cannot triumph on the symbolic terrain except by losing on the economic terrain (at least in the short run), and vice versa (at least in the long run).' See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genius and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford, California: California University Press, 1992), p. 83.

¹²⁷ Atkinson, 'The Royal Academy and the Water-Colour Societies,' 217.

— one cannot help but question whether Leighton had used the title to lend his works an added public draw without sacrificing the allusion to ‘pure’ art. After the self-confessed ‘fiasco’ of his ‘Orpheus’ — that which ‘the papers have abused, [and] the public does not care for’ — he would approach his future submissions with a renewed virulence: ‘consider what an edge and a zest I get for my future efforts,’ he told his mother, ‘and what an incentive I have to exert myself to put down the venomous jargon of envious people next year, tho’ the Academicians may think that they have cowed me, I shall very probably not exhibit; but the year after, God willing, they shall feel the weight of my hand in a way that will surprise them’.¹²⁸

Although several later paintings such as *The Golden Hours* (1864) and *The Music Lesson* (1877) would similarly tend to a musical subject, Leighton’s *Lieder ohne Worte* would be a remote experiment with musical nomenclature; just a few short years later Whistler would begin his own practice in earnest, wearing the badge of aesthetic allegiance much more visibly than the later President. Indeed, if, as Prettejohn has observed, there is a tendency to distil our understanding of Leighton into two seemingly irreconcilable poles — the ‘Aesthete’ and/or the ‘Academician’ — then it is easy to see how Whistler’s more sustained aesthetic experiment with musical nomenclature created the critical standard by which Leighton’s work appears to be situated closer to the ‘virtuous avant-garde pole’.¹²⁹ Indeed, it may be, as Prettejohn notes elsewhere, that in the canonisation of modernist art in the early twentieth century, Leighton’s own ‘revolt against the sway of “literary” values’ had been overlooked in favour of those of Whistler and Pater.¹³⁰ As such, we might end with a few words from Leighton himself during his Presidential address delivered to the Art Congress of Liverpool in 1888, which firmly re-establishes him within the ‘anti-literary’ tendencies of aestheticism:

The inadequacy of the general standard of artistic insight is here seen in the fact that to a great multitude of persons the attractiveness of a painted canvas is in proportion to the amount of literary element which it carries, not in proportion to the degree of aesthetic emotion stirred by it, or of appeal to the imagination contained in it — persons, those, who regard a picture as a compound of anecdote and mechanism, and with whom looking at it would seem to mean only another form of reading. Time and time again, in listening to the description — the enthusiastic description — of a picture, we become aware that the points emphasised by the speaker are such as did not specially call for treatment in art at all, were often not fitted for expression through form or colour, their natural vehicle being not paint but ink, which is the proper and appointed conveyor of abstract thoughts and concrete narrative.

¹²⁸ Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, I, p. 247.

¹²⁹ Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Leighton: the Aesthete as Academic,” in *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rafael Cardoso Denis and Colin Rodd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 33-52

¹³⁰ Elizabeth Prettejohn, “The Modernism of Frederic Leighton,” in *English Art, 1860-1914: Modern Artists and Identity*, ed. by David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 31-48 (p. 34).

[...]

Now I know that in what I am here saying I skirt the burning ground of controversy long and hotly waged — skirt it only, for that controversy touches but the borders of my subject, and I shall of course not pursue it here. I will, nevertheless, to avoid misrepresentation in either sense, state, as briefly as I can, one or two definite principles on which it appears to me safe to stand. It is given to form and to colour to elicit in men powerful and exquisite emotions, emotions covering a very wide range of sensibility, and to which they alone have the key. The chords within us which vibrate to these emotions are the instrument on which art plays, and a work of art deserves that name, as I have said, in proportion as, and in the extent to which, it sets those chords in motion.¹³¹

For Leighton, then, music is much more than an aesthetic model; it is fundamentally a structure for being, a sympathy which should serve as a touchstone for aesthetic experience across the arts. Moreover, in endorsing music over words he explicitly makes redundant the art critic: he who wilfully ignores the ‘aesthetic emotion’ which is stimulated by the art work and for whom painting is ‘only another form of reading’. The allusion to a ‘controversy long and hotly waged’ brings to mind recent events in which aesthetic differences were played out publically in courts of law and though Leighton states that he only wishes to ‘skirt’ the issue at hand, we will see that — inkeeping with the character of his work — there is much more to his suggestion that he does not put into words.

‘Songs without Words’: Whistler and his Critics

When Leighton refers to those who ‘regard a picture as a compound of anecdote and mechanism’ he might well have been describing William Powell Frith, the ubiquitous and highly popular purveyor of narrative paintings such as *Derby Day* (1856-1858) and *The Railway Station* (1862) — visual testaments to historical narratives of British Empire and Industry. His criticisms of aestheticism — notwithstanding, in his mind, the near-synonymous schools of Pre-Raphaelitism and Impressionism, for whom he reserved equal disfavour — form some of the most outspoken testimonies from the ‘British School’, for which he was the self-appointed spokesperson. However, as Shearer West observes, this particular antagonism has been somewhat overlooked in art history in favour of the more visible conflict between Whistler and Ruskin.¹³²

¹³¹ ‘Presidential Address delivered by Sir. F. Leighton, Bart., P.R.A., at the Art Congress, held at Liverpool, December 3rd, 1888,’ cited in Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, II, pp. 341-361 (354-355). Own emphasis added.

¹³² Shearer West, ‘Tom Taylor, William Powell Frith, and the British School of Art,’ *Victorian Studies* (1990), 307-326.

Indeed, there is much to suggest that the antagonism between Whistler and Frith was well-known to the British public. In Du Maurier's "A Fortiori" (1879) a 'Philistine Father' questions his son disapprovingly on his art practices, asking 'Why the Dickens don't you paint something like Frith's 'Derby Day', he asks, 'something everybody can understand, and somebody buy?' The query is met, somewhat predictably, by an indignant response: '*Everybody understand*, indeed! Art is for the few, father! And the higher the art, of course the fewer the few. The highest art of all is for one. That art is mine. That one is — myself!' Gazing proudly upon her son, the final word is reserved for his mother, the 'Fond Mamma' who cannot help but remark adoringly: 'There speaks my own brave boy!'¹³³ Although the 'Young Genius' artist of the sketch is unidentified in name he is all the while instantaneously identifiable as Whistler, recognisable not only in foppish appearance but through a form of aesthetic defence with which the artist had come to be synonymous. Accordingly, the father's appeal towards a more populist form of art (together with its commercial benefits) is, as the title suggests, defiantly trumped by the *Whistlerian* logic of high art. If Leighton's *Lieder ohne Worte* — and his theory of art more generally — was, as I suggest, an attempt to circumnavigate the threat of exclusion from aesthetic experiences by making an appeal to instrumental music's fundamentally egalitarian nature, then Whistler was, at least in Du Maurier's estimation, anathema to this noble pursuit. Instead, his 'genius' situates artistic value on a chart of inverse correlation: the fewer who understand, the more meaning and value a work possesses. However if the uncultured figure of the artist's father is the visible antagonist of the piece then there lurks another unseen adversary to the young artist's genius, the painter of the aforementioned *Derby Day*: Frith.

Whistler's conviction that most of his contemporaries were unable to appreciate aesthetic qualities led to his corollary argument that high art — formally advanced paintings without anecdotal compensations — would baffle or antagonise the public. As Catherine Carter Goebel has shown in her study of Whistler's 'self-construction', his self-conscious cultivation of an 'Aesthetic' persona fed upon the negativity of the press and art establishment; in essence, in order for his 'bohemian' image to emerge, it required something to emerge against.¹³⁴ Thus *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890) not only includes a lengthy section documenting the most negative and acerbic reviews of his works (the majority of which focus on his employment of music), its very title displays the extent to which Whistler prized the mythos of misunderstood genius. Given this attitude it is easy to see why Whistler chose not to dwell on the more positive assessments of his work, of which there were many. However

¹³³ George Du Maurier, "A Fortiori," *Punch* 76 (31 May 1879), p. 249. Emphasis Original.

¹³⁴ Catherine Carter Goebel, 'Arrangement in Black and White: The Making of a Whistler Legend' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Northwestern University, 1988), pp. 5-6.

not all critics found the eccentricities of his nomenclature a bar to understanding and when Whistler embarked on his musical scheme in 1867 with *Symphony in White, No.3*, it would yield some promising assessments — even if these were at times obscured by general confusion and disapproval, as one critic remarked: ‘Mr. Whistler’s “Symphony in White” (273) is the source and subject of animated controversy. Most English painters attack it as impudently incomplete, declaring that if painters could be allowed to leave off where Mr. Whistler left off in this picture, the art would be a joke; that is the mere ghost and faint dream of a picture, not a picture at all. On the other hand the work has its rapturous admirers, who find in it matter of wonder and delight.’¹³⁵ This polarising effect is evident in some of the reviews from the exhibition which identify a common feature but nonetheless disagree on its effect. Thus one critic perceptively intuited a way in which to understand Whistler’s work based on the suggestion of music implied by the title:

Mr. Whistler views art from quite another standpoint, as our American cousins say, and the first thing he exacts from the spectator is imagination. He declines to enter in the prosy details of his art, objects to being re[a]d off like an almanac, and regards articulate sounds with a holy abomination. If you are to translate his works, he seems to say, into any sister art, let it be into that of song and the *songs be without words*. Agree to this, and he will furnish you with the key note, in incident or colour, and peradventure discourse to you a few bars of tender melody, not unaccompanied with harmonies subdued and full, and most in a minor and melancholy key, but once having given you the theme the artist expects you to play the piece out yourself.¹³⁶

Whistler’s innovations with ‘musical’ art, this writer suggests, redefine the role and significance of spectatorship; fundamentally the viewer is expected to participate in completing the meaning of the painting themselves. More crudely, in order to develop the aesthetic eye one must — in sympathy with Whistler’s sonic metaphors — essentially develop the aesthetic ear. The critic discerns that imagination is integral to understanding the painting, a caveat which featured centrally in discussions of nineteenth century instrumental music, as the composer Hector Berlioz would remark: ‘[t]his music needs no words to make its expression specific; it develops a language which is generally imprecise, and which as a result has all the greater impact upon *listeners endowed with imagination*[.]’¹³⁷ Similarly, we may recall that Mendelssohn’s ‘songs without words’ yielded meaning only to ‘the ear of every genuine listener’.¹³⁸ Here academical knowledge of art and the principles which have

¹³⁵ ‘The Exhibition of the Royal Academy: Second Notice,’ *The Manchester Guardian*, 21 May 1867, p. 5.

¹³⁶ ‘Notes on Art: The Royal Academy — 5th Notice’, *Sunday Times*, 23 June 1867, p.7. Own emphasis added.

¹³⁷ Hector Berlioz, in *Le Correspondant* (22 October 1830), cited in *Critique Musicale 1823-1863*, ed. by H. Robert Cohen and Yves Gérard (Paris, 1996), pp. 63-68. Emphasis original.

¹³⁸ ‘Words for Music,’ 551.

historically informed any rightful interpretation of the art work such as colour, line and composition, have been displaced by a system which cannot be taught. Instead, the viewer is expected to enter an unspoken agreement with the artist, which, once agreed, will enable them to interpret the painting meaningfully, and personally, without recourse to a more traditional critical criteria of aesthetic standard.

In another assessment of Whistler's *Symphony in White, No.3*. from the same year it is not a painted 'song without words' but rather a 'symphony without words':

The artist's primary aim is colour; to this (as, indeed, indicated by the title of the first-named picture) everything is subordinated, everything else is rendered indefinite in order to concentrate attention upon this. In favour of this quality, the painter proposes to attain abstract art, *as exclusively addressed to the eye as a symphony independent of words is addressed to the ear*. The first picture, representing a lady in white reclining on a coach, is remarkable for beautiful chromatic harmonies of white and greys, the second [Battersea] for the exquisite truth with which the general aspect of the Thames shining under grey daylight is rendered. Yet in this direction, also, Mr. Whistler goes to extremes. We protest against any elevation of sensuous colour above intellectual form, and against a conception of art which would deprive it of means (not possessed by music) for reaching the mind and heart.¹³⁹

Where the previous critic assumed the burden of interpretation upon the hearing-eyes of the viewer, here this critic acknowledges this proposal but ultimately reasserts the artist's duty of representation. The analogy however is particularly interesting because whilst a 'song' traditionally contains verbal content, a 'symphony independent of words' is a complete musical misnomer: the nineteenth-century symphonic form, propagated and popularised by the likes of Beethoven, being purely musical. It is unclear as to whether this speaks to a lack of musical awareness on the critic's part or whether this inconsistency is used to signal the irregularity of Whistler's own practice; an unnecessary negation of form akin to Whistler's own needless relegation of 'intellectual form' to sensual and disorderly aspects of paint.

Several months after the exhibition, Whistler would come to feature prominently in Sidney Colvin's 'English Painters and Painting in 1867' where he was acknowledged as part of a new movement in contemporary art. The artists in this assemblage were not aligned under the banner of 'art for art's sake' — the term which abounds most frequently in our current estimation of the loosely-defined group (that association would not be established until the

¹³⁹ 'Fine Arts: Exhibition of the Royal Academy,' *Illustrated London News*, 25 May 1867, p. 479.

following year)¹⁴⁰ — but rather that of adherence to ‘beauty without realism’.¹⁴¹ Those identified in Colvin’s group were, in order: Leighton, Albert Moore, Whistler, D.G. Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Simeon Solomon, George Frederick Watts, Arthur Hughes and George Heming Mason. Uncannily, Colvin writes that Leighton ‘does not attempt realism’, an observation which recalls the artist’s approach for *Lieder ohne Worte*.¹⁴² Meanwhile Whistler is mooted as one of the central proponents of those who ‘aims at beauty without realism’, that which the author notes ‘completely mystif[ies] the average spectator’.¹⁴³ It would only be later in the century that the word ‘Aestheticism’ supplanted that of ‘Art for Art’s Sake’ so what we have in Colvin’s article is a proto-Aesthetic formula for the recognition of individual artists who shared a number of artistic concerns and stylistic affinities but who did not, unlike the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, constitute a formal association. What is particularly interesting about Colvin’s terminology is that ‘beauty *without* realism’ locates its sense of meaning in its own negation; like ‘songs without words’ the phrase tantalises with its own recognition of what ought to be there which conversely only reinforces the conventional expectation that ‘realism’ is a fundamental precept of art.

For Frith, Colvin’s article would, perhaps, only confirm what he already believed about this school of contemporary art and the influence of ‘Impressionist’ styles which he predicted would do ‘incalculable damage to the modern school of English art’.¹⁴⁴ Following his involvement in the Ruskin trial, Frith would resume his campaign against the perceived enemies of the ‘British School’ in full force. In ‘Crazes in Art: “Pre-Raphaelitism” and “Impressionism”’ (1888) Frith observes that the aesthetic school — strongly alluded to but not named — ‘is one in which “nocturnes” and “symphonies” flourish, in which the examples of the great masters seem to be set asides and probably despised.’¹⁴⁵ Although Whistler is not singled out by name — in fact Frith would never mention the artist by name in his writing, nor would he refer to the trial in his autobiography — it is clear from the sneering allusion to the variety of nomenclature with which the artist was associated that he is the true object of Frith’s ire and the one who would be accountable for the potential derailment of British art. To those who would be tempted to follow in the path of Whistler et al., Frith would have a message: ‘always bear in mind that after passing a long apprenticeship in drawing his business is to learn

¹⁴⁰ Tom Taylor, ‘Among the Pictures: Part II,’ *Gentleman’s Magazine* (July 1868), 151. See Prettejohn, *Art for Art’s Sake*, pp. 6-7. Prettejohn’s analysis is informed by Colvin’s identification of these artists, with the exception of Hughes and Mason.

¹⁴¹ Sidney Colvin, ‘English Painters and Painting in 1867,’ *Fortnightly Review* 2.10 (1 October 1867), 464-476.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 473.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ William Powell Frith, *My Autobiography*, II, p. 352.

¹⁴⁵ William Powell Frith, ‘Crazes in Art: “Pre-Raphaelitism” and “Impressionism”,’ *Magazine of Art* (January 1888), 187-191 (191).

to paint, by which I mean to acquire the power of thoroughly and completely representing — as the great masters did — the object before him [...] Let him throw nocturnes and symphonies to the wind.’¹⁴⁶

These ideas would be developed more fully the following year in “‘Realism’ versus ‘Sloppiness’” (1889) in which Frith’s unholy trinity of painterly styles — Pre-Raphaelitism, Impressionism and Aestheticism — are described as ‘fungi on the tree of art’.¹⁴⁷ Although Frith is assured that ‘there is little necessity to warn the English student’ of the potential dangers of adopting this practise he nonetheless feels obliged to elucidate the problems which would inevitably arise should it be properly embraced:

There is another eccentricity in the air which seems to call for observation and warning. I hear that *subject* in a picture is not only of no consequence, but it is better avoided. Pictures, according to this novel theory, should be “songs without words;” they should be beautiful in colour, light, and shadow, tone, and all the rest, but these qualities should not be made vehicles of story: that is to be left to literature. What, then, becomes of the cartoons of Raphael and the “Marriage a la Mode” of Hogarth? What becomes of Michelangelo’s “Last Judgement” and the “Acteon and Diana” of Titian? And, to go much lower, if attempts to make painting a vehicle for a story are reprehensible, what culprits are the old Dutchmen, with their Kermesses and their innumerable illustrations of Low Country life and manners! — Jan Steen, with his “Physician Visiting a Sick Frau;” and Teniers, with his “Prodigal Son”! It is true that there are Italian pictures to be found which affect the mind like a solemn strain of music, from the loveliness of the tone and the exquisite harmony of the colours; but, beyond those charms — and no one can value and enjoy them more than the writer — they mean nothing...I submit that painting is a language capable of expressing every emotion of the heart and mind of the human being, and that its vocation is to endeavour to elevate by poetic treatment of noble themes; or, if that rare power is denied the artist, then to convey moral lessons or infinite varieties of harmless pleasure.¹⁴⁸

Whistler is not named here but nor does he need to be; he would be instantly recognisable as the purveyor of the most ‘eccentric’ art of the age. The musical form of Whistler’s school is ‘novel’, Frith claims, thus positioning the movement within his oft-employed lexicon of aesthetic disapproval, amongst frequently vaunted terms such as ‘craze’, ‘fashion’ and ‘fad’. However, ‘novel’ also simultaneously reinstates the abiding structure of discourse, of *words*, with which Frith was so concerned and which these artists so foolishly sought to suppress in art. If ‘song without words’ were the musical analogue to Whistler’s paintings, then the ‘novel’ would be Frith’s — panoramic scenes of contemporary life at the service of literature. Fundamentally, the eschewal of literary content in art is problematic for Frith because it

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ William Powell Frith, “‘Realism’ versus ‘Sloppiness’,” 8. Emphasis original.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 7.

threatens an overarching narrative of national art. Frith was deeply invested in the revival and establishment of a quintessentially ‘British’ art identity and his reference to Hogarth — arguably the first ‘great’ British artist — connects him to the renewed critical interest in the artist who was seen to embody all that the British school found desirable in the development of an artistic national character; an ‘honest homely’ English character, a ‘shrewd eye,’ and an unparalleled skill for constructing ‘pictorial narrative’.¹⁴⁹ Frith might have been the artistic descendent of Hogarth — as was frequently noted in the press¹⁵⁰ — but Whistler never could be, nor could he be positioned in an artistic lineage beginning with Velasquez, as had been suggested at trial; his work lacked the necessary posterity for the inclusion in any kind of national art history. However Frith’s history is far from unidirectional; it is also concerned with ‘what will become’ of the work of the great masters, pre-existing works of huge significance. If, Frith suggests, art will insist upon suppressing intellectual content in favour of impressionistic qualities such as colour, line and form, then what objective standard can be used to value the merit of the art work; and, by extension, what room is there for the art critic who is the only necessary person to keep the Old Masters alive.

The word ‘nocturne’ therefore served a purpose for Whistler: used, as he claimed, to ‘indicate an artistic interest alone, divesting the picture of any anecdotal interest which might have been otherwise attached to it [...] This picture is throughout a problem I attempt to solve’.¹⁵¹ The ‘problem’ would be the attempt to divest the traditional understanding of a ‘picture’ — that which was predicated upon ‘anecdotal interest’ and ‘story-telling’ — by using a name which could indicate an artistic interest alone. Writing in her recent discussion of titular conventions in painting, Ruth Bernard Yeazell suggests that ‘the title’ belongs ‘to the democratizing of art — even, or especially, when painters resist the legibility it threatens.’¹⁵² But this is no less true, of course, in music which was arguably all the more susceptible to the ‘literary’ impulses of both audiences — and its critics. Perhaps then it was inevitable that Whistler’s preoccupation with musically-styled nomenclature would only succeed in heightening the sense of ‘eccentricity’ and artifice; his was an impossible task. Indeed, one critic remarking on his ‘Nocturne in Snow and White’ perceived him to be guilty of attempting to achieve the impossible:

¹⁴⁹ ‘International Exhibition 1862: Pictures of the British School,’ *Art Journal* (July 1862), 149-152.

¹⁵⁰ Remarking on Frith’s *Ramsgate Sands* (1854), *Punch* magazine’s glowing assessment asked: ‘Why not, having thus begun, go on and be the Hogarth of our day and generation?’, see “Punch Among the Painters, No. 3,” *Punch*, 155 (1854), 222.

¹⁵¹ Cited in Merrill, *A Pot of Paint*, p. 144.

¹⁵² Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired their Names* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 4.

And sooth to say, were it not ungenerous to thrust at a fallen foe, we might be tempted to hint at the impossibility of making a picture without any visible objects, these being so delicately defined as to be scarcely perceptible. Songs without words may and do enchant the ear, but canvas without distinguishable impress can hardly be expected to delight the eye.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ 'Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts,' *The Art Journal* 209 (May 1879), 90-91 (90).

2.

Music in the ‘Condition of Music’: Claude Debussy’s Reciprocal Aestheticism

[Walter Pater] said in *The Renaissance* that the tendency of all arts is to aspire to the condition of music, his theory and his practice was the same, and if he had lived to hear *L’après-midi d’un Faune*, he could not have done else but think that he was listening to his own prose changed into music by some sorcerer or sorcerers, malign or benevolent.

— George Moore, *Avowals* (1919)¹

It is not too difficult to surmise why George Moore’s reflections on Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après midi d’une faune* (1894) have failed to merit much critical discussion. After all, it is a sentiment which ostensibly marries together two very well-documented features of his writing; the unwavering reverence for his ‘master’, Walter Pater, and an equally robust interest in the art of music.² Indeed, Moore’s regard for music shaped many of his works, from his so-called ‘music novels’, *Evelyn Innes* (1898) and *Sister Theresa* (1901), to his critical treatments of painting and literature, which, in the manner of so many of his contemporaries, are routinely peppered with a lexicon borrowed from across the sister arts. As Mary S. Pierce remarks: ‘The use of sound and music was at the root of Moore’s intentions, whether it is employed as a backdrop, as a structural model, as reflective of mood, as metaphor, or as suggestive of embracing an *à-la-mode* French synaesthetic trend.’³ Accordingly, Moore would often liken the work of writers and visual artists to composers; as he would observe in *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888) of J.M.W. Turner’s ‘Carthage’ painting, the ‘passages of light and shade’ within the canvas are akin to ‘fugues, and there his art is allied to Bach in sonority and beautiful combination’.⁴ Elsewhere in this same tract, musical allusions are extended to articulate differences in literary styles, as rendered here in his consideration of Walter Scott and Edward

¹ George Moore, *Avowals* (London: Heinemann, 1924; first pub. 1919), pp. 195-196.

² For Moore’s interest in music see Elizabeth Roche, ‘George Moore’s *Evelyn Innes*: A Victorian ‘Early Music’ Novel,’ *Early Music* 11.1 (1983), 71-73; Grace Kehler, “Artistic Experiment and the Reevaluation of the Prima Donna in George Moore’s *Evelyn Innes*,” in *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 147-166; and Martin Stoddard, “George Moore and Literary Wagnerism: A Revisitation,” in *George Moore: Across Borders*, ed. by Christine Huguet and Fabienne Dabrigéon-Garcier (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 2013), pp. 33-43.

³ Mary S. Pierce, “Moore’s Music: Reading the Notes, Knowing the Score,” in *George Moore: Influence and Collaboration* ed. by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Maryland: University of Delaware Press, 2014), pp. 53-68 (p. 53).

⁴ George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, edited and annotated by Susan Dick (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1972; first pub. 1888), pp. 158-159.

Bulwer-Lytton: ‘In Scott leather jerkins, swords, horses, mountains, and castles harmonise completely and fully with food, fighting, words, and visions of life, the chords are simple as Handel’s, but they are as perfect. Lytton’s work, although as vulgar as Verdi’s is, in much the same fashion, sustained by a natural sense of formal harmony.’⁵ And in one particularly curious assessment, George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* is commended for showcasing ‘many profound modulations of that *Beethoven-like* countryside[.]’⁶

On one level, then, the affinity Moore forges between Debussy and Pater is characteristic of this tendency to casually transpose the mannerisms of contemporary artists and writers to the styles of distinguished composers. However it would be a mistake to assume that this is all that it is. Indeed, as Kate Hext has recently observed, there is something ‘perceptive’ about the comparison because Pater’s prose,

...like Debussy’s impressionistic poem for orchestra, alters the experience of continuous time. Pater writes history like an impressionist composer, choosing notes and intervals ‘according to his own peculiar sense of fact’ [...] For Pater, a musical composition possesses a certain concentration of all its parts, a simple continuity, whilst, at the same time, its perfection comes from its ‘unity of impression’. This conception, articulated in the early 1870s, anticipates ‘Impressionism’ in music. It was in Pater’s twilight years that Debussy’s first pieces of this kind were written, with their short repeated melodies dissipating the classic symphony’s structural progression into a series of impressions.⁷

What is particularly perceptive about Hext’s own remark, in turn, is that she is one of the few commentators to illuminate a historiographic context of music for Moore’s reference. Bach, Handel, Verdi and Beethoven — long-deceased figures from the classical tradition of music — are the references one is more likely to encounter in Moore’s comparative assessments, as

⁵ Ibid., p. 159. It is worth noting that this ‘anti-Verdi’ stance was fairly typical in French circles during this period. Katharine Ellis suggests that this polemic is likely to have its origins in *La Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* which had orchestrated a (somewhat successful) campaign against Verdi, which itself was part of a larger contemporary debate about posterity, canon formation and national character (Italian vs. German) in music. See *Music Criticism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 194-205. Moore’s ambivalence towards Verdi persisted into his later years and one letter of 1919 compares him, not inauspiciously, to Debussy: ‘We have only to think of [Debussy’s] *Pelléas* [*et Mélisande*] to apprehend the Italian vulgarity of Verdi; very like Dickens; yet there are good things in it.’ Letter from George Moore to Lady Cunard, 7 November 1919, in *Letters to Lady Cunard, 1895-1933*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Hart-Davis, 1957), p. 103.

⁶ Ibid., p. 162. Own emphasis added.

⁷ Kate Hext, *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 159. For a similar take on Pater’s concept of musicality and its anticipation of twentieth-century compositional practices see Ewa Borkowska, “Walter Pater’s Musical Aesthetics of Temporality,” in *(Aesth)etics of Interpretation: Essays in Cultural Practice*, ed. by Wojciech Kalaga and Tadeusz Rachwat (Katowice, Poland: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2000), pp. 94-107. Borkowska suggests that ‘Pater’s reference to the “perpetual flight” of impressions, flickering and unstable, recalls Schoenberg’s musical system in which harmonic reference-points are no longer fixed and reinforced by repetition but remain in constant flux[.]’ (p. 94).

the above examples testify to, whereas here the mention of Debussy is decidedly contemporary. More specifically, where Moore decides that Turner, Scott, Lytton and Eliot replicate the qualities of their musical ancestors, the artistic exchange between Pater and Debussy is inverted to imply that the former essentially created the musical conditions for the appearance of the latter.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that Moore repeats his assessment of Debussy's uniquely 'Paterian' affinity elsewhere. In November 1916 he had written to Lady Cunard concerning a recital he had recently attended at the Royal Philharmonic Hall which featured on its programme works by Vivaldi, Mozart, Camille Saint-Saëns and Frederick Delius. The majority of the programming failed to excite Moore but one particular suite, *Images Pour Orchestre, No. 2*, produced an entirely different sentiment:

[Delius's] *Romeo and Juliet* is but musical manufacture; I hope never to hear it again; but I cannot think of anything that would give me more pleasure to hear again than the three pieces by Debussy. He is as perfect as antiquity or Mr. Pater: one hears genius all the time, and I know of no sensation more delicious: I felt I was listening to music for the first time. The world he opened out to me was as wonderful as Paradise when Adam looked upon it for the first time, and I am writing to you to let me know when these three pieces will be given again, for I should not like to miss it.⁸

To associate Pater with both 'antiquity' and a sense of renewed vision seems to both acknowledge his contemporary recasting of Hellenic ideals whilst all the while recognising the prophetic implication of his famous statement in setting a precedent for literary modernity in both style and philosophy.⁹ From this earlier assessment it becomes clear that for Moore the pair are related in his mind because both engender an experience of self-discovery. Thus to listen to Debussy is — analogous to his encounters with Pater — to be opened up to a revelatory realm of sensory experience.¹⁰ As is clear from Moore's later statement from *Avowals* his opinion did not much change. However where his letter merely hinted toward a common aesthetic ground between the pair, his later remarks are more assured. Debussy, he

⁸ Letter from George Moore to Lady Cunard, November 1916, in *Letters to Lady Cunard, 1895-1933*, pp. 93-94.

⁹ For further reading on the convergence of Hellenism and British aestheticism see Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁰ Whilst the image of Adam might initially seem at odds with the sensorial nature of the aesthetic experience described, it could well be commensurate with what Elizabeth Hall Harris calls Moore's 'Christian aestheticism'; a confluence of doctrines which, she suggests, was informed by 'Moore's reading of Pater [and which] may also have contributed to his conception of a Christian aestheticism that served to both exclude the world and to provide life with the meaning that aestheticism could not.' See Elizabeth Hall Harris, 'The Irish George Moore: a Biographical and Critical Interpretation' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Stanford University, 1976), p. 137.

suggests, is Pater's inexorable musical corollary; and Pater himself, were he still alive, 'could not have done else' but recognise his own influence in this particular work. And so in the early decades of the twentieth century Pater's celebrated statement on the trajectory of all arts towards musicality had, in Moore's estimation, realised its inexorable conclusion in music. But not just any music: Debussy's.

In this chapter we approach the interaction between music and aestheticism from a slightly different angle, at least initially. In the first chapter, we saw how music formulated the necessary 'conditions' for the emergence and theorisation of aesthetic painting (and, by no small coincidence, the very basis for its critique). Whereas here I want to consider how aestheticism found its way into the very art it valorised — and how, perhaps, there was very little fortuitous about this either. More specifically, this chapter considers Claude Debussy and his distinctive critical dialogue with British aestheticism in the years surrounding the fin de siècle. Following from Sarah Collins's observation that 'Walter Pater's oft-quoted phrase 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music' presents an unlikely catchphrase for Victorian aestheticism, a movement that failed to register explicitly in music circles to any significant degree,'¹¹ this chapter counters this in two interrelated ways. Firstly, by considering how Debussy's interest in British aestheticism permeated his work in ways which have yet to be fully acknowledged; and secondly, by exploring the reception of Debussy's music in Britain at the turn of the century and the way in which these contemporary commentaries used the rhetoric of the 'aesthetic' to theorise and formulate the identity and aims of his work.

Debussy's name is seldom associated with aestheticism today. However as an ardent observer of the major cultural movements of his age, he was certainly aware of the aesthetic movement in Britain and was conversant with the visual and literary outputs of Rossetti, Whistler, Swinburne, Wilde and Moore. Since Debussy was unable to read English, it is, as Edward Lockspeiser remarks, 'evidence of an unusually searching mind that he should have known the work of all these writers in translation that were not exactly readily procurable.'¹² In some instances, these interests were even manifested outright in his music; a setting of Rossetti's poem, "The Blessed Damozel" (1850), entitled *La damoiselle élue* (1888), and an orchestral suite, *Trois Nocturnes* (1897-1899), which, as Debussy makes clear, is imaginatively indebted to Whistler's *painterly* namesake — not, as one might assume, those 'musical' nocturnes popularised in the early nineteenth century by Chopin and John Field. More than this, however, I want to demonstrate how 'aestheticism' infused Debussy's creative imagination on a much deeper critical level. Alex Murray and Jason David Hall have recently

¹¹ Sarah Collins, 'Practices of Aesthetic Self-Cultivation,' 98.

