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Article:

SINGING AND DIFFERENCE: THE CASE OF GAUTIER AND BERLIOZ RE-EXAMINED

Abstract

Théophile Gautier stands out as a curiously under-researched figure in the context of critical-theoretical approaches to word-music relations in nineteenth-century France. This article seeks to re-examine his importance in the light of his musical collaboration with Hector Berlioz by reworking the Derridean notion of 'iterability', bringing it into contact with Gautier's and Berlioz's *Nuits d'été* songs and offering a fresh approach to the concept of 'writing and difference' which insists on the importance of the performative in song instead of privileging writing. With analyses of *Les Nuits d'été,* the figure of Mignon, the concept of the *tombeau poétique,* and of song-like qualities in poetry, this article tests the hypothesis that singing (in) poetry fundamentally reshapes our understanding of how language functions beyond its inscription on the page, discussing the underlying 'unperformability' inherent to song.

> Bright is the ring of words
>   When the right man rings them,
> Fair the fall of songs
>   When the singer sings them.
> Still they are carolled and said –
>   On wings they are carried –
> After the singer is dead
>   And the maker buried.[1]

In his 2009 *État présent* on 'Word and Music Studies: The Nineteenth Century', David Evans outlined the ways in which scholars researching the relationships between music and literature in nineteenth-century France have 'generated a huge industry'.[2] Recognising that important steps have been made in this burgeoning field, he nonetheless critiques an over-emphasis in the scholarship on major names such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé. For this reason, he ends the *État présent* by calling on researchers to turn their attentions to the influence of less canonical writers:

> The future of the discipline looks promising if French word and music studies now turns away, for a while, from Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the over-researched giants, and expands the pool of authors studied to include Romantic and post-Romantic writers — Villiers, Laforgue, Banville — whose musicopoetics is no less complex, and no less crucial to our field.[3]

Since then, research into musicopoetics of the nineteenth century in France has been developing apace, with publications and conferences expanding the focus of the poetic corpus. For example, Florent Albrecht's 2012 monograph *Ut Musica Poesis: Modèle musical*

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[1] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Bright is the ring of words', *Songs of Travel* (1896).

[2] David Evans, '*État présent*: Word and Music Studies: The Nineteenth Century', *French Studies*, 63 (2009), 443–452 (p. 443).

[3] Evans, '*État présent*', p. 451.

et enjeux poétiques de Baudelaire à Mallarmé (1857-1897) uses the two 'over-researched giants' as framing anchor points for a study which covers Maeterlinck, Rodenbach, Krysinska, Merrill, Banville, Corbière, Nerval, and Rimbaud (to name but a few), and Phyllis Weliver and Katharine Ellis' 2013 *Words and Notes in the Long Nineteenth Century* covers not just France but also English and German poets and composers, placing particular emphasis on how canonical figures (including Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Wagner) 'occupy spaces alongside others, less well known, whose contribution to text-music relationships during the long nineteenth century was just as pervasive'.[4] Expanding the canon, then, has become an important focus in recent years. Another important development in musicopoetic research now sees scholars working to develop fresh theoretical and methodological approaches, making significant advances which build on the existing research corpus garnered from the major post-Romantic figures including Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé.[5] While more work is still needed, researchers are beginning to make significant progress in identifying the complex layers underpinning interart exchanges, and

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[4] Florent Albrecht, *Ut Musica Poesis: Modèle musical et enjeux poétiques de Baudelaire à Mallarmé (1857–1897)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012); Phyllis Weliver and Katharine Ellis (eds), *Words and Notes in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), p. 14.

[5] See for example new approaches to Verlaine and music: Mylène Dubiau-Feuillerac, 'Verlaine/Debussy: la "mise en sons" de "Spleen"' *Dix-Neuf*, 17 (2013) 57–77; Michel Gribenski, 'Du poème à la partition et à la performance: l'exemple de "Clair de lune" et de ses mises en musique au tournant des XIXe et XXe s.' *Dix-Neuf*, 17 (2013) 78–89.

understanding the imperfect relationships between poetry and music, whether in the compositional process, in the reading experience, or in performance.[6]

