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BALZAC'S VIEWS ON MEANING OF MUSIC AND IN MUSIC

MUSIC, EMOTIONS, MEMORY:
SIGNE MÉMORATIF IN LA DUCHESSE DE LANGEAIS (1834)

Music, Balzac claims, is able to convey emotions, and is thus a means of communication expressing what can hardly be contained in words (cf. Gamrat 2019). In order to describe and explain that process, Balzac applies metaphors and similes as well as referring to musical terminology (cf. Gamrat 2022, 185–88). The idea of music as a vehicle for communicating emotions and exerting impact on people looks back to eighteenth-century concepts such as those presented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1781). In the following excerpt from *La Duchesse de Langeais* (1834), Balzac demonstrates the link between music and emotions, as well as the use of the above-mentioned tropes:

Indeed, in the joy of the nun there was little of that awe and gravity which should harmonize with the solemnities of the Magnificat. She had enriched the music with graceful variations, earthly gladness throbbing through the rhythm of each. In such brilliant quivering notes some great singer might strive to find a voice for her love, her melodies fluttered as a bird flutters about her mate. There were moments when she seemed to leap back into the past, to dally there now with laughter, now with tears. Her changing moods, as it were, ran riot. She was like a woman excited and happy over her lover's return.

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But at length, after the swaying fugues of delirium, after the marvellous rendering of a vision of the past, a revulsion swept over the soul that thus found utterance for itself. With a swift transition from the major to the minor, the organist told her hearer of her present lot. She gave the story of long melancholy broodings, of the slow course of her moral malady. How day by day she deadened the senses, how every night cut off one more thought, how her heart was slowly reduced to ashes. The sadness deepened shade after shade through languid modulations, and in a little while the echoes were pouring out a torrent of grief. Then on a sudden, high notes rang out like the voices of angels singing together, as if to tell the lost but not forgotten lover that their spirits now could only meet in heaven. (DL 23–24)¹

Links between music and memory are another aspect of music that was very important to the Romantics and found its reflection in literature (cf. Bailbé 1969, 164–71). The idea is deeply rooted in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (cf. *Dictionnaire de musique* [1976]), who observed that by evoking memories some melodies generate an emotional reaction that can be stronger than reason. It happens because these memories concern elements or values that are particularly precious to the individual or group, which turns a given musical work (or tune) into what the philosopher from Geneva calls a memory sign (*signe mémoratif*) (317).

The reference to a concept made popular in France by Rousseau comes as no surprise since, as Nanine Charbonnel (2021, 95) and Michaël Tilby (2021, 145) have emphasised, Balzac perfectly knew eighteenth-century literature and philosophy. In his youth they constituted the basis of education. What is more, Rousseau's views on the links between music and emotions were popularised in the 1830s by the second edition of Senancour's *Obermann* (1833; first published in 1804). Of special interest in this context is the passage titled "Troisième fragment. De l'expression romantique et du Ranz des vaches", in which Senancour refers to Rousseau's claim that music can invoke memories and adds that it can be not only an invocation, but also a representation of our memories (1984, 185). The concept of *signe mémoratif* was thus revived and gained popularity among both writers and composers (cf. e.g., Hector Berlioz and his *idée fixe* of a person, cf. Gamrat 2021, 2023).

We will not follow the sequence of events as they are presented in Balzac's novel but attempt to reconstruct the process of the emergence of the *signe mémoratif* that plays a crucial role in the communication between Duchess Antoinette de Langeais and General Armand de Montriveau. The musical

¹ Quotations from Balzac's prose are marked for short as DL (*La Duchesse de Langeais*) and MD (*Massimilla Doni*).