¹² Edward Lockspeiser, 'Debussy and Swinburne,' *The Monthly Musical Record* (March-April, 1959), 49-53 (50).

cautioned against the potential critical minefield of ‘musical “decadence spotting”’; an undesirable epistemological slippage whereby decadence *in* music (i.e. text setting) is taken as ‘decadent music’.¹³ To be clear, then, what I am interested in here is not the type of superficial claim Murray and Hall are, quite rightly, wary of. Rather, how certain claims for art made by the aesthetic school influenced, and were appropriated by, Debussy more broadly and how these values and ideas were inscribed upon his work on a number of levels; his letters, critical writings and creative output. Indeed, as Leon Botstein has persuasively established, Debussy is somewhat singular in his attempts to incorporate ‘extra-musical’ influences into his work because although there was no shortage of modernist composers inspired by the visual arts, ‘with Debussy one can go well beyond generalisations about the common ground shared by composers and painters in any historical period. At issue in his work are *precise aesthetic strategies* transposed from painting’.¹⁴

The second part of my discussion — the delineation of a number of descriptions and commentaries that located Debussy’s music in the vein of ‘aesthetic’ affinity — might seem an inevitable extension of the first. Certainly, for British commentators who were aware of Debussy’s musical appropriations of Rossetti’s poem and Whistler’s paintings, this no doubt served as a prompt for aligning his music within the interests of this particular school. However what is interesting about these commentaries is the way in which these aesthetic touchstones for the explication of his work expanded to include a series of related figures; not just Rossetti and Whistler, but Burne-Jones, Beardsley and (as we have seen) Pater. Of particular interest here are a series of articles published by Arthur Symons between 1907 and 1908 in *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* which report upon some of the very first performances of Debussy’s work in Britain. Although perhaps better known today as a Wagnerian, Symons’s extensive writings on music covered a host of contemporary composers and as one of the few aesthetic critics to engage directly with the musical repertory, he can be seen to play a hugely significant — and almost entirely overlooked — role in promulgating Debussy’s music within the tradition of fin-de-siècle aestheticism.

It may be, then, that Moore’s avowal of Debussy’s Paterianism has been (perhaps too quickly) written off as a mere rhetorical gesture when in fact it serves as a recapitulation of an idea which had gained very real critical traction in early twentieth-century British discourse. It would, of course, be quixotic to propose that this is precisely what Pater had advocated in

¹³ Alex Murray and Jason David Hall, “Introduction: Decadent Poetics,” in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Alex Murray and Jason David Hall (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-25 (p. 9).

¹⁴ Leon Botstein, “Beyond the Illusions of Realism: Painting and Debussy’s Break with Tradition,” in *Debussy and his World*, ed. by Jane F. Fulcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 141-179 (p. 142). Own emphasis added.

his own discussion of music. However the way in which Debussy facilitated a dialogue about the constitutive properties and characteristics of aestheticism *in music itself* at the fin de siècle suggests that he might have been the unwitting beneficiary of ‘the idea’ of the Paterian ideal. Perhaps, then, as Moore suggests, this was music realised in the so-called ‘condition of music’.

Recuperating Debussy’s ‘Aestheticism’

Those who are unfamiliar with the critical conversation surrounding Debussy will benefit from learning two key details concerning the historical discussion of his work; the first is that the issue of Debussy’s artistic classification is one of particularly fraught and protracted nature in music scholarship and secondly that Debussy has never been discussed at length in light of his association with British aestheticism. As one might deduce, these two items are not mutually-exclusive. The notion of Debussy as ‘impressionist’, as seen earlier in Hext’s assessment, casts a long critical shadow over his work and it is not uncommon to see discussions of the composer prefaced with this word or any of its derivatives — almost as if, Tristan Hons writes, ‘the two terms [Debussy and ‘impressionism’] were perfectly interchangeable’.¹⁵ It is important to remember, however, that today’s discussions of Debussy’s ostensible ‘impressionism’ belie the pejorative origins of the term’s application. The epithet was first used in relation to Debussy’s *Printemps* in 1887 in a report issued by the Secretary to the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* who felt compelled to caution Debussy against ‘vague impressionism, which is one of the most dangerous enemies of truth in works of art’.¹⁶ The term itself had of course been appropriated from the eponymous art movement (in)famous in France, whose representatives were seen to embody an entirely revolutionary and novel attitude to painting. That Debussy — whose aberrations in standard tonal practice were equalled by a famously tense relationship with the conservatoire — would be likened to a school of painting which challenged the institutional and aesthetic orthodoxies of his day owes much to the fact that *Printemps* was submitted in the wake of the eighth (and subsequently, last) Impressionist Exhibition of 1886. Although some, such as James H. Rubin, maintain that in the music of Debussy ‘Impressionism had its most successful afterlife’,¹⁷ a subsequent development in the debate concerning Debussy’s classification shifted significantly towards positioning his music

¹⁵ Tristan Hons, ‘Impressions and Symbols,’ 20.

¹⁶ Report by the Permanent Secretary of the Academie des Beaux-Arts, 1887, originally printed in *Les arts Francais* 16 (1918), 92, cited in Nigel Simeone, “Debussy and Expression,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. by Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 101-116 (p. 102).

¹⁷ James H. Rubin, *Impressionism* (London: Phaidon, 1999), p. 407.

amongst the collective interests of Symbolism; an idea first posited in Stefan Jarociński's seminal work of 1968, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism*.¹⁸ Unlike 'Musical Impressionism', however, Symbolism has yet to transcend its non-musical origins and although a number of commentators have argued for its revisionist inclusion, it remains absent from most renowned dictionaries of music.¹⁹ Accordingly, then, 'Symbolist' understandings of Debussy are more biographical in nature, being developed through his personal interaction with prominent members of the Symbolist circle or elsewhere concerned with his various incorporations of the Symbolist 'text', such as the 1902 operatic setting of Maurice Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande*.²⁰ François Lesure agrees that Debussy's music is more readily aligned with the aesthetics of Symbolism than Impressionism. Even so, he cautions that it is equally important to be mindful of Debussy's conspicuous divergences from the Symbolist school of thought; namely, his growing disillusionment, and subsequent rejection of, Wagner, who was undoubtedly the cause célèbre of the French Symbolists.²¹ Indeed, as Jann Pasler summarises, much like its ideological alternative, Debussy's affinity with Symbolism is no less 'fraught with paradox and contradictions'.²² Here Pasler alludes to the fact that for all of his ostensible affinities with these two schools of thought, Debussy himself was highly critical of both terms, as he reflected in his 1901 article 'Conversation with Monsieur Croche':

I dared to point out to him that in poetry and painting alike (and I managed to think of a couple of musicians as well) men had tried to shake away the dust of tradition, but

¹⁸ Stefan Jarociński, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism*, trans. Rollo Myers (London: Eulenberg Books, 1976). Originally published in Polish as *Debussy a impresjonizm i symbolizm* in 1968.

¹⁹ This omission is noted upon by Peter Palmer who observes that the entry on "Symbolism" in *Grove's Dictionary of Music* is devoted to the symbolism of numbers. See Peter Palmer, 'Lost Paradises: Music and the Aesthetics of Symbolism', *The Musical Times* 148.1899 (Summer 2007), 37-50.

²⁰ See, for example, Elizabeth McCombie, *Mallarmé and Debussy: Unheard Music, Unseen Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Elliott Antokoletz, with Juana Canabal Antokoletz, *Musical Symbolism in the Operas of Debussy and Bartók: Trauma, Gender, and the Unfolding of the Unconscious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Marie Rolf, "Symbolism as Compositional Agent in Act IV, Scene 4 of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*," in *Berlioz and Debussy: Sources, Contexts and Legacies: Essays in Honour of François Lesure*, ed. by Barbara L. Kelly and Kerry Murphy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 117-124.

²¹ Lesure writes that although '[a]t first Debussy was swept up in the current [of Wagnerism] after his second visit to Bayreuth (1889) he became increasingly detached to the point of being regarded as a heretic by his Wagnerite friends. In 1893 he announced an article to be entitled 'The Futility of Wagnerism' but it never appeared'. See François Lesure and Roy Howat. "Claude Debussy." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online.

OxfordUniversityPress. Web. <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.liverpool.idm.oclc.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/07353>>.

²² Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 524-537.

that it had only earned them the labels of “symbolists” or “impressionists” — useful terms of abuse.²³

This tension between (musical) innovations in nineteenth-century art practice and its critics was something which arose in the last chapter. Here we saw how critical appraisals (specifically those concerning Whistler’s paintings) participated in augmenting the ideological import of certain art works, even — or especially — in the face of the artist’s very defence of this practice. Ultimately, then, this same dynamic is at work in Debussy’s ‘self-defence’; his repudiation of the terms ‘symbolism’ and ‘impressionism’ is predicated upon his belief that the terms themselves were being commandeered uncritically by his most contemptuous of detractors as a way of securely depositing the perceived heterodox tendencies of his work into recognised taxonomies, which were, in turn, used as the critical stick with which to beat him. Rather, as he protested to his publisher, Jacques Durand: ‘I’m trying to write “something else” — *realities*, in a manner of speaking — what imbeciles call “impressionism”[.]’²⁴

All the while, however, by imagining himself in the company of poets and painters ‘alike’, Debussy nevertheless affirms the notion that his inspirations are drawn from across the arts. For commentators such as Botstein, then, Debussy’s extra-musical interests, in particular painting, provide the best possible explanation for his ‘remarkable leap away from [music] tradition’ in the early 1890s.²⁵ He too is ambivalent about the wholesale conflation of Debussy’s music with either Impressionism or Symbolism because both fail to take into account his enthusiasm for Japanese art, the art criticism of Jules Laforgue, and the paintings of the Norwegian school. Most significantly, Botstein is one of the few recent critics to attempt a more thorough-going account of Debussy’s ‘uncanny correspondences’ with Whistler. The association between the two was noted in both of their lifetimes and yet it has, as Botstein notes, typically been discussed in relation to their ostensive ‘impressionistic’ affinity. Whistler was often referred to as an ‘impressionist’ by his French critics, a practice which began around the same time that his paintings were exhibited in the 1863 Salon des Refusés exhibition amongst some of the first works to be associated with this school.²⁶ In this way, Debussy’s subsequent nod to Whistler, as sanctioned in the title of *Trois Nocturnes*, was a confirmation of what they had already inferred of the composer’s own ‘impressionistic’ tendencies. Whilst acknowledging the merit in this line of enquiry, Botstein nonetheless suggests that this

²³ Claude Debussy, ‘Conversation with M. Croche,’ *La Revue Blanche* (1 July 1901), in *Debussy on Music: The Critical Writings*, collected and introduced by François Lesure, trans. and ed. by Richard Langham Smith (New York, 1977), pp. 44-50 (p. 48).

²⁴ Letter to Jacques Durand, March 1908, in *Debussy Letters*, ed. by François Lesure and Roger Nichols, trans. by Roger Nichols (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 188. Emphasis original.

²⁵ Botstein, “Beyond the Illusions of Realism,” p. 143.

²⁶ For Whistler’s association with impressionism in late nineteenth century France, see Gary Tinterow and Henri Loyrette, *Origins of Impressionism* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), pp. 465-467.

affiliation is misrepresentative on both counts; not only because Debussy himself was dismissive of the association, as we know, but because Whistler's own 'relationship to impressionism is at best ambiguous and contested'.²⁷ Instead, Botstein looks at the ways in which Whistler's art practice permeated Debussy's own creative approach more broadly — namely how both 'participated and helped promote if not codify the formulae appropriated by fin-de-siècle musical modernists [...] in their self-defense [sic]'.²⁸

By raising question marks over both Debussy and Whistler's tacitly agreed 'impressionism' Botstein's work effectively draws attention to the ways in which the discussions of influence have typically served the interests of a deeply-embedded critical dialectic in Debussy scholarship. Thus whilst these designations are not necessarily incorrect, they can be seen to mask or contain within them the legacies of British aestheticism, the impact of which in fin-de-siècle France can be traced with a reasonable degree of accuracy, as I hope to do here. It may also be that this tendency reflects a wider trend in Debussy scholarship; that is, the relative lack of critical interest in the composer's 'British' contexts more broadly — both in relation to the British artistic and literary influences which shaped his work and the reception of his music in Britain at the turn of the century.²⁹ This seems likely to be a continuation of a precedent set by early critics who would look to Debussy in order to discuss questions of national character in music.³⁰ But perhaps Debussy's inability to speak English has played some part here also. It is certainly curious that a self-confessed anglophile should not desire to learn the language and the irony of this was lost on few who knew him well, not least his own step-daughter, Dolly Bardac, who remarked: 'He spoke not a word of English and yet he adored all English things'.³¹ Elsewhere she adds:

He had a partiality for the paintings of Turner and Whistler and the drawings of Arthur Rackham, one of which inspired the *Prélude* 'Les fees sont d'exquises danseuses' [...] He was equally anglophile in his liking for beautiful silver for the table, for whisky and for the very strong tea which he prepared himself for breakfast, with the

²⁷ Botstein, "Beyond the Illusions of Realism," p. 145.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ With the exception of Roger Nichols's article, these studies are limited to biographical interest or Debussy's interest in English music. See Peter J. Pirie, 'Portrait of Debussy. 5: Debussy and English Music,' *The Musical Times* 108.1493 (July 1967), pp. 599-601; Roger Nichols, "The Reception of Debussy's Music in Britain up to 1914," in *Debussy Studies*, ed. by Richard Langham Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 139-154; and Robert Orledge, "Debussy the Man," in *Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, pp. 14-15. I am also aware of a French language work by Jean-Michel Nectoux which contains a chapter entitled "On the British Side", which considers the Debussy's visits to England and his interest in the works of Turner, Rossetti and Whistler. See Jean-Michel Nectoux, *Harmonie en bleu et or: Debussy, la musique et les arts* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

³⁰ See Barbara L. Kelly, "Debussy and the Making of a 'musicien français': *Pelléas*, the Press, and World War I," in *French Music, Culture, and National Identity, 1870-1939*, ed. by Barbara L. Kelly (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), pp. 58-76.

³¹ Cited in David A. Grayson, 'Claude Debussy Addresses the English-Speaking World: Two Interviews, An Article, and The Blessed Damozel,' *Cahiers Debussy* (1992), 23-47.

slowness and care that he devoted to everything. In his study he had installed a large armchair made of wood and leather in Morris style, which was the last word in English comfort.³²

We might say, then, that Debussy lost very little through his inability to speak English; after all, appreciation for *objects d'art* transcends a common language. However this passage is significant on a more complex level because this so-called 'Art Nouveau den' (the description is that of Debussy's friend, Pierre Louÿs)³³ demarcates how powerfully aestheticism permeated his imagination. Writing of the 'conspicuous consumption' of British aestheticism in America at the turn of the century, Jonathan Freedman suggests that the procurement of 'aesthetic' goods by rising professional elites served as demarcations of cultural-taste and authority; and that by 'decorating their houses in the new "aesthetic" styles' they were 'invoking as their own [...] the example of British aestheticism in order to breach the walls of the cultural establishment and make themselves fully at home there'.³⁴ This description is, I think, equally deserving of Debussy. What I want to suggest, then, is that the way in which Debussy used the "aesthetic" to delineate his own personal space, a practice Freedman calls 'self-creating, self-defining, and self-authenticating',³⁵ is part of a wider claim for cultural enfranchisement which is no less at stake in his approach to music (nor, as we will see, in the critical responses to it).

One of the few critics to consider Debussy alongside an exclusively 'British' interest is Richard Langham Smith, whose essay 'Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites' sets the precedent for my own work here. By contextualising Debussy's developing style amongst the dissemination of Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting within Symbolist circles in fin-de-siècle Paris, Smith suggests ways in which this influence of Rossetti can be traced throughout the composer's work — in other words, beyond the setting of "The Blessed Damsel".³⁶ At the end of his account, Smith remarks that whilst he is well aware of the pre-existing dialectic which typically governs Debussy studies he has merely used Pre-Raphaelitism as a 'window' into one aspect of Debussy's creative output, undertaken in the hope that it might 'encourage further wayside study and exploration of many bypaths' within this particular area of research.³⁷ Like Botstein, Smith demonstrates that Debussy's influences were more varied and

³² Dolly Bardac, 'Memories of Debussy and his Circle,' *Journal of the British Institute of Recorded Sound* 50-51 (April-July 1973), 158-161 (161), cited in *Debussy Remembered*, ed. by Roger Nichols (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 198-200 (p. 199).

³³ Cited in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1962), I, p.119.

³⁴ Freedman, *Professions of Taste*, p. xxiv.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁶ Richard Langham Smith, 'Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites,' *Nineteenth-Century Music* 5.2 (1981), 95-109 (109).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

distinct than the traditional ‘impressionist/symbolist’ dialectic tends to allow and that isolating these interests is necessary in order to determine their impact upon Debussy’s work. Smith’s argument is germane to my own account here because whilst Debussy’s encounters with British aestheticism were often mediated through his association with a coterie of self-identifying Symbolists, a distinction is made here between their own creative output and the British works they endorsed. In this sense, Debussy’s response to British aestheticism was, like any art movement to which he was compared, no less diffuse, perhaps, but equally no less powerful. If one thing is clear from the art-historical debate surrounding Debussy’s artistic classification is that he was regarded as the heir apparent to a number of dominant ideas within nineteenth-century aesthetics that were common to a series of more-or-less coherent movements. This so-called taxonomic ‘window’ (to borrow Smith’s term) of distinction is crucial then — not only because it allows us to delineate Debussy’s ‘aestheticism’, but more importantly because it allows us to frame British aestheticism and its own (musical) legacies at the turn of the century. We might even say that this ‘window’ is Debussy himself because of the ways in which his work creatively and critically mediates this historical exchange of ideas between fin-de-siècle aestheticism and its musical contexts.

It is widely accepted amongst Debussy scholars that the late 1880s marked a significant period in the composer’s work characterised by a growing disassociation from the Paris Conservatoire and the academicism which it was seen to represent.³⁸ In this next part of the chapter, then, I suggest that this shift in Debussy’s work can be read alongside his increasing familiarity with currents of British aestheticism, emergent at this time in France; and that his subsequent self-fashioning in this mould can be evinced not only through his musical re-imaginings of the aesthetic ‘text’ but his letters and critical writings also. My reading is therefore sympathetic to that of both Smith and Botstein and yet by focussing geographical and ideological scope it goes much further by bringing the discussion of Whistler together with lesser-discussed aspects of Debussy’s aesthetic engagement; his enthusiasm for Wilde and Swinburne, for example, and a ‘lost’ play, entitled *Frères en Art* (c.1895-1901?) which features an English protagonist, Redburne, who is modelled in the spiritual image of an English aesthete. Ultimately, what I hope to demonstrate is that by tracing and elucidating Debussy’s unique dialogue with British aestheticism in the years surrounding the fin de siècle, we will discover how the response to his music in Britain in the early years of the twentieth century reciprocated and to a certain extent augmented this appreciation.

³⁸ See, for example, Hons, ‘Impressions and Symbols,’ 17-18; and Botstein, “Beyond the Illusions of Realism,” pp. 141-142.

In February 1918, a year before Moore's affirmation of Debussy's Paterian spirit and a mere month before his death, Debussy received the following correspondence from his friend, Robert Godet:

I wanted to tell you of a book which you will be pleased to read — the French translation of *The Renaissance* by Walter Pater, a very perceptive English essayist who has both a mind and a feeling for constructive criticism rather similar to that of Wilde; moreover, he carries his knowledge lightly and never makes a show of erudition. What he leaves unsaid is nearly always as valuable as what he says and his implications find their way into his prose, or rather emanate from it, in a most musical fashion.³⁹

Evidently, Godet assumed that since Firmin Roger-Cornaz's 1917 translation of *The Renaissance* had only just recently been published in France his correspondent was entirely unfamiliar with Pater's work.⁴⁰ There is, as we will see, evidence to suggest that this was not necessarily the case. But even so, this recommendation provides us with an expedient way to begin our consideration. This is not only because by placing Debussy and Pater in the same train of intellectual thought Godet all the while corroborates that which Moore and a number of commentators had already proposed of Debussy's aesthetic inclinations at this late stage of his career. It is also because the communication directs us towards some of Debussy's better established interests, such as Wilde. Godet's use of Wilde as a touchstone with which to measure Pater's style and quality is not strictly atypical of these types of contemporary continental assessments, as recent research has shown.⁴¹ And certainly in this particular instance, Godet is likely to have made the comparison on the trust of Roger-Cornaz's introduction to *La Renaissance* in which, Emily Eells observes, 'Pater is cast as the embodiment of the Wildean concept of "The Critic as Artist," [with Godet] citing his pages on the Mona Lisa as exemplary of how criticism can aspire to the status of art.'⁴² In reading

³⁹ François Lesure, 'Cinq Lettres de Robert Godet à Claude Debussy (1917-1918),' *Revue de Musicologie* 48.125 (1962), 77-95 (91), cited in Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, I, p. 127.

⁴⁰ For the reception of Pater's work in France, see Emily Eells, "'Influence occulte': The Reception of Pater's Works in France before 1922," in *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe*, ed. and introduced by Stephen Bann (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), pp. 87-116; and Stephen Bann, "Pater's Reception in France: A Provisional Account," in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, ed. by Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro, NC: ELT, 2002), pp. 55-62.

⁴¹ See Stephen Bann's introduction to *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe*, pp. 1-18. Bann suggests that the pre-eminence of Wilde in France may have had a distorting effect on the reception of Pater's work.

⁴² Eells, "'Influence occulte': The Reception of Pater's Works in France before 1922," p. 114. See *La Renaissance [par] Walter Pater; traduction française par F. Roger-Cornaz* (Paris: Librairie Payot, 1917), pp. 15-16.

these words it is possible that Godet was put in mind of some of Debussy's own celebrated statements on the nature of music, such as this passage from an essay of 1902:

Art is the most beautiful deception of all! And though people try to incorporate the everyday events of life in it, we must hope that it will remain a deception lest it become a utilitarian thing, sad as a factory. Ordinary people, as well as the elite, come to music to seek oblivion; is that not also a form of deception? The Mona Lisa's smile probably never existed in real life, yet her charm is eternal. Let us not disillusion anyone by bringing too much reality into the dream [...] Let us content ourselves with consoling ways: such music can contain an everlasting expression of beauty.⁴³

A decade earlier, Wilde had addressed similar questions concerning art's relationship to 'truth', reality and utility in "The Critic as Artist", which defends the aesthetic critic's right to artistic license: 'Who [...] cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Mona Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed of? The painter may have been merely the slave of an archaic smile.'⁴⁴ Although Wilde and Debussy were acquainted, Phyllis Weliver has recently furthered the connection between the pair by suggesting that clear parallels can be drawn between the pathological allure of the *objet d'art* articulated in Debussy's prose and the desires of Wilde's eponymous protagonist in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). In a letter of February 1893 Debussy describes a condition; 'a state of mind,' he suggests, called the 'Cult of Desire', which is characterised by a transient sense of 'crazy but inescapable longing, a need almost, for some work of art (a Velásquez, a Satsuma Vase or a new kind of tie), and the moment of actual possession is one of joy, of love really.'⁴⁵ Remarkably, these sentiments are expressed before even the translation of Wilde's novel, which appeared in France bookshops in June 1895 and more intriguingly still, in the same month in which Debussy and Wilde first made their acquaintance. This coincidence, Weliver suggests, 'poses an intriguing possibility: Debussy may be explicating an idea that arose in conversation with Wilde'.⁴⁶

Evidently, Debussy was not immune to the strong feeling which characterised French interest in Wilde's work at this time and I would suggest that this detail makes it all the more likely that he had also encountered Pater's work.⁴⁷ Indeed, one of Wilde's earliest champions in France, Theodore de Wyzewa (1863-1917) was also one of the first writers to publish on Pater's work. Between 1889 and 1896, Wyzewa published four articles on Pater in *Revue deux*

⁴³ Claude Debussy, 'The Orientation of Music,' *Musica* (October 1902), in *Debussy on Music*, pp. 83-86 (p. 85).

⁴⁴ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Intentions* (London: Methuen, 1913; first pub. 1891), pp. 95-220 (p. 142).

⁴⁵ Letter to André Poniowski, February 1893, in *Debussy Letters*, p. 40.

⁴⁶ Phyllis Weliver, 'Wilde, Music, and the 'Opium-Tainted Cigarette': Disinterested Dandies and Critical Play,' *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15.3 (2010), 315-347 (341).

⁴⁷ For the reception of Wilde in France, see Richard Hibbit, "The Artist as Aesthete: The French Creation of Wilde," in *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*, pp. 65-80.

mondes, including an obituary of the late aesthete of 1895 records how his first edition of *The Renaissance* was not only ‘the most famous of his works’ but also the most ‘superior, in fact, through the simplicity of its subject and the novelty of its ideas’.⁴⁸ Wyzewa was known to Debussy and as an avid reader of *La Vogue*, where Wyzewa published extensively during this period, it is likely that Debussy was prompted to explore these articles — particularly given the author’s part in promoting the work of their mutual friend, Mallarmé. In her essay on the reception of Pater’s work in France before 1922, Eells suggests that Wyzewa was ‘the first French critic to write on Pater’.⁴⁹ However it seems that this accolade is rightfully owed to Paul Bourget who in the 1880s began to write on not only Pater but the aesthetic movement in Britain more broadly. In fact, such was Bourget’s enthusiasm for Pater and his circle that he had been compelled to make several pilgrimages to Oxford precisely in order to indulge these interests; according to Bourget’s biographer, it was here that he met Pater, and also Ruskin whom he allegedly asked to explain to him the paintings of Millais and Burne-Jones.⁵⁰ Bourget had been known to Debussy as early as 1877, when, in one of his first ever compositions, the precocious 15 year old set his poem “Beau Soir” to music. Over the next decade a further eight musical settings of Bourget’s poems followed and a firm friendship inevitably ensued.⁵¹ Some of Bourget’s reflections of Pater, amongst others such as Ruskin, Swinburne and Rossetti, are to be found in his article “L’esthétisme anglais,” published in *Journal des débats* in May 1885, an essay which was originally envisioned as a review of Vernon Lee’s anti-aesthetic polemic *Miss Brown* (which he was critical of in spite of being friends with Lee) but which he used to discuss the merits of English aestheticism more broadly.⁵² Given their close relationship, it is possible that Debussy learned of not just Pater but also his wider circle who are discussed throughout Bourget’s writings; certainly, a number of Debussy’s letters indicate that Bourget was in the habit of sending the composer copies of his latest publications.⁵³

⁴⁸ Theodore de Wyzewa, ‘Two Deaths: Pater and Froude,’ cited in *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by R. M. Seiler (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 300. For English translations of extracts from de Wyzewa see *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 297-303.

⁴⁹ Eells, “‘Influence occulte’: The Reception of Pater’s Works in France before 1922,” p. 87.

⁵⁰ See Michel Mansuy, *Un modern. Paul Bourget de l’enfance au disciple* (Annales littéraires de l’Université de Basançon, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1960), cited in Bénédicte Coste, ‘Two Unpublished Letters from Walter Pater to Paul Bourget,’ *The Pater Newsletter* 61/62 (Spring/Fall 2012), 4-21 (18, n. 28).

⁵¹ See E. Robert Schmitz and Virgil Thomson, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* (Dover Publications, 1967) for a complete list of Debussy’s compositions for piano, esp. pp. 223-228.

⁵² Lee actually sent Bourget a copy of *Miss Brown* in September 1884 for his consideration. See Gordon W. Smith, ‘Letters from Paul Bourget to Vernon Lee,’ *Colby Quarterly* 3.15 (August 1954), 1-9.

⁵³ In a letter of January 1886 to Eugène Vassier, Debussy makes reference to Bourget sending him ‘his latest publication’, likely to have been either *Cruelle Enigme* (1885) or an early copy of *Un Crime d’amour* (1886) [*Debussy Letters*, p. 16].

Another close acquaintance of Debussy's, and a key figure in the dissemination of British aestheticism in fin-de-siècle Paris, was Mallarmé who met Pater in March 1894 when he delivered his lecture "La Musique et les Lettres" at the University of Oxford. Debussy's association with Mallarmé was a particularly significant and oft-emphasised milestone in the development of the composer's aesthetic interests — not only because the poet provided sources of literary material for Debussy to transcribe into music (most notably, of course, the 1876 poem "L'après-midi d'un faune") but because their acquaintance established Debussy within a milieu of likeminded thinkers. Throughout the 1890s, Debussy was a regular attendee at Mallarmé's infamous 'Mardis' which he hosted at his flat in the Rue de Rome off the Boulevard des Batignolles. These informal meetings of writers, artists, journalists, and musicians who shared, Rosemary Lloyd observes, 'a passion for contemporary art, an interest in renewing outworn artistic conventions, and an openness to what the West perceived as the esthetics [sic] of Japan and China'.⁵⁴ Amongst this assortment of likeminded figures it was not unheard of to encounter Wilde and also Whistler, who, according to Louis Laloy, Debussy would witness 'pick[ing] up a sketch by Odilon Redon and ask which way it was supposed to be looked at' (a particularly curious occurrence given the turn of events at his trial only several years before).⁵⁵

It is important to note, however, that by the time Debussy joined the Mallarmé circle in the 1890s, his anti-academician credentials were already well established. Certainly, accounts from his time spent as a pupil at the Paris Conservatoire during the early 1880s suggest that his rebellious spirit had been present at a young age. In one particularly well-known anecdote, a fellow pupil, Maurice Emmanuel, recorded how Debussy would often advertise his innovative approach to composition in opposition to his teacher, Ernest Guiraud. Here Debussy would take great pleasure in extolling the virtues of deliberate parallel fifths and unresolved dissonances — hitherto unheard of within the recognised tradition of Conservatoire harmony — to his bemused classmates and when challenged by Guiraud with accusations of 'theoretical absurdity', Debussy would allegedly reply that '[t]here is no theory. You merely have to listen. Pleasure is the law'.⁵⁶ Debussy's distaste for institutional schooling intensified further in 1884 when was awarded the most prestigious French prize for composition, the *Prix de Rome*; an award which necessitated a four year residency at the Villa Medici, the French Academy in Rome, so that he might further his studies. Both during his

⁵⁴ Rosemary Lloyd, "Debussy, Mallarmé, and 'Les Mardis'," in *Debussy and his World*, pp. 255-270 (p. 256).

⁵⁵ Louis Laloy, *La Musique retrouvée* (Paris: Plon, 1928), p. 121, cited in Jean-Michel Nectoux, "Towards a Portrait of Debussy as a Connoisseur of Painting: Turner, Whistler, Lerolle, Degas," trans. Peter Bloom in *Debussy's Paris: Art, Music, and Sounds of the City*, ed. by Linda Muehlig (Northampton, Massachusetts: Smith College Museum of Art, 2012), pp. 32-45 (p. 38).

⁵⁶ Cited in *Debussy on Music*, p. 85, n.1.

residency and long after, Debussy expressed regret at having ever received such an accolade; ‘my heart sank’, he later recalled upon hearing of his victory, having ‘had a sudden vision of boredom, and of all the worries that inevitably go together with any form of official recognition. I felt I was no longer free.’⁵⁷ Despite his dismissiveness, however, commentators are agreed that this marked a particularly critical period in Debussy’s development as a composer, the beginning of his ‘mature’ period. Thus it was during his stay at the Villa Medici that he read Gabriel Sarrazin’s *Les Poètes modernes de l’Angleterre* (1885), encountering for the first time the work of Swinburne and Rossetti described by Sarrazin as members of an ‘intellectual elite’, artists and ‘dilettantes’, for whom Rossetti was their ‘acclaimed chief’; the ‘[a]postle of aestheticism, renovator of English poetry and painting, who counted among his pupils and admirers two of his peers, Swinburne and Burne-Jones’.⁵⁸ And it was from this anthology that Debussy would extract Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel” (trans. “La damoiselle bénie”) for the cantata *La damoiselle élue*; a work which he would later describe as a ‘little oratorio in a mystic, slightly pagan vein’, a remark which seems to echo Sarrazin’s own sentiments on Rossetti’s poetic ‘mysticism’ which delights in its own ‘glances of the profane’.⁵⁹

Having abandoned the *Prix* tenure in February 1887, Debussy began work on *La damoiselle élue* upon his return to Paris and subsequently submitted the piece in place of his third *envoi* (an annual compositional requirement of the *Prix* award which, despite leaving Rome two years early, he was still required to fulfil).⁶⁰ There is, as John R. Clevenger has observed, something significant in the fact that this particular work was begun so soon after relinquishing his post in Rome; *La Damoiselle élue*, he suggests, is a piece which ‘fits seamlessly within a series of radical works in which the composer consciously strove to throw off the shackles of academic tradition’ and furthermore,

...Rossetti had broken with established academic traditions in both poetry and painting, much as Debussy was trying to do in music. Hence the young composer must have felt a strong aesthetic kinship with Rossetti; indeed, he would later contemplate

⁵⁷ Debussy, ‘Impressions of a Prix de Rome,’ *Gil Blas* (10 June, 1903), in *Debussy on Music*, pp. 211-214 (p. 211).

