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Reshaping the Ballad: William Wallace's Musical Re-figuring of Rossetti's 'Sister Helen'

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ABSTRACT

Of the various musical re-figurings of the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the relatively unfamiliar symphonic poem *Sister Helen* (1897) by the Scottish composer William Francis Stuart Wallace (1860–1940), based on Rossetti's poem of the same name, is one of the most fascinating. Connections between Rossetti and Wallace are unsurprising, given that both men demonstrated a wide-ranging interest and expertise in the creative arts in general. However, Wallace's views on the benefits of a 'subjective' approach to representing a text musically, in preference to an 'objective' event-driven narrative might suggest that the musical re-figuring of a ballad was an unlikely project for him. After tracing the background of both poem and orchestral work, this article offers an in-depth analysis of Wallace's music, confirming that although a central rotational structure offered an effective representation of the driving narrative of Rossetti's text, Wallace rebalanced his musical re-figuring by incorporating two introspective episodes that offered the more subjective vision that Wallace preferred. The specifics of Wallace's composition are then further contextualized via Wallace's 1899 lecture to the Musical Association, 'The Scope of Programme Music' (where he expanded upon the subjective/objective divide), as well as his other five symphonic poems that explored a range of paratexts. In addition to reassessing Wallace's status as a composer, and identifying his re-figuring as a significant addition to the reception history of Rossetti's poem, this study allows us to consider the nature of the ballad as a genre, and its suitability for musical representation more generally.

Of the six symphonic poems completed by the Scottish composer William Francis Stuart Wallace (1860–1940), his third, *Sister Helen* (1897), based on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's ballad of the same name, is one of the most striking. On the surface, Wallace's choice of Rossetti for his re-figuring seems apt, given that both men shared a proficiency in a range of literary and artistic pursuits. However, Rossetti's poem offered a different challenge from the paratexts invoked in Wallace's two earlier symphonic poems – *The Passing of Beatrice* (1892), inspired by canto 31 of 'Paradiso' from Dante's *Divina Commedia* but 'based upon an episode which Dante does not describe',[1] and *Amboss oder Hammer* (1896), a representation of Goethe's second *Kophtisches Lied*; specifically, the ballad form of *Sister Helen* focused on a driven narrative rather than an interiority – a distinction which had implications for any musical representation. After a brief discussion of the background to, and reception history of, Rossetti's poem, this article will explore Wallace's musical re-figuring in detail, demonstrating how the composer rebalanced aspects of the poetic text. Whilst this composition helps us to understand Wallace's aesthetics of programme music – contextualized below via his 1899 lecture to the Musical Association, entitled 'The Scope of Programme Music' – it can also be seen as a

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[1]   William Wallace, *The Passing of Beatrice*, orchestral score (London: Schott & Co., 1911), p. 2.

distinctive reading of Rossetti's text that represents a fascinating contribution to the poem's reception.

1. POETIC BACKGROUND AND RECEPTION

Rossetti's ballad 'Sister Helen' has a complex history. Following an early draft of the poem in late 1851 or 1852, the ballad was first published in 30 stanzas under the pseudonym 'H.H.H.' in *The Dusseldorf Artists' Album* (1854), edited by a close friend of Rossetti and his later wife Elizabeth Siddal, Mrs Mary Howitt.[2] It subsequently went through several revisions: an introductory stanza (beginning '"Why did you melt your waxen man"') was added at the behest of William Bell Scott to make 'the impression of what was going on . . . perfectly distinct', together with three further stanzas (including one beginning '"But he calls for ever on your name"' – 'valuable for elucidation') as preparation for the 1870 *Poems*.[3] There was also a protracted discussion concerning the choice of the names Keith and Eastholm/Westholm, and the possibility of restoring the 'French motto' ('La Souricière aux Sorcières, 1580.') at the beginning of the poem.[4] Rossetti made further alterations in the second and fifth editions of his 1870 volume, and a final series of revisions in 1879 and 1880 was incorporated into the 1881 edition of the *Poems* – principally the addition of a stanza beginning '"Three days ago on his marriage morn"', along with six new stanzas describing the 'Lady of Ewern'.[5] The ballad is structured as a series of questions posed to the titular character by her younger brother, followed by her responses. Sister Helen has been abandoned by her former lover, Keith of Ewern, and in revenge she melts his waxen image over a flame, causing him 'mortal pain'. Three of Keith's kinsmen ride over to try and persuade her to abandon her witchcraft to allow his soul to pass, but to no avail – as the waxen figure is consumed by fire, Keith's soul is lost. The varied refrain at the end of each verse ('*O Mother, Mary Mother, / Her hour at last, between Hell and Heaven?*', '*O Mother, Mary Mother, / Lost, lost, all lost, between Hell and Heaven!*', etc.) – whose 'growing force' was highlighted by William Morris – adds to the drama by punctuating the progress of the disturbing tale.[6] Although Rossetti was aware of the poem's potential impact as 'a ghastly ballad',[7] he noted how important the revisions for the 1881 edition were in confirming how 'the witch began her spell on the wedding-morning of her false lover' – highlighting the 'excess of provocation (in spite of the height of her spite)' that 'humanizes her somewhat'.[8] In other words these constituted a suite of revisions that strengthened Helen's motivation for

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2   'Sister Helen', in *The Dusseldorf Artists' Album*, ed. and trans. by Mary Howitt (London: Trübner & Co., 1854), pp. 9–11. According to William Sharp, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study* (London: Macmillan, 1882), p. 20, Rossetti explained these initials as a reference to the HB graphite grading scale of pencils 'because people used to say my style was hard'.

3   See letters to William Michael Rossetti, 26 August, 2 September and 14 September 1869, in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by William E. Fredeman, 10 vols (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002–2010), IV, 248, 263, 276, and Robert N. Keane, 'D. G. Rossetti's "Poems, 1870": A Study in Craftsmanship', *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 33 (1972), 193–209 (p. 200).

4   'The witch's trap'. See Rossetti's letters to Algernon Swinburne, 14 and 26 February and 18 March 1870, to William Allingham, 21 and 28 February and *c*. 15 March 1870, and a letter to John Fergus Mclennan of *c*. 1 March 1870, in *Correspondence*, ed. Fredeman, IV, 368, 373–74, 384, 386, 388, 392 and 401.

5   Robert N. Keane's useful overview of the revisions to the poem in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Poet as Craftsman* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 47–53, includes (pp. 50–51) a discussion of changes made to the second refrain line in the late 1860s, designed 'to make the refrain suggestive without being judgemental . . . allow[ing] the reader to become the evaluator [of] Helen's motives and actions'.

6   William Morris, 'Poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *The Academy*, 8 (May 1870), 199–200 (p. 200).

7   Letter from Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, 27 October 1853, in *Correspondence*, ed. Fredeman, I, 289.

8   Letter from Rossetti to Jane Morris, *c*. 18 March 1880, in *Correspondence*, ed. Fredeman, IX, 99.

revenge by establishing her more strongly as 'a victim of thwarted love whose actions are governed by her pain and distress'.[9]

As with several of Rossetti's other poetic works, an understanding of 'Sister Helen' is complicated further by a related visual representation – a familiar example of Rossetti's 'double works' – in this case an unfinished drawing of *c.* 1870.[10] Margaretta Frederick suggests that the drawing had a significant role in the process of modifying the central character 'from sorceress to scorned woman', as Rossetti was 'physically engaging in this humanizing process'.[11] The fact that Lizzie Siddal was also moved to illustrate 'the dramatic moment when the wax melts, the betrayer dies, and Helen is damned' in *c.* 1860 – the year that she married Rossetti – further suggests the narrative's potential for re-figuring in the other arts.[12]

Apart from Robert Buchanan's familiar attack on what he termed 'The Fleshly School of Poetry', suggesting that the 'grotesque mediaevalism' of 'Sister Helen' was 'essentially imitative', and characterizing 'the device of the burthen, of which the fleshly persons are very fond for its own sake, quite apart from its relevancy' as an 'affectation',[13] the poem's early reception was mainly positive. Critics singled out the poem's 'fierce and relentless irony', its 'weird refrain, the echo repeated from earth and heaven, as it were, of consuming hate and hopeless despair', the 'vividness' of each scene, the 'happy employment of an innocent little boy as interested onlooker' and the 'eerie desolation' of the denouement.[14] As an 'arduous sensual tragedy', Arthur Symons designated the poem 'in a sense', Rossetti's 'highest creation';[15] for Swinburne, the combination of the poem's drive and focus made it 'out of sight or all thought of comparison the greatest ballad in modern English':

> There can be no pause in a ballad, and no excess; nothing that flags, nothing that overflows; there must be no waste of a word or a minute in the course of its rapid and fiery motion. Even in our affluent ballad literature there is no more triumphant sample of the

9   Margaretta S. Frederick, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Drawing for "Sister Helen": The Visual Metamorphosis of a Poem', *Master Drawings*, 44 (2006), 77–86 (p. 78).