This dual approach – on the one hand expanding the canon, while on the other strengthening the theoretical and methodological frameworks to include practice-led research – is particularly relevant for deepening our understanding of aesthetic developments in nineteenth-century France, whose major writers and composers grappled with the challenges of artistic production against the backdrop of major political upheavals. It is perhaps not surprising that during the July Monarchy (1830–1848) for example, the musical scene was dominated by the works of non-French composers. Parisian opera houses were largely monopolised by repeat performances of operas by foreign composers, such as Gioachino Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829) or Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), and approximately half of the repertoire performed in concert halls up to 1870 consisted of music by Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Haydn, and Weber.[7] While French composers struggled to get their voices heard on the major public stages, by contrast the national literary scene saw the emergence of new voices and literary styles which responded to the significant changes in French society under both the Bourbon Restoration (1814–1830) and the July Monarchy, notably Honoré de Balzac's shift towards Realism in *La Comédie humaine*. The apparent disjuncture between the prevalence of non-French music on the one hand, and more socially-engaged French literature on the other, might imply a lack of connection between the

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[6] See for example the AHRC-funded CHARM project 2004–2009 <http://www.charm.rhul.ac.uk/index.html> [accessed 29 July 2015], followed by the CMPCP project 2009–2014 <http://www.cmpcp.ac.uk/> [accessed 29 July 2015].

[7] Déirdre Donnellon, 'French Music Since Berlioz: Issues and Debates', in Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter (eds), *French Music Since Berlioz* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1–18 (p. 1).

art forms. In fact, the relationships between words and music were developing in the domain of smaller-scale works such as poetry and song, often in the more private settings of the artistic salons, and informed by aesthetic shifts which detached themselves from the vicissitudes of political life (such as Parnassianism). This article pinpoints a turning point in word-music relations around 1838-1841 by focusing attention on the importance of smaller-scale genres. It thus seeks to re-examine how the relationships between poetry and song develop at this key point in time so as to encompass a new understanding of how language functions beyond its inscription on the page.

In order to do so, this article will address the specific relationship between Hector Berlioz (1803–1869) and Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) and their interactions on the level of poetry and song, taking as its theoretical frame the tensions that arise between text and (sung) performance. It will draw on theories put forward by Derrida in the late 1960s to enable a fresh approach to ways in which Gautier inscribed unperformable language into his poetry. For example, Gautier inscribes an unperformable song into his 1833 poem 'La Chanson de Mignon'.[8] The song is granted only a textual presence on the page yet is also presented in the context of an extended dialogue which makes up the rest of the poem: while both the dialogue and the song suggest performance, they remain on the level of metaphorical performance. This foregrounds, as we shall see, how unperformable language generates a friction between possible performances as song (including Mignon's song, or singing Berlioz's settings of Gautier's poetry). Poems are repeated in different contexts, whether musical or otherwise, yet no performance is ever the same, as Derrida's concept of 'iterability' reminds us. Following Derrida's examination of the tensions between writing and performance in his 1968 lecture on 'La Différance', critics became more aware of the

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[8] Théophile Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort* (Paris: Dessessart, 1838), via Gallica <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k70716q> [accessed 21 November 2014], pp. 213–19.

problems of performative aspects which emerge in the sounding out of a written page. Derrida recognises that writing cannot fully capture the spoken aspects of language since 'il n'y a pas d'écriture purement et rigoureusement phonétique'.[9] In so doing, he opens up the question of how other forms of inscription, such as the musical score, can also contribute to the subtle tensions between the written and the oral which have yet to be fully interrogated.[10] Which elements go unheard in the gap between page and performance? How does a text inscribe what can and cannot be performed? In 'La Différance', Derrida signals a specific example in which the 'différence graphique (le *a* au lieu du *e*), cette différence marquée entre deux notations apparemment vocales, entre deux voyelles, reste purement graphique.'[11] As the phonetic and the graphic aspects of language struggle to fully contain and convey each other, this can result in a gap in understanding. It is an awareness of this gap in understanding enacted by the unperformable elements of inscribed text which, I suggest, enables us to open

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[9] Jacques Derrida, 'La Différance' in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 3–29 (p. 5).