work that becomes such a sign in *La Duchesse de Langeais* is the romance *Fleuve du Tage* (1818) by Joseph Hélyas de Meun (text) and Jean-Joseph-Benoît Pollet (music), which enjoyed great popularity in the 1820s (cf. Jamain 2004, 177). The Duchess herself frequently plays this romance for her own pleasure or at times when she strives to curb her emotions, which are getting out of control. This is precisely what happens at a moment that turns out to be crucial for an understanding of the relationship between the two main protagonists. Agitated, the Duchess seats herself at the piano and plays a fragment of the romance. When asked what piece of music it might be, she answers: “The prelude of a ballad, called, I believe, *Fleuve du Tage*” (DL 159). She quotes this title as though it were of no great importance or as if she were struggling to recall it. Nevertheless, it is this banal tune that a moment later becomes associated with a confession of love, as the Duchess tells the General what she feels for him and, unable to bottle up her feelings as she sheds tears of passion. In this way, at this precise moment (the Duchess’ confession) the melody becomes associated with the protagonists’ emotional life and becomes an element of personal communication between the two, what Jean-Pierre Barricelli (1990, 53) calls their “‘private’ tune”. The melody would probably hardly prove memorable in other circumstances, though the romance text itself may be taken as a kind of prophecy concerning de Langeais’ future, since it describes a farewell to the familiar world and the beloved person, and a withdrawal from the world (cf. Gamrat 2019, 115–17). The piano tune (prelude to the romance, not the entire piece) thus becomes an intertext that allows Balzac to add a new semantic layer to the song text and turns its tune into a *signe mémoratif* in the minds of the protagonists.

Five years later, the General finds the Duchess in a monastery on an obscure Spanish island. Despite now living in an enclosed religious order, she senses her beloved coming. She is now Sister Theresa, and she communicates her feelings for her old love by improvising on the organ during Holy Mass. She embeds motifs from *Fleuve du Tage* in her improvisation, thus conveying her emotions and reviving memories. The emotions they evoke are too strong for the General to bear, and he leaves the church without hearing the end of the improvisation. Montriveau is, naturally, the only person in the church who understands the message contained in that tune—as it is not meant for anyone else to decode. Balzac thus describes the music and the emotions it stirs up:

The General had left the church during the *Te Deum*; he could not listen any longer. The nun’s music had been a revelation of a woman loved to frenzy; a woman so carefully hidden from the world’s eyes, so deeply buried in the bosom of the

Church, that hitherto the most ingenious and persistent efforts made by men who brought great influence and unusual powers to bear upon the search had failed to find her. The suspicion aroused in the General's heart became all but a certainty with the vague reminiscence of a sad, delicious melody, the air of *Fleuve du Tage*. The woman he loved had played the prelude to the ballad in a boudoir in Paris, how often! and now this nun had chosen the song to express an exile's longing, amid the joy of those that triumphed. Terrible sensation! (DL 17)

The brief summary above demonstrates how Balzac wrote about music and how it functioned in his writings. Music was, to him, a means of revealing and conveying emotions. This in itself is far obvious, since Balzac is considered as a master of literary descriptions, not—of analysing emotions. What is more, in Balzac's text music conveys encoded messages. In the novel under study, it also becomes a pretext to refer to the then popular pieces of music and to those that Balzac cherished himself, which enriches the text by pointing to the interconnections and interactions between different arts, but also engages the reader. Without knowing the repertoire referred to, and the aesthetic context of the epoch, readers may find it hard to decode textual signification in his texts.

MASSIMILLA DONI INTERPRETS ROSSINI'S OPERA:
INSTRUMENTATION AND COLOUR, EMOTIONS AND MEMORY

Such artistic devices that involve readers' interest and knowledge are even more prominent in the short story titled *Massimilla Doni* (1837), which is one of Balzac's "musical texts", reflecting that epoch's tendency to integrate music (and other arts) into a literary work (cf. Castanet 2001; Didier 2018; Halliwell 2021). In the story, Balzac not only expounds some aesthetic concepts concerning art, but also modifies his language using new artistic means. This, however, is a subject for a separate paper (cf. Gamrat 2022).