⁵⁸ Gabriel Sarrazin, *Les Poètes modernes de l’Angleterre: W. S. Landor, P.B. Shelley, John Keats, Elisabeth Barrett Browning, D. G. Rossetti and A. C. Swinburne* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1885), p. 234: ‘L’élite intellectuelle de son pays, ce petit groupe d’artistes et de dilettantes qui crée les reputations durables, l’acclama chef d’école. Apôtre de *l’Esthétisme*, rénovateur de la poésie et de la peinture anglaises, il compta parmi ses élèves et admirateurs deux de ses pairs, Swinburne et Burne Jones.’

⁵⁹ Letter to Andre Poniatowski, 8/9 September 1892, in *Debussy Letters*, p. 38; Sarrazin, *Les Poètes modernes de l’Angleterre*, p. 250: ‘D’autres fois, ces mêmes créations, après s’être laisse entrevoir, se font soudain invisibles; et di j’avais raison de dire plus haut que Rossetti arrive à fixer sur la toile poétique le mysticism de sa vision, il est temps d’ajouter qu’il me semble aussi se complaire à la dérober souvent aux regards profanes.’

⁶⁰ Roger Nichols, *The Life of Debussy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 51.

another Rossetti poem, in collaboration with Pierre Louÿs, for a piece to be entitled *La Saulaie*.⁶¹

There is also no doubt that the inherent ‘musicality’ of Rossetti’s poetry would have appealed to Debussy.⁶² Indeed, as the research of Bryan Gooch and David Thatcher has demonstrated, posterity has proved it to be a poem of distinctive appeal to composers — being set to music some fourteen times between Debussy’s setting in 1887 and 1928, the most for any poem by Rossetti.⁶³ In her reading of the ‘silent song’ of Rossetti’s *The House of Life* sonnet series, Phyllis Weliver has argued that ‘music’ is always more than just a thematic concern for Rossetti but in fact something which is ‘concretely present in structural and figurative elements’.⁶⁴ These moments of what Weliver calls ‘presence and absence’⁶⁵ are a useful way of understanding Debussy’s own translation of “The Blessed Damsel”, more particularly in his use of silence — or ‘sourdines’ (‘mute’) as they are transcribed on the score. In *La Damselle élue* moments of muted sound are used to frame the pivotal moment in the cantata — the appearance of the Damsel — in a way which dramatically stresses her central importance in the piece. However the dramatic diminishing of music also sympathetically corresponds the poem’s chief thematic concern: that of unrealised desire. The effect particularly poignant in the Damsel’s lines— ‘Dans l’Amour; Et d’être pour toujours, Comme alors pour un temps, Ensemble, Moi et Lui’ — whereupon the music immediately dissipates, as if to reflect the vanishing hopes of being united with her love.⁶⁶ This attentiveness towards the detail of Rossetti’s poem can also be observed in phrases where Debussy directly transposes descriptions of the Damsel into musical motives; as Smith has noted, the lyrics which relate the description of the Damsel ‘three lilies in her hand’ and ‘seven stars in her hair’ correspond to three and seven-note motifs in the music.⁶⁷

⁶¹ John R. Clevenger, “Debussy’s Rome Cantatas,” in *Debussy and his World*, pp. 9-98 (pp. 72, 70).

⁶² For a discussion of the ‘musicality’ of Rossetti’s “Blessed Damsel,” see Karen Yuen, ‘Music’s Metamorphosis in the Life and Creative Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’ (Ph.D. dissertation, English, University of London, 2008), pp. 110-121.

⁶³ Bryan N.S. Gooch and David S. Thatcher, *Musical Settings of Early and Mid-Victorian Literature: A Catalogue* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), pp. 492-493. These include orchestral settings by Granville Bantock (1891), Edgar Bainton (1907) and Ernest Farrar (1907); a piano setting by Arnold Bax (1906); a string quartet by Benjamin Burrows (1927); and a choral work by Julius Harrison (1928). Most recently the German electronic outfit, Tangerine Dream, have a track entitled “Blessed Damsel” on their 2007 album *Madcap’s Flaming Duty*.

⁶⁴ Phyllis Weliver, “The ‘Silent Song’ of D.G. Rossetti’s *The House of Life*,” in *The Figure of Music in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry*, ed. by Phyllis Weliver (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 194-212 (p. 195).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁶⁶ For a transcript of Debussy’s cantata see Mark DeVoto, *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality: Essays on His Music* (Hillsdale, New York: Pendragon Press, 2004), pp. 70-76.

⁶⁷ Smith, ‘Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites,’ 102.



Fig. 5. *La damoiselle élue* (1893), illustrated by Maurice Denis.

Debussy's concern for the visual dimension of the poem is particularly significant given that he is unlikely to have seen Rossetti's eponymous companion painting to the work whilst he was composing the cantata (although he would later acquire a copy).⁶⁸ Even more remarkable is the way in which Maurice Denis's 1893 frontispiece for *La Damoiselle élue* (Fig. 5) reinscribes the qualities of Rossetti's painting, *The Blessed Damozel* (1875-1878), from Debussy's musical interpretation of the poem; the symbolic imagery of the flaxen-haired damozel and her celestial companions, together with the overall static, two-dimensional quality which prevailed in early Pre-Raphaelite and Art Nouveau etchings. The affinity Debussy cultivated between his music and painting, then, seems to be part of a conscious shift towards forging new relationships between the arts; and nowhere was this more evident than in the score of *La Damoiselle élue*, which, Lockspeiser notes, 'brings us very near to a purely visual conception of music: the decorative Pre-raphaelite curves are projected into the long sinuous arabesques of the Damozel's aria [sic]'.⁶⁹ There was nothing fortuitous, then, about the fact that the first concert devoted entirely to Debussy's work, in March 1894, was held in the gallery of *La Libre Esthétique* in Brussels, which was then the cultural centre of the Art Nouveau movement.⁷⁰ Here the gallery space turned concert hall extended the sense of the correspondence between Debussy's own predilections and those of British aestheticism — his music performed amongst William Morris's illuminated books of the Kelmscott Press and Beardsley's illustrations for Wilde's *Salomé*.

The Académie des Beaux-Arts were not wholly negative in their appraisal of Debussy's *La Damoiselle élue* however they did remark that the chosen text was 'rather obscure' and that the piece 'still smack[ed] of those modish, systematic tendencies in expression and form for which the Academy ha[d] already had occasion to upbraid the composer'.⁷¹ And when *La Damoiselle élue* was at last performed for the general public in April 1893 at a *Société Nationale* concert, critics were quick to foreground the association between Rossetti and the composer. The famously acerbic music critic from the *Echo de Paris*, Henry Gauthier-Villars, or 'Willy' as he was known, likened the piece to a 'painting on a stained glass window [...] contrived not without a certain amount of perversity'; a remark which registered both the compositional make up of Debussy's music as a series short melodic fragments pieced together in seemingly mosaic-like form but equally the style of Pre-

⁶⁸ Clevenger, "Debussy's Rome Cantatas," p. 70.

⁶⁹ Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, I, p. 120. By evoking the idea of the 'arabesque', a term later used to name a pair of piano works written between 1888 and 1891, Debussy was consciously referencing common ground between visual and aural patterning. Almost half a century earlier, Hanslick had famously used the arabesque as an example of ornamentation which 'pleases for its own sake'. Music, he wrote, 'as compared with the arabesque, is a picture, yet a picture the subject of which we cannot define in words, or include in any category of thought' (*The Beautiful in Music*, pp. 74, 70-71).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁷¹ Cited in Nichols, *The Life of Debussy*, p. 52.

Raphaelite painting (and, perhaps, their perceived eroticism) which had taken hold of the public imagination.⁷² Other chastised the piece as a ‘very sensual, decadent work’— an observation which nevertheless sealed Debussy’s ability to translate the overt eroticism of Rossetti’s poem into music.⁷³

Frères en Art: Debussy’s Painless Revolution

As Smith and others have made clear, it is evident that the Pre-Raphaelite sensibility appealed greatly to Debussy; more than ‘impressionism’, even, the Académie’s preferred term of disapproval, it was Pre-Raphaelitism which, Botstein suggests, served as ‘the visual sister art that permitted Debussy to realise his painless revolution’.⁷⁴ Debussy’s correspondence suggests that he had intended to set another of Rossetti’s poems, “Willow-wood”, but competing priorities and the prevailing ambition to stage his first opera (*Pelléas et Mélisande*) worked to hamper its completion.⁷⁵ One of these projects was *Les ‘Frères en Art’ (F.E.A)* which seems to have been instigated around 1895 with his friend, René Peter. According to Peter, however, the document which was later discovered upon Debussy’s death bears little resemblance to the work they undertook together, suggesting that Debussy took it upon himself to complete the play alone — possibly even as late as 1901.⁷⁶ The play itself concerns the formation of an esoteric society of artists and thinkers, so-named *F.E.A*, which sought to promote their work in their own interests in order to prevent critical and commercial exploitation. Robert Orledge calls the play a ‘roman à clef peopled from his own *fin-de-siècle* world,’ and summarises its major players (painters, sculptors and art critics, though, interestingly, no musicians or composers) as thinly-veiled satires of well-known figures, including Maltravers, the painter, who is Debussy himself; Marie, Maltravers’ mistress, is Rosalie (Lilly) Texier (Debussy’s first wife); Hildebrand, another painter is likely to be the art

⁷² Cited in Léon Vallas, *Debussy: His Life and Works*, trans. Marie O’Brien (London, 1933), p. 75. Although he does not mention Gauthier-Villars’ remarks, Smith discusses the ‘stained glass’ effect of Debussy’s *La damoiselle élue*, arguing that the quality of ‘luminous yet grainy sound’ gives the impression of being ‘lit from behind’ — a statement which Debussy used to describe Wagner’s *Parsifal*: ‘The bright divisi registration is kept throughout the piece and there are notable moments where high octave doublings, played quietly in the violins, are left unsupported by bass instruments. This ‘stained glass’ effect was perhaps suggested by Pre-Raphaelite paintings, a common device of which was to achieve a luminous presence by painting in transparent colours on a wet white background — literally ‘as if lit from behind.’ See Smith, ‘Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites,’ 102.

⁷³ Cited in François Lesure, *Claude Debussy* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1994), p. 134. For a discussion of the ‘erotic’ in Debussy’s *La damoiselle élue*, see Julie McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, pp. 117-136.

⁷⁴ Smith, ‘Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites,’ 106.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Robert Orledge, “Debussy and Satie,” in *Debussy Studies*, pp. 154-178 (p. 163).

historian and sculptor, Adolf Von Hildebrand; and St. Diaz, the art critic, seems to represent Diaz de la Pena, a pupil of Delacroix.⁷⁷ One of the play's most significant voices is that of Charles Redburne, described simply as an 'English art critic', who Lockspeiser notes is not only 'the hero of the piece' but clearly suggestive of either Swinburne, Moore or even possibly Ruskin.⁷⁸

However certain aspects of Redburne's dialogue in *F.E.A* are not easy to reconcile with any of Lockspeiser's proposed possibilities and we can see this in moments of the play where its anarchical spirit is at its strongest. In one scene, for example, when Maltravers (the strongest proponent of revolution in the play) advocates burning the museums and libraries, Redburne responds: 'I don't mind burning the museums so long as it were merely an antiseptic means of destroying mediocrity. If I had created a great work I shouldn't want to condemn it to a museum for ever.'⁷⁹ This sentiment could well have stemmed from Debussy's understanding aestheticism as a school of 'intellectual elitism' and more particularly, perhaps, the description of Rossetti presented in Sarrazin's anthology as an artist who purposefully 'refused his paintings to be delivered to the public view'.⁸⁰ Nevertheless it is important to see Redburne not as a faithful attempt to 'recreate' Swinburne, Moore, Ruskin or any of their associative British counterparts but merely as an imaginative means of capturing what Debussy understood (or hoped) to be the anti-commercial interests of British aestheticism. For as he makes clear in his only letter to refer to *F.E.A.*, fidelity to the characters was outweighed by an overarching message: 'one has to generalize throughout; for one thing, if you portray people in bulk you have a better chance of getting some of them right.'⁸¹

It may be more useful, then, to use Lockspeiser's theory concerning the characterisation of Redburne as a means to examine Debussy's interests in these individuals' work more broadly. It seems less probable, for instance, that Ruskin was the determining influence for Redburne since he is named in the play — and by Redburne himself no less. However what the reference does do is ground the play assuredly within a contemporary climate; when introduced to Hildebrand for the first time, Redburne informs him: 'your face is well known to me from our London bookshops. Your portraits are sold as widely as those

⁷⁷ Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 238-241.

⁷⁸ Edward Lockspeiser, *Music and Painting: A Study in Comparative Ideas from Turner to Schoenberg* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 124. See also, Lockspeiser's 'Frères en art, pièce de theatre inédite de Debussy,' *Revue de Musicologie* 56.2 (1970), 165-176.

⁷⁹ Lockspeiser, *Music and Painting*, p. 130.

⁸⁰ Sarrazin, *Les Poètes modernes de l'Angleterre*, p. 234: 'Il se refusa de son vivant à livrer au public la vue[.]'

⁸¹ Letter to Alice Peter, May-June 1898, in *Debussy Letters*, p. 96.

of Ruskin and Miss Langtry'.⁸² As Debussy would not make his first visit to London until 1902, it is unlikely that this knowledge came from personal experience. Rather, then, this brief reference was placed in order to advertise his familiarity with Ruskin whose work he clearly knew of if not through the writings of Bourget then certainly courtesy of Robert de la Sizeranne's *Ruskin et la Religion de la Beauté* (1895).⁸³ What Debussy would have admired most about Ruskin was his endorsement of Turner. In fact when Debussy unleashes his tirade against 'imbecilic' art critics and their misapplication of terms such as 'impressionist' he suggests that it is used most inaccurately in conjunction with the English artist who is 'the finest creator of mystery in the whole of art!'⁸⁴ Further indications of Debussy's interest in Ruskin's work emerge elsewhere, as François Lesure has suggested, such as his 1901 article, 'Conversation with M. Croche', where the eponymous character claims:

My favourite music is those few notes an Egyptian shepherd plays on his flute: he is a part of the landscape around him, and he knows harmonies that aren't in our books. The 'musicians' hear only music written by practiced hands, never the music of nature herself. To see the sun rise does one far more good than hearing the *Pastoral Symphony*. What's the use of such incomprehensible art?⁸⁵

Croche's emphasis on the humble shepherd faithfully transcribing nature seems to recall Ruskin's own idyllic image of the 'shepherds of the high Alps', in a passage which Lesure erroneously credits to *Praeteria* (1885) but which in fact comes from a much lesser-known work, "Essay on the Relative Dignity of the Studies of Painting and Music" (1838).⁸⁶ Here Ruskin writes:

The shepherds on the high Alps live for months in a perfect solitude, not perhaps seeing the face of a human being for weeks together [...] When the sun is just setting, and the specks of eternal snow become tinted of a pale but bright rose colour by his dying beams, the shepherd who is highest upon the mountain takes his horn and sounds through it a few simple but melodious notes, signifying "Glory be to God!"⁸⁷

⁸² Lockspeiser, *Music and Painting*, p. 130. Langtry (1853-1929), or the 'Jersey Lily' as she was known, was a conspicuous figure amongst London Aesthetic circles, acquainted with Wilde, Whistler and featuring as a subject in the work of a number of painters such as Millais and Burne-Jones.

⁸³ Linda Cummins, *Debussy and the Fragment* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 96-97. Ruskin is also mentioned in Louis Laloy's *Claude Debussy* (Paris, 1909) in connection with the Pre-Raphaelite movement, which was authored with Debussy's permission (pp. 19-20).

⁸⁴ Letter to Jacques Durand, March 1908, in *Debussy Letters*, p. 188.

⁸⁵ 'Conversation with M. Croche,' in *Debussy on Music*, p. 48.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.n. 3

⁸⁷ John Ruskin, "Essay on the Relative Dignity of the Studies of Painting and Music and the Advantages to be Derived from their Pursuit," [1838] in *The Works of John Ruskin*, I. pp. 267-285 (p. 272).

The two passages here share some uncanny similarities; those celebrated ‘few notes’ of the humble shepherd, the romantic solipsism of the creator and most importantly, the privileging of nature’s immediate beauty. However it might be easy to overstate Debussy’s interest in Ruskin on this basis because whilst the figure of Ruskin’s shepherd suggests that communion with nature reveals God’s message, Debussy’s shepherd — who is musical but pointedly not a musician — is described in a way which connects him more immediately to the earth he cultivates; communicating not the words of God *through* nature, then, but those of Nature itself.

Debussy’s privileging of nature is well-known and more often than not allied to the form of pantheistic philosophy common to Baudelaire, whose poems Debussy set in 1890 in the series, *Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire*.⁸⁸ However this same spirit belongs equally in the poems of Baudelaire-devotee Swinburne, styled in Sarrazin’s anthology as a poet working in the admixture of ‘Pagan reconstitutions, scenes of The Middle Ages and of the East, pantheism, humanitarianism, [and] social Revolution’; and their creator himself, unique amongst his countrymen, ‘the most truculent theories of revolutionary atheism’.⁸⁹ Debussy would recommend Sarrazin’s work in 1893 to his one-time *F.E.A* ‘collaborator’, René Peter, upon being asked to provide a bibliography of French translations of Swinburne’s work.⁹⁰ Perhaps this mutual interest arose during the development of their joint venture several years later; it certainly does not seem fortuitous that Peter himself would later remark that ‘[b]etween Swinburne and Debussy the threads of Symbolism were drawn together in a way that foreshadows the whole series of his songs.’⁹¹ Debussy’s friend Vittorio Gui also recalls being struck by the composer’s affinity for the English poet:

His enthusiasm for Swinburne caused me to realise the real significance of the work of the Great English poet, steeped as I was then in an excessive admiration for Tennyson. He did not conceal the derivation of the text of his *Prose Lyriques* from the sensibility of Laforgue and others of the Parnassians who were spiritually his predecessors.’⁹²

Arthur Nestioviski remarks that ‘[i]n view of his admiration for Swinburne, and of the Swinburne-euphoria that contaminated most of his friends and collaborators for more than

⁸⁸ Arthur Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1976), p. 217.

⁸⁹ Sarrazin, *Les Poètes modernes de l’Angleterre*, p. 283: ‘Reconstitutions païennes, scènes du Moyen Age et de l’Orient, panthéisme, humanitarisme, Révolution sociale, République universelle[.]’ and p. 347: ‘M. Swinburne jette à la face de ses compatriots les theories les plys truculentes de l’athéisme révolutionnaire[.]’

⁹⁰ Lockspeiser, ‘Debussy and Swinburne,’ p. 51.

⁹¹ René Peter, *Claude Debussy*, new edition augmented with unpublished letters (Paris, 1944), p. 32.

⁹² Vittorio Gui, ‘Debussy in Italy,’ *Musical Opinion* (February 1939), pp. 404-405, cited in *Debussy Remembered*, p. 227.

twenty years, it is strange that Debussy never contemplated setting any of his poems to music.⁹³ It is certainly true that Debussy did not directly set any of Swinburne's poems to music, however it may be that this sensibility manifested itself in his work in more covert ways. Gui's mention of Debussy's *Prose Lyriques* (1892-1893), for example, seems to take on an added significance when mentioned in the same train of thought as the composer's affinity for Swinburne. *Prose Lyriques* is a unique entry in the Debussy canon in that the four-piece song cycle was conceived upon entirely original material; a series of poems he wrote himself entitled "De Reve", "De grève", "De fleurs" and "De Soir". Arthur Wenk describes the series as being 'a direct expression of Debussy's relation to poetry and to the artistic movements with which he was involved at the *fin de siècle*' and he is agreed, as are most commentators, that Debussy's poetic style is modelled somewhat in the vein of Baudelaire.⁹⁴ It is possible, however, that Swinburne also played a determining role in Debussy's cultivation of a poetic voice, particularly if this enthusiasm was as powerful as Gui had believed it to be. Consider, for example, the third stanza from Debussy's "De Grève" (Of Shore):

Mais la lune, compatissante a tous,
Vient apaiser ce gris confit,
Et caresse lentement ses petites amies,
Qui s'offrent, comme lèvres aimantes,
A ce tiède et blanc baiser.
Puis, plus rien...
Plus que les cloches attardées
Des flottantes églises,
Angélus des vagues,
Soie blanche apaisée!

But the moon, pitiful to all!
Comes by and soothes this grey struggle,
And slowly caresses its little friends
Who offer themselves like loving lips
To this warm and white kiss.
Then, nothing more,
Nothing but the belated bells
Of the floating churches,
Angelus of the waves,
Soothed white silk!⁹⁵

Here we seem to get a feeling of one of the works identified in Sarrazin's anthology of being of particular importance, that of Swinburne's "Satia te Sanguine": 'O beautiful lips, O bosom/ More white than the moon's and warm,/ A sterile, ruinous blossom/ Is blown your way in a storm.'⁹⁶ The imaginary landscape of Debussy's "De Reve" (Of Dreams) also seems to bear more similarity to Swinburne than it does Baudelaire, taking place in a landscape of Arthurian legend where 'Knights have died/ On the path to the Grail!'.⁹⁷ And desire mixes headily in the liminal space between sleep and waking: 'The night has the softness of a woman,/ Hands seem

⁹³ Arthur Nestiovski, *Debussy and Poe* (York: University of York, 1983), pp.40-41.

⁹⁴ Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets*, p. 198.

⁹⁵ Translation from Wenk, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

⁹⁶ Swinburne, "Satia te Sanguine," in *Poems and Ballads* (London: Savill and Edwards, 1866), pp. 98-101 (p. 98).

⁹⁷ Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets*, p. 311.

to graze the souls,/ Hands so foolish, so frail,/ In the days when swords sang for them!/ Strange sighs rise up from under the trees./ My soul, this is some ancient dream that grips you!’⁹⁸ The effect is reminiscent of Swinburne’s “*Laus Veneris*”, a work which was alleged to be a particular favourite of Debussy’s, and with which it seems to occupy the same imaginary universe between ‘[a]sleep and waking’ and where knights are ‘souls that were/ Slain in the old time, having found her fair[.]’⁹⁹

Despite fielding several possible suggestions in his discussion of *F.E.A.*, Lockspeiser suggests that ‘the figure most obviously evoked by Redburne is George Moore, noted for his red hair and whiskers, and recalled clearly enough in Debussy’s pseudonym’.¹⁰⁰ Several of Moore’s works were published in France between 1886 and 1893, including *Confessions of a Young Man* (serialised in *La Revue indépendante* as *Les Confessions d’un jean Anglais* in 1888).¹⁰¹ And it is more than likely that Moore and Debussy met, most probably at one of the Tuesday Salons hosted by Mallarmé, with whom Moore had become acquainted during the 1870s.¹⁰² Moore’s *A Modern Lover* (1883) also seems to address many of the same issues at the heart of *F.E.A.*, namely the dilemma of the modern artist caught between allegiances to his own aesthetic principles on the one hand and the prospect of having to exploit one’s own work for financial and social gain on the other. Since Moore’s novel was not translated into French during the time Debussy was working on his play it seems unlikely that he had engaged directly with the source material. However he could, as Lockspeiser surmises, have encountered these ideas in an article which Moore published in a French periodical in 1889 in which he described the impulse of his novel:

I imagined a band of young men united by one aspiration — Art for Art’s sake — animated by one aestheticism, love of modern London life; and [...] refusing to prostitute their art in base commercialism, standing resolutely together, determined not to go to the public, but to make the public come to them. At the time I wrote, no such aestheticism and no such society existed. The only fact I had to build upon was the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood [...] But their aestheticism was very different [...] The ideas I then gave utterance to were already in the air; I was merely the first to name them, and attempt some definite description of the tendency that was then faintly astir.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Swinburne, “*Laus Veneris*,” in *Poems and Ballads*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰⁰ Lockspeiser, *Music and Painting*, p. 129.

¹⁰¹ See G. P. Collet, *George Moore et France* (Paris, 1957).

¹⁰² See Moore’s, *Confessions of a Young Man*, pp. 62-65.

¹⁰³ G[eorge] M[oores], ‘Impressionism,’ *Hawk* (December 17, 1889), 670, cited and translated by Adam Parkes in *A Sense of Shock: The Impact of Impressionism on Modern British and Irish Painting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 88.

Common to both *A Modern Lover* and *F.E.A.*, then, is an idealistic vision of the organisation of artistic life in the face of (unwarranted) critical intervention and, worse still, exploitation. And like *F.E.A.*, Moore's novel plays with the boundaries between fact and fiction, introducing characters who resemble living figures and setting his novel in effectively 'real time' — the London of Langtrys and Ruskins described by Redburne.¹⁰⁴ Supposing then that Debussy had in fact been influenced by Moore's novel it seems that this admiration was mutual, as Moore wrote to Edouard Dujardin in 1887:

My new story "Spring Days" is to appear in a daily paper, the Evening News. If I can, I will begin it by the end of February [...] The story will be as simple as "A Mere Accident" was complicated. Would you like it for the *Revue Indépendante*? Translated by Wyzewa or Debussy, whose version of Rossetti's poem was so good, my story would not I think be out of place in your review.¹⁰⁵

This acknowledgement is the first mention of Debussy in Moore's writing and one which predates his assessment of the composer's supposed Paterian affinity by almost thirty years. Curiously, his mention of Debussy's *La Damselle élue* also predates the completion of the work itself, which, although begun, had yet to be publically performed. One might ask whether it is possible Moore had heard Debussy perform an early draft of the work amongst friends; or perhaps this suggests that Moore was under the impression that it was Debussy, not Sarrazin, who had translated Rossetti's poems into French. Nevertheless, it is significant that Moore — who was in fact entirely capable of performing the translation himself — should propose the possibility of a composer translating his work, suggesting that he was interested in foregrounding the association of his writing with a tradition of music: precisely that which he would later suggest of Pater's own prose.

Certainly if Debussy had encountered Moore's work, in particular *Confessions of a Young Man*, then he would have been privy to the discussion of another mutual interest: Whistler — Moore's description of whom clearly recalls Debussy's own later defence of his own music practice and the undisciplined use of critical terms:

Whistler, of all artists, is the least impressionist; the idea people have of his being an impressionist only proves once again the absolute inability of the public to understand the merits or demerits of artistic work.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ See Anna Gruetzner Robins, 'George Moore's *A Modern Lover*: Introducing the French Impressionists to London,' *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 61.1 (2007), 47-56.

¹⁰⁵ Letter to Edouard Dujardin, 12 December 1887, in *Letters from George Moore to Ed. Dujardin, 1886-1922* ed. John Eglinton (New York: Crosby Gaige, 1929), pp. 22-23.

¹⁰⁶ Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, p. 102.

Of course, Debussy's interest in Whistler's painting is well-known. However it may be, as Botstein has skilfully demonstrated, that the true depth of this particular influence on Debussy's work has been understated; and not merely because '[t]he language in Debussy's letters makes it clear that he read Whistler and not only admired his paintings; Whistler's influence on Debussy [also] extended to the way he *thought* about art.'¹⁰⁷ Whistler's "Ten O'Clock" lecture was translated by Mallarmé in the May 1888 issue of *Revue Indépendante*; and there is every indication that Debussy not only read this work, but as Botstein suggests, that 'it was Whistler who gave Debussy the idea of identifying his own music criticism, published under the nom de plume Monsieur Croche, as the work of the "anti-dilettante."¹⁰⁸

Undoubtedly, Debussy's most unequivocal debt to Whistler is evident in *Trois Nocturnes* which borrowed from the artist's painterly namesake. However as a closer examination of Debussy's precise intentions for the orchestral suite make clear, this was not just a superficial appropriation of aesthetic terminology, but rather symptomatic of a (Whistlerian) attitude to art more broadly. The work was begun in 1892, only several months after Debussy was privy to the acquisition of Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (1872) — the public fervour surrounding its purchase is unlikely to have escaped Debussy's attention (no less so given that the negotiations were handled personally by Mallarmé).¹⁰⁹ After working on his piece for two years, Debussy decided in 1894 to name his latest work *Nocturnes* and that they would have, as he revealed to his friend Eugène Ysaÿe, a very particular painterly intention: 'It's an experiment, in fact, in finding the different combinations inside a single colour, as a painting might make a study in grey, for example.'¹¹⁰ And when finally complete, *Nocturnes* was issued with a description which seems to reflect how deeply Whistler's paintings — reproductions of which he had pinned to the wall of his studio¹¹¹ — had impressed upon his own language of musical tonality:

The title *Nocturnes* is to be interpreted here in a general and, more particularly, in a decorative sense. Therefore, it is not meant to designate the usual form of the Nocturne, but rather all the various impressions and the special effects of light that the word suggests. *Nuages* renders the immutable aspect of the sky and the slow, solemn motion of the clouds, fading away in grey tones lightly tinged with white. 'Fêtes' gives us the vibrating, dancing rhythm of the atmosphere with sudden flashes of light. There

¹⁰⁷ Botstein, "Beyond the Illusions of Realism," p. 151. Own emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Nectoux, "Towards a Portrait of Debussy as a Connoisseur of Painting: Turner, Whistler, Lerolle, Degas," p. 38.

¹¹⁰ Letter to Ysaÿe, 22 September 1894, in *Debussy Letters*, p.75.

¹¹¹ Although Pasteur Valéry-Radot reports seeing coloured reproductions of Whistler's work hanging in the composer's apartment in 1910, we can only speculate as to which precise works they would have been. See *Letters de Claude Debussy à sa femme Emma*, ed. by Pasteur Valléry-Radot (Paris, 1957), p. 35, cited in Jean-Michel Nectoux, "Portrait of the Artist as Roderick Usher," in *Debussy Studies*, pp. 108-138 (p. 110).

is also the episode of the procession (a dazzling fantastic vision), which passes through the festive scene and becomes merged in it. But the background remains resistantly [sic] the same: the festival with its blending of music and luminous dust participating in the cosmic rhythm. *Sirènes* depicts the sea and its countless rhythms and presently, amongst the waves silvered by the moonlight, is heard the mysterious song of the Sirens as they laugh and pass on.¹¹²

As commentators have observed, this level of descriptive detail into the precise intent of his work is rare in Debussy's writing.¹¹³ The question, then, is why Debussy decided to be so candid at this point in his career and concerning this particular work — after all, the term 'nocturne' historically belonged to music so a comment on the appropriation of a generic *musical* title for a *musical* work ought to be superfluous. However as we know of Debussy's sustained attempts to 'break' with music tradition, it was precisely the notion that he was restoring the 'nocturne' to its rightful etymological origin that he was so eager to pre-empt. As he indicates, then, his *Nocturnes* bear little resemblance to the works of the same name made popular by individuals such as Chopin and John Field before him. Rather, these pieces are 'not the usual form' but the reinscription of a traditional format vis-à-vis the formal experiments of (Whistler's) paintings. On the basis of his commentary, it would be tempting to label Debussy's *Nocturnes* as 'programmatic'. This, however, is not strictly true. As we saw in Chapter 1, attempts to name the art 'work' became particularly fraught in the second half of the nineteenth century as artists and composers struggled to find the best means to direct the viewer-listener away from the determinacy of language and towards the less prescriptive nature of pure aesthetic experience. Whistler himself suggested that the term 'nocturne' was used to 'indicate an artistic interest alone, divesting the picture of any outside anecdotal interest which might have been otherwise attached to it [...] The picture is throughout a problem I attempt to solve'.¹¹⁴ So that which might be considered 'programmatic' in Debussy's description here is actually the enactment of the problematic tension between attempting to convey a philosophical impulse and the need to describe it in real terms; these works were not literally attempting to depict 'clouds' or the 'sea' but rather the essence of them.

Elsewhere, as we see, Debussy was particularly vocal about the use of excessive detail in the art work, as he explains here in a letter of 1893:

...too often we're concerned with the frame before we've got the picture; it was our friend Richard Wagner, I think, who got us into this fix. Sometimes the frame is so ornate, we don't realize the poverty of the central idea [...] It would be more

¹¹² See Leon Vallas, *Claude Debussy*, p. 112.

¹¹³ Simeone, "Debussy and Expression," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, p. 104.