10   See <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s220.rap.html> [accessed 28 January 2021]. For a useful overview of these 'double works' see <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/racs/doubleworks.rac.html> [accessed 28 January 2021]. See also: Gail Lynn Goldberg, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Revising Hand": His Illustrations for Christina Rossetti's Poems', *Victorian Poetry*, 20 (1982), 145–59, and 'Rossetti's Sonnet on "A Virgin and Child by Hans Memmeling": Considering a Counterpart', *Victorian Poetry*, 24 (1986), 229–43; Catherine Golden, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Two-Sided Art', *Victorian Poetry*, 26 (1988), 395–402; J. Hillis Miller, 'The Mirror's Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art', *Victorian Poetry*, 29 (1991), 333–49; Federica Mazzara, 'Rossetti's Letters: Intimate Desires and "Sister Arts"', *Interface*, 28 (2008), 115–24; and Brian Donnelly, 'Sonnet – Image – Intertext: Reading Rossetti's *The Girlhood* and *Found*', *Victorian Poetry*, 48 (2010), 475–88, who suggests (p. 475) that 'Rossetti's engagement of both visual and verbal images to create meaning' can produce 'another kind of text, an intertext that is unique to the painter-poet'.

11   Frederick, 'Rossetti's Drawing', pp. 80, 83.

12   Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 122. The illustration can be found at <http://lizziesiddal.com/portal/sister-helen/> [accessed 28 January 2021].

13   Thomas Maitland [Robert Buchanan], 'The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti', *The Contemporary Review*, 18 (August 1871), 334–50 (pp. 342, 348); Buchanan even included his own alternative refrain, '(*O Mr. Dante Rossetti, / What stuff is this about Heaven and Hell?*)'. For a discussion of this and Henry Duff Traill's 1882 parody of the poem, see Carolyn Williams, 'Parodies of the Pre-Raphaelite Ballad Refrain', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 71 (2016), 227–55. For other less positive views of 'Sister Helen', see J. M. Gray's review of William Sharp's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1882) in *The Academy*, 23 (6 January 1883), p. 1, which noted, 'we may doubt as to the supremacy claimed at p. 357 for "Sister Helen" and "The King's Tragedy"'.

14   'Shirley', 'The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Fraser's Magazine*, 1 (May 1870), 609–22 (p. 620); Thomas Bayne, 'Our Modern Poets. No. XI.—Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *The St. James's Magazine*, 32 (October 1877), 415–30 (p. 415).

15   Arthur Symons, 'A Note on Rossetti', *The North American Review*, 204.728 (July 1916), 128–34 (p. 131).

greatness that might be won by a poem on these conditions than we find in the ballad of 'Sister Helen.' The tragic music of its measure, the swift yet solemn harmonies of dialogue and burden, hold in extract the very heart of a tragedy, the burning essence distilled from "Hate born of Love, and blind as he."[16]

This success was in part due to the poem's generic identity. Although, as Letitia Henville has noted, the nineteenth-century ballad represented a 'loose category', Rossetti's text included many of the characteristics associated with the genre, being a narrative 'composed of lines of three or four stresses', focusing on 'action rather than interiority', containing 'a repeated or an incremental refrain', adopting 'simple language' and incorporating a 'speaker [who] is a detached observer'.[17]

Elsewhere 'Sister Helen' has been seen as a manifestation of Rossetti's interest in the occult, or grouped with other Rossetti poems incorporating 'representations of feminine corruption', such as 'Jenny', 'Eden Bower', and 'The Card-Dealer'.[18] Commentators have also been struck by its air of detachment; Stephen Spector, for example, has highlighted the increasing marginalization of the central character:

> as the intensity of love increases, the greater becomes the isolation of the self . . . Rossetti explores the self-absorbed intensity of love which has been raised to such a high degree of intensity that it has turned to hate . . . The speakers treat their auditors as innocent children who cannot possibly understand the emotions described . . . the heroine is completely inaccessible to the brothers, father and wife of Keith of Ewern; even her own brother can only listen uncomprehendingly.[19]

Maggie Berg has suggested that the 'persistent characteristic' of 'ambivalence' in Ruskinian definitions of the grotesque can be applied to Rossetti's art and poetry; as Ruskin noted in *The Stones of Venice*:

> if the objects of horror in which the terrible grotesque finds its materials were contemplated in their true light, and with the entire energy of the soul, they would cease to be grotesque, and become altogether sublime; and that therefore it is some shortening of the power, or the will, of contemplation, and some consequent distortion of the terrible image in which the grotesqueness consists.[20]

16   Swinburne, 'The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Fortnightly Review*, 7.41 (May 1870), 551–79 (p. 566). See also T. H. Hall Caine, 'The Poetry of Dante Rossetti', *The New Monthly Magazine*, 116 (July 1879), 800–12 (p. 807), who described 'Sister Helen', as 'the one great ballad of the century'.

17   Letitia Henville, 'Introduction', Special Issue: Ballads, *Victorian Poetry*, 54 (2016), 411–20 (pp. 411, 413).

18   See Clyde K. Hyder, 'Rossetti's *Rose Mary*: A Study in the Occult', *Victorian Poetry*, 1 (1963), 197–207, and Sharon Smulders, 'A Breach of Faith: D. G. Rossetti's "Ave," Art-Catholicism, and Poems, 1870', *Victorian Poetry*, 30 (1992), 63–74.

19   Stephen J. Spector, 'Love, Unity, and Desire in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *ELH*, 38 (1971), 432–58 (pp. 436–37).

20   Maggie Berg, 'John Ruskin's Definition of D. G. Rossetti's Art', *Victorian Poetry*, 20 (1982), 103–12 (p. 105); *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903–1912), XI, 178.

The grotesque in 'Sister Helen', argues Berg, therefore lies not only in its focus on 'evil and . . . destructive passion', but also in its 'ambiguous attitude to sin'; she highlights the alienating refrain (preventing the reader 'from entering into the full implications of the action, so that it remains a spectacle'), and the particular function of 'Mary Mother' – who, 'by mediating between Hell and Heaven . . . parallels the ambivalence of Sister Helen's sin, which is demonic intent issuing from absolute faith'.[21] However, some earlier literary critics preferred to focus on one aspect of the text that contrasted with its surface ghastliness: Helen's former humanity, albeit repressed, but for some still identifiable. As Janet Harper in the *Westminster Review* noted:

> In showing us a disappointed woman's whole loving being transfused into what we might call witch-like wickedness, he [Rossetti] has had the art to leave with us an idea of deeply-concealed feeling and great self-repression in her cold laconic replies, and in one line, at least, a strong proof of an intensity of still-surviving humanity – that where the little brother has said the retreating figures look sad by the hill, and she, knowing she has lost both her own soul and her lover's, says, 'But he and I are sadder still'.[22]

Similarly, for Maxwell Gray in the *New Review*, despite Sister Helen being 'the most tragic and terrific female character ever drawn' (making Lady Macbeth 'mild' in comparison), her 'lovable and moving' qualities and the 'native sweetness on which her tragic fierceness is based' made her more terrible.[23] As we will see, it was this tension between Sister Helen's potential humanity and her terrible revenge that Wallace placed at the heart of his musical re-figuring of Rossetti's poem, rebalancing the nature of the central character.

2. WALLACE'S *SISTER HELEN*: BACKGROUND

Although there is no evidence that Wallace was familiar with Rossetti's Sister Helen drawing, he would certainly have appreciated Rossetti's ability to explore different creative pursuits, given his own wide-ranging artistic abilities. Whilst the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham suggested that Wallace's 'easy familiarity with nearly every known art and craft' made him 'one of the most versatile characters of the day', the music critic Ernest Newman felt that this had a detrimental effect upon his compositional development. Wallace's 'writing music and poetry, drama, fiction, and criticism, painting, drawing in black and white, working in metal, engraving on wood, bookbinding, [and] studying Japanese prints like a specialist', Newman argued, had prevented him 'from giving to any one of them the proper amount of time and labour'.[24] Newman even compared Wallace overtly to Rossetti, questioning whether the latter 'would not have been a better poet or a better painter if he had applied himself to poetry or to painting alone'.[25]

Wallace's interdisciplinary awareness led to some interesting personal relationships, however. As Valerie Carson has noted,[26] Wallace was a member of 'The Anonymous Academicians',

21 Berg, 'Ruskin's Definition', p. 111.

22 Janet Harper, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Artist and Poet', *Westminster Review*, 146.1 (July 1896), 312–21 (p. 318).