In a way that is also characteristic of his *Philosophical Studies*, Balzac's short story comprises a study and philosophical interpretation of music. The text is rooted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse used for comparing arts as well as ideas concerning music's impact on humans. Through the mouth of Massimilla Doni, Balzac presents his in-depth analysis of Rossini's opera and draws numerous parallels to this short novel under discussion. The writer's textual concept depends on the real world and fiction mutually shedding light on one another, on multi-level mutual correspondences between the music

of the opera, between the plots of both the story and the opera, and Biblical history as represented in the Venetian theatre (cf. Gamrat 2020).

To begin with, I will discuss the references in Balzac's short story to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theories of music and to their extension by Senancour. The key doctrine that the writer refers to is that of links between music and memory, that is, of music's ability to bring back memories and generate emotions. Balzac alludes to both these faculties of music, which, he claims, can evoke memories, images, and emotions. Instead of representing the mechanism of associations forming between music, emotions, and memories, as he did in his novel, in the short story the writer comments on this phenomenon in a manner that was typical of the comparison-of-arts discourse, originating in the eighteenth and developed in the nineteenth century: "In the language of musicians,... painting is arousing certain associations in our souls, or certain images in our brain; and these memories and images have a color of their own; they are sad or cheerful" (MD 97–98).

Later in the text, Balzac complements this idea with references to the symbolism of instruments known from earlier periods—a knowledge he largely owed to his collaboration with composer Jacques Strunz (cf. Citron 1967; Gamrat 2022, 182–85). Instruments are associated not only with a specific context and type of place, but also with related emotions. Balzac thus asks rhetorically:

Has not the oboe the peculiar tone that we associate with the open country, in common with most wind instruments? The brass suggests martial ideas, and rouses us to vehement or even somewhat furious feelings. The strings, for which the material is derived from the organic world, seem to appeal to the subtlest fibres of our nature; they go to the very depths of the heart. (MD 98)

Confirmation such views can be found in any treatise or handbook of composition and orchestration then in use. Authors of such works linked instruments to extramusical contexts and emotions (cf. Reicha 1814, 1818; Berlioz 1844). Similar concepts can be found in the eighteenth century's intense theoretical discourse on the aesthetics of art (including the German *Affektenlehre* rooted in musical rhetoric or the French *théorie des passions*; cf. Mattheson 1739; Rameau 1722; Grimalt 2020, 27–80). Importantly, Balzac observes how Rossini breaks away from these traditional codes by linking the instrument to specific situations or emotions, which, he claims, allows the composer to achieve unprecedented depth and move his audience. Balzac comments on the invocation in the opening of the opera as follows:

By a learned elaboration,... this appeal to heaven is accompanied by brass instruments only; it is that which gives it such a solemn, religious cast. And not merely is the artifice fine in its place; note how fertile in resource is genius. Rossini has derived fresh beauty from the difficulty he himself created. He has the strings in reserve to express daylight when it succeeds to the darkness, and thus produces one of the greatest effects ever achieved in music. (MD 73)

Later passages confirm Balzac's deep rooting in theories expounded at the turn of the nineteenth century, as well as his excellent knowledge of contemporary trends in art and art criticism, including the then popular type of discourse based on comparing different arts. Those text fragments also elaborate again on emotions associated with music:

[E]ach instrument has its task, its mission, and appeals to certain feelings in our souls. Does a pattern in gold on a blue ground produce the same sensations in you as a red pattern on black or green? In these, as in music, there are no figures, no expression of feeling; they are purely artistic, and yet no one looks at them with indifference. (MD 97)

Colour is shown here as a universal medium present in all the arts that "paint" similar emotions or images in the audience's minds. Naturally, each art does so by using tools proper to that art.