¹¹⁴ Cited in Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint*, p. 114.

profitable, I feel, to go about things the other way round, that's to say, find the perfect expression for an idea and add only as much decoration as is absolutely necessary.¹¹⁵

Written during the compositional stages of *Nocturnes*, this protest clearly recalls Whistler's own early practice of rejecting the gold-plated frame in favour of painting it to conceal any distinction from the canvas within.¹¹⁶ It also maintains Debussy's stance of the ideal form of music being inherently 'absolute', as he makes clear with his reference to the Wagnerian model which promotes the idea of music being structured by a text. For Debussy, writing here in 1912: 'There is really no need for a program, although it is honey for the bees as far as any literary commentaries are concerned. Simple, bare music is quite sufficient.'¹¹⁷

Naturally, the inter-artistic exchange from music, to painting, and back again did not go unnoticed by those who encountered Debussy's work. Writing in 1901, in arguably the most perceptive commentary of Debussy's *Nocturnes*, Pierre de Bréville suggested that '[i]t is some musical Whistler' before adding: 'this can be turned around and permit one to affirm that Whistler is Debussy in painting.'¹¹⁸ The sentiment neatly expresses the nature of reciprocity which characterises Debussy's interaction with the aesthetic movement and is a sentiment we find articulated by Théodore Duret in a letter to Whistler in June 1903:

Have you heard of Debussy and of his nocturnes? After reproaching you in every way for having borrowed from the language of music to apply it to painting, now music comes in search of inspiration from your painting. What a turnaround! How things have come full circle!¹¹⁹

Duret's note serves as a reminder of the extent to which painterly and musical strategies had permeated one another's territory by the turn of the century and more importantly, the part Whistler played in naturalising this idea. Because as Duret clearly suggests (and Debussy clearly intended), the term *Nocturnes* had shed its exclusively-musical beginnings to become almost entirely synonymous with Whistler's unique form of artistry. More importantly, where Whistler was 'reproached' for his art, this same spirit is some forty years later celebrated; as Debussy favourably recorded of his celebrated reception: 'I was dubbed the 'Whistler of

¹¹⁵ Letter to Ernest Chausson, 23 October 1893, in *Debussy Letters*, p. 58.

¹¹⁶ See Victoria Rosner, *Victorianism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 38-39.

¹¹⁷ Claude Debussy, 'On Respect in Art,' *SIM* (December 1912), in *Debussy on Music*, pp. 268-272 (p. 271).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Letter from Théodore Duret to Whistler, 30 June 1903, cited in Margaret F. MacDonald and Joy Newton, 'Correspondence Duret-Whistler,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (November 1987), pp. 150-164 (p. 164).

music’’.¹²⁰ This ‘turnaround’, then, marks not only a shift in art practice but one in attitude also; and as we will see going into the next part of the chapter, Debussy clearly benefited from the increased public acceptance of ‘aesthetically-minded’ approaches to art.

Delighting the Soul of Keats: British Responses to Debussy up to 1907

Despite his lifelong love affair with all things English, Debussy would not set foot upon English soil until 1902, aged forty. In the years that followed a further seven trips were made, during which time his popularity in the country grew exponentially; from being, at the time of his first visit, almost entirely unknown to the British public, to being hailed upon his death in 1918 as one of the most celebrated composers of the age. ‘By the death of Claude Debussy,’ *The Saturday Review* wrote, ‘European music is bereaved of its most original personality. No composer of the present day has had a greater influence on the world of music’.¹²¹ However this is not all, the obituary adds. This was a bereavement of particular significance to this nation because ‘England may claim the distinction of having given him the most sympathetic reception. Even in France he did not enjoy the uncontested glory accorded to him in this country.’¹²²

Initially, however, Debussy’s music received only minimal notice across British newspapers and periodicals. And the very first acknowledgement of his work — a 1901 article giving notice to foreign contemporary music — gives a clear sense of just how undistinguished he was in these early years. Here the readers of the first February issue of *The Musical Times* were dutifully informed that ‘at the Lamoureux concert, on the 6th January, two very effective orchestral Nocturnes, by *Mr Debussey* [...] were much applauded novelties’ [sic].¹²³ No doubt Debussy would have been pleased to learn that by the following year (a month before his first pilgrimage to London) the same periodical had, at the very least, succeeded in spelling his name correctly — even if the suggestion that the recent performance of his *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the *Opéra Comique* had ‘met with but a very qualified success’ is unlikely to have inspired any further consolation.¹²⁴ Another similarly prosaic account of this performance was issued the same day in *The Monthly Musical Record*, documenting that the ‘much-talked

¹²⁰ Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche, et autres écrits*, ed. by François Lesure (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 293, cited in Lloyd, “Debussy, Mallarmé, and ‘Les Mardis,’” p. 257.

¹²¹ ‘Claude Debussy,’ *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 125.3259 (13 April 1918), 318-319 (318).

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ ‘Foreign Notes,’ *The Musical Times* 42.696 (1 February 1901), 122-123 (123). Own emphasis added.

¹²⁴ ‘Foreign Notes,’ *The Musical Times* 43.712 (1 June 1902), 409-410 (410).

of' piece had recently been given in Paris, although it did add (reader be warned) that it 'is of the ultra modern type'.¹²⁵

This lack of detail and colour was entirely expected of these types of 'Foreign Notices' which were merely reportage; a concise survey of music recently performed across Europe — from Berlin to Bucharest and beyond — and certainly not the personal impressions of the author who could not possibly have been present at all events. In fact it would have been highly unlikely that any of the writers of these early reports had heard Debussy's music first-hand, or at least not in Britain, because that opportunity would only present itself in August 1904. The initiative was undertaken by Sir Henry Wood, the director of the Promenade Concerts, who had made it the mission of the series to present as varied and comprehensive a selection of music as possible to the British public by combining popular canonical works with lesser-known and more contemporary musical outputs.¹²⁶ Debussy — specifically his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* — was an inevitable addition to the programme. In fact there are suggestions that the opportunity to hear this work in Britain was long overdue. Writing on the morning of the event, *The Musical Standard* remarked that 'it is hoped that it [*Prélude*] will be repeated later on in the season for the benefit of those who are [...] holiday-making at the present moment'.¹²⁷ Although responses to the event were scarce, they were on balance mostly receptive. *The Athenaeum* observed that the setting of Mallarmé's poem was 'purposely vague in form, and well described on the programme as a "study in atmosphere"', concluding that it 'displays not only skill, but individuality'.¹²⁸ However *The Musical Times* was less convinced, recording Debussy's work as one of two 'novelties' presented that evening (the other being Herr Fritz Volbach's 'Alt Heidelberg, du Feine') and of which 'neither proved very interesting'.¹²⁹ And we get a sense here of how Debussy's formidable reputation abroad might have preceded him (or perhaps the reviewer had been taking notes from the 'Foreign Notices') because the report adds that his music had 'attracted much attention in Paris by his operas, notably *Pelléas et Mélisande*, [sic], owing to the "advanced" character of the music'.¹³⁰ One of the most positive responses to the event came from Paul Seer of the *The Musical Standard* who provided a particularly prescient style of account which would later feature prominently in appraisals of Debussy's work:

The Prelude heard at Queen's Hall on Saturday reveals a man of the most exquisitely delicate sensibility and of sweetest fancy. It is entitled "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune"

¹²⁵ 'Musical Notes,' *The Monthly Musical Record* 32.378 (1 June 1902), 116-117 (117).

¹²⁶ For further reading see Lawrence Poston, 'Henry Wood, the "Proms," and National Identity in Music, 1895-1904,' *Victorian Studies* 47.3 (2005), 397-426.

¹²⁷ 'Miscellaneous Matters,' *The Musical Standard* 22.555 (20 August 1904), 121-122 (121).

¹²⁸ 'Musical Gossip,' *The Athenaeum* 4009 (27 August 1904), 282.

¹²⁹ 'Promenade Concerts,' *The Musical Times* 45.739 (1 September 1904), 600.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

and represents “the soliloquy of a faun resting from the sultry mid-day heat in the shade wood” — a charming fancy which would have delighted the soul of Keats. In fact, there is a marked affinity between this poet and the composer. The glowing imagination and supremely beautiful colour effects that adorn the pages of Keats were apparent in Debussy’s music, but, above all, he shares with the poet that visionary transparency of style, that spiritualised refinement of conception that for ever haunt the undying pages of Keats.¹³¹

If Seer was aware that Debussy’s *Prélude* already had a poetic source — and that it was, technically, Mallarmé — then he certainly does not reveal it here and since the accompanying programme note for the event had erroneously translated the work as ‘The Afternoon of a Young Gazelle’, he could have been forgiven the oversight.¹³² Nevertheless, the entirely unprompted reference to Keats is perceptive in what it anticipates of the later critical assessments of Debussy’s music; the detection (or rather here, perhaps, *projection*) of an aesthetic sensibility in his music.

Between 1904 and 1906 Debussy’s work continued to be staged across Britain and the much-hoped for repeat performance of *Prélude* at the Promenades occurred in late 1904 and repeated again in March 1906. Nevertheless, reports and reviews of these occasions are few and far between and it wasn’t until 1907 that Debussy’s popularity truly took root. As Roger Nichols writes in his account of Debussy’s reception in Britain, this marked change can be attributed to several key factors.¹³³ The first and most important, he suggests, was the decision made by Wood and Sir Edgar Speyer in December 1907 to bring Debussy over to London in order to personally oversee the performance of his work at the Promenade Concerts, an event which eventually materialised in February of the following year. Woods’s memoir records that Speyer had reservations about Debussy’s ability as a conductor (which would prove not to be unfounded). However, it was ‘concluded that, whether he was or not, London wanted him and London must have him’.¹³⁴ This suggests quite a significant swell of interest towards Debussy’s music, especially when we consider that his first musical outing, under Wood’s directorship no less, had received only a quietly appreciative response only three years before. Even Seer’s exceptionally glowing account of the first event had recorded that ‘the large audience present bestowed upon it a very limited amount of applause’.¹³⁵ This sudden popularity might be explained with recourse to the other factor of 1907, the foundation of *La Société des Concerts Français* by one of the most effective champions of Debussy music in

¹³¹ Paul Seer, ‘Some Events of the Week,’ *The Musical Standard* 22.556 (27 August 1904), 128-129 (128).

¹³² Percy Alfred Scholes, *The Mirror of Music, 1844-1944: a Century of Musical Life in Britain as Reflected in the Pages of the Musical Times* (Novello, 1947), p. 450.

¹³³ Roger Nichols, “The Reception of Debussy’s Music in Britain up to 1914,” p. 141.

¹³⁴ Sir Henry J. Wood, *My Life of Music* (London, 1938), p. 157, cited in *Debussy Remembered*, p. 216.

¹³⁵ Seer, ‘Some Events of the Week,’ 128.

Britain, T. J. Guéritte; the purpose of which, *The Musical Standard* recorded, was ‘to give authoritative renderings of contemporary French music’.¹³⁶ Here Debussy was presented as part of a ‘new school’ of French music, amongst others such as Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), Ernest Chausson (1855-1899), Vincent d’Indy (1851-1931), and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). This initiative clearly did a great deal to advance Debussy’s popularity in Britain because by 1909 the demand for his music had grown so considerably that *La Société des Concerts Français* series had been obliged to dedicated an entire evening to his music. *The Musical Times* recorded that it was a sell-out event which ‘exhibit[ed] the composer’s great originality and peculiar idioms’.¹³⁷

Naturally, the increased staging of Debussy’s work in Britain around this time produced a proliferation of articles and notices in the press. British audiences had no choice but to sit up and listen. However this does not necessarily explain the general approval, nor, as I want to demonstrate here, the particular rhetoric which characterised Debussy’s reception in Britain. Those musical compatriots presented as part of Guéritte’s advancement of contemporary French music, for instance, received nothing like the level of attention or approval Debussy did. What makes the reception of Debussy’s music all the more exceptional is that relative to the arrival of other ‘advanced’ varieties of music from across continental Europe at this time, his success was unparalleled, particularly beginning in 1907. Certainly, he was not subject to the scathing assessments suffered by some of his near-contemporaries, such as Arnold Schoenberg, who makes for a ready comparison with Debussy because he too was known for his non-conventional attitude toward music composition and his appropriation of the ‘painterly’ (although, incidentally, Debussy did not care for his music).¹³⁸ Received wisdom has it that modernism in music, literature and the arts was generally a suspect enterprise in Britain, however as Deborah Heckert observes:

The question of Debussy reception in Britain [is] so different from that of the avant-garde German music of Strauss and Schoenberg [...] Despite Debussy’s own deviations from standard tonal practices, his music was never seen in Britain as revolutionary or threatening in the way that Strauss and Schoenberg were. Some of this may be linked to national sentiment against Germany and Germans. It may also be connected to Debussy’s identification with the art of the Impressionists, in its descriptive, atmospheric nature. Impressionism was well established and appreciated in England, beginning some 30 years earlier with the celebrated Whistler-Ruskin libel case[.]¹³⁹

¹³⁶ ‘The Société des Concerts Français,’ *The Musical Standard* 31.796 (3 April 1909), 14.

¹³⁷ ‘Société des Concerts Français,’ *The Musical Times* 50.794 (1 April 1909), 259.

¹³⁸ See Eric Frederick Jensen, *Debussy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 249-250.

¹³⁹ Deborah Heckert, “Schoenberg, Roger Fry and the Emergence of a Critical Language for the Reception of Musical Modernism in Britain, 1912-1914,” in *British Music and Modernism, 1895-1960*, ed. by Matthew Riley (Farnham: 2010), pp. 49-66 (p. 55 n.44).

By examining the contrasting reactions of London critics to the first two British performances of Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces* Op. 16 in 1914, Heckert suggests that changing attitudes towards his music can be linked to the public's increased familiarity with modernism in the visual arts, specifically the formalist theories of Roger Fry and the Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910 and 1912. In other words, the 'puzzling switch in popular and critical tastes in conservative London' which lead to the increased acceptance of Schoenberg's music can be directly attributed to 'the growing critical discussion of modernism in the visual arts and the development of a critical language in which to frame that discussion'.¹⁴⁰

Following from Heckert's observation, in the next part of this discussion I want to suggest that the 'critical language' needed to frame the discussion of Debussy's work was already in place, having been prepared by the innovative changes already forwarded in British aesthetic theory — and not just by Whistler, but by the proto-modernist ethos of the 'aesthetic' school and its advocates more broadly. More than this, however, I want to suggest that this critical framework was knowingly cultivated by Arthur Symons across a series of music reviews and critical works. Although Nichols's survey of Debussy's reception in Britain recognises one of Symons's articles, 'French Music in London' (December 1907), in fact a review of a *La Société des Concerts Français*, as a valuable contribution to Debussy's increased visibility in Britain, it may be that Symons' intervention in Debussy's reception has been critically underplayed in another way. This is not only because the article cited by Nichols is just one of a number of articles in which Symons endorsed Debussy's music — and not even the first of that year — but because his reflections on Debussy appear to demarcate the beginning of the composer's 'aesthetic' codification in the English music criticism.

Arthur Symons and the Making of Debussy

As one of the most visible circulators of fin-de-siècle aestheticism, Symons's accounts of Debussy's music are likely to have resonated with critics and readers already accustomed to the ideological implications of his prose. Today Symons is perhaps better known as one of several key champions of Wagner, alongside other prominent figures such as George Bernard Shaw, Beardsley and Moore. However not only did he write extensively across a repertoire of modern music but he would later complicate his attachment to Wagner by citing his music as a contributory factor in his nervous breakdown of 1908.¹⁴¹ Moreover, this devotion to Wagner

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁴¹ See Martin Stoddard, *Wagner to 'The Waste Land': A Study of the Relationship of Wagner to English Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 74-76. The uncanny correspondences between Symons's

is, as Sarah Collins has observed, complicated by his frequent statements on the autonomous nature of music — the very basis of which is, of course, discordant with the Wagnerian philosophy of ‘programme music’.¹⁴² In *Plays, Acting and Music* (1903), for example, Symons outlines his theory of music in a way which is entirely sympathetic to those outlined by some of the most vocal proponents of absolute music, such as Hanslick, who famously positioned himself antithetically to Wagner: ‘Music has no subject, outside itself; no meaning, outside its meaning as music’.¹⁴³ As Collins astutely observes, Symons’s belief that music was the exemplar model of pure form stemmed from his adherence to Pater’s “The School of Giorgione”.¹⁴⁴ And much like Vernon Lee, whose own adherence to the Pater’s ‘music’ is discussed in the subsequent chapter, Symons was preoccupied with following Pater in discovering a standard aesthetic ideal that may be applied across the arts, writing in the preface to his *Studies in the Seven Arts* (1906): ‘Do you remember the first two sentences of Pater’s essay on “The School of Giorgione”? I will copy them, for they make a kind of motto for my book, and sum up, I think, the way in which you and I [...] have looked upon art and the arts.’¹⁴⁵

Understanding how Symons’s Paterian sympathies informed his position on music is crucial because it announces itself in a number of his earliest musical critiques. More specifically, his essay ‘The Problem of Richard Strauss,’ first printed in 1902, opens with Pater’s immortal lines:

In that essay on ‘The School of Giorgione,’ in which Walter Pater came perhaps nearer to a complete or final disentangling of the meanings and functions of the arts than any writer on aesthetics has yet done, we are told: ‘*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.*’ And of music because, ‘in its ideal, consummate moments, the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression; and to it, therefore, to the condition of its perfect moments, all the arts may be supposed constantly to tend and aspire.’¹⁴⁶

However this ideal, he continues, is not being properly met in music:

Wagnerian-styled mental breakdown and that of Magnus from Lee’s “A Wicked Voice,” discussed briefly in the subsequent chapter, are striking and indicate the extent to which Wagner’s music was culturally associated with an acutely ‘affective’ Decadent pathology at the fin de siècle. For further reading, see Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism*, pp. 57-87.

¹⁴² Sarah Collins, ‘Absolute Music and Ideal Content: Autonomy, Sensation and Experience in Arthur Symons’s “Theory of Musical Aesthetics”,’ *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 19.1 (2014), 45-66 (49).

¹⁴³ Arthur Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1903), p. 230.

¹⁴⁴ Collins, ‘Absolute Music and Ideal Content,’ 49.

¹⁴⁵ Arthur Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Archibald Constable and Company, 1906), p. iii.

¹⁴⁶ Arthur Symons, “The Problem of Richard Strauss,” in *Studies in Seven Arts*, pp. 301-348 (p. 301). Originally printed ‘The Music of Richard Strauss,’ *The Monthly Review* 9.3 (December 1902), 80-91.

Now the aim of modern music, which may seem to be carried to at least its furthest logical development in the music of Richard Strauss, is precisely to go backwards from this point towards which all the other arts had tended and aspired in vain, and to take up again that old bondage from which music only had completely freed itself. 'For while in all other words of art,' Pater tells us, 'it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it.' With the entrance of the 'programme' into music, with the attempt to express pure idea, with the appeal to the understanding to make distinctions, music has at once forfeited all the more important of its advantages over the other arts, condescending to an equality which it can never even maintain; putting itself, in fact, at a wilful disadvantage.¹⁴⁷

For Symons, then, 'programme music' was aesthetically retroactive, working 'backwards' in direct contravention of the promise set out by the Paterian ideal. Remarkably, however, this attitude reflects Symons' distinction from contemporary understandings on the dialectic between 'absolute' and 'programme' music, the latter of which was predicated almost entirely upon its forward-looking attitude — hence, of course, the name 'music of the future'. Ultimately this situates Symons at odds with the very principles set out by one of his most celebrated of musical figures, Wagner, upon whose foundations Strauss formulated his own musical style. These conceptual inconsistencies did not go unnoticed by more established factions of the music press either, specifically by Ernest Newman who responded to this critique with an essay 'Mr. Arthur Symons on Richard Strauss', which elucidates a fatal error in Symons' methods of analysis:

He first of all enunciates a theory of musical aesthetics that is, to say the least, debatable — at all events, as he has phrased it — and then condemns Strauss because his music, in Mr. Symons's opinion, runs counter to this theory. Starting from Pater's dictum that music is the type of the perfect art [...] he imagines that Strauss's music shows a tendency "to go backwards"[...] Now, a little analysis would have shown Mr. Symons that, so far from the programme being a new element in music, it is as old as music itself.¹⁴⁸

Not only is Symons misinformed on the nature of programme music, then, Newman suggests, but seemingly close-minded to its possibilities; 'we are finding out every day how many fresh things can be said in music, how greatly the representative, as distinguished from the merely expressive, side of the art is developing; and this evolution is really not to be cut short by the haphazard use of an epithet that has come to be looked upon as opprobrious'.¹⁴⁹ Newman's analysis identifies what he believes to be the central flaw in Symons's understanding of music;

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ernest Newman, 'Mr. Arthur Symons on Richard Strauss,' *The Speaker: the Liberal Review* (11 April 1904), 35-36 (35).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 36.

the first being his reliance on Pater's musical dictum and, in a related sense, the way in which this was used to propagate his ideas on progressiveness in music.¹⁵⁰

However even if Strauss was, as Newman suggests, being unfairly (and even inaccurately) measured against a standard of which he had no prior knowledge, understanding how Symons exercises a particular aesthetic criterion in his appraisals of music is to understand not only how Strauss fails to meet these values, but how Debussy exceeds them. Indeed, several commentators have observed that the Strauss/Debussy dichotomy was 'basic to music aesthetics at this time', which suggests that Symons had (in spite of Newman's belief) a fairly firm grasp of topical debate.¹⁵¹ Thus in his 1908 article, 'Claude Debussy,' Symons remarks twice on how Debussy departs from the style of the German composer, observing that:

[Debussy] has made for himself a new art which is like no other music, but which it is impossible to call anything but music. It is thin, remote, a gossamer-web; it is diaphanous, frolicsome, fantastic; it plays with sounds, bringing new colour out of them; he gives us melody without fixed tunes, he uses his orchestra to do certain feats, not big, unpleasant ones, as Strauss does, but small, delicate acrobatic ones.¹⁵²

And then adding, with concern to Debussy's *La Mer*:

This music was still, in a sense, imitative, but again it was not programme music. What is aimed at was a representation, through the suggestion of sounds, of a mood of nature; and I can see no objection to the imitation on strings and harps of the swish and crying of waves, done as Debussy does it, in subordination to what I have called a mood of nature. There is none of the crude realism of Strauss in "Don Quixote" or of his sensationalism in "Salome"; there is suggestion, which passes, fluid as water, with the cadence of the wind'.¹⁵³

Unlike Moore, Symons stops short of naming Pater's 'condition' outright — perhaps because his comments on Strauss which had preceded them were criticised precisely for its reliance on

¹⁵⁰ It is worth noting that Newman's criticism of Symons is likely to have stemmed from his own low tolerance for Pater's 'ideas' on music, having two years previously published on this specific subject, suggesting that the flaws in Pater's formulation of the 'perfected art' might be linked to his 'vague' aesthetic sensibility: 'The final conclusion is that, just as instrumental music by itself cannot satisfy certain of our aesthetic needs, so there are other needs, other faculties, which no music can satisfy; which cannot be satisfied even by the poetry that approaches most nearly to music. And if Pater argues that the highest art is that which resembles music in its vagueness, we must attribute this judgment to the fact that Pater's brain was more susceptible to vague than to specialised artistic emotion'. See Ernest Newman, "Walter Pater on Music," in *Studies in Music by Various Authors*, ed. by Robin Grey (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Kent and Co., Limited, 1901), pp. 292-301 (p. 301).

¹⁵¹ For the Strauss/Debussy dichotomy, see Marianne Wheeldon, *Debussy's Late Style* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 118-119. Wheeldon records that this practice was first noted by W.H. Daly in his biographical study *Debussy* (Edinburgh, 1908).

¹⁵² Arthur Symons, 'Claude Debussy,' *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 105.2728 (8 February 1908), 170-171 (170).

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

this particular epithet. Instead, the reader is left to draw their own conclusion from the dialectic he stages between Debussy as a purveyor of a ‘suggestive’, ‘non-programmatic’ music and that of the ‘programmatic’ composer, Strauss, whose music he had previously suggested to have regressed the Paterian spirit. Nevertheless, moments in his celebration of Debussy’s music clearly some of Pater’s descriptions from ‘The School of Giorgione’ where the ‘presence of water [...] is as characteristic, and almost as suggestive, as that of music itself’.¹⁵⁴

Where Pater is actually cited in Symons’s commentaries on Debussy, it is in a curious, though no less significant, musing on the phrenology of the aesthetic type: ‘The face of Debussy has a singular likeness to the later portraits of Rossetti,’ he observed, ‘there is the same brooding meditation in eyes and forehead. A certain heaviness of aspect is characteristic of most artists of extreme delicacy: Gautier, Renan, Pater, Maeterlinck, among writers.’¹⁵⁵ In an interesting turn of events this particular assessment, made during Debussy’s 1908 visit to England, appeared to win the approval of the composer himself, as his friend Georges Jean-Aubry later recalled: ‘The London papers — I kept the cuttings, and they lie before me as I write — were unanimous in emphasising two facts, neither of which displeased Debussy: the enthusiasm of the public and the physical resemblance of the composer to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, which some of the papers went so far as to designate as “striking”.’¹⁵⁶ Not that Symons’s remarks on Debussy and Rossetti were strictly limited to physical likeness, of course, as we see here in an article entitled ‘On Some Modern Music’ of March 1908:

The method of Debussy, in his choral setting of “The Blessed Damozel” of Rossetti, which was given at Queen’s Hall on 29 February, for the first time in England, was thought by the examiners of the Academie des Beaux-arts in 1893 to be too modern, too Pre-Raphaelite, altogether too obscurely foreign, above all too vague. It was about the time that a French man of letters called Gabriel Sarrazin, who had been spending a good deal of time in London (I used to meet him at Maddox Brown’s), brought out a very valuable book on modern English poetry, containing prose translations, done very faithfully after the originals [...] The whole Pre-Raphaelite school had its vogue then in Paris, and it was towards a poet and painter like Rossetti that Debussy naturally turned for suggestion and material.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 97.

¹⁵⁵ Symons, ‘Claude Debussy,’ p. 171. Curiously enough, these reflections on Debussy’s appearance anticipated those made by Richard Specht in *Der Merker* in November 1910, which record his response to the recent performance of Debussy’s work in Berlin. Here he remarks how he had been expecting to meet an individual from the canvases of *L’Aile bleue* (a character from one of the works by the Belgian symbolist, Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921)) but had instead been met by a man ‘thick-set with small abrupt movements, a sort of gnome in tails’. He concluded that Debussy made the impression of a ‘black-and-white sketch of Beardsley’, or perhaps he had been ‘carved out of a hefty black radish’. See Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, II, p. 129.

¹⁵⁶ Georges Jean-Aubry, ‘Some Recollections of Debussy,’ *The Musical Times* (1 May 1918), 204-205.

¹⁵⁷ Arthur Symons, ‘On Some Modern Music,’ *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 105.2732 (7 March 1908), 297-298 (297).

Whilst at first glance this passage might appear to exist merely for the purpose of providing some biographical detail, it becomes clear that Symons is not only establishing an English context within the common interests of a continental school of thought (something which other assessments would clearly follow in doing), he is also acknowledging a conflict between two sets of value systems which characterise artistic debate, one which we saw in the previous chapter — those who reject outright that which they deem to be ‘too modern’ or ‘too vague’ and those who possess the ability to appreciate it. And lest there be any doubt as to which side of this ideological divide Symons resides upon, the brief aside concerning his acquaintance with Sarrazin (the deliverer of this modern English verse to the French) parenthetically locates him within the parameters of this reciprocal exchange. This sense that Debussy’s music required a particular temperament would also feature in other commentators’ assessments; as one critic wrote in March 1908, ‘[t]here can be no question as to the cleverness of the music or its poetic import; the only thing is to get one’s ears educated, so to speak, in order to appreciate its strange idiom’.¹⁵⁸ Because as Symons makes clear in an earlier article, ‘French Music in London,’ Debussy’s music is novel in an unfamiliar way:

Here, if anywhere, is a new kind of music, not merely showy nor wilfully eccentric...but filled with an instinctive quality of beauty, which can pass from mood to mood, surprise us, lead us astray, but end by leading us to the enchantment in the heart of what I have called the wood. But words, however vague, are too precise for his music, which suggests nothing but music. It is content to be lovely in a new and unfamiliar way, the pure remote melody always just creeping in and always just held back, so that it may suggest the more. That is the modern method [...] and that is why this composer, who is in no sense literary, can go for a title or an impulse to Mallarmé or to Maeterlinck or to the “Blessed Damsel” of Rossetti.¹⁵⁹

Symons’s reflections on the discordancy of language and music seem to echo Mendelssohn’s own sentiments on the limited capability of words in the expression of ideas; Debussy’s music ‘suggests nothing but music’ and the listener is invited in to supply their own understanding. It is wholly antithetical, then, to the programme music of Strauss which advertises its own distinction between content and form and who, ‘[i]n his anxiety to convey more precise facts than music can convey by itself [...] gives quotations [...] which are, after all, only one degree removed from headlines or programmes.’¹⁶⁰

Symons’s efforts to work through the aesthetic implications of Debussy’s music become clearer when he relates the qualities of this sound to the illustrations of Beardsley, who is cited twice in his accounts of the composer; first in an assessment of June 1907 where

¹⁵⁸ ‘M. Claude Debussy,’ *The Musical Times* 49.781 (1 March 1908), 172.

¹⁵⁹ Arthur Symons, ‘French Music in London,’ *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 104.2720 (14 December 1907), 723-724 (723).

¹⁶⁰ Symons, “The Problem of Richard Strauss,” in *Studies in Seven Arts*, p. 306.

Symons records how in listening to *Prélude* he had ‘heard the little joys of tiny Beardsley creatures, dancing to the tinkling of elfin bells’.¹⁶¹ And once again in his essay ‘Claude Debussy’ in February the following year:

The wood, as I have said, is solitary; no human being enters it. The phantoms have unearthly voices; they express neither love nor hate, hardly desire; but for the most part dreams that have no outset nor conclusion, and when they are awake they play indolently at acrostics. Beardsley would have recognised his perverse elegance in these wandering outlines, in which sound plays pranks in the brain. He would have collected them in visible outlines, he would have shown them to us, in fancy dress, playing indolently at acrostics.¹⁶²

Since Beardsley owned and illustrated a copy of Mallarmé’s poem, it is possible that Symons had this series of accompanying images in mind.¹⁶³ However the analogy is interesting in another way. In his essay on Symons’ ‘Decadent Mythmaking’, Chris Snodgrass suggests that Symons was ‘personally responsible for sustaining, if not promulgating, many of the myths and legends of the “yellow nineties”’; and that there is ‘no more compelling example of Symons’ talent for refashioning literary and artistic figures into useful icons of his own myth of the Decadence (or Impressionism, or Symbolism, as he chose) *than his interpretation of Beardsley*.’¹⁶⁴ This ‘mythmaking’ is, I would argue, no less at work here; in relation to Debussy, certainly, but with significant ramifications for the posthumous remaking of Beardsley’s ‘musical’ reputation also. Emma Sutton has recently observed that Beardsley’s work, which was replete with musical (specifically: *Wagnerian*) imagery, ‘was routinely described in musical analogies only *after* his death’ in 1898.¹⁶⁵ And Symons was one of a number of commentators who posthumously acknowledged the musical dimension of Beardsley’s illustrative lines: they were, he suggested in 1898, ‘the minims and crochets by which he wrote down his music; they made the music, but they were not the music’.¹⁶⁶ However Sutton’s analysis reveals a striking inconsistency: not only was Beardsley’s work never ‘described as “Wagnerian”, or compared with Wagner’s work, but was more frequently described as “Mozartian”’ — a comparison which effectively ‘aligned his work with an antithetical musical heritage.’¹⁶⁷ What this demonstrates — and what Sutton’s argument

¹⁶¹ Arthur Symons, ‘Debussy and Other Questions,’ *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 103.2694 (15 June 1907), 746-747 (746).

¹⁶² Symons, ‘Claude Debussy,’ p. 171.

¹⁶³ See *A Second Book of Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* (London: Leonard Smithers and Co, 1899), p. 107.

¹⁶⁴ Chris Snodgrass, ‘Decadent Mythmaking: Arthur Symons on Aubrey Beardsley and Salome,’ *Victorian Poetry* 28.3/4 (1990), 61-109 (61-62). Own emphasis added.

¹⁶⁵ Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism*, p. 198.

¹⁶⁶ Arthur Symons, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: At the sign of the Unicorn, 1898), p. 30.

¹⁶⁷ Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism*, p. 198.

ultimately builds towards in her monograph, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism* — is that a posthumous reception which repeatedly emphasised form over representation, and presented the type of contentious debates with which fin-de-siècle aestheticism was engaged as merely ‘risqué’, performed a *fait accompli*; namely, that the suppression of Beardsley’s ‘political’ Wagnerism went hand in hand with the depoliticization of aestheticism more broadly.¹⁶⁸ In this way, then, Symons’ remarks concerning the affinity between Debussy’s music and Beardsley’s illustrations turn the tide against this posthumous commentary, recasting Beardsley’s work not as orderly and refined in the classical manner of Mozart, but as affective, decadent and ‘perverse’. It suggests, then, that Beardsley’s playful arrangement of line and form was the imaginative precursor to this music — framing the line of influence much as Moore does in his own discussion of Debussy’s fulfilment of the Paterian ‘condition’.