23 Maxwell Gray, 'The Women of Lyric Love', *New Review*, 15.91 (December 1896), 708–23 (p. 719).

24 Sir Thomas Beecham, *A Mingled Chime: Leaves from an Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1949), p. 75; Ernest Newman, 'The New School of British Music. V. William Wallace', *Speaker*, 5.122 (1 February 1902), 499–501 (pp. 499, 500). Wallace's artwork included the documenting of eye conditions when a medical student at Glasgow University and during the First World War, the painting *Waterloo Drum* (exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1928), and a range of designs for the covers of his musical compositions and prose works.

25 Newman, 'The New School', p. 499.

26 Valerie Carson, '"A Protean Spirit": William Wallace: artist, composer and catalyst' (Masters thesis, University of Durham, 1999), pp. 13–14.

a group of creative artists made up of the sculptor John Tweed (1869–1933), the mezzotintist Norman Hirst (1862–1956), the architect Detmar Jellings Blow (1867–1939) – one of whose mentors was William Holman Hunt, co-founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of which Rossetti was a member – and another artist simply referred to as 'Douglas'.[27] These five members ('plenty for any Academy') dined 'once a fortnight in a cheap restaurant', but there were monthly meetings with invited guests such as the conductor August Manns (1825–1907), the poet, critic and editor W. E. Henley (1849–1903), the sculptor Alfred Gilbert (1854–1934), and the painter Theodore Roussel (1847–1926), who were all presented with 'a medal (in plaster)'.[28] As philosophies of art formed the basis of discussion, Wallace was clear as to the criteria for choosing these guests: 'gentlemen who have no ideas beyond their own subject' were apparently 'ineligible'. However, he foresaw potential problems – 'it w^d. be unfortunate if they didn't turn up, or mistook the compliment', and as Tweed was known to 'get on with very few men', Wallace's strategy was to 'get the length of asking Roussel to dine & then we'll stick!'.[29] The composer's social circle in the 1890s also included some of the painters known as the Glasgow Boys, such as James Guthrie (1859–1930) and John Lavery (1856–1941),[30] and Wallace's future wife, Ottilie McLaren (1875–1947), was a talented sculptor who studied with Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) from 1899 to 1901 in Paris.[31] Like Rossetti, therefore, Wallace thrived within a lively set of overlapping interdisciplinary coteries.

Although Wallace may not have been entirely in sympathy with all aspects of what the Pre-Raphaelites represented,[32] he shared Rossetti's interest in connections between the arts. Stating that he did not believe 'in the ultimate happiness of the man who says one art is enough for a lifetime', Wallace suggested that 'every one can translate into his own tongue the work of others, absorb it till pictures appear as symphonies, and symphonies as sculpture'. 'The most complex piece of music that was ever written is clear to anyone who works at art in any shape or form', he wrote, and that 'the artist – the true artist – is at home in all arts alike'.[33] In an article on 'Orchestral Colour' (which included a quotation from another member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, John Millais), Wallace also suggested that there was an 'analogy

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27   As Carson notes, '"A Protean Spirit"', p. 13 n. 17, 'Douglas' could refer to Edwin James Douglas (1848–1914), John Douglas (1867–1936), Sholto Johnstone Douglas (1871–1958) or James Douglas (1858–1911). For more details of Tweed see Lendal Tweed, *John Tweed: Sculptor* (London: Lovat Dickson, 1936) and Nicola Capon, *John Tweed: Sculpting the Empire* (Reading: Spire Books, 2013).

28   Letter from Wallace to his fiancé Ottilie McLaren, 14 January 1898, *GB-En* (National Library of Scotland) MS 21514, fol.13^r.

29   Wallace to Ottilie McLaren, 14 January 1898, fol.13^r–v.

30   See Carson, '"A Protean Spirit"', pp. 16–17. For studies of the Glasgow Boys, see: Roger Billcliffe, *The Glasgow Boys: the Glasgow School of Painting, 1875–1895* (London: Murray, 1985); Vivien Hamilton, *Joseph Crawhall, 1861–1913: One of the Glasgow Boys* (London: Murray, 1990); and *Pioneering Painters: the Glasgow Boys*, ed. by Susan Pacitti and Fiona MacLeod (Glasgow: Glasgow Museums Publishing, 2010).

31   John Tweed also studied in Paris in 1893 and developed a friendship with Rodin; see Capon, *John Tweed*, pp. 22–33.

32   In *The Threshold of Music: An Inquiry into the Development of Musical Sense* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1908), p. 102, Wallace referred to 'the Pre-Raphaelites and their clique' as part of his attack on a school of musical criticism that 'castigated' Monteverdi for 'attempting to suggest to the mind of the hearer what was in the mind of the composer' whilst accepting '*in another art*, the drab sermonising of men who turn their studios into conventicles for the elect'; 'denying to a composer the right to describe in his programme just what he means', these critics '[scanned] with breathless awe the painter's type-written descriptions, issued in horn-book fashion, as if they were the sublimest quotations from Holy Writ'. In *The Musical Faculty, its Origins and Processes* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1914), p. 49n, Wallace also cited the Pre-Raphaelites as a modern example of 'atavism', although this was not necessarily a criticism.

33   Letters from Wallace to Ottilie McLaren of 31 January 1896 (*GB-En* MS 21502, fol. 12^r–v), 29 May 1896 (*GB-En* MS 21504, fols 27^v–28^r), and 26 November 1897 (*GB-En* MS 21513, fol. 47^r).

between modern music and the art of the impressionistic painter'. He highlighted how 'the harmonist works as the impressionist does . . . [concealing] his technique by a broad, massive style, full of atmosphere and light', and asserted the importance of colour and timbre in presenting thematic ideas:

> The musical phrase which expresses the primary idea has its melodic grace enhanced by the quality of the instrument which utters it. Let us imagine some phrase coming forth timidly and softly on the oboe; it is then taken up (perhaps augmented) by all the strings, and finally ends in a climax by being blazed forth by the trombones. It is not every section of melody that can be so treated, but when it admits of being presented in this protean fashion it acquires new shades at each appearance; its character grows, as it were, from infancy to manhood . . . Fertility of orchestral resource may often redeem a lack of form; form, rigid and inflexible, can hardly compensate for colourless orchestration.[34]

As noted above, Wallace was also a poet. Although he set texts by writers such as Matthew Arnold, Blake and Shelley, many of his vocal works incorporated his own verses, ranging from the cycle of *Spanish Songs* (1893) to the vocal scena *The Outlaw* (*c*. 1908). Wallace's decision to re-figure a ballad musically is surprising, however, given his negative remarks on this genre in his 1894 article, 'Song-Impressionism'. Here Wallace highlighted 'suggestive' poems by Shelley and Blake that demanded a 'modesty' in any musical setting, the charm of which would lie in the work's 'semi-obscurity, its vagueness, almost its mysticism'. Defined as 'Impressionism' (developing the theme of his 'Orchestral Colour' article), this would create 'music which leaves much unsaid, which all but speaks its message, leaving the rest for the bearer [sic] to feel'.[35] In distinguishing between this 'subjective' approach and the 'objective' approach of the ballad, Wallace was clear as to the inferiority of the latter:

> The emotion of latter-day songs has . . . a certain banality. It is personal, objective, and has to 'tell a story.' On the other hand, that which is partly subjective, which treats of moods and not of things, is disregarded by reason of its unsuitability for the market. To the former category the modern ballad belongs by reason of its directness. Its words (and here I am dealing more with the text than the music) are characterized by a similarity of mould and form. He who writes them knows his ground, and travels along a well-worn road of sentiment from lack of enterprise to seek for new paths.[36]

He would, however, have been familiar with several British musical re-figurings of ballads in the late nineteenth century, including Edward Elgar's *The Black Knight* of 1893 – a choral setting of Longfellow's translation of Ludwig Uhland's *Der schwarze Ritter* – and Charles Villiers Stanford's immensely successful choral ballad *The Revenge* (1886) based on Tennyson's poem.[37] From a Scottish perspective, there was George Macfarren's *Chevy Chace* overture

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34   William Wallace, 'Orchestral Colour', *Musical Standard*, 44 (8 April 1893), p. 267.
35   Wallace, 'Song-Impressionism', *Musical Standard*, 46 (6 January 1894), 7–9 (pp. 7–8).
36   Wallace, 'Song-Impressionism', p. 7.
37   For discussions of these musical works, the poetry on which they were based, and the contexts surrounding them, see Frederick Burwick, 'Longfellow and German Romanticism', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 7 (1970), 12–42; Edward W. Kravitt, 'The Ballad as Conceived by Germanic Composers of the Late Romantic Period', *Studies in Romanticism*, 12 (1973), 499–515; Byron Adams, 'Elgar and the Persistence of Memory', in *Edward Elgar and His World*, ed. by