[10] In 'La Différance', Derrida points towards the non-textual performative concepts of laughter and dance, but not song (which includes text). Derrida, 'La Différance', p. 29. His most extensive writings on song are found in his engagement with Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* published in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967). However, this article suggests that the relationship between Derrida's concepts and their applicability to song texts and performances is not to be found in *L'Écriture et la différence*, but in his other essays, lectures, and writings on the problematic aspects of the performativity of language, such as his 1971 lecture 'Signature, Événement, Contexte' in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 365–393, or *Béliers: Le Dialogue ininterrompu: entre deux infinis: le poème* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2003).

[11] Derrida, 'La Différance' p. 4.

up the concept of iterability set out by Derrida to other uses of performative language, and particularly song. This article thus suggests that Derrida's foregrounding of necessarily unperformable elements (such as the inaudible difference between the *a* and the *e* vowels in his coinage of the term *différance* in performance contexts such as a lecture) casts important light on the tensions underpinning the performed quality of poetry and music, and particularly the under-researched area of French song of the 1830s and 1840s. Bringing the Gautier-Berlioz relationship back into centre frame, this article sets out to analyse key conceptual issues that arise from Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été* set of songs on Gautier texts through three avenues of enquiry: the figure of Mignon; the concept of the *tombeau poétique*; and the notion of song-like qualities in poetry.

Given that Gautier was a major literary figure in his day whose works span multiple genres including poetry, drama, and the novel, he stands out as a curiously under-researched name in recent scholarship. In particular, as this article contends, understanding Gautier's relationship with other art forms, and particularly music, is significant for analysing word-music relations at a key period of aesthetic shift in interart engagement, particularly in the smaller-scale genres in which he operated. While François Brunet's 2006 monograph *Théophile Gautier et la musique* contains much important primary source and biographical data pertaining to Gautier the *mélomane* and music critic with limited technical knowledge of music, it does little to contextualize Gautier's position within the theoretical dimension of word-music relations now understood as a multi-layered process of exchange.[12] Similarly, Andrew G. Gann's important but more dated work from the 1980s offers important insights into Gautier's work as a lyricist (especially in the early stages of the poet's career) but again

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[12] François Brunet, *Théophile Gautier et la musique* (Paris: Champion, 2006).

does so in a manner that does not question the nature of word-music relations per se.[13] A 2013 article by Chris Collins on Manuel De Falla's song settings of Gautier serves as a rare example of scholarship on Gautier and music probing the critical challenges which underpin the nature of poetry and music as artistic forms, especially when combined in song form, by examining the performative aspects of the poetic text when set to music, notably exclamations, shouts, or cries such as those which figure in Gautier's Spain-inspired *España* poems (1845).[14] Elsewhere in the scholarship on Gautier, only very recently have studies emerged which seek to reconsider his status as a writer worthy of extensive literary study. Aurélia Cervoni, for example, completed doctoral research at the Université Paris-Sorbonne (awarded 2011) in which she reclaims Gautier from the side-lines, critiquing how references to Gautier's work in today's academe are restricted to a small set of oft-repeated quotations, especially his doctrine of 'l'art pour l'art' expounded in the Preface to his 1835 novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, and excerpts from his best-known 1852 poetry collection *Émaux et camées* foregrounding his role in the emergence of Parnassianism and the importance of poetic craftsmanship.[15] Whilst this article attempts to make some contribution to the debate which resituates Gautier within the critical scholarship on nineteenth-century France, the main aim is not, however, to focus on Gautier per se, but to address his place in the critical-theoretical domain which enables us to rethink musicopoetics in the 1830s and 1840s. Of particular importance in this context are his influential *Comédie de la mort* (1838) poems,

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[13] Andrew G. Gann, 'Lyrics by Gautier: the Poet as Songwriter' *Francofonia*, 2 (1982), 83–100.

[14] Chris Collins, 'Gautier's Spain and Falla's France: Voice and Modes of Performance in "Séguidille"', *Dix-Neuf*, 17 (2013), 9–23.

[15] Aurélia Cervoni 'Théophile Gautier devant la critique (1830-1872)', (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2011).

which enable us to examine the extent to which the small-scale poems within this work (rather than the lengthy cantos of the main opening sections) have generated highly inflected responses to the performability of poetic language especially in the context of song form.