Although Symons’s reflections on Debussy were later compiled into a chapter in his reissue of *Plays, Acting and Music* in 1928, their original appearance in *The Saturday Review* charted only the course of a year from March 1907 to March 1908; and there is a sense that his endorsement of Debussy, though significant, is relatively slight compared to his more extensive writings on Wagner.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, traces of Symons’s influence can be discerned in other assessments of Debussy made both during and after the period in which his articles appeared. In September 1908, for example, mere months after his observations on Beardsley appeared in ‘Claude Debussy’, an assessment of Granville Bantock’s work “The Pierrot of the Minute” supplies an imaginative link between these two figures, describing the piece as: ‘one of the daintiest and most fairylike works we have yet had from his clever pen. There is a suggestion of M. Debussy about it [...] It is musical filigree of the most gossamer type, a wayward fancy from the realms of pretty artificialities, a Beardsley picture on a canvas of bright-coloured sounds’.¹⁷⁰ Elsewhere, there is evidence that Symon’s publically-advertised allegiance to nineteenth-century aesthetic thought did a great deal to foreground the composer’s association within this particular school of thought. Indeed, this is the precise sentiment with which one author begins his discussion of “Impressionism in Music” in which Debussy, together with Faure and D’Indy, is described as belonging to a collective ‘school’ which has ‘throw[n] to the winds all established notions of form and design’ in order to ‘express the subjective side of nature in music’.¹⁷¹ Debussy, however, is singled out in his unique facilitation of these ideas:

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁶⁹ Arthur Symons, “Claude Debussy” in *Plays, Acting and Music* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), pp. 123-138.

¹⁷⁰ ‘Comments and Opinions,’ *The Musical Standard* 30.768 (19 September 1908), 181-182 (182).

¹⁷¹ G. H., ‘Impressionism in Music,’ *The Musical Standard* 28.708 (27 July 1907), 53-54 (53).

It is well to enquire the nature of the material with which this fascinating wizard of sound weaves such subtle and complex musical problems. He is attempting to express, by means of his art, what Rossetti, Burne Jones and Whistler have done in theirs; namely, to convey subtle and mystic impressions of a subjective nature by creating a vague and indefinite atmosphere. Or, in other words, to make an appeal to the inner domain of feelings by setting in motion delicate waves of emotion which by their subtle power suggest situation and moods of feeling.¹⁷²

This passage is particularly significant not only because it assumes Debussy's association with the aesthetic movement to be of unequivocal parity, but equally because its overriding concern for the subject of 'musical impressionism' is marked with the slightly discordant images of wizardry and mysticism — what we might call the vernacular of Symbolism — while all the while being creatively linked to the paintings of three of the leading names in the British Aesthetic movement. In other words, it is a commentary which boils down the competing taxonomies of late nineteenth-century aesthetics to one single unifying concern for the art of 'suggestion'. This music is decidedly non-mimetic, making its appeal not to some objective truth or idea from outside of itself, but those innate feelings of its listener.

'[A]n out-and-out disciple of Pater': (Aesthetic) listening to Debussy

From 1908, it seems that Symons's mantle was taken up by the English musicologist, Edward Evans, who, over the course of the next decade, would not only become one of Debussy's most powerful advocates in England but who would extend the premises of Symons's criticism further still, presenting a form of music critique which consciously routed Debussy in the tradition of Paterian aestheticism. In January 1908, for example, he commenced his lecture to the members of the Concert Goers' Club on subject of modern French music precisely by evoking Pater's statements from "The School of Giorgione":

Whilst all the arts are equally unfettered in their search for adequate self-expression, they are to this extent interdependent that any strong movement in them is sooner or later reflected in the others; or perhaps it would be truer to say that these movements proceeded from the domain of abstract aesthetic impulse and reach the separate arts in the order of their degree of receptiveness for the ideas thus set in motion. This would explain why music, which is the most self-concentrated of the arts, owing to what Pater describes as its identification of form

¹⁷² Ibid.

and matter, is frequently slowest to submit to these influences, of which, however, it inevitably receives the impress in its turn.¹⁷³

These sentiments, he suggested, could be used to sum up the present impulse of French music which was taking its impulses from the arts of painting and poetry in a bid to ‘emancipate themselves from the bondage of the major and minor systems’ which characterised conventional approaches towards composition. And of this new school, he suggest, Debussy was the ‘archetype’ composer because his music above that of any of his contemporaries ‘endeavour[s] to recreate in their listeners, by the means of sensuous impressions, the emotional sensations stimulated in them by other sensuous impressions.’¹⁷⁴

These implications are extended further still in a lecture delivered by Evans in May 1909 to accompany the English premiere of Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Here he even takes to task those critics who had previously labelled Debussy ‘as an impressionist’, suggesting (in a way which Debussy himself would no doubt have appreciated) that this issue rests ‘largely on the definition one assigns to that much abused word.’¹⁷⁵ Indeed, Evans’ approach to Debussy’s music is far more analytical in approach than any other contemporary commentator. Like Symons, Evans emphasises the decidedly non-programmatic elements of Debussy’s work; namely his rejection of the Wagnerian *leitmotif*, which he suggests ‘originates with the dislike which an active imagination has for enforced idleness’.¹⁷⁶ He even cites Debussy’s own disdain for the use of ‘musical phrases’ as articulated in his precise intentions for *Pelléas et Mélisande*:

I wished — intended, in fact — that the action should never be arrested; that it should be continuous, uninterrupted. I wanted to dispense with parasitic musical phrases. When listening to a music-drama, the spectator is wont to experience to kinds of emotion: the musical emotion on the one hand; and the emotion of the character, on the other. Generally these are felt successively. I have tried to blend these two emotions and make them simultaneous. Melody is [...] powerless to express the constant change of emotion or life. Melody is suitable only for song, which confirms a fixed sentiment.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ ‘Some Aspects of Modern Music (A Lecture),’ *The Musical Standard* 29.734 (25 January 1908), 52-53 (52).

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Debussy’s “Pelléas et Mélisande”,’ *The Musical Standard* 31.805 (5 June 1909), 361-364 (362).

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 361.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Evans is likely to have lifted these precise remarks from Lawrence Gilman, *Debussy’s “Pelléas et Mélisande”: A Guide to the Opera* (New York: Schirmer, 1907). They originally appeared in *Le Figaro* (16 May 1902) in an essay/interview entitled ““Pelléas et Mélisande”: A Reply to Critics’. See *Debussy on Music*, pp. 79-82.

For Debussy, the leitmotif is the enemy of subjectivity since it fixes musical response into a formula of narrative ‘song’-like expectations; an artifice which reduces listener experience to procedure and in doing so, does a disservice to the flux of not only emotional experience of music, but even of ‘life’ itself. Using Debussy’s sentiments to demarcate a distinction between ‘rhetorical’ and ‘aesthetic’ effects in music, Evans suggests that much of this rests upon ‘the attitude of the listener’, concluding that *Pelléas et Mélisande*,

...must be listened to and judged on a purely aesthetic basis. The late James Sully, one of our finest authorities on psychology, defined the action of music as threefold: intellectual, moral or emotional, and aesthetic. Carrying his arguments to their logical conclusion it becomes possible to form a critical classification of musical impressions, according to whether one or the other of these elements predominates. Now the greatest German masters appeal to us by rhetorical means, by which the greatest intellectual impression is created, combined, in the case of the Romantic school, with an ever increasing degree of emotional effect. Except in the pre-symphonic era of music, purely aesthetic considerations have been relegated to a humbler place in the musical cosmos. This is contrary to a widely held conception of aesthetics which is well defined by Pater as follows: “Art is always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material; the ideal examples of poetry and painting being those in which the constituent elements of the composition are so welded together that the material or subject no longer strikes the intellect only; nor the form, the eye or ear only; but form or matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect to the imaginative reason, that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol.” *Whether consciously or not, Debussy is an out-and-out disciple of Pater in this respect.*¹⁷⁸

Here we are returned to the beginning of the chapter; to Moore who suggested that Debussy’s music fulfilled Pater’s claim that all art aspires to the condition of music. It seemed a deeply quixotic ‘aesthetic’ claim and perhaps it remains such, although Evans, the analyst, concurs; Debussy, more than any other composer, carries the Paterian spirit assuredly into music and into modernity. Unlike Moore, however, Evans provides us with a more explicit insight into how he determines his conclusion. Lifting lines from “The School of Giorgione”, Evans draws attention to the Paterian paradigm which moves the axis of aesthetic activity away from the object itself and towards the listener, essentially obliterating the distinction between them. That is why, then, Evans is so eager to highlight Debussy’s rejection of the leitmotif, because these are the anathema of perception; an edifice which reduces aesthetic experience into a series of literary expectations (as Debussy writes elsewhere, a device designed ‘to aid those who cannot read a score’¹⁷⁹) and acting as a bar to the general act of perception itself. But there

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 363. Own emphasis added.

¹⁷⁹ Claude Debussy, ‘L’Ouragan,’ *La Revue Blanche* (15 May 1901), in *Debussy on Music*, pp. 35-37 (pp. 35-36).

is a condition to all this — this effect is contingent upon the ‘attitude of the listener’.¹⁸⁰ Debussy may be, by virtue of his adherence to his ideas, an ‘out-and-out disciple of Pater’ but in order to experience the ‘seductive aesthetic effect’ of his music, the audience must reciprocate.¹⁸¹

We take our leave of Debussy now having come (to borrow the words of Théodore Duret) ‘full circle’. But these parting sentiments about listening, aesthetic perception and Paterian ‘discipleship’ take on renewed significance in the next chapter. Here, in Vernon Lee’s musical reading and writing, the implications of Pater’s ideas for music itself play a vital role once again.

¹⁸⁰ ‘Debussy’s “Pelléas et Mélisande”,’ 363.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

3.

Rethinking the Conditions of Music: Vernon Lee (Reading Pater) Reading Edmund Gurney

“All art,” wrote Pater, summarising Hegel, “tends to the nature of music.” This saying has long haunted me; and with it the suspicion that knowledge of the nature of music would afford the best clue to the aesthetics of other arts less simple in their tasks and less seemingly intimate in their processes. Now what is the nature of music?

— Vernon Lee, *Music and its Lovers* (1932)¹

From an early age, before even her acquaintance with Pater’s oft-cited aphorism from “The School of Giorgione,” the young Violet Paget found that her thoughts often ‘tended’ to the nature of music. Writing in a series of exchanges with her friend, Henrietta Jenkin, in 1874, the sixteen year old declared that whilst she had no ‘artistic talent of any sort’, she did possess ‘a certain faculty in writing, which [she] would willingly devote to the service of art.’² Accordingly, she had taken to recording her numerous considerations in a commonplace book: ‘but on looking over the five or six volume of foolscap of which it consists,’ she revealed, ‘I find that nearly everything in it is relative to aesthetics, particularly those of music.’³ Several months later she would write to Jenkin again and confirm that a discernible pattern of specifically musical thought was emerging from her notebooks: ‘[W]henever I have a thought, [I] put it down — it is good practice for defining one’s ideas. A great many of these reflexions are on music, because I never hear a piece without perceiving some little aesthetical rule or part of a rule[.]’⁴ Sadly, however, she added that the art of music was at present ‘very little understood, and very carelessly studied’ and hopeful that these critical ills might one day be remedied, remarked: ‘vague dreams of a great work on music haunt me, but not more as a work of mine than of anyone else.’⁵

It would not be until 1932 that ‘Vernon Lee’⁶ would publish *Music and its Lovers*, her only major work on the subject of music, having in the intervening half century published

¹ Vernon Lee, *Music and its Lovers: An Empirical Study of Emotional and Imaginative Responses to Music* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932), p. xx. Subsequent references given in the text.

² Letter to Henrietta Jenkin, 19 April 1874, in Mandy Gagel, ‘Selected Letters of Vernon Lee’ (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Boston University, 2008), pp. 115-116.

³ Letter to Henrietta Jenkin, 19 April 1874, in Gagel, ‘Selected Letters’, p. 116.

⁴ Letter to Henrietta Jenkin, 4 September 1874, in Gagel, ‘Selected Letters’, p. 130.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The pseudonym ‘Vernon Lee’ was adopted in 1875 when Paget first began publishing because, as she would later remark in 1878, ‘no one reads a women’s writing on art, history or aesthetics with anything but mitigated contempt’ (Letter to Henrietta Jenkin, 18 December 1878, ‘Selected Letters’, p. 184).

extensively on a wide range of genres, from drama to literary criticism, histories and biographies, psychological aesthetics and art appreciation, together with several works of fiction.⁷ Even so, the subject of music never strayed too far from Lee's critical purview; as she would observe, with characteristic diffidence, in her revised edition to *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1907; first published 1880); 'I have probably spent more hours writing about music than hearing it[.]'⁸ Certain facets of this life-long engagement are well documented. In particular, scholarship has long been alert to Lee's enduring affection, and corresponding distaste, for eighteenth-century music and the Wagnerian-styled music of the future respectively. Indeed, as Emma Sutton has observed, Lee's critical commentaries on these two musical schools assume a parity in which her positive assessments of eighteenth-century music equally entail a negative commentary on modern music and its overly dramatic tendencies.⁹ As Lee would write in 1877 on the subject of musical expression in eighteenth-century music: 'The proper mission of art is to raise us by showing us beautiful forms, and if art be distorted from its proper use, for the sake of suggesting thought or exciting passion, it revenges us by giving us forms which are not only ugly, but which revolt our logical instinct [...] This invariably happens when music is made subservient to dramatic intentions, for then the general object of art is thwarted.'¹⁰

As Carlo Cabellero observes, to recognise Lee's love of eighteenth-century music is to appreciate the crucial tenets of her own rereading of aestheticism.¹¹ Her fundamental belief that art required some semblance of moral and social meaning would be her reaction against the perceived 'artistic selfishness' of the 'Baudelaire-Gautier' school; and, as Carolyn Burdett has noted, her development of 'empathy' was part of this mission 'to rescue art from the trivialisation and moral vacuity she feared characterised aestheticism'.¹² The 'general object of art', then, was to be not only socially and politically responsible but (or necessarily, perhaps)

⁷ For a comprehensive list of Lee's primary texts over the course of her career see Phyllis F. Mannocchi, 'Vernon Lee': A Reintroduction and Primary Bibliography,' *English Literature in Translation*, 1880-1920 26.4 (1983), 231-267.

⁸ Vernon Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* rev. 2nd ed (London: Fisher Unwin, 1907), p. xx.

⁹ Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s*, pp. 66-67 n.25.

¹⁰ Vernon Lee, 'Musical Expression and the Composers of the Eighteenth Century,' *The New Quarterly Magazine* 8 (January 1877), 186-202 (187).

¹¹ Carlo Caballero, "'A Wicked Voice': On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music,' *Victorian Studies* 35.4 (1992), 385-408.

¹² In a letter of 13 December 1884 addressed to her friend, Frances Power Cobbe, Lee would write: 'I cannot join in your animosity against aestheticism. The movement had much that was morbid, though much less than the aesthetic Baudelaire-Gautier movement whence it was partially derived; & it had, besides a seal of artistic selfishness, a lot of mere *polissonerie*, as in Swinburne's earlier books, disagreeably mixed with its dead serious morbidness. Still it has on the whole been a healthy & most useful movement, I think[.]' Cited in Gagel, 'Selected Letters', p. 357; Carolyn Burdett, 'The Subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside': Vernon Lee's Psychological Aesthetics,' *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 12 (2001), 1-31 (2).

beautiful; and for Lee the music of the eighteenth-century was highly prized within this ‘tally of virtues’.¹³ Accordingly, though not dismissive of all nineteenth-century music,¹⁴ her belief that certain modern music had rejected the perfection of form in favour of petitioning the emotional sense goes some way to explaining why her antipathy towards Wagner was so strong; his, she believed, was a music not of beauty but malaise, inflicting ‘nervous wear and tear’ and ‘imprison[ing] the [...] half-attentive hearer in the net of his *Leit-motivs* [sic].’¹⁵ In his now-seminal 1861 essay, ‘Richard Wagner et *Tannhäuser* à Paris,’ Baudelaire had espoused the affective power of Wagner’s music by claiming that it had ‘designs on us’.¹⁶ Yet whilst Lee (and many others, like Debussy) would have agreed with this assessment, the self-conscious and ‘parasitical’ affectivity of Wagner’s music was precisely the point of contention. Lee’s distain for the excesses of Wagner’s music find its apogee in her “A Wicked Voice” (1890), which highlights the degenerative human cost of denaturalising art’s ‘proper mission’. Here, Magnus, the self-confessed Wagnerite, is subjected to an endless recital of perverted leitmotifs — the recurrent musical phrases of Zaffirino which punctuate the text, acting as both thematic and structural conceit — and is ultimately left pathologically wasted by a ‘strange and deadly disease [of] little, tripping flourishes and languishing phrases, and long-drawn, echoing cadences.’¹⁷

Remarking on Lee’s tenacious critical investment in these two, dialectical schools of musical development, Vineta Colby concludes that:

What is most remarkable about Vernon Lee’s theories of music is how little they changed over the course of her life. Her views on the aesthetics of art evolved slowly from her early rejection of Ruskin for his moral condemnation of the Renaissance, through her discipleship to Pater’s classical organicism, her rediscovery of Ruskin and recognition of the social and moral function of art, and her studies in psychological aesthetics. But in her writings on the aesthetics of music and her personal tastes in music, the Vernon Lee of 1932 is essentially the same as the Vernon Lee of the 1870s.¹⁸

Perhaps governed by her observation of Lee’s ubiquitous, career-long praise and censure for eighteenth-century music and Wagnerism respectively, Colby has determined that by

¹³ Caballero, “‘A Wicked Voice’: On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music,” 386.

¹⁴ Vineta Colby notes that Lee admired ‘Schubert’s *Die schone Mullerin* and *Winterreise*, all of Brahms, and some Chopin and Robert Schumann.’ See Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 220.

¹⁵ Vernon Lee, ‘The Religious and Moral Status of Wagner,’ *Fortnightly Review* (1911), 868-885 (876, 878).

¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, ‘Richard Wagner and *Tannhäuser* in Paris,’ in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. by P. E. Charvet (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp. 325-358 (p. 332).

¹⁷ Vernon Lee, “A Wicked Voice,” in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2006), pp. 154-181 (p. 181).

¹⁸ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 218.

extension her ‘theories of music’ were equally unfailing. But this is not strictly true and the mistake is made, I think, in drawing too fine a distinction between Lee’s theories on the ‘aesthetics of music’ and ‘the aesthetics of art’. In *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, for instance, Lee had declared that ‘the object of the writer has been to study not the special nature and history of any art in isolation, but to study the constitution and evolution of the various arts compared with each other’.¹⁹ But this would not always be the case. Writing some fifty years later in *Music and its Lovers*, this sentiment is precisely that which she would advise against: ‘the nature of music would be most profitably studied not so much by analysing and comparing various works of art, for that would acquaint us only with the evolution of various styles and the influence of individual masters’ but ‘by examining the effects of music in general on its audience’ (*Music*, p. 23). As such, the Vernon Lee of the 1870s was driven by the same desire to illuminate the nature of music as preoccupied her final work, *Music and its Lovers*; but the Lee of 1932 had benefitted from years of refining her understanding of music through the musical and aesthetical theories of her contemporaries. Ever ‘haunted’ by her precocious efforts to either write herself or find another’s ‘great work on music’, Lee had applied herself to the examination of music as part of a concerted effort to ‘unite both studies; not with any present aim, but with a view to a very vague aesthetical future.’²⁰ This musical engagement, however, had long gone unnoticed until very recently when Shafquat Towheed demonstrated that Lee’s investment in contemporary musicology was far more significant and extensive than has previously been acknowledged. In his article “‘Music is not merely for musicians’: Vernon Lee’s Musical Reading and Response,’ Towheed considers Lee’s engagement with music through her personal library of musical titles, suggesting that she was driven by the desire to close the gap between specialist and non-specialist audiences in their appreciation of music.²¹ Here Towheed notes that although only thirty books pertaining to a musical topic feature in Lee’s private collection (which amounts to over 400 volumes in total), that it is the diversity and significance of these works alone which should command our attention: biographies of composers such as Beethoven and Schumann; histories of music; studies of the psychology of music; and various treatise on musical aesthetics.²²

¹⁹ Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, pp. 3-4.

²⁰ Letter to Linda Villari, 7 June 1879, in Gagel, ‘Selected Letters’, p. 187.

²¹ Shafquat Towheed, ‘“Music is not merely for musicians”: Vernon Lee’s Musical Reading and Response,’ *The Yearbook of English Studies* 40.1-2 (2010), 273-294.

²² Ibid., 286. Towheed lists the following works, together with his own notes on Lee’s encounters with certain works: Giovanni Alibrandi, *Manuale di musica all'uso degli insegnanti ed alunni* (Turin: Ermanno Loescher, 1881), possibly unread; Albert Bazaillas, *Musique et inconscience* (Paris: Felix Alean, 1898); Camille Bellaigue, *Psychologie musicale* (Paris: Delagrave, 1893); Theodor Billroth, *Wer ist musikalisch?* (Berlin: Baetel, 1898); P. Blaserna, *Le Son et la musique* (Paris: Alean, 1892), possibly unread; Jules Combarieu, *Les Rapports de la musique et de la poésie: considérées au point de vue de l'expression* (Paris: Alean, 1894); [Unknown author,] *Canti popolari* ([n.d.]); Lionel Dauriac, *La Psychologie dans l'opéra français* (Paris: Alean, 1897), possibly unread; Lionel Dauriac, *Essai sur l'esprit musical* (Paris: Alean, 1904); Joseph Goddard, *The Deeper Sources of the Beauty and*

One of these works is particularly conspicuous, being not only the oldest musical tome in Lee's musical library but equally, Towheed notes, by far her most heavily glossed item: Edmund Gurney's *The Power of Sound* (1880).²³ Born in 1847, Gurney began his intellectual schooling as a fellow of Classics at Trinity College, Cambridge, later abandoning this venture to undertake studies in medicine, law, psychology and later in life, psychical research in paranormal phenomena. Yet music was his most enduring personal and professional interest. Rollo Myers has suggested that *The Power of Sound* lays claim to being one of the most important contributions to musical aesthetics ever written,²⁴ and yet its failure to generate immediate success with nineteenth-century music aficionados greatly contributed to Gurney's disillusionment with subsequent writing on musical topics and it remained his only major work on the subject. Briefly, *The Power of Sound* assumed the familiar nineteenth-century conviction that music's subject-matter and its form are coextensive; the type of stance which is today almost entirely synonymous with Hanslick and with whom Gurney's name has occasionally been linked (a fact which may have contributed to the critical obscurity of Gurney's work).²⁵ However this purported affiliation is not only dismissive of the detail and nuance of Gurney's work, it fundamentally misrepresents his unique critical intervention into the nineteenth-century formalist debate; as Gordon Epperson remarks: 'Formalist will not

Expression of Music (London: William Reeves, ?1905]), possibly unread; Edmund Gurney, *The Power of Sound* (London: Smith, Elder, 1880); Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen: ein Bâtrag zur Revision der Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1896); Friedrich von Hausegger, *Die Musik als Ausdruck* (Vienna: Carl Konegen, 1887); Frank Howes, *The Borderland of Music and Psychology* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1926); Marie Jaëll, *La Musique et la psychophysiologie* (Paris: Alean, 1896); Friedrich Kerst, *Schumann-Brevier* (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1905), possibly unread; Heinrich Adolf Köstlin, *Geschichte der Musik* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1895), possibly unread; Charles Lalo, *Esquisse d'une esthétique musicale scientifique* (Paris: Alean, 1908); Wanda Landowska, *Musique ancienne* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1909), possibly unread; Lionel Landry, *La Sensibilité musicale: ses éléments — sa formation* (Paris: Alean, 1927); Auguste Laugel, *La Voix, l'oreille, et la musique* (Paris: Baillière, 1867); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Le Cas Wagner* (Leipzig: C. G. Naumann, 1888); Ludwig Nohl, *Mozarts Leben* (Leipzig: R. Reisland, 1870); Hubert Parry, *The Evolution of the Art of Music*, 4th edn (London: Kegan Paul, 1905); Edward Ireneus Prime-Stevenson, *Long-Haired Iopas: Old Chapters from Twenty-Five Tears of Music Criticism* (Florence: Italian Mail, 1927), possibly unread; Hugo Riemann, *Wie hören wir Musik? Grundlinien der Musik-Ästhetik* (Leipzig: Max Hesse, 1903), possibly unread; Nesta de Robeck, *Music of the Italian Renaissance* (London: Medici Society, 1928); Romain Rolland, *Beethoven* (Paris: Cahiers de la Quinzaine, 1903); Anton Rubinstein, *Die Musik und ihre Meister* (Leipzig: Bartholt Senff, 1892); Karl Storck, *Beethovens Briefe: in Auswahl* (Stuttgart: Greiner und Pfeiffer, 1909); Karl Storck, *Mozarts Briefe: in Auswahl* (Stuttgart: Greiner und Pfeiffer, 1909); Carl Stumpf, *Tonpsychologie*, 2 vols (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1883-1890); and Harry Porter Weld, *An Experimental Study of Musical Enjoyment* (Worcester, MA: American Journal of Psychology, 1912).

²³ Edmund Gurney, *The Power of Sound* (London: Smith, Elder, 1880). Subsequent references given in the text. Lee's copy is located in the British Institution of Florence, Harold Acton Library and is signed 'V. Paget, London Aug 3.81'. It should be noted that I will be referring to the first edition of *The Power of Sound* throughout this chapter, rather than the 1966 reprint, edited and introduced by Edward T. Cone, unless otherwise specified.

²⁴ Rollo Myers, 'Edmund Gurney's "The Power of Sound",' *Music and Letters* 53 (1972), 36-43 (36). See also Jerrold Levinson, *Music in the Moment* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).

²⁵ See Jerrold Levinson, "Edmund Gurney," in *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 187-191.

quite do for [Gurney],’ rather he ‘was a nonreferentialist.’²⁶ That is to say, whilst the ‘referentialist’ is concerned with locating ‘meanings’ in extra-musical associations (such as descriptive titles, leitmotifs, etc.), the non-referentialist holds musical meaning to be inherent in the work itself (in keeping with the ‘formalist’ creed), although he ‘is not necessarily opposed to secondary [...] “meanings”.’²⁷ Unlike Hanslick, then, Gurney did not set out to either suppress or deny that a listener’s encounter with the musical work might yield an emotional or imaginative encounter with the musical work. Rather, he made the ‘more or less ascertainable facts’ of ‘musical phenomena’ — the experience itself — the starting point for his enquiry (*Power*, p. vi). Governed by his own growing interest in psychology, Gurney’s work focused predominantly on the perception of a work by the listener; and in turn, upon the degree of pleasure experienced by the listener’s perception of the work’s ‘beauty’. Thus, he stated: ‘My primary concern being with the aesthetics of Hearing, and in particular with Music, the various analogies and contrasts with other regions of experience present have been introduced in connection with the different divisions of the main subject; which has led to a somewhat sporadic notice of other arts’ (*Power*, p. vii).

Lee acquired her copy of *The Power of Sound* in August 1881 and would review it twice for publication: first in December 1882 and again — notably, some twenty five years after her first encounter with the work — in her 1906 essay, ‘The Riddle of Music’, which re-assessed Gurney’s book alongside a number of subsequent publications on music. Gurney and Lee had met in the summer of 1882 at the former’s home, an event which likely transpired on account of the host having written approvingly to Lee regarding an article she had published on vivisection in the *Contemporary Review* in May — a subject he himself had published upon only three months before.²⁸ Their encounter was recalled by Lee in a letter to her mother of 21 June 1882:

[W]ent to dinner at the Gurneys. They have a pretty little house in Brompton, or rather off the Knightsbridge road. Mrs Gurney who is, as you know, a gardener’s daughter whom he had educated, Morris fashion, is a very fine, beautiful young woman, big, blonde, like some of Rubens’ younger types, with fine manners. Edmund Gurney is supposed to be marvellously handsome but is to me a mere fine butler with a dash of

²⁶ Gordon Epperson, *The Mind of Edmund Gurney* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), p. 24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁸ Peter Gunn makes the connection between Gurney’s letter and the dinner invitation in his biography of Lee, see *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 84-85. It is likely that Gurney initiated communication given that Lee makes reference to his article in her own (810). Their anti-vivisection stance is, as I hope to demonstrate, just one of many converging areas of critical interest between the two. See Edmund Gurney, ‘An Epilogue on Vivisection,’ *Cornhill Magazine* 45 (February 1882), 191-199; and Vernon Lee, ‘Vivisection: An Evolutionist to Evolutionists,’ *Contemporary Review* 41 (May 1882), 788-811.

guardsman, with [a] very undecided manner [...] Talked music the whole time with Mr Gurney who (I suspect) is beginning to be flabbergasted & think me a charlatan.²⁹

Their acquaintance would be renewed several times over the following weeks and thereafter on an annual basis when Lee would make her yearly pilgrimage back to England from Florence, only ending when Gurney passed away in 1888.³⁰ We also find that Gurney's name features visibly in a series of exchanges concerning the well-documented plagiarism row of 1897, where Bernard Berenson had suggested that Lee's article 'Beauty and Ugliness,'³¹ co-authored with Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thomson, too closely resembled the concepts he had forwarded in his own works, *Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (1894) and *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896).³² These charges were vehemently denied by the Lee camp and writing to Mary Costelloe Berenson, Lee would enclose a series of personal documents to disprove the charges and demonstrate the true source of her ideas:

These notebooks (with the guiding dated extracts) I put entirely at yr [sic] disposal for as long a period as you like, together with a copy book containing annotations on the proof sheets of *Florentine Painters*, and my copybooks on psychological reading, and my annotated copies of W. James, Foullee, Wundt & Gurney (re-read while writing *Beauty & Ugliness*), because these copy books & annotations shed a great deal of light both on the chronology & genesis (excuse such big words!) of my notions, and also on the notions themselves, of both of which I think that Mr Berenson & yourself have erroneous views.³³

Later in the same letter, Lee would take to tackling each individual point of conjecture in turn, and concerning the allusion to Adolph Hildebrand (who she cites in 'Beauty & Ugliness'), writes: 'I don't see why I should have spoken of him with more admiration than I did of W. James, Lange & Sergi, or of Edmund Gurney, whom I admire above all other writers on aesthetics.'³⁴

Quite remarkably given that Lee explicitly places Gurney atop her hierarchy of aestheticians, this connection has historically only merited fleeting (and largely biographical) notice in critical scholarship of her work.³⁵ Recent years have witnessed a small but valuable

²⁹ Letter to Matilda Paget, 21 June 1882, in Gagel, 'Selected Letters', p. 254.

³⁰ See Gagel, 'Selected Letters,' pp. 256, 270, 294, 327, 372, 374 and 410.

³¹ Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, 'Beauty and Ugliness,' *Contemporary Review* 72 (Oct 1897), 544-569. This article is not to be confused with Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's later work of the same name *Beauty and Ugliness: and other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912).

³² For the most recent summary of these events see Mandy Gagel, '1897, A Discussion of Plagiarism: Letters between Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson, and Mary Costelloe,' *Literary Imagination* 12.2 (2010), 154-179.

³³ Letter to Mary (Costelloe) Berenson, 4 November 1897, in Gagel, 'Selected Letters,' p. 587.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 590.

³⁵ These include Peter Gunn's biography which cites Lee's letter concerning her meeting with Gurney (*op. cit.*); and also Colby's biography which notes that the two were acquainted and that Lee had read and reviewed Gurney's *The Power of Sound* (Colby, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 114, 115, 167 and 218).

number of efforts to address this critical lacunae, beginning, of course, with Towheed's aforementioned article; and yet still the scope and significance of this interaction remains largely uncharted, for in spite of the acknowledgement that *The Power of Sound* was one of Lee's most-read works, Towheed's essay provides no further exploration of Lee and Gurney's intellectual affinity. One of the most insightful recent reflections concerning Lee's potential interest in Gurney — and we might possibly add surprising insofar as it is an essay which does not take Lee for its main subject — comes courtesy of Phillip Ross Bullock and his recent discussion of the early-twentieth century programme writer, Rosa Newmarch.³⁶ Here, as part of his wider efforts to 'locate Newmarch's contribution to early twentieth-century musical life in Britain within the legacy of Victorian Aestheticism,' Bullock takes to sketching the intellectual context of the period with recourse to some of Lee's writings on music.³⁷ Drawing attention to Lee's differentiation between 'hearing' and 'listening', first articulated in 'The Riddle of Music' (1906) and later developed in *Music and its Lovers*, Bullock suggests that this distinction was 'partly inspired by Edmund Gurney's *The Power of Sound* [...] yet has a clear precursor in Hanslick's far more judgmental condemnation of those who would yield to music's suggestive emotional power', concluding that:

In her writings on aesthetics (particularly in the field of music), Lee can be seen negotiating between the claims of Pater's subjectivism and Hanslick's formalism, drawing on and distancing herself from elements of both, and viewing the resulting dialogue through her own prismatic interest in the developing fields of psychology and physiology.³⁸

Although Bullock has, I contend, downplayed the influence of Gurney on Lee's work, many of his observations do not strictly preclude many of my own conclusions, both here and throughout this thesis as a whole; the tension between Pater and Hanslick, for example (which we touched upon in Chapter 1); the convergence of musicology and British aestheticism in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century (and more specifically, the dearth of critical discussion pertaining to the scope and dynamics of this interaction); and finally, the fact that Lee's thinking is fundamentally multidisciplinary in nature, skilfully and critically interrogating one academic discipline through the critical lens of another — and vice versa.