(1836), based on a melody associated with a ballad describing the feuding Percy and Douglas families, and Hamish MacCunn's orchestral ballads *The Ship o' the Fiend* (1887) and *The Dowie Dens o' Yarrow* (1888).[38] These models may have inspired Wallace's own choral work *The Massacre of the Macpherson* (1897), based on one of the *Bon Gaultier Ballads* penned by the Scottish poets William Aytoun and Theodore Martin.[39]

Like Rossetti's Sister Helen project, Wallace's composition existed in more than one form. The American actress Elizabeth Robins (1862–1952), best known for her performances of Ibsen's works – and who later became a playwright, novelist and suffragette – had lunched with Edward Burne Jones and the music critic J. A. Fuller Maitland (at Fuller Maitland's home, probably in 1896), where the idea of staging Rossetti's poem with scenery and costumes by Burne Jones and music by the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg was discussed.[40] According to Wallace, Fuller Maitland recommended him instead, leading to a meeting with Robins on 26 January 1897 where it was decided that the refrain should be sung behind the scenes by a mezzo soprano or contralto, although Robins preferred the idea of a boy alto. Wallace described this meeting in a letter to his fiancée, Ottilie McLaren:

> At the outset I sang to her my idea of the refrain, very low & without accompaniment, & she jumped to her feet electrified & the ears were in her eyes. She cried "oh! You are the man for this. You've got the spirit of it all!" . . . my plan is to make the refrain the comment of a <u>nun</u> or a <u>monk</u> – and I shall myself sing the refrain for the first few rehearsals & see how it sounds. It will be very varied & not always the same, and the music will be in some old Gregorian style – as the Lamentations of Jeremiah are sung in convents. Maitland said, when I mentioned this, that Huysman[s] in his last book speaks of the effect as very wonderful, and as I have a friend in Monsignor Rouse at the convent of the Sacré Coeur at Roehampton I shall discuss this part of the music with him sh^d. I be in any difficulties about it.[41]

The instrumentation was to be 'the 5 strings, harp, organ and a chime of 3 bells', with 'quite "formless"' music that would 'drop in when there's no dialogue & die away when the speakers deliver their lines, & be simply an indefinable vague sound coming from the direction of the stage, invisible and very intense'.[42] A later account suggested that the duologue was

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Byron Adams (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 59–96 (pp. 64–66); W. W. Robson, 'Tennyson and Victorian Balladry', in *Tennyson: Seven Essays*, ed. by Philip Collins (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1992), pp. 160–82 (pp. 177–79); J. Timothy Lovelace, *The Artistry and Tradition of Tennyson's Battle Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 79–83; and Paul Rodmell, *Charles Villiers Stanford* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 118–23.

[38] See Alasdair Jamieson, 'The Music of Hamish MacCunn (1868–1916): A Critical Study' (PhD thesis, University of Durham, 2007), pp. 50–67, and Jennifer L. Oates, *Hamish MacCunn (1868–1916): A Musical Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 54–60.

[39] The ballads by Aytoun (1813–1865) and Martin (1816–1909) first appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, before being collected together as *The Book of Ballads: Edited by Bon Gaultier, and Illustrated by Alfred Crowquill* (London: W. S. Orr, 1845).

[40] Angela V. John, *Elizabeth Robin: Staging a Life, 1862–1952* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 70, notes that Robin approached Grieg 'to supply merely a musical prelude' (which 'came to nothing'), and that the Welsh composer Joseph Parry (1841–1903) was also consulted, but he 'thought the plan rather ambitious'.

[41] Letter from Wallace to Ottilie McLaren, 29 January 1897, *GB-En* MS 21508, fols 46–7. In fol. 45^{r–v}, Wallace confirmed that he had met Robins socially several times in the early 1890s, and that she 'still remembered some of [his] out of the way songs'. For Huysmans' description of Gregorian chant in *À Rebours* (1884), see Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 164–66.

[42] Letter from Wallace to Ottilie McLaren, 29 January 1897, fol. 47.

'continuously accompanied by music';[43] however, the performance – planned for May or June 1897 – apparently never took place, so instead Wallace 'set to work and arranged the principal material, with some additions and subtractions' as a symphonic poem later in the same year.[44]

In its new form, Wallace's *Sister Helen* was premiered on 25 February 1899 at the Crystal Palace, with the composer conducting. There were some positive, if rather contradictory, responses in the musical press, highlighting the 'masterly, virile, [and] powerful' music, noting that 'the illustrations' were 'realistic without trace of clap-trap devices; the treatment clever and the style dramatic', or singling out 'the broad plaintive phrase' of the *Andante* section as representing 'an effective contrast to the rest of the music, dramatic in character, and at times weakened by realistic effects'.[45] However, music critics, in contrast to their literary counterparts, were more circumspect about the subject matter of Wallace's work. Conceding that 'no loftiness or nobility of expression or treatment' would be 'compatible' with the 'malignant hatred' that represented the 'keynote of the poem', nonetheless the *Musical Times* felt that its 'absence . . . [prevented] Mr. Wallace's music attaining a high level of artistic value', and wished that 'the composer had elected to be inspired by a damsel of more civilised sentiments'.[46] The *Athenaeum* went further in highlighting what it saw as the relative limitations of programme music (even when provided with an explanatory text in the form of a programme note);[47] it was 'one thing to read the meaning of this or that theme while the work is being performed, and another to perceive at once by help of the recited poem and certain stage action the connexion between tone and word',[48] a sentiment echoed by Dundee's *Evening Telegraph*:

> It is easy to see, by the wholesale employment of representative themes or leading motives, that as an accompaniment to a recitation the new piece would be effective. In abstract music [sic] . . . it is wholly impossible to depict such things as the summons to the "little brother" to "run up into the balcony and play," or to describe in music the "old passionate love" or "the emotion which the flickering flame and the melting of the wax excites in Helen's breast."[49]

There was little further comment on *Sister Helen* in the musical press. Although Edwin Evans and Ernest Newman both provided overviews of Wallace's compositions, Evans was only able to suggest the 'perfect appropriateness' of Wallace's symphonic poems in general and their striking 'aesthetic beauty of material and . . . atmosphere'; Newman was more critical, concluding that Wallace failed to develop as a composer, remaining 'rooted in certain defined habits of expression'.[50] The nature of the subject matter, together with some critics' opposition

43 'Crystal Palace Concerts. Mr. W. Wallace's Symphonic Poem "Sister Helen."', *Musical Times*, 40 (April 1899), p. 246.

44 'Crystal Palace Concerts. Mr. W. Wallace's Symphonic Poem "Sister Helen."'.

45 'Crystal Palace Concerts. Mr. W. Wallace's Symphonic Poem "Sister Helen."'; Crystal Palace Concerts', *Musical Standard*, 11 (4 March 1899), p. 136; 'Music. The Week.', *Athenaeum*, 3723 (4 March 1899), p. 282.

46 'Crystal Palace Concerts. Mr. W. Wallace's Symphonic Poem "Sister Helen."', p. 246.

47 As Roger Scruton notes, there is some debate over the definition of this term: 'Some prefer to attach the term purely to instrumental music with a narrative or descriptive "meaning" (for example, music that purports to depict a scene or a story)', whereas 'others have so broadened its application as to use the term for all music that contains an extra-musical reference, whether to objective events or to subjective feelings'. See 'Programme Music', *Grove Music online*, <oxfordmusiconline.com> [accessed 7 January 2022].

48 'Music. The Week.', *Athenaeum*, 3723 (4 March 1899), p. 282.

49 *Evening Telegraph*, 28 February 1899, p. 3.

50 E[dwin] E[vans], 'Modern British Composers. III. Mr. William Wallace.', *Musical Standard*, 19 (13 June 1903), pp. 370–71 (p. 371); Newman, 'The New School of British Music', p. 500.

to programme music, therefore militated against a detailed appraisal of Wallace's *Sister Helen*. Not only did these writers avoid any meaningful discussion of the work's distinctive musical design, offering little comment upon the music itself, but as the analysis below demonstrates, they also failed to appreciate Wallace's clear attempt to inject a certain 'nobility of expression' in his rebalanced re-figuring of Rossetti's poem.