Like Gautier's, Berlioz's works span multiple genres, from large-scale opera and dramatic symphony to song miniatures. Berlioz's settings of six Gautier poems under the collective title of *Les Nuits d'été* stand out in the repertoire as one of the most significant sets of French song, recognised as pivotal in the development of a French song form (as opposed to one derived from the German *Lied*, for example). This is due, in part, to Berlioz's text selection: he opts to set six poems from *La Comédie de la mort* just a few years after the poems' publication (Berlioz composed *Les Nuits d'été* in 1840–41). The set examines the nature of melancholy and death in the context of idealized love, exploiting the traditional alliance between *la mort* and *l'amour*. On the face of it, the apparent thematic coherence of the poem texts selected by Berlioz seems to repeat a Romantic cliché, but in reordering the poems into his own work, Berlioz creates a loose narrative arc that differs from Gautier's own approach (which is not based on a narrative progression). The *Nuits d'été* begin on a confident note looking forward to springtime and the possibility of new life and new love, but the next four songs thematize death in more lugubrious tones (the male poetic voice imagines his female lover to be dead or gone), before returning to a more celebratory outlook in the yearning for a new life elsewhere in the final song of the set. The relative simplicity of the poem texts selected and reordered in this way by Berlioz is mirrored by the short line lengths and uncomplicated rhyme schemes that characterize Gautier's verse in these poems. While the properties of Gautier's verse might hint at a lyrical use of poetic language making it amenable to song form, Berlioz uses his composer's prerogative to recast some of the verse features (including extending note values to disrupt metrical accent) which challenges the notion that simple verse forms equate to making a poem amenable to setting to music as

song. In fact, the minor manipulations at the level of the verse line are part of a broader reworking by Berlioz which takes the poem out of their original context (published as a collection of 'poésies diverses' at the end of *La Comédie de la mort*) to turn them into a different work of art with a different aesthetic scope and agenda. For example, as well as reordering the poem texts, Berlioz also modified a number of the poem titles to suit his own purposes (in some instances granting them a more 'musical' title, while in others reinterpreting the poet's supposedly musical language), as outlined in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Berlioz's modifications to Gautier's poems for *Les Nuits d'été*

Berlioz, *Les Nuits d'été* (1841, Op.7) Song titles	Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort* (1838) Original poem titles
1. Villanelle	Villanelle rhythmique
2. Le Spectre de la rose	Le Spectre de la rose
3. Sur les lagunes: Lamento	Lamento – La Chanson du Pêcheur
4. Absence	Absence
5. Au Cimetière: Clair de lune	Lamento
6. L'Île inconnue: Barcarolle	Barcarolle

In also devising a new title for his song set, *Les Nuits d'été*, Berlioz signals his wider aesthetic vision.[16]

Berlioz's exploitation of his friend Gautier's poems sees him engaging with ways of repeating the texts in diverse performance contexts. In particular, the *Nuits d'été* set affords us access to a distinctive test-case through which to examine the influence of performance

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[16] Richard Stokes, 'Translator's Preface' in Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes (eds), *A French Song Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. xvi–xviii (p. xvii); Annegret Fauser, 'The Songs', in Peter Bloom (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 108–124 (pp. 119–120).

expectations as possible driving factors behind the compositional process, particularly in relation to smaller-scale works. The songs were originally scored only for voice and piano, as is typical of the salon song genre popular in France in the 1840s, but Berlioz moved beyond this by later reworking the songs on an expanded framework, creating a new orchestral accompaniment between 1843–56. Where others have analysed *Les Nuits d'été* for localized or specific textual details of disruption or embellishment of Gautier's poems by Berlioz, this article takes a different tack in order to ask the question of the performance challenges raised by the set, in part through their recasting as orchestral song.[17] Examining Berlioz's and Gautier's musicopoetics enables us to uncover a close connection between songs which thematize death and the afterlife (in a seemingly straightforward Romantic cliché), and songs which repeatedly enact the process of death and the afterlife. A number of tensions emerge between the fictionally-depicted death of a speaking or singing voice in the poems/songs, and the dying away of a real voice inherent within the 'liveness' of actual performances of the musicopoetic work.[18]

Performing *Les Nuits d'été* raises a number of practical issues which have led musicologists and professional musicians alike to question the implications of the songs' performability in recent years. In 2000, Annegret Fauser (a specialist in Berlioz and French orchestral song) pointed out the apparent paradox in Berlioz's compositional decisions with the *Nuits d'été* set: 'Given Berlioz's extensive experience as a composer and conductor, we may well ask why he produced such an unperformable or at least problematically

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[17] See for example Stephen Fleck, 'L'Évocation poético-musicale dans *Les Nuits d'été* de Berlioz-Gautier' in *La Comédie de la Vie et de la Mort*, *Bulletin de la Société Théophile Gautier* 18 (1996), 163–189.