Perhaps we would be mindful, then, as Bullock suggests, not to overstate the influence of any one single thinker in Lee's intellectual development. After all, as Angela Leighton reminds us, Lee's critical lens was consciously prismatic in nature; it 'enjoy[ed] the dialectic

³⁶ Phillip Ross Bullock, "'Lessons in Sensibility': Rosa Newmarch, Music Appreciation, and the Aesthetic Cultivation of the Self,' *The Yearbook of English Studies* 40.1-2 (2010), 295-318 (312).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 296.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 313.

of altering points of view' and 'does not lend itself to summary.'³⁹ And yet at the same time, the fact remains that Lee returns to Gurney's work repeatedly over the course of her career — a detail suggested plainly enough by the near-quarter century which separate her two published reviews of his work (and can, I want to suggest here, be traced even further still). Crucially, this indicates something particularly significant; that this text, potentially more than any other work at Lee's disposal, held an unparalleled appeal — a theoretical benchmark which continued to stimulate and inform her understanding of music long after her initial encounter. Accordingly, this chapter takes for its subject Lee's critical (re)readings of Gurney's *The Power of Sound*, together with the suggestion that this particular work shaped her attitude towards the study and investigation of music in ways which have yet to be fully acknowledged. This chapter begins by elucidating some of the central tenets of Gurney's dense and theoretically-nuanced work which amount to his conception of musical experience; the distinction he makes between music in relation to the other arts; his theories of the perception of 'beauty' in the musical work; and his classification of listener types. I then examine Lee's critical responses to *The Power of Sound*, as outlined in her published reviews, 'Impersonality and Evolution in Music' (1882) and 'The Riddle of Music' (1906), before ending with a final discussion of some of the ways in which the implications of Gurney's work are interpolated by Lee in *Music and its Lovers*. By tracing a trajectory which runs from Lee's first encounter with *The Power of Sound* in 1881 to 1932 this chapter argues that Lee maintained a hitherto unexplored and crucially, *career-long* dialogue with Gurney's work. More than this, by exploring Lee's responses to Gurney we are afforded a unique insight into (to borrow her own casting) the 'chronology & genesis' of her ideas.⁴⁰ In other words, Lee's ongoing negotiations with this particular text, the way in which she assimilates, challenges and revises Gurney's aesthetics of music reveals as much of her little-known appreciation of this work as it does the vicissitudes of her own ongoing attempts to theorise aesthetic experience.

With this in mind, what I want to suggest is that Lee's ongoing engagement with *The Power of Sound* is particularly illuminative of another important and well-documented dialogue in her work; her life-long conversation with Pater and her critical negotiations with the central tenets of aestheticism itself. Commentators have long acknowledged that *Belcaro* (1881) marks a significant moment in Lee's oeuvre; the 'transition from historian [...] to aesthetic critic' and a shift irrevocably conditioned by her increasing familiarity with Pater's work.⁴¹ Arriving at Gurney's work in August 1881, Lee's brush with Paterian aestheticism

³⁹ Leighton, *On Form*, p. 101.

⁴⁰ Letter to Mary (Costelloe) Berenson, 4 November 1897, in Gagel, 'Selected Letters,' p. 587.

⁴¹ Stefano Evangelista, "Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism," in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 91-111 (p. 92). See also Laurel Brake, "Lee and the Pater Circle," *op. cit.*, pp. 40-58.

was not only fresh in her mind, the encounter is in fact visibly inscribed on the title page of her heavily-annotated edition of *The Power of Sound* (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). Here, Lee has (re)written the opening lines from “The School of Giorgione”: ‘To regard all products of art as various forms of poetry is the mistake of much popular criticism. For this criticism, poetry, music and painting are but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities of colour in painting, of sound in music, of rhythmical words in poetry...’ As we saw in the previous chapter, Arthur Symons had also pledged allegiance to the ineffaceable quality of the ‘first two sentences in Pater’s essay on “The School of Giorgione”,’ suggesting that they served as ‘a kind of motto’ for *Studies in the Seven Arts*, being summative of the way in which he ‘looked upon art and the arts’.⁴² This is equally true of Lee, of course, who was, as Angela Leighton observes, ‘Pater’s most original disciple and commentator.’⁴³ As such, I would like to suggest a slight revision to Bullock’s deduction that Lee’s writings on music negotiate between ‘Pater’s subjectivism and Hanslick’s formalism’. Rather, what I hope to explore is how Lee’s attempts to describe the nature of music can be understood here as a less polemic and less dialectical negotiation between the aesthetics of Pater and of Gurney, whose own distinctive attempts to systematically account for the nature of music belie their own deeply ‘aesthetic’ concerns. Indeed, as Catherine Dale has recently suggested: ‘Gurney’s concern with beauty throughout all his writings on music implies that his true status on the history of art is as an aesthete rather than an analyst. They abound with questions of an aesthetic nature concerning the relative merits of different works and the qualitative judgments these imply depend, naturally, on the listener’s perception of a work’s beauty.’⁴⁴ Lee’s efforts to work through the nature of music, as governed by her reception of Pater and Gurney’s ideas, not only demonstrate a sustained effort to interpolate ‘the condition of music’, they also ask us to rethink the line between nineteenth-century musicology and British aestheticism, fields which are, perhaps, commonly assumed to be discrete. And as such, Pater, Gurney and Lee emerge from this dialogue with more in common than what separates them; a mutually sympathetic thesis which understands that aesthetic investigations begin a priori with an examination of music and the conviction that individual experience (and moreover the nature of that experience) was central. Those (musical) ‘conditions’ of Pater’s aestheticism are well-known, so let us begin by exploring those of Gurney.

⁴² Symons, *Studies in the Seven Arts*, p. iii.

⁴³ Angela Leighton, ‘Ghosts, Aestheticism, and “Vernon Lee”,’ *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.1 (2000), 1-14 (2).

⁴⁴ Catherine Dale, *Music Analysis in Britain in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 87.

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Fig. 6. Title page from Vernon Lee's personal copy of Edmund Gurney's *The Power of Sound* (1880). British Institute of Florence, Archive and Special Collections of the Harold Acton Library.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Source: Shafquat Towheed, "“Music is not merely for musicians”: Vernon Lee's Musical Reading and Response,' *The Yearbook of English Studies* 40.1-2 (2010), 273-294 (285).

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Fig. 7. Detail from Lee's copy of *The Power of Sound* (1880)

Today Gurney is perhaps best known for his involvement in the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) which he founded in 1882 alongside President Frederic W.H. Myers and friends William F. Barrett, Henry Sidgwick, and Edmund Dawson Rogers (counting notably G.F. Watts, Ruskin, William Gladstone and Lord Tennyson amongst its honorary members).⁴⁶ The organisation was established with the objective to investigate 'that large group of debatable phenomena designated by such terms as mesmeric, psychical and Spiritualistic [...] in the same spirit of exact and unimpassioned enquiry which has enabled Science to solve so many problems.'⁴⁷ Lee would attend one of these meetings at Gurney's behest in July 1885, though not with the outcome her host would undoubtedly have desired, recording two days later that it 'was a very dull business, consisting mainly of avowals of failed experiments & fraudulent ghosts'.⁴⁸ Indeed, this is one of several references Lee makes to Gurney's seemingly swift rejection of musical matters for diversions of a more spiritual nature and we can see that as early as 1883, a mere seven months after her first review of *The Power of Sound* was published, she would remark on how Gurney was much changed:

Mr G. has got, I think, quite ramolli on the subject of ghosts; and the odd business is that he has no explanatory theory on the subject, but merely swallows all the stories which are given him as evidence. Still, it is curious to see what an amount of sound negative reason even these people have. When I told him that there were few or no ghosts in Tuscany, instead of that proving, as it does to me, that ghosts must be due to peculiar actions of the fancy, he placidly averred that as the Red Indians had a greater organ of scent, and the germans [sic] of music, so the Teutonic people might have an organ for seeing ghosts who would remain invisible though present for the Latins. Mrs. G. got red & convulsed on the subject: I think she must be at the bottom of it all.⁴⁹

Ghosts, spectres and 'hauntings' are, of course, everywhere in Lee's writing. As Angela Leighton observes, Lee's 'ghosts' embody the power of aestheticism itself insofar as the ('culture') ghost emerges from the aesthetic schema which locates the study of culture in individual response.⁵⁰ Thus the positivist methods of the SPR were of little interest to Lee. And writing in the preface to her supernatural anthology, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890),

⁴⁶ Edmund Gurney, Frederic W.H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, 2 vols. (London: Society for Psychical Research, 1886), I, p. xxxvi.

⁴⁷ Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 137.

⁴⁸ Letter to Matilda Paget, 11-12 July 1885, in Gagel, 'Selected Letters,' pp. 371-372.

⁴⁹ Letter to Matilda Paget, 6 July 1883, in Gagel, 'Selected Letters,' pp. 294-295.

⁵⁰ Leighton, 'Ghosts, Aestheticism and "Vernon Lee",' 2. See also Leighton's chapter "Seeing Nothing: Vernon Lee's Ghostly Aesthetics," in *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word*, pp. 99-125.

she would use these sentiments to issue a disclaimer for the expectant reader: ‘Hence,’ she writes, ‘my four little tales are of no genuine ghosts in the scientific sense; they tell of no hauntings by the Society for Psychical Research, of no spectres that can be caught in definite places and made to dictate judicial evidence. My ghosts are what you call spurious ghosts[.]’⁵¹

For Gurney to have graduated to this particular area of research from his previous work on musical aesthetics might seem like a radical departure but as Edward Cone has observed, we might detect a similar attempt in both undertakings: ‘The desire to approach as systematically as possible a peculiarly recalcitrant subject — on that had previously been relegated for the most part to the realm of the subjective and emotional.’⁵² Indeed, this is precisely the sentiment which Gurney would foreground in the preface to *The Power of Sound*:

Since the publication of Helmholtz’s *Tonempfindungen*, an epoch-making book in the branch of physics which deals with musical sound, the study of that subject has been widely popularised. But while the indispensable material of musical phenomena has thus met with exceptionally complete treatment, and has been in its salient points exceptionally well understood in this country, little attempt has been made to apply scientific treatment to the musical phenomena themselves (*Power*, pp. v-vi).

Gurney perceived himself to be ‘distinctly at variance’ with Helmholtz, and indeed with other ‘German systems of aesthetics, general or musical,’ which ‘replace scientific enquiry by barren systematisation or abstract metaphysics’ (*Power*, p. vi), seeing *The Power of Sound* on a continuum of contemporary materialist enquiries into music, whilst all the while unique in approach and methodology. Thus whilst the German systems neglect the ‘fundamental facts and problems of Music’, Gurney believed that a proper aesthetical analysis should not shy away from ‘the difficulties which the phenomena of Music present,’ but actually embrace ‘the phenomena themselves [as] being actual more or less ascertainable facts’ (*Power*, p. vi). As he continues,

the views to which I have tried to supply a scientific basis are the very ones I find more or less explicitly held by scores of reasonable people, who have observed for themselves and are keenly interested in the position and prospects of the musical art. But though many may be led to them by individual instinct and experience, none the less must I hold it important to get at the scientific basis for them, if possible (*Power*, p. xix).

Gurney’s opening gambit registers what he believed to be his own specific intervention into nineteenth-century musical aesthetics; and like Pater, he too would caution against those who

⁵¹ Vernon Lee, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: W. Heinemann, 1890), pp. xx-xi. Lee’s preface is dated ‘Maiano, near Florence, June 1889’.

⁵² Edward T. Cone, “THE POWER OF The Power of Sound,” in Edmund Gurney, *The Power of Sound* (London: Smith, Elder, 1880; reprint, New York: Basic Books, 1966, with an introduction by Edward T. Cone), p. vi.

would homogenise the arts: ‘To those who believe in transcendental links, making all the arts One,’ he cautions, ‘this treatment may appear unsatisfactory’ (*Power*, p. vii).⁵³

Yet it may be, Dale suggests, possible to observe a potential tension here insofar as ‘Gurney’s equal concern with providing a scientific basis for his theory of music and with perception, aesthetics, and the technical process that occur in the foreground [...] presents a rich and varied tapestry of ideas but also a conflict between them that he never really succeeded in resolving’.⁵⁴ Writing in his obituary of Gurney in 1888, F.W.H. Myers addressed the protean nature of his former SPR colleague, saying that his ‘intellectual nature offered one of those cases, so to say, of a double foci, of juxtaposed but scarcely reconciled impulses [...] I mean that while his instincts were mainly aesthetic, his powers were mainly analytic.’⁵⁵ There is, perhaps, an inference in Myers’ testimony that this ‘double foci’ is a musicological failing. Certainly, as Cone has observed, the ‘solutions [Gurney] offers to the problems he raises are often unsatisfactory’ in the ‘analytical-scientific’ sense and yet,

...he performed valuable service by simply raising them, by trying to solve them, and by letting us see how he goes about the job. His point of view, a healthy corrective for some of those popular today, is what is important. It is one that values the music above its analysis and that respects the hearer’s delight as the final test of its quality — indeed, as the purpose of its existence.⁵⁶

Indeed, one of Gurney’s central claims was that in the increasing professionalization of nineteenth-century aesthetics the art of music was at risk of being consigned to technical proficiency merely; and his ‘chief object,’ he elucidates, was ‘to examine, in such a way as a person without special technical knowledge may follow, the general elements of musical structure, and the nature, sources, and varieties, of musical effect [...] to mark out clearly the position of Music, in relation to the faculties and feelings of the individual, to the other arts, and to society at large’ (*Power*, p. vii). Accordingly, he explicitly stated that his own work — prefiguring Lee’s own claim to be writing ‘neither for Musicians nor for Musical Critics’ in *Music and its Lovers* — was ‘not for musicians, but those who care for music’ (*Music*, p. 13; *Power*, pp. x-xi). At the heart of Gurney’s enterprise was the attempt to balance intellectual rigour whilst trying to account for music’s all important civilising function. As his friend

⁵³ Though he names no names here, Gurney’s rejection of ‘oneness’ theories might be taken as a barbed allusion to a number of prominent nineteenth-century art/music theories, such as Baudelaire’s ‘Correspondences’ or all the more likely: the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (‘total art work’) from the musical prose of Wagner (who, as we will see, Gurney was hugely disapproving of).

⁵⁴ Dale, *Music Analysis in Britain in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, pp. 73-74.

⁵⁵ F.W.H. Myers, ‘Obituary of Edmund Gurney,’ *The Athenaeum* (30 June 1888), 827.

⁵⁶ Edward T. Cone, “THE POWER OF The Power of Sound,” in Edmund Gurney, *The Power of Sound* p. vi.

Constance Rothschild later remarked, he wrote ‘seriously upon the theory of music in connection with the happiness of human life’.⁵⁷

Despite his quixotic ambition for popular success, however, Gurney’s treatise failed to realise an appeal with either amateur or professional. Several commentators have suggested that much of this lies in the length (some 600 pages), the repetitiveness of Gurney’s argument and its general lack of organisation.⁵⁸ Writing in 1922, Croom Robertson remarks that: ‘Whether it was that the plan was beyond the grasp of common readers, or that musical experts resented the excess of scientific speculation, or that professional theorists found the exposition over-discursive, the merits of the book were not at once recognised’.⁵⁹ One particularly unflattering (not least malapropos) critique featured in an obituary published in *The Musical World*; here the author remarked that *The Power of Sound* was not only ‘far from being a good [book]’, it would merit reading for the young student if ‘only to see how such things ought not to be done’.⁶⁰ However not all reviewers were so dismissive. Indeed, one commentator who found particular merit in Gurney’s treatise was James Sully, who recognised that whilst the work has a ‘distinct and popular aim in reference to musical culture [...] it is in the main a very serious attempt to re-cast the philosophy of the subject’. Summarising the main principles of Gurney’s argument, Sully remarks:

Speaking generally, one may say that there have been two ways of explaining the delight afforded by music, that of the formalists who find the secret of beauty in certain laws of structure, and that of the idealists or associationists who refer it to the peculiar suggestions of the art. Mr. Gurney is, broadly speaking, a formalist and not an idealist; that is to say, he thinks suggestion is no essential ingredient in music. On the other hand, he differs from previous formalists in denying that the beauty of form can be analysed or rationally grounded on general principles. His work has thus a two-fold negative purpose, to show how small a part association plays in musical enjoyment, and to prove the incompetence of current principles of form to account for the characteristic effects of good as contrasted with bad music.⁶¹

Gurney would later issue a rejoinder to Sully’s review which we shall turn to in due course, however first I wish to address some of the theoretical nuances concerning musical formalism which Sully identifies. In Chapter 1 we saw how Mendelssohn’s *Lieder ohne Worte* advanced a form of ‘non-referentialism’ which, proceeding from the musical ‘work’, denied that music itself was possessed *a priori* of any programmed ‘content’ whilst all the while endorsing the listener to create their own ‘meaning’ governed by the suggestiveness of the piece. It was a

⁵⁷ Constance de Rothschild, *Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 206.

⁵⁸ See Jerrold Levinson, *Music in the Moment* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997); and R. A. Sharpe, *Philosophy of Music: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

⁵⁹ Cited in Dale, *Music Analysis in Britain in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, p. 76.

⁶⁰ ‘Facts and Comments,’ *The Musical World* 67.26 (30 June 1888), 505-506 (505).

⁶¹ James Sully, ‘VI.—Critical Notices,’ *Mind* 6.22 (April 1881), 270-278 (270).

stance which upheld music's formal autonomy — later crystallised by Hanslick who would similarly repudiate the use of 'words, titles, and other conventional associations [...] which we often falsely ascribe to the character of music itself'⁶² — but departed chiefly from his more dogmatic account which argued for music's encompassing self-sufficiency: 'The habit of revelling in sensations and emotions is generally limited to those who have not the preparatory knowledge for the aesthetic appreciation of *musical* beauty'.⁶³ Like Hanslick, Gurney's discussion makes a similar postulation that what matters is beauty and that beauty is a matter of form:

The central conception itself, I need hardly say, is that the primary and essential function of Music is to create beautiful objective forms, and to impress us with otherwise unknown things, instead of to induce and support particular subjective moods and to express for us known things (*Power*, p. 490).

However whilst Gurney appears to have accepted Hanslick's so-called 'negative thesis' — which rejects 'the widely-accepted doctrine that the office of music is "to represent feelings"'⁶⁴ — Gurney would not dismiss an emotional response to music since he advocated the central and intrinsic value of the listener's individual experience. Indeed, it is conclusions such as these which lead R. A. Sharp to observe that Gurney's definition of art 'is very modern sounding', since he maintains that an art work is 'designed and executed by a man (or men) with a view to pleasure' (*Power*, p. 43).⁶⁵ Accordingly, Gurney concludes that 'pleasure' is the condition of discrimination for the individual: 'What is partially true of all the arts is wholly true of this one — that it must be judged by us directly in relation to pleasure, and that pleasure is the only criterion by which we can measure the relative worth of different specimens of it' (*Power*, p. 369). Thus Sully's analysis neglects to discern that Gurney's 'two-fold negative purpose' ultimately proceeds from a positive assertion about the musical experience itself; 'namely,' William Gatens observes, 'that it is essentially and pre-eminently an emotional one' and that for Gurney, 'no theory of musical meaning or system of musical aesthetics is valid which denies or overlooks the reality of this experience.'⁶⁶ As Gurney continues:

It must suffice here to mention in the briefest way the prime characteristic of Music, the *alpha* and *omega* of its essential effect: namely, its perpetual production in us of an emotional excitement of a very intense kind, which yet cannot be defined under any known head of emotion. So far as it can be described, it seems like a fusion of strong emotions transfigured into a wholly new experience, whereof if we seek to bring out the separate threads we are hopelessly baulked; for triumph and tenderness,

⁶² Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, pp. 24-25. Emphasis original.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶⁵ Sharpe, *Philosophy of Music: An Introduction*, p. 23

⁶⁶ William J. Gatens, 'Fundamentals of Musical Criticism in the Writings of Edmund Gurney and His Contemporaries,' *Music & Letters* 63.1-2 (January-April, 1982), 17-30 (20-21).

desire and satisfaction, yielding and insistence, may seem to be all there at once, yet without any dubiousness or confusion in the result; or rather the elements seem there which we struggle dimly to adumbrate by such words, thus making the experience seem vague only by our attempt to analyse it, while really the beauty has the unity and individuality pertaining to clear and definite form. Even when the emotion takes a definable hue, a kinship it may be to laughter or to tears, it still has the character of directing down those special channels a highpitched excitement having its independent source at the general watershed of unique musical impression (*Power*, p. 120).

According to Gurney, music can thus be understood as either ‘impressive’ or ‘expressive’. And this was, Jerrold Levinson notes, an important point of distinction for Gurney because ‘[w]hat he is primarily concerned to deny is that musical beauty or impressiveness is either the same as, or depends on, definiteness of expression of emotion’.⁶⁷ ‘Impressiveness’ is that which the individual might identify to be ‘beautiful’ and music which gives the greatest pleasure will be the most ‘impressive’. Whereas ‘expressiveness’ concerns music’s means ‘of creating in us a consciousness of images, or of ideas, or of feelings, which are known to us in regions outside Music, and which therefore Music, so far as it summons them up within us, might be said to *express*’; and here two further distinctions are made between expression which ‘may take the form of imitation’ and that which ‘may be an idea, as when a fine idea is expressed by a metaphor’ (*Power*, p. 312). Music, Gurney argues, can at times be both ‘impressive’ and ‘expressive’ however ‘expressiveness of the literal and tangible sort is either absent or only slightly present in an immense amount of impressive music’ (*Power*, p. 314). Ultimately ‘impressiveness’ is always superior to ‘expressiveness’ because ‘[a] tune is no more constituted beautiful by an expression, *e.g.* of mournfulness or of capriciousness, than a face is. The impressiveness which we call beauty resides in the unique musical experience’ (*Power*, p. 318).

Gurney’s case for the uniqueness of musical impressions begins in his theorising of music in relation to the other arts because although ‘[t]his distinction, as regards visible forms, may seem very irrelevant to our main subject of sound [...] in truth it is not so’ (*Power*, p. 58). Dividing the five branches of the arts into ‘presentative’ and ‘representative’, Gurney sets music (and architecture) apart from the arts of poetry, painting and sculpture which ultimately require that their forms be ‘cognisable in the world outside them, and recognised on representation’ (*Power*, p. 60). By contrast, the function of music is to ‘*present*, not to represent, and their message has no direct reference to the world outside them’ (*Power*, p. 60). These differences are tabulated in the chapter “The Elements of a Work of Art,” where Gurney takes to distinguishing the various determining features of the arts by the heads of subject-

⁶⁷ Levinson, *Music in the Moment*, p. 1.

matter, material, and form (Fig. 8.). Here we discern that music's subject-matter is 'auditory forms', a fundamentally materialist understanding which determines that its content is 'wholly independent both of external phenomena and external utility [...] having no existence independent of art'; and antithetical to the subject-matter of painting which, on the other hand, 'exists externally and independently of works of art' (*Power*, p. 55). Indeed, such was Gurney's belief in each individual art's obdurate formal obligations he would be led to conclude that the aims of Aesthetic painting — in a manner which recalls our discussion in Chapter 1, where Whistler's sterner critics dismissed his work upon analogous terms — were *reductio ad absurdum*:

Nor can the responsibilities of representative art to its subjects be got rid of in the way which the modern advocacy of 'art for art's sake' seems often to suggest. *We hear it seriously stated that the subject of a picture is to the essence of its effects as external as the words to the music of a song.* This of course can only mean that the essence of pictorial effect is the production of a delightful pattern. But only through being naturally short-sighted, or by more than half closing our eyes, can we get the effect of a pattern without at the same instant recognising objects: the pattern-lines cannot divest themselves of their character as lines of objects, and the objects cannot be recognised apart from their association and relations (*Power*, p. 395. Own emphasis added).

For Gurney, even if we were to scrutinise painting by adopting a visual handicap, painting's innately representative qualities are non-negotiable because as the 'prominence of forms' in pictorial compositions become necessarily enlarged, 'the less can their significance as forms of known objects be detached' (*Power*, p. 396). Curiously, however, whilst Gurney seems to adopt the stance of a conservative critic (there is, one might argue, a slight hint of Frith here) by suggesting that a painting cannot subordinate its subject matter to its 'effects', the suggestion of viewing a painting through obscured vision simultaneously belies his own renunciation of those principles of 'art for art's sake'. Indeed, the notion itself (unwittingly, one would suspect) bears an uncanny resemblance to the perceptive strategy advocated by Baudelaire in 'Salon of 1846', where he writes:

The right way of knowing whether a picture is melodious is to look at it from far enough away to make it impossible for us to see what it is about or distinguish its lines. If it is melodious, it already has a meaning and has taken its place in our collection of memories'.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'Salon of 1846,' in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, pp. 47-108 (p. 57).

ARTS OF REPRESENTATION.		POETRY . . .	<p><i>Subject-matter.</i>—Objective and subjective phenomena of many kinds; arranged in groups, usually in subordination to some central conception or subject. This subject-matter exists externally to and independently of works of art.¹</p> <p><i>Material.</i>—Words; differing in various countries, and changing slightly in every generation.</p> <p><i>Form.</i>—Metre, or something analogous to it; in any case abstract relations of sound.</p>	ARTS OF COLOUR. ²
		SCULPTURE . .	<p><i>Subject-matter.</i>—Visible objects belonging to the organic world; but especially the one class of human forms; represented singly, or in groups usually with a central subject. (Sculpture of animal and vegetable forms becomes prominent chiefly in connection with architecture, and in such branches of art as ivory- and metal-work.) This subject-matter exists externally to and independently of works of art.</p> <p><i>Material.</i>—Marble, bronze, &c.; constant.</p> <p><i>Form.</i>—Implied in the subject-matter.</p>	
		PAINTING . . .	<p><i>Subject-matter.</i>—Visible phenomena of many kinds; represented singly or in groups with or without a central conception. This subject-matter exists externally to and independently of works of art.</p> <p><i>Material.</i>—Surfaces and pigments: theoretically constant, though liable to change from invention and losses.</p> <p><i>Form.</i>—Implied in the subject-matter.³</p>	
ARTS OF PRESENTATION.		ARCHITECTURE	<p><i>Subject-matter.</i>—Visible forms and arrangements of form of many kinds.⁴ The central conception or purpose is usually in great measure utilitarian; and in many (not all) of the subordinate combinations utilitarian purposes, existing independently of art, underlie the art-forms which have no such independent existence.</p> <p><i>Material.</i>—Marble, stone, wood, &c., of various colour; each country is in this respect greatly dependent on its own products.</p> <p><i>Form.</i>—Abstract lines and surfaces and their proportional arrangements.</p>	
		MUSIC	<p><i>Subject-matter.</i>—Auditory forms, i.e. series and combinations of sounds, wholly independent both of external phenomena and external utility, and having no existence independent of art. <i>Subjects</i> are the leading and recurrent phrases in a composition.⁵</p> <p><i>Material.</i>—Some system of notes; for us the notes of the chromatic scale, susceptible of various colour or quality according to the instrument by which they are produced. This material had a slow development, but has long been constant, and can hardly but remain so, except in so far as the invention of new instruments may add to its colours.</p> <p><i>Form.</i>—Abstract proportions of time and pitch.</p>	

¹ See pp. 54, 56, for note to these words.

²⁻⁵ See p. 56 for notes to these words.

Fig. 8. Table demonstrating Gurney's distinction between 'Arts of Presentation' and 'Arts of Representation' in *The Power of Sound* (1880)

Continuing his discussion of this ‘modern advocacy of “art for art’s sake”,’ Gurney’s observation is followed by an attendance to ‘Mr. Pater’s [...] most interesting essay on the *School of Giorgione* [sic]’, who, Gurney surmises, must be aware of the ‘fallacy’ of representational art being able to rid itself of its attendance to subject-matter because the author purposefully skirts the matter by emphasising ‘first of all [the] delight [of] the senses’ in the aesthetic encounter (*Power*, p. 396). Quite simply ‘pictorial qualities’ are a prerequisite of painting — which, in Gurney’s schema, is perhaps the most ‘representative’ of the representative arts — and thus, by definition, cannot be eradicated; and even if this were possible, he adds kindly, we should not endeavour to achieve this because these qualities are equally ‘the indispensable condition [...] to stir in us depths of imaginative joy’ (*Power*, p. 396). Therefore although Gurney ‘comprehend[s] and concur[s] with the purport of Mr. Pater’s introduction to his essay, [he] cannot think he has well summed up that purport in saying that “all Art constantly aspires towards the condition of Music” [sic].’ He concedes that where art ‘may perhaps be loosely and metaphorically described’ using such this phrase, the idea that a ‘picture’ may present ‘one single effect to the imaginative reason’ is inconsistent because the ‘represented and recognised objects [...] are inevitably part of what the imaginative reason is occupied with’ (*Power*, pp. 396-397 n.1).

For Gurney the distinction between the two, arguably most prominent, arts of music and painting is fundamentally governed by the abilities (and consequent limitations) of the two central artistic faculties of sight and hearing. In this capacity, the ‘eye’s immense power of motion and adjustment’ is vastly superior to that of the ear because:

In the case of sight [...] we can in an instant grasp and realise an enormous number of impressions of phenomena in space; and we can also perceive of such phenomena in succession, i.e. perceive motion; in the case of hearing, we possess a very limited power of grasping simultaneous impressions, but great retentiveness and power of perceiving the relations between successive impressions (*Power*, p. 62).

Unlike painting, music possesses ‘no simultaneity of impression’; its form unfolds diachronically over time. As Gurney remarks on page 92 of his book (which Lee earmarked as ‘important’): ‘in a melodic form there is no multiplicity or thronging of elements, no impression of conspiring parts all there at once. The elements are units succeeding one another time’ (*Power*, p. 92). Melody is rendered distinctive in Gurney’s scheme because the ear’s perception of this unfolding sound does not ‘exhibit anything analogous to the labyrinthine order presentable by a similar number of visual elements, which the eye would delight to third and master with a conscious realisation of their complexity’ (*Power*, p. 92).

According to Gurney’s analysis, the character of melody is indissolubly bound up with its rhythmic contours and this is something which, Gurney suggests, ‘needs to be specially

dwelt on, inasmuch as modern metaphysical speculation is a way of denying, and modern musical practice of ignoring it' (*Power*, p. 156). And the aesthetic experience of music, Gurney concludes, proves the 'indispensableness' [sic] of rhythm to melody because while the ear is always 'quite neutral' in being exposed to hitherto unknown musical material, 'once the tune is known and liked, the full pleasure of its beauty will be felt in going over those very bars, so that the apprehension of them must be entirely dependent on the consciousness of what is to follow' (*Power*, p. 165 n.1). Our perception of this melodic line, which is 'a unity to which all the parts are necessary in their respective places', is constituted by our ability to follow this sequence, and it is to this progressive form that Gurney gives the name 'Ideal Motion' (*Power*, p. 165).

Understanding that music should give pleasure to the listener and that this pleasure itself is intensified by the quality of organic vitality in music, Gurney thus draws a conclusion which in its conflation of organicism, time and subjectivity takes on a distinctly Paterian flavour:

Thus pleasure in the whole has no meaning except as expressing the sum of our enjoyments from moment to moment; a sum which will be increased in proportion as the organic principle pervades the whole. In fact, to say that parts are all-important is merely to assert our inability to do what involves a contradiction in terms — to enjoy something the essence of which is a *succession* of impressions by a *simultaneous* review of all the impressions (*Power*, pp. 214-215. Emphasis original).

This emphasis on the pleasure of the 'moment' recalls the conclusion to Pater's *Renaissance*, where he writes that 'art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake'.⁶⁹ As Kate Hext discerns, Pater's use of the 'moment' aestheticizes temporality and 'open[s] out the central tautology of "art for art's sake"; art, in other words, is not *for its own sake* exactly but for the sake of dignifying those ephemeral moments, which would otherwise be but flecks in deep time.'⁷⁰ Brad Bucknell's account of Pater's sense of music and temporality might also be applied to Gurney; that is 'that [the] intensification of experience comes out of the need for an isolated self to take on the fatality of its own composition and to do so at every moment.'⁷¹ However whilst Gurney similarly dignifies the aesthetic 'moment' and the taking-together of these moments for the sum of pleasure his account is more urgent than Pater's whose idea of 'moments gone by' are applied indiscriminately to both individual aesthetic experience and the successive nature of art as a series of historical moments.⁷² For Gurney then it is not so

⁶⁹ Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 153.

⁷⁰ Hext, *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy*, p. 146. Emphasis original.

⁷¹ Bucknell, 'Re-Reading Pater: The Musical Aesthetics of Temporality,' 603.