3. WALLACE'S MUSICAL RE-FIGURING

C. A. Barry's programme note for the premiere of *Sister Helen* suggested that the work's structure could be explained as four main sections: (i) an Introduction (bar 1 to 5:6), representative of a 'statement of themes'; (ii) an 'appropriately Scotch' second section (5:7–15:6); (iii) an *Andante* (15:7–21:4), described as a 'slow movement'; and (iv) 'the working-out of the themes' and the return of selected material, from 21:5 to the end of the work.[51] Wallace's own briefer programme note for a performance at New Brighton on 30 July 1899 retained these broad divisions,[52] suggesting that Barry's note was an informed one. However, in the analysis that follows, I offer an alternative approach that takes greater account of the structural subtleties of Wallace's composition, helping us to understand its individual design more clearly. A simplified structural overview is given in Figure 1, which should be referred to throughout.[53]

1 to 5:6: Introductory Space

Wallace's introductory section outlines many of the thematic ideas of *Sister Helen* (Ex.1);[54] their meaning can be identified by combining Barry's and Wallace's description with Granville Bantock's comments on an early sketch of the work.[55] Confirming his preference for the 'subjective' representation of mood that he highlighted in his article 'Song-Impressionism', Wallace's thematic materials begin with a chromatic idea, 'brooding' (Ex.1(a)). The key of the work, D minor, is only tentatively suggested via the opening first inversion tonic chord – creating a tonal ambiguity suitably representative of the titular character's absorption. This is followed by the dotted idea of 'the hour of her triumph' (Ex.1(b)), the second bar of which contains what Bantock highlighted as a 'sinister phrase' of E, B flat and E in the celli and basses.[56] Both of these musical ideas are transformed later in the introduction: 'brooding' is developed in a *molto appassionato* form (as the highlighting of motif 'x' in Exx.1(a) and 1(c) makes clear) to suggest how Helen 'thinks of her old passionate love', and this leads to a more forceful and expanded version of 'triumph' four bars after figure 4. Bantock was more critical of a subsequent motif, however, 'the old lover's agony', which he felt had 'a marked resemblance to the entrance theme in [Wagner's] Tristan & Isolda (first act) when Tristram

51   See C. A. Barry, 'Symphonic Poem, "Sister Helen", programme note, *Programme of the Seventh Saturday Concert*, Crystal Palace, 25 February 1899, pp. 280–85.

52   Wallace, programme notes for the all-Wallace concert, New Brighton Tower, 30 July 1899, 'New Brighton Tower concert programmes for the season 1899–1900', Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, MS 33/2/1/13.

53   Lower case letters in the table denote minor keys, and upper case, major, with 'seq.' referring to sequential material. *Sister Helen* has been recorded by Martyn Brabbins and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra on Hyperion CDA66848 (released in 1996).

54   All musical examples are taken from the manuscript full score, housed as MS 244 at the Royal Academy of Music, London (*GB-Lam*).

55   See a letter from Bantock to Wallace, 16 September 1897, in *Granville Bantock's Letters to William Wallace and Ernest Newman, 1893–1921: 'our new dawn of modern music'*, ed. by Michael Allis (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017), pp. 65–67.

56   *Granville Bantock's Letters*, pp. 65–66. This tritone figure later forms the basis of the bass line for the riding music at figure 9.

Bar/Figure	Section/Thematic material	Key
1 – 5:6	**Introductory Space** [*Largo*, 4/4] 'brooding'; 'the hour of her triumph'; 'the flickering flame and the melting of the wax'; 'she thinks of her old passionate love'; 'the hour of her triumph'; 'the old lover's agony'	d → g (V)
5:7 – 15:6	**Rotation (Ride) 1: Expository space** [*Vivace*, 3/4, crotchet = 120] dialogic theme; 'ride' ('revenge' allusion); 'the hour of her triumph'; 'revenge'	g seq → d → eb → c →
15:7 – 21:4	**Contextual Interlude 1** 'the old love'	D♭
21:5 – 29:7	**Rotation (Ride) 2: Developmental space** [*con fuoco*, 3/4, crotchet = 144] 'revenge' – 'the flickering flame and the melting of the wax'; 'revenge'/'the hour of her triumph' – 'the flickering flame and the melting of the wax'; 'revenge' – 'the old lover's agony'/'ride' – 'the flickering flame and the melting of the wax'; 'ride' ('the hour of her triumph' & 'revenge' allusions); 'the hour of her triumph'; 'the old lover's agony'/'ride'	seq seq → d → a →
29:8 – 33:5	**Contextual Interlude 2** [*meno allegro*, crotchet = 108] 'she thinks of her old passionate love'; link to Interlude 1	B♭
33:5 – 42:5	**Rotation (Ride) 3: Confirmatory space** [*più stretto*, 3/4, dotted minim = 60] 'revenge' reiterated; 'ride' transposed & extended ('revenge' allusion); 'the hour of her triumph'; 'revenge'; 'the old lover's agony'	seq seq → d →
42:6 – 42:13	**Coda** [*Largo*, 4/4] 'knell'; 'revenge'; 'brooding'	tritone → d

Figure 1: Simplified Structural Overview of Wallace's *Sister Helen*.

[sic] enters Isolda's cabin, & meets her for the first time during the voyage';[57] the contours of Wallace's musical idea in the manuscript score (Ex.1(d)) suggest that this was revised in the light of Bantock's comments. As musical re-figurings of emotional states, therefore, these thematic materials in the introductory space mirror Wallace's apparent preference for the

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57   *Granville Bantock's Letters*, p. 66.

Example 1: *Sister Helen*, introductory thematic materials. (a) bars 1–6, 'brooding' (b) bars 10–11, 'the hour of her triumph'(c) 3:4–3:7, 'she thinks of her own passionate love' (d) 5:1–5:3, 'the old lover's agony' (e) 1:9–2:2, 'the flickering flame and the melting of the wax'.

more 'subjective' approach highlighted in his 'Song-Impressionism' article. However, given the nature of the ballad, Wallace was unable to resist representing one of the key poetic events more objectively: 'the flickering flame and the melting of the wax' (Ex.1(e)), where string *pizzicato* and upper wind textures inject a sense of musical realism (just after the initial iteration of the 'triumph' motif). The fact that this striking musical idea appears three times in

succession (transposed to a lower pitch on each occurrence) is significant, symbolic of the three days over which Helen has been melting her 'waxen man' (ll. 1–2).

Structural Objectivism: The Three Rides

Given the ballad's focus on action, the musical material that makes up the core of Wallace's re-figuring relies primarily upon the 'objective' aspect of Rossetti's poem – its narrative drive. At the heart of the poetic structure is a sense of modified repetition, as Rossetti relates the separate approaches of Keith of Ewern's kinsmen to Sister Helen's balcony to plead for mercy. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the similarity between the stanzas that introduce each of the 'three horseman that ride terribly' is striking. Each stanza confirms the name of the rider (all of whom ride 'fast'), identified by the horse's white mane, plume, or hair, respectively, and reiterates Helen's revelling in her former lover's potential fate – a cumulative effect that heightens

'Oh, it's Keith of Eastholm rides so fast,
    Sister Helen,
For I know the white mane on the blast.'
'The hour has come, has come at last,
    Little brother!'
    (*O Mother, Mary Mother*,
Her hour at last, between Hell and Heaven!)

'Here's Keith of Westholm riding fast,
    Sister Helen,
For I know the white plume on the blast.'
'The hour, the sweet hour I forecast,
    Little brother!'
     (*O Mother, Mary Mother*,
Is the hour sweet, between Hell and Heaven?)

'Oh it's Keith of Keith now that rides fast,
    Sister Helen,
For I know the white hair on the blast.'
'The short short hour will soon be past,
    Little brother!'
    (*O Mother, Mary Mother*,
Will soon be past, between Hell and Heaven!)
        [ll.71-77, 120-26, 162-68]

Figure 2: Modified repetition in Rossetti's three rides.

the poem's tension. Wallace therefore had to find a suitable musical structure to represent this heightened replaying of a poetic event. His solution can be understood as a type of rotational form – a concept that has been explored in the music of composers such as Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Mahler, Wagner, Debussy, Sibelius, Bantock, Gershwin, Webern, Shostakovich and Vaughan Williams.[58] As James Hepokoski has outlined, rotational form begins with the establishment of a 'referential statement' of 'differentiated figures, motives, themes' that make up a sequence of musical materials, designated 'Rotation 1'. This referential statement is then reworked flexibly in subsequent rotations, resulting in a series that can be understood as modified replayings of the first rotation:

> Second (and any subsequent) rotations normally rework all or most of the referential statement's material, which is now elastically treated. Portions may be omitted, merely alluded to, compressed or, contrarily, expanded or even 'stopped' and reworked 'developmentally'. New material may also be added or generated. Each subsequent rotation may be heard as an intensified, meditative reflection on the material of the referential statement.[59]

This 'intensified' reworking of a set of musical materials therefore provided an effective way to represent the succession of kinsmen.