THE MUSICAL GENRE AND ITS CONNOTATIONS

Genealogical commentary plays a major role in Balzac's analysis. He undertakes to persuade his readers that *Mosè in Egitto* is an oratorio, not an opera—and is therefore related to a different set of signification processes and codes worked out over the many centuries of sacred music history. Had Balzac used the terms 'opera' and 'oratorio' interchangeably and in a chance manner in his tale, we might accept this as *licentia poetica*, a lack of precision which, however, does not detract from the work's value. However, the writer clearly and repeatedly defines the genre of Rossini's opus as an oratorio. Already at the very beginning of the conversation that introduces the audience to this musical work, we find this unequivocal claim: "This is not so much an opera, monsieur," said she, "as an oratorio" (MD 67). Moreover, the music itself also appears to Balzac as of too much weight to be defined as an opera. Massimilla

claims that “[t]he music of this oratorio contains a whole world of great and sacred things” (MD 99; cf. Hamilton 2013; Gamrat 2020)

Balzac’s most obvious argument is the work’s subject matter. To a Frenchman not accustomed to operas on Christian religious themes, the suffering of the Jewish nation and its escape from captivity made possible by divine intervention would have appeared too serious for the operatic stage. Indeed, what Rossini takes from the Old Testament is not merely his overall theme, but also the specific miracles (the Plagues of Egypt, crossing the Red Sea) and the role of God Himself, strongly highlighted by the composer: His interventions, the protection He offers to the chosen people, revenge exacted on the wrongdoers, as well as the power of prayer. The title hero is “Moses ... the liberator of an enslaved race” (MD 69), whose life story is followed with great attention by the audience. His prayer before the Red Sea crossing is heard by God, as Mrs Caetano emphasises in the story. The writer relates the theme of Israelite slavery in Egypt to the situation of Venice (and Italy at large) in the early nineteenth century. This parallel bestows a new meaning, important to the story’s protagonists, on Rossini’s work.

What is more, the domination of choruses and ensemble scenes, in combination with Biblical themes and a prevalence of recitatives, creates an impression of great solemnity, inspiring a stronger focus and more profound reflection than a stage work replete with showy arias might generate. Such arias were applauded directly afterwards, which interrupted the course of action. Greater concentration, resulting from the structure of the piece, encourages the audience to consider the theme at greater depth. Such strong focus was important for the Romantics. To Balzac, it seems to have been one of the key elements of artistic expression.

MUSICAL TERMINOLOGY AND THE RESULTING SEMANTICS

Musical terminology as presented in Balzac’s story plays a double role. On the one hand, it shows which aspects of Rossini’s composition, his ways of setting the text and musically depicting the situation, were important to the writer. On the other hand, this is where Balzac’s technique manifests itself: his ability to use metaphors and fuse aesthetic-philosophical theories with literary fiction. He focuses, first and foremost, on such elements as harmony, melodic structure, tempi, keys, orchestration (including instrument symbolism), and dynamics, which highlight the operatic events and emotions. The reactions

of the story's protagonists to these aspects of the music reflect their emotional states. Various combinations of these elements demonstrate the power of music and of musical stage image, as well as their impact on humans, which, according to Balzac, decides about the greatness of the operatic art. We can clearly see how the writer focuses on links between the instrument, its colouring or context (religious, for instance), and emotion. In the description of the overture, all these elements are very distinctly present:

The physician heard the sublime symphony with which the composer introduces the great Biblical drama. It is to express the sufferings of a whole nation. Suffering is uniform in its expression, especially physical suffering. Thus, having instinctively felt, like all men of genius, that here there must be no variety of idea, the musician, having hit on his leading phrase, has worked it out in various keys, grouping the masses and the dramatis personae to take up the theme through modulations and cadences of admirable structure. In such simplicity is power. The effect of this strain, depicting the sensations of night and cold in a people accustomed to live in the bright rays of the sun, and sung by the people and their princes, is most impressive. There is something relentless in that slow phrase of music; it is cold and sinister, like an iron bar wielded by some celestial executioner, and dropping in regular rhythm on the limbs of all his victims. As we hear it passing from C minor into G minor, returning to C and again to the dominant G, starting afresh and fortissimo on the tonic B flat, drifting into F major and back to C minor, and in each key in turn more ominously terrible, chill, and dark, we are compelled at last to enter into the impression intended by the composer. (MD 71)