⁷² Carolyn Williams' distinction between Pater's sense of 'atomism' (the breakdown of reality into separable elements) and 'inextricable interrelation' (disparate elements are involved in all processes)

much the fatality of ‘experience’ itself which is under threat but music’s very form, which being so removed from the nature of the representative arts (with which Pater is most concerned when he writes of the temporal moment), demands that these individual impressions are received and remembered as they immediately erode.

Crucially, Gurney’s sense of music’s diachronic form underscores the distinction he makes between two ‘ways of hearing’: ‘definite’ and ‘indefinite’. As we have seen in previous chapters, the vast majority of written accounts of music in the nineteenth century carried with them, to varying degrees, an assessment of ‘correct listening’ practice. Alexandra Hui remarks that ‘much nineteenth-century music criticism was a re-examination of the proper form of listening’.⁷³ Hanslick had already advanced his two varieties of listening typologies, that of ‘pathological’ and ‘aesthetic’ listening, in *The Beautiful in Music* in 1854; and, as Rose Subotnik has suggested, Hanslick’s formalist account of music was responsible for the priority and practice of ‘structural listening’ and its subsequent prevalence in nineteenth-century musical thought.⁷⁴ Hanslick was highly critical of ‘pathological’ listening, characterising it as merely a state of disengaged, unthinking receptivity, where the individual is merely aware of a succession of sounds merely, instead positioning ‘aesthetic’ listening as the ultimate goal of musical experience which is an act of pure contemplation.⁷⁵ Yet Gurney claimed not to be familiar with Hanslick’s work, an admission which Lee, writing in ‘The Riddle of Music’, finds curious: ‘although there is no appearance of Edmund Gurney having read [*The Beautiful in Music*], it is more than likely that its essential ideas had been carried beyond Germany by the then raging Wagner controversy, and been assimilated by the English psychologist, in his conversations with other musicians, without his ever knowing who had given the start to his own theories.’⁷⁶

Many of Gurney’s deductions concerning the form, value and enjoyment of music all presuppose listening that occurs in the ‘definite’ mode of listening which is a form of structured listening which attends to the architecture of music. Thus ‘definite’ listening entails the ‘perception of individual melodic and harmonic combinations,’ whereas ‘the indefinite character involv[es] merely the perception of successions of agreeably-toned and harmonious

might also apply here. Williams writes that: ‘The inevitability of material annihilation makes the self irrelevant; epistemological nihilism makes the world of objects — and finally the mind itself — unknowable. Without at least a provisional outside, there is no inside; without solid objects, there can be no subject.’ See Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater’s Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 24-25.

⁷³ Alexandra Hui, *The Psychophysical Ear: Musical Experiments, Experimental Sounds, 1840-1910* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013), p. 23.

⁷⁴ Rose Subotnik, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 279.

⁷⁵ Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, pp. 123-142.

⁷⁶ Lee, ‘The Riddle of Music,’ 209.

sound' (*Power*, p. xx). Gurney ultimately defends structural apprehension of music as the goal of listening: 'that the pleasure arising from any series or combination of sounds which conveys no distinct musical meaning should be lower and less than that attainable through more definite apprehension, scarcely requires proof' (*Power*, p. 307). Nevertheless, he does allow for the fact that even the less desirable mode of 'indefinite' hearing rewards us with a distinct sort of pleasure and moreover, 'there is the evidence of the majority of those who at all enjoy listening to Music [...] have experienced at different times both sorts of pleasure' (*Power*, p. 307).

Everything we have outlined thus far is contingent upon a pivotal and undoubtedly problematic feature of Gurney's thesis. This is that which he calls — 'for want of any other term' — the 'musical faculty'; that which is capable of 'co-ordinating a series of time- and pitch-relations into forms or notions, and of deriving various degrees of satisfaction or dissatisfaction from the proportions so progressively contemplated' (*Power*, p. 317). This faculty takes note of the so-called 'Ideal motion' and it cannot be seen nor can it be tested, being 'wholly unique and intuitive' in nature from individual to individual (*Power*, p. 217). Many recent commentators find this particular aspect of Gurney's thesis difficult.⁷⁷ And it proved to be a particularly hard sell for Sully:

If I am right Mr. Gurney's hypothesis of a unique faculty is an unnecessary *deus ex machina* [...] I do not see that Mr. Gurney's idea derives much support from the contention that the ideal motion of music is something *sui generis*, for surely there is some analogy between the form-yielding motion of music and the form-yielding motion of an object moving in space. Nor do I think that the idea of a unique faculty is greatly aided by the supposition of a special cogency in musical sequence, which I suspect is very much a matter of custom general or special (where melody has become familiar) and depends on the fact, too lightly touched on by Mr. Gurney, that melody is essentially a response to a continually renewed attitude of expectant attention [...] there is no perfect consensus among individuals and peoples at the same level of development as to what constitutes the proper object of approval of the supposed musical faculty.⁷⁸

Gurney would take the opportunity to respond to Sully's review in "The Psychology of Music" published in his two-volume anthology of essays, *Tertium Quid: Chapters on Various Disputed Questions* (1897). Acknowledging that his reply might 'have found a more appropriate place in a second edition' of *The Power of Sound*, Gurney remarks that as his book has been wrongly 'supposed to be an esoteric treatise, comprehensible only to experts' and

⁷⁷ Gurney's biographer, Gordon Epperson, remarks that like James Sully he too initially 'regarded this hypothesis as an unnecessary *deus ex machina*' however his opinion has since changed, for 'there is growing evidence, amassed in extensive studies in the musical development of children, that aptitude for music—determined both by genetic inheritance and early nurture — is manifested independently of other cognitive and emotional propensities' [Epperson, *The Mind of Edmund Gurney*, p. 27].

⁷⁸ Sully, 'VI — Critical Notices,' 277-278.

that these impressions are ‘not likely to get corrected’, he had resigned himself to the fact that his work ‘will never reach a second edition’.⁷⁹ Even so, Gordon Epperson observes, Gurney’s response serves as both ‘a summary of the fundamental tenets of his book and as a brilliant defence of his theory’ and is nevertheless useful in its own right.⁸⁰ He begins by re-establishing that which he had elucidated in *The Power of Sound* concerning the unique art of music and elaborates in turn on a manner of points on which ‘I do not understand Mr. Sully to differ’ upon.⁸¹ Gurney naturally takes issue with Sully having determined his ‘musical faculty’ to be a ‘*deus ex machina*’, because it is not merely introduced to ‘cut the knot of an aesthetic problem’ however ‘admittedly complex and difficult’ that aesthetic issue is.⁸² Understanding Sully to be agreed that music is innately ‘presentative’, that its formal structure is the sum of unfolding units, and that the ear is the feature which (in an admittedly mysterious fashion) takes cognisance of this form, Gurney writes:

This being so, I do not see how any one can deny the faculty to be *sui generis*, unless he is prepared to contend that other faculties than the musical, or other senses than the auditory, can take cognisance of pitch-relations. The musical faculty is at any rate *sui generis* to the extent of apprehending, and alone apprehending, this sort of [musical] motion; and Mr. Sully seems here to be implicitly denying it that amount of uniqueness and independence which at the beginning of this paper I credited him with accepting, and which seems necessarily involved in the simple fact that [Person] A picks up and remembers a tune which to B is a mere fortuitous successions of sounds.⁸³

Therefore taking this supposed faculty as he has defined it, Gurney argues, ‘we find in it a useful name for a particular power which two persons, alike in all other respects of taste and temperament, may differ by the whole extent of possessing in perfection and not possessing it at all’; and it is a fact, he continues, ‘which belong not to scientific research but to the most ordinary observation’.⁸⁴ Gurney would also respond to Sully’s argument that he has drawn too ‘hard a line between the beautiful and the unbeautiful’, arguing that the notion of beauty is subjective:

...as regards the hard and fast line, in the case of most people at any rate, it persists in drawing itself, for each individual, between certain bits of music which at a particular stage of his development give him the characteristic pleasure and those which do not. In dwelling on these cases, simply as being those which present the problem clearly and decisively, I in no way deny the existence of an enormous number of other bits, pleasurable in various degrees, which would bridge over the gap between the

⁷⁹ Edmund Gurney, *Tertium Quid: Chapters on Various Disputed Questions* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1887), II, pp. 251-302 (p. 251).

⁸⁰ Epperson, *The Mind of Edmund Gurney*, p. 28.

⁸¹ Gurney, *Tertium Quid*, p. 254.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 253-254.

extremes. Nor do I see how my position is invalidated, as Mr. Sully [...] thinks that it is, by the fact of wide differences in the scope and in the verdicts of the musical faculty in different individuals. Till we can in some way see around it, and trace (as we shall never trace) its innermost connections with the organism, I do not see what right we should have to expect entire similarity in its operations — though I must add that with persons of ‘good ear’ who have had similar chances in the way of becoming early familiar with the same music, the similarity of perception and taste in this region is often quite exceptionally close, in spite of wide difference in all other respects of character and intellect [...] What each person thinks beautiful in Music is discovered by himself, and for himself, in a manner which is hopeless for him to analyse into elements of idea and emotion known outside of Music.⁸⁵

By suggesting that beauty is determined at a local level, both ‘by’ the individual themselves and ‘for’ their own ends, Gurney defends a form of personal appreciation which is fundamentally aesthetic in nature. Thus Sully is mistaken in thinking that he would try to prescribe the experience of beauty himself since this is demarcated subjectively; a line which ‘persists in drawing itself’. As such, to his critic (and others besides who had taken his account to task), Gurney would ultimately concede the verification of a ‘musical faculty’, though not without adding a note of thanks for affording him the ‘occasion to rapidly retrace some of the drier portions of [his] former course in the present reply’.⁸⁶ He was only too painfully aware that he would never ‘become a master of the art’, for he perceived himself (not unlike the young Lee) to lack both ‘natural facility and early training’ for a professional music career; and yet, he adds: ‘I should like to think that there are a few lovers of Music to whom [*The Power of Sound*’s] popular aspects and possibilities [...] have been somewhat more clearly brought home by what I have written.’⁸⁷

(Re)reading Gurney: Lee’s ‘double’ foci

When Lee arrived at *The Power of Sound* in August 1881 she was, in her own estimation, a humble student of aesthetics. She had only the previous year published her first major work *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), an erudite collection of essays on Italian music and culture which had been quietly but nonetheless favourably received by both critics and the reading public. However a mere twelve months later, in May 1881, Lee declared a volte-face; ‘to care for one particular historical moment, to study details of one particular civilisation, to worry about finding the exact when and how of any definite event,’ she reflected in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (1881), ‘all this has become

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 282.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 300.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 301-302.

unintelligible to my sympathies of today.’⁸⁸ Believing her previous cultural preoccupation to be too liminal in scope she concluded: ‘Thus, from my small magisterial chair or stool of 18th century-expounder, I have descended and humbly gone to school as a student of aesthetics.’⁸⁹

As several commentators have acknowledged, this particular collection of essays registers a significant and highly self-conscious development in Lee’s career, that which she would call a ‘new myself’; and ‘the beginning,’ Colby remarks, ‘of Vernon Lee’s lifelong effort to describe and analyse aesthetic experience.’⁹⁰ Her ‘aesthetic training’ acknowledged an array of art writing — ‘from Plato to Lessing, from Reynolds to Taine, from Hegel to Ruskin’ — however it was a curriculum entirely of her own devising:

I have consciously and unconsciously assimilated a good deal of the books that I read; but I have never deliberately accepted (except in the domain of art-history and evolution, of which I have not treated in this book which deals only of art in its connection with the individual artist and his public) a whole theory, and *set myself either to developing or correcting it*: the ideas of others enter largely into the answers to my self-questionings, but they do so because they had become part and parcel of my own thought[.]⁹¹

Pater’s name is not listed amongst Lee’s catalogue of prominent art writers and theorists. Even so, as Laurel Brake has observed, the omission of his name in *Belcaro* belies the work’s own unmistakably Paterian endowment, indicating that her new attitude towards aesthetics had been conditioned (‘consciously’ or ‘unconsciously’) by an increased, and highly favourable, familiarity with Pater’s ideas.⁹² And this context is significant in establishing Lee’s critical mind set when she very shortly thereafter acquired *The Power of Sound* in August 1881. This is not only because it establishes the fact that Lee was newly conversant with Pater’s work — a detail arguably corroborated by the sketching of the opening lines from “The School of Giorgione” on the title page of her copy of Gurney’s work. It is also because this ‘new myself’ was, as Lee clarifies, not only highly receptive to contemporary accounts of aesthetic experience, but equally, the possibility of ‘developing’, ‘correcting’, rereading and *rethinking* them.

Within days of meeting Gurney in June 1882, Lee would submit her first ‘review’ of *The Power of Sound* entitled ‘Impersonality and Evolution in Music’ to Percy William

⁸⁸ Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: Satchell, 1881), pp.4-5.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 55.

⁹¹ Lee, *Belcaro*, p. 9. Own emphasis added.

⁹² Brake, “Lee and the Pater Circle,” in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics and Aesthetics*, p. 56.n.5. Lee and Pater met 18th July 1881, antedating the postscript to *Belcaro* by three days.

Bunting, editor of the *Contemporary Review*.⁹³ However, in many ways ‘Impersonality and Evolution in Music’ is not a review at all. Or rather, any reader having hoped to discover a systematic summary and analysis of *The Power of Sound* might have felt a little misled since Lee spends far more time discussing her own critical theories than she does outlining the ideas in Gurney’s treatise. But this undertaking is, of course, significant in and of itself and the impulse for this endeavour becomes clear in Lee’s opening remarks. She begins by acknowledging that she is ‘neither a psychologist nor a scientific musician [...] merely one who has been led in the course of various historical and aesthetic studies [...] into the presence of certain phenomena of musical history and philosophy’; phenomena which, she continues, ‘have been scientifically explained to me by what I must be permitted to call Mr. Gurney’s brilliant psychologico-musical discoveries.’⁹⁴ This leads Lee to the conclusion that she and Gurney embody a mutually dependent but fundamentally simpatico critical relationship:

It is with this hope that I am about to compare the results of Mr. G’s psychological analysis with those of my own historic observation, and to show how mutually dependent and explanatory are our respective conclusions — his, that music of all the arts is the one which deals most with abstract form and least with personal emotion; and mine, that of all arts music is the one which has developed least under the influence of personal character, and most under the pressure of the inherent necessities of artistic form.⁹⁵

In the early 1880s, Lee’s understanding of artistic evolution was informed by a revised Hegelian model of developmental history, accepting that the ‘classification of art into symbolic, classic, and romantic is correct in its definition of each of these conditions,’ but nevertheless believing it to be ‘erroneous in limiting this definition to the essential nature of any one art.’⁹⁶ Music therefore was not to be condemned to ‘hopeless romanticism’, as Hegel suggested, but viewed as an organic form which had been by turn — like all the arts — symbolic, classic, and romantic at various stages of its development. It is upon this understanding that Lee congratulated Gurney for having proven the ‘romanticism of music [...] to be a complete myth’:

Mr. Gurney’s psychological analysis of music has completely destroyed all the artistic hierarchies which have ever been framed, has scattered to the four winds those cherished systems of art classification, of symbolic, classic, and romantic arts, which every art philosopher and every aesthetical coxcomb has expounded or implied in his criticisms. For music has always been thought of, reasoned about, as the particular art whose interest is least an interest of form, whose influence is most purely emotional, whose connection with human interests and real life is the greatest; in Hegelian

⁹³ Letter to Matilda Paget, 22-25 June 1882, in Gagel, ‘Selected Letters,’ p. 257.

⁹⁴ Lee, ‘Impersonality and Evolution,’ 841.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Vernon Lee, ‘Comparative Aesthetics,’ *Contemporary Review* 38 (Aug 1880), 300-326 (313).

language, as the most romantic of all non-literary arts, that is to say, as the art which strives most after an extra-artistic effect, and which departs farthest from the normal mission of art to engross the attention upon mere intrinsic qualities of form. And Mr. Gurney has undertaken to prove, and (to my mind) has succeeded in proving, that the real state of matters is the exact reverse, and that music is of all arts the one most exclusively interesting in form, most independent of non-artistic interests, most isolated from real life — in short, the very archetype of self-concentrated art, the very standard of classic art towards which *all the other arts have always, in their periods of perfection, most tended*.⁹⁷

For Lee, Gurney had broken new aesthetical ground by overruling the traditional systems which had hitherto been accepted as scripture; thus contrary to previous belief, music is the art *most* capable of enacting the ultimate ‘mission of art to engross the attention upon mere intrinsic qualities of form’. Several aspects of this passage are particularly illuminating. The first is the parenthesis which enclose the venturing of her own critical opinion — ‘(to my mind)’ — being demonstrative of the sort-of tentativeness which so often features in Lee’s writing, particularly about music; and a disclosure which ultimately betrays her own sensitivity to the non-specialist in the appreciation of art. The other revealing aspect is the final sentence which exhibits a ‘Paterian cadence’,⁹⁸ a term Laurel Brake coins to describe how elements of Pater’s ideas manifest stylistically in Lee’s work. Here, it is particularly evident in the use of the word ‘tended’ — a term Lee repeatedly substitutes for ‘aspires’ when citing from “The School of Giorgione” — and an indication, perhaps, that she was reading Gurney through the prism of her own critical reading of Pater.

Indeed, the possibility that Pater was on Lee’s mind here is confirmed later in the essay, when she reasserts her belief that music’s unique form makes it a prime candidate for measuring the evolution of the arts ‘since in its so purely abstract and ideal forms such evolution can be traced without the disturbing influences of personality and country and civilization, which in the plastic arts are considerable, and in the literary arts most important and perplexing’, before adding:

“All arts,” Mr. Pater has suggestively said, though perhaps without following to the full his own suggestion — “All arts tend to the condition of music;” which saying sums up perfectly my own persuasion that the artistic element of all arts, which in each is perplexed, and thwarted by non-artistic elements, exists in most unmixed condition in music, because music is in reality much less connected with life and its wants and influences than any other art.⁹⁹

However Lee would develop Pater’s maxim by way of Gurney’s more particularising

⁹⁷ Lee, ‘Impersonality and Evolution,’ 841-842. Own emphasis added.

⁹⁸ Brake, “Vernon Lee and the Pater Circle,” p. 56 n.5.

⁹⁹ Lee, ‘Impersonality and Evolution,’ 857.

distinctions between the definitive formal differences between the arts and suggests — as *The Power of Sound* detailed exhaustively in its chapters “Abstract Form as Addressed to the Eye” and “Abstract Form as Addressed to the Ear” — that our present understanding of this relationship is ‘founded upon an analogy between the arts addressing the eye and those addressing the ear which does not exist.’¹⁰⁰ Thus in the plastic and graphic arts, ‘[c]ertain combinations of lines and certain combinations of colours respectively please or displease the organ of sight’ and as such,

we can understand our preferences in the highest and humblest of the arts which address the eye. But in music it is totally different. We enter into a sphere of artistic form analogous to all appearance to that of the other arts; but when we try to account for our likings and dislikings, and seek for the equivalent of what has been explained by our plastic and graphic preferences, we discover that we are surrounded by phenomena of a totally different sort[.]’¹⁰¹

Musical experience is therefore, for Lee and Gurney alike, entirely unique and incomparable to our experience and appreciation of the other arts. But if we are to accept the purely formalist prerogative of music — which ‘reproduces neither external forms nor psychical conditions’ — then this, as Lee recognises, presents a problem for the motivations of music criticism because ‘the only real interpreter, the only man who can really increase our appreciation and enjoyment, is the performer’.¹⁰² Referring to ‘one of the most important chapters’ of Gurney’s treatise, Lee observes:

A Ruskin may double our appreciation of Turner by telling us of all the subtle truthfulness, of all the exquisite realization of one of his landscapes [...] and, if I may quote an actual case, I have myself experienced how much better I appreciate and enjoy the paintings of Giorgione’s school since reading the essay in which Mr. Pater, by describing the single pictures, makes us see them in much greater detail, and, by summing up their whole effect, brings it home with redoubled magic; while in the case of music, only the humming or playing over of a phrase, the pointing out of its parts on the score, can bring home to us any beauties we have failed to perceive; and the attempt of the writer to explain, by reference to sights and emotions with which the notes have but the faintest or the most conventional connection, results merely in occupying our minds with irrelevant thought and distracting them by the vision of what music cannot give, from the reality of what music alone can do.¹⁰³

In other words, the art of music ‘cannot be appreciated any the better by any amount of spoken criticism’¹⁰⁴; precisely the sentiment which Gurney expresses in his ‘important chapter’ on

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 845.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 844.

¹⁰² Ibid., 857.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

musical criticism which similarly observes that ‘no words can penetrate or enhance [music’s] effects’ and that ‘the true interpreter of music must always be the performer, not the critic’ (*Power*, pp. 526-527). Both Gurney and Lee, then, advocate a similar approach to the act of interpretation which transfers perception away from ‘the object as in itself,’ as Pater suggests in the Preface to *The Renaissance*, towards querying: ‘[w]hat is this song [...] to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort of degree of pleasure? How if my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?’¹⁰⁵ By displacing questions about meaning away from the ‘professional’ arbiter of meaning and value — the critic — and towards the individual, Lee and Gurney both use the essential formalist quality of music to enfranchise the crucial role played by the audience in constituting aesthetic meaning through the mechanism of reception. Thus in the case of music, Lee observes, it is only through a process of inwardly replaying and reassessing a piece of music that true understanding and appreciation emerges. And this is the listener’s prerogative — only they can ‘bring home [...] any beauties [they] have failed to perceive’ — because music is fundamentally self-referential and we must look *within* to discover its meaning, as Gurney had suggested:

[M]any who derive a large amount of true perceptive pleasure from some compositions and some parts of compositions, but find others above their heads, suppose that a more gifted or more cultivated faculty would reveal some symbolic purpose and meaning, that it would show them different things, instead of the same things better and more of them. Instead of sticking to the music and asking, ‘What does it say?’ to which a few more hearings might give them the answer, they look outside and ask, ‘What does it mean?’ and feel sure the composer could have told them. (*Power*, p. 525).

Lee does however reserve one particular area of criticism for Gurney’s thesis and this would be that he does not draw ‘so complete a distinction between the character of musical form and of the elements of which the form is composed’.¹⁰⁶ As we know, at the time of reading *The Power of Sound* Lee was still invested in a bettered understanding of ‘artistic evolution’ and projecting this impulse on to Gurney’s work she suggests that the *material* of music ‘is that which has always existed’ whereas the *form* ‘has existed as a class only a comparatively short time’; and therefore that which we understand to be artistic form is in fact the reshaping of the pre-existing ‘material’ which is fraught with emotional and symbolic associations by any ‘given school of composers’ at any particular historical moment.¹⁰⁷ However as Colby has observed, Lee’s attempts to define musical form in ‘Impersonality and Evolution’ result in a ‘series of incomprehensible, if not incoherent, passages’ and ultimately, by the end of the

¹⁰⁵ Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. xxix.

¹⁰⁶ Lee, ‘Impersonality and Evolution’, 843.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

essay, Lee ‘admits defeat’.¹⁰⁸ Indeed having wrapped herself in a series of aesthetical knots, Lee signs off with a challenge to Gurney to answer that which she cannot explain herself: ‘I now attempt to direct the attention of Mr. Gurney to that form evolution which his victorious dispersal of all the old myths of personality and romanticism [...] has left the only possible explanation of musical identity and musical change’.¹⁰⁹

Gurney never would address this challenge, as Lee would wryly observe of his later-life mystic investigations with the SPR: ‘[He] died some six years later, having abandoned the riddle of music for other riddles, which are solved, most likely, only by travellers who never return to teach us’.¹¹⁰ But even so, by the time Lee returns to reassess *The Power of Sound* in her 1906 article ‘The Riddle of Music’ the principles of artistic evolution which had been so dear to her twenty four years earlier had been displaced by an entirely different aesthetic imperative. Indeed, as she acknowledges herself, having ‘turned all my attention to the visual arts, and to those branches of psychology which promised to shed light upon them’ in the intervening years, she had returned to Gurney’s work only to find that ‘my own seemingly irrelevant study into the psychology of the visual art enabled me to see deeper into the mystery [of music]’.¹¹¹ As such, she had confirmed her formative belief that ‘the riddle of music’ is also, ‘with differences of detail and degree, the riddle of all the fine arts’, therefore understanding that ‘music (if studied by Gurney or another like him) might become the typical art with which all general aesthetics would begin’.¹¹²

In addition to *The Power of Sound*, Lee’s article also considers six other major works on music: Hanslick’s *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (1896 reprint); Lionel Dauriac’s *Essai sur L’Esprit Musical* (1904); Jules Combarieu’s *Les Rapports de la Musique et de la Poesie* (1894); Friedrich von Hausegger’s *Die Musik als Ausdruck* (1887); Th. Ribot’s *La Logique des Sentiments* (1905); and Theodor Lipp’s *Grundlegung der Aesthetik* (1903). Even so, much of what follows in the article concerns Gurney and Hanslick almost exclusively and the remaining authors are generally afforded a perfunctory comment. What is distinctive about Lee’s chosen texts is that Gurney’s is not only the sole English language text in the group but also — his work having never been reissued — the oldest. Therefore despite never resolving the so-called ‘riddle of music’ she reveals that *The Power of Sound* has gotten closer to the answer than any another work and is therefore the standard to which all subsequent contributions to musical aesthetics are measured. Although Lee credits Hanslick with being the first to successfully dismiss the ‘habit of speaking and even of thinking of [...] emotion as

¹⁰⁸ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 218.

¹⁰⁹ Lee, ‘Impersonality and Evolution’, 858.

¹¹⁰ Lee, ‘The Riddle of Music,’ 207.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 208.

the subject-matter' of music (and in this sense, she suggests, Gurney is his 'twin critic'), she discerns a chief difference between the two in the way in which Hanslick had been 'satisfied with a mere controversial argument that the beauty of a composition is not the same thing as its emotional suggestiveness', whereas Gurney 'added a masterly analysis of the element both of emotional suggestion and of beauty; and, what was in a manner more valuable still, a rejection of forthcoming scientific explanations as still inadequate to solve the chief riddle of music.'¹¹³ The two main factors of musical expression which are central to 'the riddle of music' Lee continues are:

Music presents two sets of psychological phenomena. It can suggest and stimulate feelings akin to those produced by the vicissitudes of real life; and it can interest, fascinate, delight, or weary and displease, by what we can only call the purely musical quality of its sound-patterns. Music thus awakens two different kinds of emotion — a dramatic one referred to its expressiveness; and an aesthetic one connected with the presence or absence of beauty.¹¹⁴

Although this understanding between the two varieties of phenomena presented by music is not explicitly credited to any particular aesthetician, it bears an uncanny likeness to Gurney's distinction between music as 'impressive' and as 'expressive'. Indeed, as she later remarks: 'Hanslick and Gurney already made it clear that these two powers of music are far from being identical or commensurate; nay, that they tend to stand [...] in inverse ratio to one another [...] So that, while writers on music, from the prefaces of Gluck to the pamphlets of Wagner, and from Hegel to Schopenhauer, have spoken of the suggested emotion as the real meaning of music, and of the form as an elaborate appeal to the senses, it has become evident, since the analyses of Hanslick and Gurney, that emotion suggestion is largely a question of nervous stimulation [...] whereas the form, the pattern or structure of sounds, requires for its appreciation the steadiest attention and most loving co-operation[.]'¹¹⁵ In other words, because we know the form of music, the 'patterns' of sound, to be fundamentally fixed properties in the hypothetical 'musical work' the identification of 'emotional' content is only ever supplied solely by the listener. Thus the answer to both of these questions lies with the listener as Lee discerns that the 'emotional appeal of music is usually greater with half-attentive and self-engrossed listeners than with real musicians following attentively each complex and co-ordinated beauty of a great composition'.¹¹⁶

By championing the Hanslick-Gurney thesis, whilst simultaneously dismissing Wagner, Lee is of course revisiting one of the most familiar chapters in nineteenth-century

¹¹³ Ibid., 209-210.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 209.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 217.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

aesthetic discourse. Gurney himself was no stranger to the anti-Wagner debate, having taken the composer to task in his essay ‘Wagner and Wagnerism’ (1883).¹¹⁷ Here, Gurney argues that Wagner’s excessive deployment of the leitmotif throughout his music had reduced the listening experience to a state of wearying repetition: ‘To the melody [...] there clings a faint flavour of disease, something overripe in its lusciousness and febrile in its passion. The effect is strangely cumulative. Steadily through the whole evening one feels a growing sense of being imprisoned in the fragrance of a musical hot-house[.]’¹¹⁸ Ultimately, Gurney concludes, Wagner had produced music of only the ‘haunting kind’.¹¹⁹ Of course, many nineteenth-century commentators were quick to point out the explicitly expressive qualities, and potentially debilitating effects of, Wagner’s music.¹²⁰ Writing in his 1888 polemic, *The Case of Wagner* (a work Lee owned), Nietzsche remarked that Wagner is the ‘artist of decadence’ and as such ‘represents a great corruption of music. He has guessed that it is a means to excite weary nerves — and with that *he has made music sick*’.¹²¹ Lee’s own dislike for Wagner predates any of the works documented in Towheed’s consideration of her musical reading.¹²² Nevertheless, it seems almost assured that Lee’s reading of Gurney augmented and substantiated — in the sense of providing her with the technical theoretical justifications for — her own dislike of Wagner’s music (certainly some of the common imagery between ‘Wagner and Wagnerism’ and “A Wicked Voice” suggest that Lee made have had more than a passing acquaintance with this particular essay).

Lee’s understanding that music betrays two types of experience, one which is predominantly ‘emotional’ and one which is ‘aesthetic’, informs her distinction between two types of listening practice, that which in *Music and its Lovers* she would later christen ‘hearers’ and ‘listeners’:

The first kind of emotion is essentially personal, the second essentially impersonal; [. . .] the first leads away from the music to the experience and interests of the hearer, whilst the second adheres to the music with an exclusiveness proportionate to the purely aesthetic delight; [. . .] the first is as various as the emotional experience and condition of the individual hearer, while the second is as unchanging as the form-quality of the composition. Finally, [. . .] while the first is favoured by nervous excitability, weakness of attention, and the presence of vague feelings of self, in fact, by inferiority, momentary or permanent, of psychic power and organisation; the second, on the contrary, demands a braced heightening of nervous tone, a resistance

¹¹⁷ Edmund Gurney, ‘Wagner and Wagnerism,’ *Nineteenth Century* 13 (March 1883), 434-452.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 444.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 443.

¹²⁰ For a discussion of Wagner’s music and its ‘pathological’ effects, see Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism*, pp. 57-87.

¹²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘*The Birth of Tragedy*’ and ‘*The Case of Wagner*’, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 620. Own emphasis added.

¹²² See Lee, ‘Comparative Aesthetics,’ *op. cit.* Here Wagner is compared with Hegelian classical art and identified as ‘romantic [...] the stage of decay’ (317).

to random stimulation, a spontaneity and steadiness of attention, a forgetfulness of self and interest in the not-self, in fact, a vigour and organisation of soul approaching to the magnificent wealth and unwavering self-forgetfulness of all spiritual creation.¹²³

Whilst Bullock entertains the possibility that this passage was influenced by Gurney's distinction between 'definite' and 'indefinite' hearing, he concludes that it is far more in keeping with Hanslick's 'far more judgmental condemnation of those who would yield to music's power.'¹²⁴ Certainly, Lee's division between the 'impersonal' and 'personal' emotion betrays a clear prejudice against those who listen to music in a way which Hanslick famously characterised as 'pathological'. However Hanslick's listening typologies are clearly pathological types and as Nicholas Cook observes, 'a polemic against what he saw as the inadequate manner in which most people listen to music', whereas Lee, like Gurney, would allow for the possibility that an individual might observe both practices during any single encounter with the musical work (even if 'definite' listening is preferred).¹²⁵ Thus Lee concludes that 'whichever of the two possibilities we consider, there remains an action of the aesthetic element upon the emotional; and the emotional is probably purified by the aesthetic, as the aesthetic is unquestionably brought deeper into our life by the emotional' and more importantly, that in 'this fusion, or rather this oscillation between the emotional suggestion and the aesthetic contemplation of music lies, perhaps, the moral and social function of the art'.¹²⁶

This appeal against the narrowest sense of art appreciation is Lee's version of aestheticism — that which Peter Gunn suggests is 'removed from the 'ivory tower', 'aesthetical', conceptions of the artistic function'¹²⁷ — and the expression of her ultimate conviction that even art which aspires towards formal perfection can take account of morality in some form; as she would write in *Belcaro*, 'though art as no moral meaning, it has moral value; art is happiness, and to bestow happiness is to create good.'¹²⁸ Gurney would correspondingly reflect on morality, rejecting the Haweis-school of 'music and morals', and suggesting that 'in life we may promote happiness through morality, in Art we may promote morality through happiness; but this belief will gain and not lose from a recognition that moral and aesthetic excellence are not Siamese twins, but 'twin-sisters differently beautiful' (*Power*, p. 379). Lee therefore understands that this effect can be reconciled most effectively in music:

¹²³ Lee, 'The Riddle of Music,' 225-226.