5:7 to 15:6 Rotation/Ride 1

The music that makes up the first rotation is established from seven bars after figure 5, a G minor *Vivace* section in 3/4. The section begins with a lilting, waltz-like theme on the violas and celli, doubled an octave higher by the clarinet (Ex.2(a)), which does not appear again in Wallace's symphonic poem. Its sequential nature (leading to a brief suggestion of F major) underlines its lighter character, and the fact that its 12 bars are immediately repeated, with the theme now an octave higher in the first violins (subsequently mirrored at an even higher octave by the flutes) parallels the dialogic aspect of Rossetti's poem; Barry makes an even more specific suggestion – that the music represents how 'Sister Helen bids her "little brother" run up into the balcony and play'.[60] After the repetition of smaller musical units and a climactic half-diminished seventh chord on E, a two-bar dotted figure in the bass ushers in 37 bars of

58   See, for example: James Hepokoski, *Sibelius: Symphony No. 5* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Warren Darcy, 'Rotational Form, Teleological Genesis, and Fantasy-Projection in the Slow Movement of Mahler's Sixth Symphony', *19th-Century Music*, 25 (2001), 49–74, and '"Die Zeit ist da": Rotational Form and Hexatonic Magic in Act 2, Scene 1 of *Parsifal*', in *A Companion to Wagner's Parsifal*, ed. by William Kinderman and Catherine R. Syer (Woodbridge: Camden House, 2005), pp. 215–44; Andrew Davis and Howard Pollack, 'Rotational Form in the Opening Scene of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 60 (2007), 373–414; Stephen Rogers, *Form, Program, and Metaphor in the Music of Berlioz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Daniel Grimley, 'Landscape and Distance: Vaughan Williams, Modernism, and the Symphonic Pastoral', in *British Music and Modernism, 1895–1960*, ed. by Matthew Riley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 147–74; James Hepokoski, 'Clouds and Circles: Rotational Form in Debussy's "Nuages"', *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, 15 (2010), 1–17; Michael Allis, 'Bantock and Southey: Musical Otherness and Fatalism in *Thalaba the Destroyer*', *Music & Letters*, 95 (2014), 39–69; Charity Lofthouse, 'Rotational Form and Sonata-Type Hybridity in the First Movement of Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony' (PhD thesis, City University of New York, 2014); Seth Monahan, 'Negative Catharsis as Rotational Telos in Mahler's first "Kindertotenlied"', *Intégral*, 28/29 (2014/2015), 13–51; Sebastian Wedler, 'Thus Spoke the Early Modernist: *Zarathustra* and Rotational Form in Webern's String Quartet (1905)', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 12 (2015), 225–51.

59   Hepokoski, *Sibelius: Symphony No. 5*, p. 25.

60   Barry, *Sister Helen* programme note, p. 283.

Example 2: Rotation 1, musical materials (a) dialogic theme, 5:7–6:8 (b) 'ride' music, 9:1–9:8 (c) 'the hour of her triumph' transformed, 12:8–13:1 (d) 'revenge', 14:6–14:9.

the 'ride' music at figure 9 (Ex.2(b)), its incessant three-beat rhythm and dotted reiterations representing the pounding of the 'horse-tread' (l. 58) of Keith of Eastholm. Wallace's annotation on the manuscript score notes that 'the movement should be hurried gradually' until the section's climax, where 'the hour of her triumph' idea is transformed (Ex.2(c)) and extended, incorporating a scotch snap; its D minor tonality is undermined via a sequential outgrowth, leading to an E flat minor descending arpeggio.

The first rotation ends with two iterations of the 'revenge' motif (Ex. 2(d)),[61] whose contours are reminiscent of the opening of the finale of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, 'Pathétique' (Ex.3) – particularly bars 3–4. Although Wallace may not have been fully aware of the fateful associations of Tchaikovsky's music,[62] he would no doubt have appreciated its emotional force and obsessive character, and the musical allusion in *Sister Helen* (whether conscious or otherwise) suitably parallels Timothy Jackson's description of how the 'triumph' of the symphony's third movement is 'brutally undercut' in the finale, being 'closely connected with Tchaikovsky's larger conception of malevolent Fate dramatically intervening in the "endgame" . . . with disastrous results'.[63] The section from 5:7 to 15:6 in Wallace's work is therefore important not only in terms of its function in establishing the materials that are revisited in subsequent rotations, but also in its ordering of events: in the context of Rossetti's poem, the placing of the 'revenge' motif at the end of the first rotation confirms that the first kinsmen's entreaties are in vain.

21:5 to 29:7 Rotation/Ride 2

The second rotation (associated with the ride of Keith of Westholm) increases the momentum by being presented at a heightened *con fuoco* tempo marking of 144 crotchet beats per minute. It represents a more expanded and discursive replaying of Rotation 1, hence its designation in Figure 1 as a developmental space. The initial waltz music of the previous rotation is now not present; this is unproblematic in terms of the concept of rotational form, as the omission of musical material in subsequent rotations is not uncommon.[64] Instead, the

Example 3: Tchaikovsky, Symphony no.6, finale, opening (Moscow: P. Jurgenson, *c.* 1901).

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61   The shape of the 'revenge' motif is alluded to in bars 11:1–3 as part of the riding music.

62   Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony had its English premiere on 28 February 1894 at a Royal Philharmonic Society concert, and was programmed frequently in Britain; 'Current Notes', *The Lute*, 136 (April 1894), p. 308, suggested that 'its general tone is peculiarly significant of the ending of earthly existence'.

63   Timothy Jackson, *Tchaikovsky, Symphony no.6 (Pathétique)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 29. For Jackson's discussion of what the details of the 'fateful' programme of this symphony might represent, see pp. 36–73. Scholars have also traced descending scalic motifs with fateful associations as significant musical ideas in Tchaikovsky's fourth and fifth symphonies, although in the latter, the move from the minor to the major context is symbolic of triumph; see David Brown, *Tchaikovsky: The Crisis Years (1874–1878)* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1982), particularly pp. 163–69, and Joseph C. Kraus, 'Tonal Plan and Narrative Plot in Tchaikovsky's Symphony no.5 in E Minor', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 13 (1991), 21–47.

64   See, for example, rotations in the finale of Mendelssohn's Symphony no.3, 'Scottish', discussed in Benedict Taylor, *Mendelssohn, Time and Memory: The Romantic Conception of Cyclic Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 267–76.

section begins with three mini rotations of a 'revenge'-'the flickering flame and the melting of the wax' progression that become increasingly complex, as Figure 1 suggests. The second of these statements combines 'revenge' with the transformed 'the hour of her triumph', whilst the third is expanded significantly – the 'revenge'-'wax' frame now encompasses references to 'the old lover's agony' and some of the riding music. After these variants, the riding music then begins a 57-bar section almost exactly as it did in the previous rotation, although there are some differences: the lower textures incorporate some melodic writing, and there is a brief allusion to 'the hour of her triumph' and 'revenge' motifs. Although the climactic 'the hour of her triumph' idea (transformed) is present at 27:5, this time it is short-lived, as it is undermined after a scalic descent by sequential references to 'the old lover's agony' (combined with vestiges of the riding rhythm), and another manifestation of the scalic descent leads to a slowing of the horse's hooves. This rotation therefore represents a developmental, intensified replaying of the previous rotation, replacing the dialogic theme with a series of 'revenge'-'flame'/'wax' formulations, reworking the riding material, telescoping the 'triumph' climax, and substituting 'the old lover's agony' for the final 'revenge' motif.

33:5 to 42:5 Rotation/Ride 3

Although Wallace may have used the 1881 edition of Rossetti's *Poems* as his source (suggested by Barry's programme notes referring to the line '"Three days and nights he has lain abed"'),[65] there is no reference in the notes – or indeed in the score – to Keith's new wife, the 'Lady of Ewern', ensuring that the titular character remains at the centre of the musical narrative; the final rotation can therefore be understood in relation to the ride of Keith of Ewern's father. Rotational structures can have a linear purpose. As Warren Darcy has suggested, for example, a 'brief motivic gesture or hint planted in an earlier rotation' can be 'ultimately unfurled as the telos, or final structural goal, in the last rotation'.[66] Just as the three horsemen add a cumulative momentum to the poem, so Wallace's final rotation suggests its heightened import in three ways: first, by the repeated iterations of the 'revenge' idea that mark the beginning of the rotation at 33:5, reminding the listener of the inexorable nature of the denouement (Ex.4(a)); second, by the fact that the riding material that follows (now extended to 43 bars) is transposed a minor third lower than its previous incarnations in rotations 1 and 2 (Ex.4(b)), before reverting to its Rotation 2 form two bars before figure 38, confirming the inevitability of fate; third, by extending the climactic version of the transformed 'triumph' in the tonic as a 23-bar paragraph (39:6–41:7), avoiding both the tonal diversions of its manifestation in Rotation 1, and the brevity of its presentation in Rotation 2. With a brief reference to 'revenge' and 'the old lover's agony', and a half diminished seventh chord on E, the success of Helen's scheme seems assured.[

Subjective Interiority: The Contextual Interludes

Had Wallace's *Sister Helen* consisted solely of the three rotations and their increased momentum, one might have sympathy with the *Musical Times* criticism above, that the inclusion of a 'nobility of expression' might have led to a greater sense of 'artistic value'. However, the work includes two clear sections where Wallace was able to incorporate a more expressive approach. As Figure 1 above suggests, these take the form of two contextual interludes that

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65   Barry, *Sister Helen* programme note, p. 281.
66   Darcy, 'Rotational Form', p. 52.