Musical terminology is applied throughout the text. Balzac's analyses are quite lucid for his times. Thanks to the use of expert terminology, Balzac's discourse appears more professional; it offers evidence of our guide's competence, which makes her specific claims more credible and convincing. It is a rather rare strategy in Balzac, partly because music, though eminently present in his prose, is rather seldom discussed there on this level of in-depth detail. The hitherto-presented elements of Balzac's strategy for the representation of a real musical work (including the visual component enhanced by the music) in literary fiction are best summed up in the above-quoted passage, as well as in Balzac's depiction of the best-known number from Rossini's opera—Moses' prayer *Dal tuo stellato soglio*, which precedes the parting of the Red Sea waters. The narrator points to the messages contained in the music and to additional meanings read into the work by the audience gathered in the Venetian theatre. In her interpretation of Moses' prayer, Massimilla Doni distinctly alludes to the situation in Italy, which makes her nation's reaction

to this fragment of the opera quite exceptional. Even before the curtain rises, she tells a French physician present at the spectacle: “you will see with what religious hope the whole house will listen to the prayer of the rescued Hebrews, with what a thunder of applause it will respond!” (MD 69). The liberation of the Israelites offers hope to Italians, which makes the protagonist exclaim during the prayer, with hope in her voice: “Ay, sing! [...] Sing! You are free!” (MD 97).

These commentaries concerning the music are enhanced by parallels drawn by Balzac between the lives of the opera's protagonists (Osiride and Elcia) and those of characters in his story (Massimilla and Emilio Memmi), as well as the fate of entire nations (Israel's slavery in Egypt and the situation in contemporary Italy). In this way, Rossini's music as an external element—an exo-sign according to Eero Tarasti's terminology (41)—becomes important for the story's characters, and functions not merely as an element of narration, but also as a set of signs proper to the story, belonging to its own world as an endo-sign (41).

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In his texts, Honoré de Balzac attempts an explanation of how music influences a person's intellectual and emotional life. This issue is taken up by the eponymous character of Massimilla, who analyses Rossini's opera *Mosè in Egitto* (1818). In her interpretation, she makes use of many signs present in European cultural codes and draws on aesthetic theories of music. She thus refers to the symbolism of instruments, musical genres, to such *topoi* as prayer, escape, storm, love, death, miracles, divinity and the divine, as well as rhetorical figures. In *La Duchesse de Langeais*, on the other hand, these elements are not elaborated upon in such detail (some of them are only signalled), since the author focuses here on the mechanism of associations arising between music, emotions, and memories. He depicts music as a language of the soul. By emphasising its communicative function, he emulates a Romantic trend, even though he himself is (usually) not viewed as a Romantic.

Balzac's literary interpretation of music exemplifies the ways in which musical signification functioned in nineteenth-century French culture and was incorporated into descriptions of human internal life, as an element important for an understanding of the human world. Balzac thus introduces the reader not only to specific pieces of music, but to the internal lives and emotions of his characters in relation to that music. The writer develops original artistic

means which enhance the emotional message of the text, vividly depict its audiosphere, and stimulate the reader to become acquainted with systems of signification—existing ones, as well as those which the story is about to generate.

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BALZAC'S VIEWS ON MEANING OF MUSIC AND IN MUSIC

Summary

This paper aims to demonstrate how music and its signification have been interpreted in literary works. Two texts by Balzac will be used as examples. They interpret meaning in music and present the mechanisms by which individual significance becomes attached to musical works. In the novel *La Duchesse de Langeais*, the author carefully reconstructs the process of connections arising between music, emotions, and memories, which turns a musical work into a memory sign in the minds and lives of individuals. In the short story *Massimilla Doni* Balzac analyses the score of Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto* (1818)—elements such as instrument and musical key symbolism as well as the music's impact on listeners. Both literary works present music as an aspect of human communication, consisting of signs, symbols, and codes that support verbal senses or operate beyond the limits of what words can convey.

Keywords: musical signification; word-and-music studies; music in literature; French romanticism; 19th-century French culture