¹²⁴ Bullock, 'Lessons in Sensibility': Rosa Newmarch, Music Appreciation, and the Aesthetic Cultivation of the Self,' 312.

¹²⁵ Nicholas Cook, *Music, Imagination and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 15.

¹²⁶ Lee, 'The Riddle of Music,' 227.

¹²⁷ Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 81.

¹²⁸ Lee, *Belcaro*, p. 229.

Music, in a manner more obvious and efficacious than the other arts, disposes of modes of movement and being; and it is gain to the individual soul, and to the aggregate souls of societies and races, if, freed every now and then from the hurry and confusion, the tentative and abortive effort, of practical life, and saved at the same time from the pursuit and the suspense of intellectual existence, our emotions, our moods, our habits of feeling, are schooled into the ways of lucidity and order, of braced and balanced intensity, of disinterested satisfaction, of contemplative happiness, which are the ways of aesthetic form, the ways of beauty. We may interpret in this sense, rather than in the original one of Hegel, the old notion, explained and renewed by Walter Pater, that ‘all art tends to the condition of music’.¹²⁹

By naming Pater here (again) Lee registers not only her own debt but her revision to his ideas concerning the conditions of aesthetic experience; that which Leighton calls her ‘more ambiguous and morally inflected’ version of Paterian aestheticism.¹³⁰ For ultimately, Lee suggests, art cannot function without the co-operation of the beholder/listener because we are the ones who augment its existence through aesthetic experience — just as (ideally) we might be somehow bettered by this encounter. This sentiment would underlie her notion of ‘empathy’, as expounded in her 1912 work on psychological aesthetics, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics*, where she would write that ‘art, by reversing the process and furnishing us with artistic images and emotions to be revived by real things by accustoming us to translate reality into form (instead of form into reality) can purify and elevate the contents of our consciousness. The same with music’.¹³¹

For Lee, both Pater and Gurney had successfully usurped the ‘older’ system of aesthetics — that which had ‘explained the beauty of a picture or a statue by the beauty of the object which that picture or statue undertook to represent’ — by prioritising human experience over the long-held representative and mimetic duties of artistic form.¹³² Even so, the ‘new musical aesthetics’ of Gurney could only take Lee so far in her effort to wholly resolve the ‘riddle’ of music — the ‘riddle’ of all the arts. As she would write in *Beauty and Ugliness*: ‘The aesthetics of music are, if possible, in a still more backward condition, owing to the special difficulty of self-observation and the hopeless confusion of the terms employed. So that, despite the value of men like Stumpf, Hanslick, and Duaric, I am not aware of much progress since the masterly analysis of the late Edmund Gurney, whose great work on *The Power of Sound* refuted all existing explanations without substituting any new ones’.¹³³ For these answers, she suggests, one would have to turn to the ‘science[s] of the mind’.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Lee, ‘The Riddle of Music,’ 227.

¹³⁰ Leighton, *On Form*, p. 101.

¹³¹ Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), p. 266. Lee would specifically reference this statement by way of a footnote which cites the aforementioned passage in ‘The Riddle of Music’.

¹³² Lee, ‘The Riddle of Music,’ 217.

¹³³ Lee and Anstruther-Thompson, *Beauty and Ugliness*, p. 13.

¹³⁴ Lee, ‘The Riddle of Music,’ 207.

In Lee's advancing years these 'sciences of the mind', exemplified by theorists such as Theodor Lipps (to whom *Beauty and Ugliness* is dedicated), were her attempt to fill the critical gap — those elusive *hows* and *whys* — left by Gurney's otherwise 'masterly' analysis. It is this 'science' to which Lee would accede in 'The Riddle of Music', together with the suggestion that the inquiry would also be greatly abetted by 'analytic and comparative studies of varieties of form and their aesthetic perception, studies which have hardly been attempted or thought of hitherto.'¹³⁵ *Beauty and Ugliness*, *The Handling of Words* and *Music and its Lovers* were all variously attempt to address this particular methodological absence in critical enquiry, works which attended closely to the psychology and aesthetic responsiveness of the individual respondent.¹³⁶

More specifically, *Music and its Lovers*, as Lee states, is an attempt to describe 'the various kinds of response, emotional and imaginative (and even musical), to music; and attempts to account for these being thus various'— 'a book on aesthetics, but aesthetics as a branch of psychology' (*Music*, p. 13). Ever 'haunted' by Pater's maxim, and with it 'the suspicion that knowledge of the nature of music would afford the best clues to the other arts', Lee suggests that she has been compelled to interpolate his claim, defining the study of music as that which,

...deals with aesthetics not as part of *a priori* philosophy, but as a branch of empirical psychology, the nature of music, like the nature of anything else we can discuss with any profit, is merely another way of saying: its actions and reactions as they can be discerned and foretold by us. From this point of view the nature of music would be most profitably studied not by analysing and comparing works of art, for that would acquaint us only with the evolution of various styles and the influence of individual masters, as by examining the effects of music in general on its audience [...] art is not the material collection of objectively existing pictures, statues, poems or musical compositions [...] rather, the work of art is the junction between the activities of the artist and those of the beholder or hearer (*Music*, p. 23).

¹³⁵ Ibid., 224.

¹³⁶ Lee's *The Handling of Words* is arguably the literary-minded companion piece to *Music and its Lovers* as it similarly prioritises reader-response. Here Lee would write that the 'work, when complete, is just that various, fluctuating, inscrutable form which owes its being to the Reader as much as to himself, and which is hidden from him by the impenetrable wall of flesh separating one soul from another' [Vernon Lee, *The Handling of Words, and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane, 1923), p. 81.] Angela Leighton connects Lee's sense of 'handling' to Pater's in her monograph *On Form* (*op. cit.*, pp. 103-104), as in "The School of Giorgione," following his statement on the aspiration of arts 'towards the condition of music', he writes: 'That the mere matter of a poem, for instance, its subject, namely, its given incidents or situation [...] should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling, that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees' [Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 135].

By attempting to account for the diversity of listeners' responses to music, Lee makes the phenomena of music, the experience itself, the centre of her understanding and thus: 'The enquiry what music is, therefore resolves itself, for those thinking like myself, into an enquiry as to what music does in the mind of the hearer' (*Music*, p. 24). However for all of its claims, Towheed remarks that *Music and its Lovers*,

...is only partially empirical: Lee's sample size was a mere 150 people and much of her analysis is qualitative rather than quantitative. By her own admission, her analysis was based on an 'analytico-synthetic description of each Answerer from the musical and emotional point of view,' a method which she described as invariably leading to 'silent discussions' with her answers 'and even more frequently with myself'. There is little attempt at statistical analysis and her data are not tabulated or indexed.¹³⁷

But we might be wary of excessively overstating the musicological failings of *Music and its Lovers*. As Towheed goes on to say, Lee's use of questionnaires was entirely her own; a 'research methodology at the time still being developed in sociology' and antedating a number of sympathetic enquiries, such as J. R. Ackerley's respondent questionnaire in *The Listener* magazine, by several years.¹³⁸ It was, then, a remarkable achievement by anyone's standards, let alone somebody who professed, as she does, to being 'a musical ignoramus' (*Music*, p. 536). Equally, the tension Towheed discerns between the objective standards inferred by an 'empirical study' and the neglect of statistical analysis within *Music and its Lovers* is, I think, quite significant here; a work which he calls 'semi-quantitative, part impressionistic'.¹³⁹ It may be, then, to borrow F.W.H. Myers' assessment of Gurney, that *Music and its Lovers* is no less disposed to a 'double foci' of variously 'aesthetic' and analytic' tendencies. Thus by opting not to tabulate her data, but to instead allow her 'gallery of *dramatis personae*' to articulate their answers in the text, Lee composes an aesthetic dialogue, one which dignifies the wholly unique and incomparable nature of musical experience which she sought to demonstrate. As Lee reflects: 'the evidence (at least the valuable evidence) given by other persons [...] and the generalisations from them, are purely individual. And the Reader must regard them as telling him, not about the nature of an abstract Art of Music and of an abstract Human Mind (or Soul), but about the reactions to music of an individual Answerer[.]' (*Music*, p. 485). Here she recognises that one cannot legislate for the behaviour of the individual in the musical encounter and that this experience is coloured by a medley of personal impressions, memories, and associations, and as a result she can only endeavour to remain descriptive and not prescriptive

¹³⁷ Shafquat Towheed, "The Science of Musical Memory," in *Words and Notes in the Long Nineteenth-Century*, pp. 104-122 (p. 113).

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Towheed, "Music is not merely for musicians", 280.

in her account of this experience; ‘a study of what is, not what ought to be; of what style in composer A is good for ‘Listener’ or ‘Hearer’ A; while style or composer B is more to the taste of ‘Listener’ of ‘Hearer’ B; not which style or composer is good for all musical mankind and for all ages of music’s future existence. In short I have tried (with however small a success) to explain tastes, but not to prescribe them’ (*Music*, p. 544). And for all of this *Music and its Lovers* is also a deeply personal work, owing partly to the fact that it had taken Lee some twenty years to translate the data from her surveys into print. Writing to her friend, Maurice Baring in November 1921, Lee would announce her intention ‘to get rid of my dreadful old-man-of-the-sea book on Hearers and Listeners (Lord why did I ever begin it!) which was interrupted by the War and then other things and takes all my remaining strength. When — if — that’s off my back I shall dedicate Bousset’s *Rest d’une ardeur* to literary psychology’.¹⁴⁰

Gurney’s name is not present in *Music and its Lovers* but we would be mistaken in believing that his influence had not augmented it. Sam Halliday has recently remarked that ‘[s]imilar accounts of melody appear in Gurney’s *The Power of Sound* and Vernon Lee’s *Music and its Lovers*, the latter of which is in some respects an unacknowledged rewrite of the former’.¹⁴¹ The claim, remarkable in itself, is made all the more so by the fact that Halliday does not substantiate it with any comparative analysis. Halliday has, I think, alighted upon something valuable here and yet *Music and its Lovers* is not a ‘rewrite’; for all of its indebtedness to the ‘new sciences of aesthetics’ — developments Gurney was never privy to — it never could be. Rather, *Music and its Lovers* might be speculatively postulated as a sequel, that which attempts to ‘fill the gaps’ left by Gurney’s analysis. For as Lee concedes in ‘The Riddle of Music’, the explanations of science were not around ‘at the time when Gurney wrote his book’ but had they been ‘[w]ho knows but that such methods, employed by one so specially gifted, might not have solved the riddle of music, and thereby explained the *how* and *why* of beauty, suggestion, and impressiveness in every other art?’¹⁴²

Lee’s most striking debt to Gurney’s thesis is announced in the opening page. *Music and its Lovers*, like *The Power of Sound* before it, channels an egalitarian impulse towards non-professionals, being ‘neither for Musicians nor for Musical Critics’ but for lovers of music (*Music*, p. 13). The significance of this critical gauntlet is best understood, perhaps, by

¹⁴⁰ Cited in Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 211. It is not clear when precisely Lee adopted the new name, *Music and its Lovers*, but the title does bear some semblance to that of Anton Rubenstein’s book, *Musik und ihre Meister* (1892), which Lee owned. If this was an intentional borrowing then it is possible that by substituting the word ‘master’ for ‘lover’ Lee was able to further emphasis the trajectory of her investigations, being not an analysis of composers (as Rubenstein’s book proceeds), or ‘the influence of individual masters’ as she remarks in the first chapter, but rather its enamoured listeners (*Music*, p. 23).

¹⁴¹ Sam Halliday, *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture, and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 160.

¹⁴² Lee, ‘The Riddle of Music,’ 207.

recognising that Lee and Gurney were both refining their approaches towards a discipline which was in the throes of increasing specialization. Indeed, ‘musicology’ — or *Musikwissenschaft* (‘music science’) — as we know it today was effectively ‘made’ during the late 1880s.¹⁴³ Yet both Gurney and Lee remained (in impulse, if not in scholarly contribution) outwardly resistant to this sweep of professionalization. To a certain extent, this is perhaps because both felt themselves to be interlopers in this discipline and thus ill-equipped to speak authoritatively on the topic. But more importantly, I think, because they recognised the value of reaching a non-specialist audience at a time when they were in danger of being lost in the critical demarcation of music’s disciplinary objectives.

Although there is no mention of Gurney himself in *Music and its Lovers*, there is a patent nod to his legacy in the chapter “The Powers of Sound” — and not merely in common nomenclature. Here Lee establishes her (Gurneyean) understanding of music as ‘patterns of successive and simultaneous notes’, the basis of which leads her to conclude that these units of sound are processed by the listener through a recognition of concatenation:

Therefore the very simplest relations in which notes or beads on a string or words in a sentence can be recognised as existing, the relation between separate and consecutive, implies on our part a perception of diversity and sameness, which we could not have if each single sensation did not leave that trace by which it is recognised and related to its similar or dissimilar successor [...] Tautologically, we could not follow the notes unless we were aware that there were separate notes to follow (*Music*, p. 36).

One of the tenets of Gurney’s hypothesis was that the musical experience might vary in accordance with the individual’s musical aptitude; a theory which is given due deliberation in Lee’s work, where she explains the first four of her sixteen queries sought ‘to ascertain the extent to which the answerer is musically developed’ — asking the respondent whether they are able to sing, sight read or play a musical instrument ‘by ear’ — whilst the succeeding questions, together with Lee’s encouragement to ‘add as many details and distinctions as you like’, are clearly more qualitative in nature (*Music*, p. 562). However these questions taken together, Lee asserted, ‘constituted an objective criterion of the degree of musical endowment and cultivation’ and as such, ‘it became possible to ascertain how far the conflicting answers about music having a message or remaining just music correspond with the musical status [...] of the individuals by whom they were furnished’ (*Music*, p. 29). Query VI also illustrates how Lee was able to introduce dependent variables into her investigation:

¹⁴³ See Erica Mugglestone and Guido Adler, ‘The Scope, Method, and Aim of Musicology (1885): An English Translation,’ *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 13 (1981), 1-21.

Does music (always without words or suggestive title):

(A) put you into emotional conditions or moods different from the one you happen to be in?

Or (B) does it merely intensify already existing moods or emotions?

Or (C) do you merely recognise, without participating, that music represents varieties of human emotion and mood?

(D) which of these ways of responding to the emotional character of music is the most common in your case, and can you give any reasons (differences of composer, or of your own condition) which account for such different response? (*Power*, p. 564)

Here, by establishing the object of investigation to be ‘music without words’, Lee invites the testing of the conditions of musical experience within the prescribed limits of music alone, without verbal determinants. The particular query is key because Lee acknowledges that her original hypothesis had been that ‘the tendency to attribute to music an emotional message [...] might be greater due to the greater predominance of emotional interest in the Answerer’s usual inner life’ (*Music*, p. 29). What she discovered however was that ‘there seemed no direct relation between the degree of emotional disposition and the question whether music had or had not a message [...] this question showed itself in an obvious relation to what I have called the musical *status* of the Answerers’ (*Music*, p. 30).

Through the resulting dialogue, Lee reveals, it ‘became obvious that there existed two different modes of responding to music, each of which was claimed to be the only one by those in whom it was habitual’ (*Music*, p. 31) and elaborating upon that which she had recognised some twenty years previously in ‘The Riddle of Music’, she establishes a distinction between the act of ‘listening’ and of ‘hearing’:

Listening implies the most active attention moving along every detail of composition and performance, taking in all the relations of sequences and combinations of sounds as regards pitch, intervals, modulations, rhythms and intensities, holding them in the memory and coordinating them in a series of complex wholes, similar [...] to that constituted by all the parts, large and small, of a piece of architecture [...]. *Hearing music* [...] is not simply a lesser degree of the same mental activity, but one whose comparative poverty from the musical side is eked out and compensated by other elements (*Music*, pp. 31-32. Emphasis original).

But even so, Lee, following Gurney, would allow for the possibility that ‘there is usually a degree of “listening” in all “hearing” of music and a necessary substratum of “hearing” in all “listening”’ (*Music*, p. 108). Indeed, although Lee ‘outs’ herself as a ‘Listener’,

and nothing but a ‘listener’, for I am utterly bored after a very few moments of mere ‘hearing,’ I am distinctly susceptible to the presence of human emotion in music, and

am always aware that in each case of its particular human character as well as of its attraction or repulsion for myself (*Music*, pp. 91-92).

Perhaps owing to this personal experience Lee is careful not to penalise those who supplement their understanding and lack of attentiveness to music with other thoughts, recognising that ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’ are ‘the two ways of impersonal, contemplative happiness in which music can benefit mankind’ (*Music*, p. 34). Unique to Lee’s consideration therefore is something which much of nineteenth-century musical analysis, particularly those of a materialist slant, tend to side-line — that is when we talk about ‘meaning’ in music we seldom acknowledge two distinct designations of the term; the first, an unnegotiable musicological understanding that ‘meaning’ is that which the individual discerns in the ‘content’ of music; and the second, the other connotation of ‘meaning’ — that of ‘value’. For Lee, ‘music is music. That is why the psychological lens, however supernaturally powerful, would not reveal it to be a mosaic of human emotions nor even a juxtaposition of Leitmotifs, each standing for a human personality or a human episode. Music, however strong its human suggestion may happen to be, is artistic pattern and acts as unity’ (*Music*, p. 95). Nonetheless, the second sense of ‘meaning’ is no less valid and together ‘they explain the two kinds of “meaning” which are ascribed to music and which music can have in our lives’ (*Music*, p. 34). As Lee had suggested in *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (1913):

It is possible and legitimate to be interested in a work of art for a dozen reasons besides aesthetic appreciation; each of these interests has its own sentimental, scientific, dramatic or even moneymaking emotion; and there is no loss for art, but rather a gain, if we fall back upon one of them when the specific aesthetic response is slow or not forthcoming. Art has other aims besides aesthetic satisfaction; and aesthetic satisfaction will not come any the quicker for turning our backs upon these non-aesthetic aims.¹⁴⁴

Of course, Lee had never turned her back on these aims. Rather, she had made the attempt to account for and dignify them her life-long mission.

In 1874 Lee had claimed to be ‘haunted’ by the ‘dreams of a great work on music.’¹⁴⁵ Was this Gurney’s *The Power of Sound*? Judging by her repeated engagements with this work, her uncanny returns, and the way in which these (re)readings of Gurney’s work modulated her ideas on music, leaving their subtle revenants within the pages of *Music and its Lovers*, we might well say that this was the musical work she had long hoped for. And yet at the same time, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, this might be to possibly misrepresent or

¹⁴⁴ Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), pp. 137-138.

¹⁴⁵ Letter to Henrietta Jenkin, 4 September 1874, in Gagel, ‘Selected Letters,’ p. 130.

overly romanticise Lee's critical approach. For although her supposedly 'peripheral' position in relation to the central artistic and intellectual developments of her day has almost certainly been overstressed, her spirit of intervention — her ongoing efforts to revisit, reread and rethink the ideas of those around her — cannot.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, these very efforts are clearly inscribed on the title page of her copy of *The Power of Sound*.

Specifically, then, my interest here has been in Lee's rereading of Gurney's work, together with her subsequent assimilation of several of his central premises for the art of music. But in an inescapable way, since the two are co-extensive in Lee's critical imagination, this has also been about her equally interpolative approach towards aestheticism. Indeed, as Evangelista observes, this too is an undertaking of equally interpretive quality since through Pater's work, Lee 'rereads aestheticism [...] express[ing] the need to reinterpret it, but it also contains a plea not to forget — an invitation to keep going back to its defining works.'¹⁴⁷ Thus it is Pater, not Gurney who receives the recognition for having 'haunted' her in the opening lines of *Music and its Lovers*, despite (or perhaps because of), as she writes elsewhere, the fact that he had not 'follow[ed] to the full his own suggestion — "All arts tend to the condition of music".'¹⁴⁸ Perhaps, then, the impulse underlines Lee's attempts to analyse musical experience in *Music and its Lovers*; and as such, I want to end here by returning to Towheed's assessment that this work is 'semi-quantitative, part impressionistic', together with the suggestion that this (ostensive) dialectic emerges from her variously analytical and impermeable Paterian tendencies.¹⁴⁹

In "The School of Giorgione" Pater observed that in 'the favourite incidents of Giorgione's school, music or the musical intervals in our existence, *life itself is conceived as a sort of listening* — listening to music, [...] to the sound of water, to time as it flies' and that 'such moments are really our moments of play, and we are surprised at the unexpected blessedness of what may seem our least important part of time [...] because at such times, the stress of service, everyday attentiveness being relaxed, the happier powers in things without are permitted free passage, and have their way with us.'¹⁵⁰ This Paterian paradigm flows through *Music and its Lovers*, resurfacing in moments where musical experience is described as akin to being,

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Sylvia Mieszkowski, "Vernon Lee — Gen(i)us Loci of the Academic Periphery," in *Academia's Gendered Fringe: A Historical Perspective 1890-1945*, ed. by Miriam Kauko, Sylvia Mieszkowski and Alexandra Tischel (Gottingen: Wallstein, 2005), pp. 83-106.

¹⁴⁷ Stefano Evangelista, "Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism," p. 103. Own emphasis added.

¹⁴⁸ Lee, 'Impersonality and Evolution,' 857.

¹⁴⁹ Towheed, "Music is not merely for musicians", 280.

¹⁵⁰ Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 96. Own emphasis added.

...continually washed over by a shallow tide of other thoughts: memories, associations, suggestions, visual images and emotional states, ebbing and flowing round the more or less clearly emergent musical perceptions, in such a way that each participates of the quality of the other, till they coalesce, forming a homogeneous and special contemplative condition (*Music*, p. 32).

Ultimately, then, music, like all aesthetic experience, is not wholly contingent upon any particular variety of music or listening practice but being ‘attuned to’ its existence and recognising our own participation in the act of perception. This is equally another condition of Pater’s ‘condition’, as Lee discerns, for music — like life — is only ever destined to erode and it is in these ‘intervals’ that the most valuable appreciation of the ‘aesthetic’ resides. For Lee, who, writing in *Renaissance Studies and Fancies*, rereads the formula of aestheticism, this is music not for ‘art’s sake, but [...] for the sake of life — art as one of the *harmonious* functions of existence’.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Vernon Lee, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to Euphorion* (London: Smith, Elder, 1895), p. 259. Own emphasis added.

Conclusion

That “*All art aspires towards the condition of music*” [...] is probably the most familiar use of the term [‘condition’] in Pater. There, it seems to sum up an aesthetic concerned with form, not content, sound, not meaning, beauty, not history. However, it is interesting that, very often, conditions in Pater are plural.

— Angela Leighton, “Aesthetic Conditions: Returning to Pater”¹

This thesis ends, as it began, with Pater’s famous axiom: ‘*All art constantly aspires to the condition of music*’; a statement which, as we saw Tim Barringer remark in this introduction, is ‘indelibly associated with the Aesthetic movement [...]’² Given the ubiquity of Pater’s maxim in critical literature on aestheticism, Barringer’s assessment could hardly be disputed and indeed it has not been the purpose of this thesis to do so. Rather, to question how well the common recitation of this single idiom serves our critical practice; to open out its critical tautology; and to recuperate the intellectual and historical contexts of music which its rhetoric tacitly obscures.

To do this required some reconditioning on both sides. So often, to approach ‘music’ is to approach a subject which seems to disguise its own ideological premises — ‘form, not content, sound, not meaning, beauty, not history’ — an art which eschews the attempts of critical interpolation; an art form which (all too readily) feeds into and bolsters the aestheticist’s prerogative for an art which supposedly ‘wants to be nothing more than art.’³ Yet it is, as Lawrence Kramer reminds us, all too easy to treat music as an ‘Abstract entity, something *in* but not *of* culture and history.’⁴ And equally, as we well know, to define the tradition of British aestheticism in such narrow terms is both an oversimplification and trivialisation of its methods and aspirations. Accordingly, I have been led to re-historicize this association; to ‘deidealize [...] without (entirely) disenchanting’⁵ the claims of either discourse; to see music not as the unequivocal catchword for art’s necessary disassociation from ‘the social’ or ‘the political’ but rather the very means through which aestheticism’s ongoing negotiations with these contingencies found their most fruitful, and invariably,

¹ Angela Leighton, “Aesthetic Conditions: Returning to Pater,” in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, pp. 12-23 (p. 15).

² Tim Barringer, “Burne-Jones’s *Le Chant d’amour* and the Condition of Music,” in *Rival Sisters: Art and Music at the Birth of Modernism*, p. 152.

³ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 51.

⁴ Lawrence Kramer, ‘Viewpoint: Dangerous Liaisons: The Literary Text in Musical Criticism,’ *Nineteenth-Century Music* 13.2 (1989), 159-167 (165). Emphasis original.

⁵ *Ibid.*

complex, articulation. Thus the historicization project of this thesis has been twofold, since by recognising that aestheticist thought and practice was not just sensitive to — but in fact both invested in and critically evaluative of — the intellectual climate of contemporary musicology, we are asked to rethink not only our own default modes (where the tendency to (re)cite Pater’s ‘condition of music’ is ‘virtually *de rigueur*’)⁶, but to discover how the dynamics of this association played out historically, in ultimately unexpected ways. Indeed, there has, perhaps, been an implicit tendency to see this exchange as entirely one-way and yet as we have seen the legacy of aestheticism became implicated in *music itself* no sooner than the ink of Pater’s (now-indelible) statement had set.

In the foregoing discussions, we traced the exchanges between aestheticism and music discourse through a variety of meeting points, beginning, not fortuitously, in a context where the critical recitation of Pater’s ‘condition of music’ looms large: aesthetic painting. Here we explored some of those critical issues commonly identified as characteristic of aestheticism’s transposition of music into painting through a more specific dialogue — that of ‘songs without words’. It has long been recognised that music served as a means of subordinating ‘literary’ concerns to the non-verbal properties of form, tone and colour, an act which, in turn, reconfigured the pre-agreed (or at least, pre-conceived) terms of two key roles; that of the critic, who had made it their business to act as interpolator of ‘meaning’ and value in art, but also that of the viewer whose understanding of their part in the machinations of evaluation had been predicated largely upon their identity as ‘reader’. By bringing Mendelssohn’s ‘Songs without Words’ together with Leighton and Whistler’s paintings these particular issues were brought into even sharper focus. Moreover, as an idiom for both the aspirational condition of aesthetic painting and, for Frith in particular, the very means for its critical deconstruction, what became apparent was the duplicity of the trope itself. If, by substituting the literary for music, Pater had provided a new point of reference for art, one which sought to displace the objective standards of popular critics in the aim of democratizing its key tenets, then this was concomitantly the very lexicon used for reinscribing this practice back into its proper place. Moreover, tracing this dialogue was to understand how the vicissitudes of these ‘meanings’ emanated not entirely from the music itself but from associations which were produced as part of a much wider and crucially ongoing circulation and convergence of aesthetic and cultural values.

These implications for the augmentations and mediations of ‘reception’ and the remaking of ‘meaning’ through art-music crossings were continued (arguably inverted), with all the more pertinence, in Chapter 2 where we explored Debussy’s distinctive dialogue with

⁶ Rubin and Mattis, “Musical Paintings and Colourful Sounds: The Imagery and Rhetoric of Musicality in the Romantic Age,” p. 4.

British aestheticism. Indeed, as is clear from the commentary which accompanied his *Nocturnes*, the affiliation Debussy desired was not musical at all but rather ‘Whistlerian’, since the word ‘nocturne’ had been highly mediated by Whistler’s art practice, transcending its previous attachment to a genre of music to become a catchword for modernist tendencies and acts of defiance against conservative critics and their conformity of taste.

More specifically, of course, this particular chapter was a means to probe Sarah Collins’s assessment of British aestheticism as a movement which ‘failed to register explicitly in music’.⁷ In recent years, a number of studies have already troubled the certainty of this claim. Byron Adams, for example, has recently suggested that the text of Elgar’s 1903 oratorio, *The Apostles*, ‘reflect[s] how deeply fin de siècle aestheticism pervaded Elgar’s imagination’.⁸ Equally, Phillip Ross Bullock’s research on Rosa Newmarch suggests that the legacy of literary aestheticism can be traced in the professionalised field of programme note writing in the early twentieth century (with important insights, as we have seen, for considerations of Vernon Lee). These are two markedly different approaches and musical contexts but both suggestive of greater potential scope for similar advances in the critical interrelation between British aestheticism and music.

My own intervention into this small critical pool concerned the dialogue between Debussy and the tradition of aestheticism in the years surrounding the fin de siècle. Given the historic tendency to view Debussy’s ‘extra-musical’ contexts as an oscillation between ‘impressionist’ and ‘symbolist’ tendencies, this is, perhaps, the discussion which is most likely to galvanize musicologists. Yet at the same time this was not a revisionist reading, nor was it an argument for establishing ‘aestheticism’ as a hitherto-unrecognised musical genre. Rather, this was a recuperation, undertaken and justified on historicist grounds (and one which might well have been obscured by the continued enforcement of the very critical dialectic which Debussy openly rejected). By tracing the dissemination and reception of British aestheticism in France in the late nineteenth century, together with the subsequent reception of Debussy’s music in Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century, Debussy’s engagement with the tradition of British aestheticism was, in effect, brought ‘full circle’. Moreover, what I hope to have demonstrated here is that the alliance forged between Debussy and aestheticism was not necessarily a foregone conclusion. Rather, that the reception of Debussy’s music in Britain indicates that he was in part the beneficiary of an attitude which was always more than ‘just music’. As we saw in Chapter 1, the fragmentation of Mendelssohn’s status at the fin de siècle

⁷ Collins, ‘Practices of Aesthetic Self-Cultivation,’ 98.

⁸ Byron Adams, “Elgar’s Later Oratorios: Roman Catholicism, Decadence and the Wagnerian Dialectic of Shame and Grace,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, ed. by Daniel M. Grimley and Julian Rushton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 81-105 (p. 96).

was part of a wider ‘Decadent’ backlash against the bourgeois mores with which he had become inextricably linked in nineteenth-century England (the self-same values which had arguably afforded Mendelssohn his initial success). We might say, then, that Debussy’s reputation was, by virtue of Symons’ effusive endorsement, ‘made’ by the same aesthetic proclivity which had systematically ‘unmade’ Mendelssohn a little over a decade previously. Debussy’s was not music in the ‘condition of music’, per se (despite George Moore’s affective claim), but rather music augmented by the conditions of aestheticism.

Many of the ideas and concerns traced throughout this thesis find their conclusion in the final discussion of Vernon Lee, who long-anticipates my attempts here to open out the tautology of Pater’s ‘condition of music’ through her own lifelong endeavours to unravel the so-called ‘riddle of music’. Unlike some of the other individuals implicated in this thesis, it is likely that Lee’s own investment in the art of music has never been taken for granted, even if, as I hope to have demonstrated here, the true extent of this engagement has. One of the central objectives of this thesis was that by re-historicizing aestheticism’s association with music we might be able to not only to draw out some of the connections between the types of theoretical questions and methodologies with which they were engaged, but ultimately to see the critical value in adopting a long perspective on the development of British aestheticism. Thus in *Music and its Lovers*, a work which is both outside of the generally-agreed chronology of aestheticism and which has received very little critical attention, Lee effectively extends the dialogue between aestheticism and music well into the twentieth century.

Angela Leighton observes that Lee ‘seems to be attempting an experiment in psychology which is the logical conclusion of Pater’s aestheticist manifesto.’⁹ This is a reflection on Lee’s much anthologized ghost stories, but the sentiment is, perhaps, no less germane to Lee’s attempts to analyse musical experience. Yet if *Music and its Lovers* is a ‘psychology’ of music, it is likewise a sociology of music. Lee’s typology of listening behaviours were a formative contribution to a field which expanded exponentially in the decades which followed, finding its memorable (and greatly expanded) apogee in Theodor Adorno’s “Types of Musical Conduct” (1962).¹⁰ Lee’s dialogue with the ‘condition of music’ takes Pater’s claim and carries it to the ‘full[ness] of his own suggestion’, whilst at the same time never losing sight of the purpose of art and moreover, like all her attempts at ‘rereading’,

⁹ Angela Leighton, “Resurrections of the Body: Women Writers and the Idea of the Renaissance,” in *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Alison Chapman and Anne Stabler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 222-238 (p. 235).

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, “Types of Musical Conduct,” in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1962), pp. 1-20. The full typology is: (1) the expert listener; (2) the good listener; (3) the culture consumer; (4) the emotional listener; (5) the resentment listener; (6) the jazz expert and jazz fan; (7) the entertainment listener; and (8) the indifferent, the unmusical or the anti-musical.

continually looking back whilst all the while advancing the boundaries of scholarship. It is Lee, then, for whom the title of this thesis is arguably most apposite. Her dialogue with music, with aestheticism, is undoubtedly an open-ended one and a clear invitation for us to revisit these contexts ourselves.

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