Example 4: Rotation 3. (a) 33:5–34:1, overlapping 'revenge' motif (b) 35:3–35:10, 'ride' music transposed.

Example 5: 17:1–17:8, Interlude 1, 'the old love'.

punctuate the musical structure, both of which (in contrast to the rotational sections) appear in major keys and explore a slower pace. The first of these, a D flat major *Andante* spanning 48 bars (15:7–21:4), which according to Barry 'is elaborated in the form of a "slow movement," and is not further referred to', is the most tonally stable section of the entire work.[67] It opens with a four-bar introduction underpinned by prominent accompanying textures in the harp, leading to a new theme on violas and clarinet (Ex.5) whose chromatic ascending motif (highlighted as 'y') is subsequently developed. Just as Rossetti used the revisional process to offer

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[67]   Barry, *Sister Helen* programme note, p. 284.

a clearer explanation for Sister Helen's actions, thus making her a more human figure, so here Wallace explores how the kinsmen 'remind [Helen] of the old love, and of the tokens of troth which she gave':[68]

> 'He sends a ring and a broken coin,
> Sister Helen,
> And bids you mind the banks of Boyne.'
> [ll. 149–50]

The second *meno allegro* interlude (29:8–33:5) is slightly shorter, at some 38 bars. It begins (Ex.6(a)) as a transformation of Ex.1(c), 'she thinks of her own passionate love', this time without the *appassionato* marking, and in a different metre. However, as the theme develops – and in contrast to Barry's suggestion above – it adopts the chromatic ascending contours from the previous interlude (see Ex.6(b)). Together with its B flat major tonality and relatively slow speed (crotchet = 108) in comparison to the music that surrounds it, this creates a bond between the two interludes, suggesting that Helen's internal thoughts encompass a sense of retrospection, and serving to underline the titular character's humanity. In combination, therefore, these interludes explore the 'interiority' usually absent from the ballad genre – an example of Wallace overriding literary parameters for the sake of musical contrast, allowing him to balance the driving narrative with 'that . . . which treats of moods and not of things'.[69]

Coda: Helen's Revenge Satiated

In the context of the previous sections, the 8-bar denouement is relatively brief, highlighting the stark conclusion to the poem. Wallace's coda provides a suitable representation of the final knell on brass and lower strings, supported by a tam-tam stroke (Ex.7).[70] Although the

Example 6: Interlude 2 (a) 29:8–30:4, 'She thinks of her own passionate love' transformed (b) 31:5–31:7, echo of interlude 1.

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[68]   Wallace, programme note.

[69]   Wallace, 'Song-Impressionism', p. 7.

[70]   A tam-tam stroke is also employed as the final sound of Wallace's final symphonic poem, *Villon* (1909); see Michael Allis, '"A curious intricate work of the modern, but not the ultra-modern, school": William Wallace's *Villon*', in *The Symphonic Poem in Britain, 1850–1950*, ed. by Michael Allis and Paul Watt (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020), pp. 181–218 (p. 212).

Example 7: *Sister Helen*, closing bars: 'knell', with 'revenge' and 'brooding' references.

allusion to the 'revenge' motif that follows reminds us of the inevitability of Keith's demise as part of the unfolding narrative, it is a fragmented reference to Helen's brooding (reinforcing *Sister Helen*'s titular focus) – punctuated by a *fortissimo* D minor chord added on Bantock's advice – that brings the work to a close.[71]

4. *SISTER HELEN* AND WALLACE'S AESTHETICS OF PROGRAMME MUSIC

Only three months after the premiere of Wallace's *Sister Helen*, on 9 May 1899 the composer gave a lecture to the Musical Association entitled 'The Scope of Programme Music', published later in the same year in a slightly revised form.[72] Having defined programme music broadly as 'music which attempts to excite a mental image by means of an auditory impression', Wallace touched on several important issues in his lecture, directing his argument at composers and critics alike. Whilst a composer should 'show distinction in choosing his theme', demonstrating 'evidence of a keen and dignified appreciation of that which is good in literature', critics were censored for attaching spurious 'meanings' to musical works (including one particularly unfortunate biographical interpretation of a move to the minor key in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony), and in the light of this, for their inconsistency in condemning composers who provided extra-musical meanings themselves. Although the 'analytical concert book' had fostered the public's 'desire to know what music means', those attempting to judge programme music were reminded that 'the composition itself is no less important than the theme

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[71] See *Granville Bantock's Letters*, p. 67.
[72] William Wallace, 'The Scope of Programme Music', *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 25th session (1898–1899), 139–56. For a brief discussion of the revisions to the lecture, see *Granville Bantock's Letters*, pp. 8–10.

it is meant to illustrate, and it is only reasonable to ask that some attention be paid to the musical workmanship as well as to the literary aspect of the subject'.[73]

In terms of the relationship between music and a poetical idea, Wallace went on to identify three classes: (i) 'music which attempts to symbolize sounds not primarily produced by musical instruments, as, for example, the wind, thunder, the song of a bird'; (ii) 'music which attempts to symbolize in sound visual impressions, such as the flight of a bird, the movement of water or fire, the tranquillity of nature', and (iii) 'music which attempts to symbolize in sound ideas which are entirely subjective and appeal to the intellect, such as love, revenge, grief – all the emotions, in fact'.[74] The first two 'objective' approaches associated with 'too close an adherence with a literary text' ran the risk of 'almost annul[ling] all emotion by attacking the objective side and by depicting it so faithfully that the mind is unable to get away from the purely pictorial idea', potentially 'preclud[ing] any strict musical structure, unless it so happens that the poetic idea is laid out on lines corresponding to musical form'. However, the third 'subjective' approach was judged to be 'of infinitely greater value musically', echoing Wallace's earlier discussion in 'Song-Impressionism':

> when a composer comes to treat a literary idea which is purely subjective he is less hampered by any sequence of incidents such as a more objective scheme would offer, and he is therefore the more free to exercise his own judgement regarding the symbolism of his theme as well as the treatment of his musical material . . . when the idea is subjective the music can conform to technical requirements, and can be worked out on lines exactly similar to those used in the treatment of absolute music.[75]

By removing 'certain concrete features' and working 'entirely upon imaginative ideas' in this subjective fashion, concluded Wallace, there was then 'little to choose' between programme music and absolute music, 'except that the composer declares or withholds his primary idea, or the emotion which he felt on entering upon, or subsequent to the accomplishment of, his work'.[76] For Wallace, therefore, the representation of concepts or emotional moods was preferable to the re-figuring of detailed poetic events (whether visual or aural) – echoing and developing some of the ideas that he had highlighted briefly in 'Song-Impressionism' in 1894.

In relation to Wallace's first two symphonic poems, the position that he outlined in his 1899 lecture is unsurprising. *The Passing of Beatrice* was 'designed to illustrate the passing, or transition, of Beatrice from earthly to immortal form',[77] whilst *Amboss oder Hammer* represented the general mood of Goethe's *Kophtisches Lied* rather than its poetic details.[78] However, as the analysis above suggests, *Sister Helen* was not purely 'subjective', but an amalgam of the subjective and objective. The question then arises, why did Wallace advocate a subjective

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73 Wallace, 'The Scope of Programme Music', pp. 145, 146.

74 Wallace, 'The Scope of Programme Music', p. 140.

75 Wallace, 'The Scope of Programme Music', pp. 140, 141, 143–45.

76 Wallace, 'The Scope of Programme Music', p. 152.

77 Wallace, *The Passing of Beatrice*, orchestral score, p. 2. Peter John Atkinson, 'Regeneration and Re-enchantment: British music and Wagnerism, 1880–1920' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2017), pp. 186–93, explores parallels between this work and Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* in terms of their combination of earthly and heavenly love.

