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In 1982 Steven Paul Scher identified three general categories to help us understand the rich connections between music and literature.¹ “Music in literature,” which included the literary “imitation . . . of the acoustic quality of music,” adaptations of “larger musical structures and patterns and the application of certain musical techniques and devices” in literary works, and “literary presentation . . . of existing or fictitious musical compositions,”² has been expanded in recent years to encompass a whole manner of ways in which the implications of how music is represented in literature might be understood; discussions of gender, genre, structure, the nature of creativity, the cultural significance of musical instruments, aesthetics of criticism, and authorial proclivities have all contributed to a rich debate,³ representative of the “high-quality synergetic interactions” that interdisciplinary studies offer.⁴ Scher’s two remaining categories, however, were music-centered: “music and literature” (primarily the setting of text), and “literature in music” – broadly related to concepts of musical narrative, where literary paratexts might help us to understand the nature and sequence of specific musical events. Growing numbers of studies in these areas continue to assert interdisciplinary promise, particularly where the nature of the literary text in question suggests a distinctive analytical or interpretative methodology.⁵ Given the significant potential of this approach, this special issue, an outgrowth of the 2014 conferences “Words About Music” at Monash University, and “Music Literature, Historiography and Aesthetics” at the Institute of Musical Research in London (convened by the Universities of Monash and Leeds), explores further possibilities of how our understanding of specific musical works might be productively revised or enhanced by viewing them through the lens of literary models, works, or allusions.

Building on Lawrence Kramer’s suggestion that “a song . . . is a reading, in the critical as well as the performative sense of the term,”⁶ we might explore how all types of
musical representations of literature might be seen more overtly as critical interpretations of their texts. Susan Youens has interpreted Schubert’s “Der Einsame” as a “pointed critique” of Karl Lappe’s poem, for example, part of a “partial détente” that typically represents the composer-poet relationship – “born from the need to say ‘No’ to something in the poet’s proposition and from the challenge of creating multiple levels of musical commentary on the text.” However, this can be developed further, engaging where pertinent with literary debates as part of a text’s reception history, and in particular, considering how selected literary criticism of a writer and their works (not just the specific texts themselves) might be appropriated in searching for a suitable hermeneutic approach to any musical refiguring. Not only can this help to reassess “problematic” or relatively marginalized musical works as well as offering new insights into familiar repertoire, but it can be applied to various manifestations of the music-text relationship. In terms of text setting, for example, competing aesthetics of the ballad have been used to highlight the musical uncanny in Schubert’s “Erlkönig,” and musical readings by Parry and Elgar of Tennyson’s poem “The Lotos-Eaters” have been explored overtly as contributions to the debate over the poem’s didactic or aesthetic status in literary scholarship.

A similar interdisciplinary frame might be used to interrogate text-music relationships in other musical genres, however. Developing James Hepokoski’s familiar concept of the contract between composer and listener in defining program music to encompass what the listener “finds” rather than what they are “given,” for example, the first article in this issue explores how the listener might “grapple” with the “connections” suggested by the juxtaposition of musical text and paratext in Granville Bantock’s 1902 orchestral poem, The Witch of Atlas, based on a poem by Shelley of 1820. Whilst Bantock’s inclusion of an abridged paratext in his published score offers a useful way in to appreciating his orchestral refiguring, literary scholarship in particular can be identified as a site of meaningful
interpretative strategies that might be applied to aspects of the music; these include issues of genre (the specific concept of mythopoesis), the central idea of transformation in the poem, and Shelley’s awareness of the visual perspective. The resultant close reading has implications for both literary scholarship and musicology: not only can Bantock’s reading be seen as a contribution to the poem’s reception and meaning, but the study also confirms Bantock’s significance in the development of program music – as a composer willing to experiment with musical structure to take account of the implications of his poetic models.

The issue of “voice” has been at the center of a wide range of studies in music and literature, whether in terms of tensions between natural and studied music-making of literary characters, broader representation of female vocality (including the voice being silenced or marginalized), structural concerns, or exploration of national cultures; if overviews of contemporary music have adopted the concept of the decomposing voice to explore issues of human and inhuman sonorities, the field of opera studies has encouraged the placing of voice at the heart of concepts of narrativity, aesthetics, and cultural, sexual and performing identities. It is this potential of voice in an operatic context that is reinforced by Jason D’Aoust’s article. After a brief discussion of Massenet’s opera Werther in relation to other operatic versions of Goethe’s novel The Sorrows of Young Werther, D’Aoust focuses on how the idea of voice might be explored when translated from one genre to another – in this case, how a “semantic space of vocality” in Macpherson’s The Poems of Ossian is refigured in Werther’s “Lied d’Ossian” scene in act 3. Moving from the “archaic ballads” of Macpherson’s original and the epistolary context within which the Ossian reference appears in Goethe’s novel, D’Aoust highlights how in Massenet’s opera the Ossianic voice – whilst framed in a separate aria distinct from the through-composed writing elsewhere in the work – is hidden through a “seamless illusion of undifferentiated singing and speech.” This
revocalization has implications for how we might reconsider the real and the symbolic in operatic staging.

If vocal identity is a central issue in Massenet’s Werther, then Anthony Burgess’s song-cycle, The Brides of Enderby (1977) raises wider questions of authorial identity. Whilst Burgess is a relatively familiar figure in general studies of intermediality (given the musical references in his poetry, novels, and autobiographical essays, and his substantial output as a composer), this particular composition offers the opportunity to explore how Burgess interprets poetry penned by his own literary persona F. X. Enderby. In unravelling the complexities of these relationships, and exploring their implications, Carly Rowley focuses upon the importance of the Muse figure within the cycle, whose contrasting personas mirror the authorial ambiguity of the entire set. By reverting to a form of the poetic text associated with a younger version of Burgess’s poetic self rather than the fictitious Enderby, the penultimate song in The Brides of Enderby, “She was all brittle crystal,” as Rowley suggests, represents a more personal fusion of words and music, symptomatic of this multi-layered composition.

As Maria Rovisco and Magdalena Nowicka have noted, “cosmopolitanism emerges more and more as a key analytical tool to study a variety of outlooks, processes and ethico-political practices that are observable in a variety of social and political contexts”; this is underlined by the recent plethora of musical studies that have applied this ideology. The final article by Ryan Weber moves away from the close analysis of a specific work to explore how the literary models of Arne Garborg and Hamlin Garland might be used to reformulate our understanding of the cosmopolitanism of Grieg and MacDowell, helping to frame their cultural identities. Not only does this have implications for the composers’ respective reception, but these parallel readings (encompassing Garborg’s Weary Men, Grieg’s “Eros,” Garland’s Crumbling Idols, and MacDowell’s Eight Songs Op.47) identify a cultural network
of composers and writers who “manufactured a style of inbetweenness” that transcended “boundaries of time, geography and discipline.”

Asserting the potential of literary criticism as an analytical tool; understanding the musical refiguring of vocality; exploring the implications of authorial identity in a composer’s setting of his own literary texts; interrogating a transatlantic discourse of cosmopolitanism through music-literature parallels – these distinctive approaches to reading music through literature, applied to a range of musical genres (symphonic poem, opera, song cycle, solo song and orchestral suite) are suggestive of the wide scope and rich potential of such interdisciplinary work. Future contributions to this fascinating field of study can only be encouraged.
I should like to thank Paul Watt and Sarah Collins for their extremely generous help in assisting with the preparatory stages of this special issue.


10 Hepokoski, “Fiery-Pulsed Libertine or Domestic Hero?”, 136.

11 See, for example, Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture, ed. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994);


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