78 See 'The Week', *Athenaeum*, 3600 (24 October 1896), p. 571. C. A. Barry's programme note for the premiere of *Amboss oder Hammer* in the 41st annual series of Crystal Palace concerts on 17 October 1896, p. 115, suggested that the composer aimed to 'furnish an impression of the whole poem, the gist of which seems to be that a life of restless energy is to be preferred to one of comparative and listless inactivity'.

approach to programme music, when *Sister Helen* offered a more complex vision? As I have suggested briefly elsewhere,[79] this was probably related in part to the disappointing critical reception of *Sister Helen*, where it was the narrative behind the symphonic poem, rather than the music itself, that tended to be highlighted in the musical press. This may have been the catalyst for Wallace's wish, noted above, that 'some attention be paid to the musical work-manship as well as to the literary aspect of the subject'.[80] However, Wallace's 1899 lecture offered an alternative possibility in addition to the binary concept of subjective versus objective re-figuring where, despite incorporating objective details within a work, the impact on the listener was primarily emotional:

> The musical treatment of a poetic subject can effect another result – namely, that it is possible for the translation into sound of an impression whose quality is primarily auditory or visible, so to re-act upon the intellect, during the process of listening, that a purely subjective response is aroused by the objective stimulus . . . music may represent not only a given physical state . . . but also the *emotional result* of such a state.[81]

One might therefore reconsider 'the flickering flame and the melting of the wax' and the rides of the kinsmen in *Sister Helen* as objective representations that instil a subjective response in the listener: a feeling of horror in the former, or urgency and drama in the latter. Significantly, Barry's programme note attempted to suggest that 'the flickering flame and the melting of the wax' idea was 'more properly' representative of 'the emotion which this process excites in Helen's breast' rather than the visual image itself.[82] However, Wallace's lecture went further in suggesting that seemingly objective elements might be downgraded in importance when viewed in terms of the wider musical characteristics of a piece of music:

> A horse gallop may be deftly suggested, but here it is not the actual sound of the hoofs nor the rattle of the harness, but the rapidity of movement and the reiteration of a series of well-marked rhythms that are conveyed by the music. The flickering of fire . . . the "countless laughter of the sea," the calm of night, the ever-changing aspects of nature have been used again and again as themes for musical illustration. None of these effects, however, are of themselves of any great moment. They are devices subsidiary and incidental to any broad scheme upon which music is based . . . Their importance is relative to the treatment and style of their surroundings.[83]

The specific examples offered here – the galloping hooves and the flickering of a fire – represent a clear reference to the seemingly 'objective' details in *Sister Helen*, and can therefore be seen as an attempt to reinterpret their significance; Wallace's lecture can therefore be interpreted as a direct response to his recent experiences in re-figuring Rossetti's poem and the critical reaction to it.

Wallace completed three more symphonic poems in the years following his lecture. In 1901, he made the radical decision deliberately to hide details of any possible paratext in his

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79   Allis, '"A curious intricate work of the modern, but not the ultra-modern, school"', p. 216.
80   Wallace, 'The Scope of Programme Music', p. 146.
81   Wallace, 'The Scope of Programme Music', p. 141.
82   Barry, *Sister Helen* programme note, p. 282.
83   Wallace, 'The Scope of Programme Music', pp. 140–41.

subsequent symphonic poem at its premiere, where it was simply titled 'Symphonic Poem no.4'. This was a practical demonstration of his assertion in the lecture that 'it is a matter for the composer to decide whether he will suggest to his audience what his meaning is'.[84] In his concert programme for the work's premiere on 27 March 1901, Wallace claimed that there was 'no "programme" attached to the music and the listener is free to put his own interpretation upon musical ideas which have no concrete or verbal equivalent in the composer's mind'.[85] Bantock remained unconvinced:

> Wallace has turned traitor . . . His Symphonic Poem (No 4) performed by the London Philharmonic, was a pure piece of cowardice. Wallace could not write abstract music, & yet he puts forward programme-music, for such it is – vide papers – without even the title. Therein he hangs himself.[86]

The press expressed similar reservations. For the *Monthly Musical Record*, 'a definite title or written programme . . . would not, of course, affect the music, qua music, but it would help the hearers to realize the composer's intentions, by surrounding them with, as it were, a fitting atmosphere' – a response that was echoed by the *Musical Standard*.[87] For the *Musical Times*, this was an opportunity to define its position on the relationship between musical text and paratext, as they were given nothing but the 'bare indication, "Symphonic Poem"':

> It may be said that nothing more is wanted; that each hearer is thus left at liberty to surround the music with a romance of his own invention. How far music – which, as in the present instance, certainly seems to be the reflection of some poetical story or romance – requires an explanatory programme depends, we think, upon the quality of the music. If it display strong individuality in its thematic material, and if the developments are skilful, then a programme adds little to its interest; it is little more than a toy to amuse non-musical minds. And the thematic material in Mr. Wallace's work just lacks that power which would give life and interest to the developments, and vividness to the excellent orchestral colouring, so that a story would have helped it along.[88]

Such comments seem to have had little effect on Wallace, as the work was performed once more as 'Symphonic Poem no.4' in Birmingham in March 1904.[89] The first reference to the composition's descriptive title, *Greeting to the New Century*, seems to be in Wallace's programme note for a performance of his final symphonic poem *Villon* on 10 February 1910.[90] Wallace's next essay in the genre, *Sir William Wallace A.D. 1305-1905*, reverted to the idea of the purely 'subjective' representation, with four broad sections evoking 'local atmosphere,

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84   Wallace, 'The Scope of Programme Music', p. 151.
85   Concert programme, Philharmonic Society, 27 March 1901, p. 8, available via *Nineteenth-Century Collections online* [accessed 15 July 2018].
86   Letter from Bantock to Ernest Newman, 2 April 1901, in *Granville Bantock's Letters*, p. 129.
87   'Musical Notes', *Monthly Musical Record*, 31 (May 1901), p. 105; Bombardo, 'The Concert Room', *Musical Standard*, 15 (30 March 1901), pp. 192–93.
88   'The Philharmonic Society', *Musical Times*, 42 (1 May 1901), p. 326.
89   'Music in Birmingham', *Musical Times*, 45 (April 1904), p. 250.
90   Concert programme, Philharmonic Society, 10 February 1910, p. 5, available via *Nineteenth-Century Collections Online* [accessed 5 July 2018]. The identical programme note for a Royal Philharmonic Society performance on 28 January 1918 was signed by Wallace.

energy, lyrical feeling, and manliness and action';[91] it was left to his final symphonic poem *Villon* (1909), to attempt to combine objective details such as the tolling of the Sorbonne bell and the mediaeval poet's descent into drunkenness with a more subjective musing on past loves.[92]

5. CONCLUSION

As Lisa Matson has suggested in her overview of twentieth- and twenty-first-century representations of Rossetti (primarily in fiction, drama and film), 'successive generations have used him as a container for their own desires, anxieties, and issues'.[93] In Wallace's case, the composer's reservations over 'objective', narrative-driven re-figurings of poetic texts, voiced in his articles and his lecture on programme music, led him to rebalance aspects of Rossetti's 'Sister Helen' ballad in its translation into a musical structure by highlighting a more 'subjective' approach. The majority of Wallace's thematic material in *Sister Helen* is representative of emotional states – 'brooding', 'triumph', 'agony', and 'revenge'. Even where Wallace was obliged to portray what on the surface might have been interpreted as 'objective' poetical detail such as 'the flickering flame and the melting of the wax' or the kinsmen's rides, he was able to justify these musical events in his own mind either as features that could produce 'subjective' emotional responses, or as 'subsidiary' or 'incidental' effects that were not 'of any great moment' when viewed in the context of the musical vision as a whole.[94] Wallace's use of rotational form in his quicker sections offers an imaginative solution to the challenge of representing the various rides of Keith of Ewern's kinsmen. However, the connected, tonally stable contextual interludes (which were either ignored or relatively marginalized by music critics) that punctuate these driving, restless passages are also significant. Just as Rossetti's drawing and his poetic revisions served to modify an awareness of the titular character's status (and the motivation for her actions), so Wallace extended this process to incorporate a real sense of interiority that the ballad form lacked. In allowing Sister Helen to muse more widely on her former love, Wallace's musical re-figuring echoed attempts by some early commentators (and the critic of the *Westminster Review* in particular) to focus on Helen's repressed humanity.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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91   Concert programme, Royal Philharmonic Society, 11 February 1915, pp. 5–6, available via *Nineteenth Century Collections Online* [accessed 8 July 2018].

92   See Allis, '"A curious intricate work of the modern, but not the ultra-modern, school"'.

93   Lisa Dallape Matson, *Re-Presentations of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Portrayals in Fiction, Drama, Music, and Film* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2010), p. 2. There is only brief discussion of music, however, concerning the 2001 album *This Is Where We Disappear* by the American band The Green Pajamas; see pp. 188–90, 198–99.

94   Wallace, 'The Scope of Programme Music', pp. 146, 140–41.