[18] See <http://songart.co.uk/> [accessed 20 February 2015].

performable score as that of *Les Nuits d'été*.'[19] In the same year, the world-renowned song accompanist and recording artist Graham Johnson commented on this same paradox, highlighting the specific performance challenges of *Les Nuits d'été* despite the apparent benefit of having two performable versions of the set. Johnson suggests that, despite its smaller-scale ambit, the piano version in fact presents greater technical challenges for the singer who is left comparatively unsupported, while the orchestral version poses major practical barriers to performance because of its large instrumental scoring:

> A work which can have a double life on both the concert and recital platform is considered good value for money in terms of a performer's learning time. It is, however, a far from ideal recital piece, no matter how well it works in the concert hall with a good conductor and a world-class soloist. It is extremely taxing for almost any singer (perhaps more so in the piano version, for the orchestra provides a different kind of support) and it is very seldom that all the songs in the set suit the same performer, tessitura-wise. The piano-accompanied version was conceived for mezzo-soprano or tenor but the orchestral version (if performed in the composer's chosen keys) calls for all four voice types: soprano (*Villanelle*, *Absence*, and *L'Île inconnue*); mezzo-soprano (*Le Spectre de la rose*); tenor (*Au cimetière*); baritone (*Sur les lagunes*). Ever impractical in the grand manner, Berlioz even employs different instrumentation for each song.[20]

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[19] Fauser, 'The Songs', p. 121.

[20] Graham Johnson, 'Hector Berlioz', in Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes (eds), *A French Song Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 14–19 (p. 17). It should be noted that the commonly-used piano version is an orchestral score reduction rather than the original Berlioz piano version published by Costallat.

These practical considerations rightly occupy discussions of the Berlioz-Gautier set in the domains of musicology and music performance, and shape performers' decisions when putting on the set.[21] What the discussions miss, however, are the wider aesthetic concerns. Rather than focusing solely on these practical considerations (of voice type, tessitura, or orchestration), for example by comparative analysis of the vast corpus of recordings of *Les Nuits d'été'* already in existence, it is perhaps more helpful to examine the underlying aesthetic issues which problematize the set. Tensions emerge between the demands of the written page (both poem text and song score) and the oral and aural possibilities of the human voice engaged in performing the work. Elements always remain which cannot ever be performed, such as sections of the text which are omitted in a song setting (for example, Berlioz sets only the first 3 quatrains of 'Absence', omitting the remaining 5 stanzas), or metrical features such as *enjambement* which mean that other metrical options and/or rhyme words go unheard (for example in setting 'Lamento – La Chanson du Pêcheur' as *Sur les lagunes: Lamento*, Berlioz's vocal line runs on l. 3 into l. 4 'Sous la tombe elle emporte mon âme et mes amours' rather than maintaining the line break after 'emporte'. Berlioz's score silences the important rhyme with 'morte' in l. 1, and also generates a performance query concerning whether or not the singer should insert a breath after 'mon âme'). Like the conflict highlighted by Derrida in 'La Différance' which sees the graphic text as never fully able to capture the phonetic, a conflictual burden arises which relates to the apparent

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[21] The set is more usually performed by a female artist singing the full set, rather than using a variety of voice types, as the Berlioz scoring and tessitura would suggest. Recordings by Régine Crespin, Véronique Gens, or Anne Sofie von Otter offer helpful examples of different performance decisions, including choice of key and tessitura. Fauser also points out that 'the matter of complete performance may well be irrelevant, and even, in a sense, counterproductive'. Fauser, 'The Songs', p. 121.

'unperformability' of key elements of the *Nuits d'été* songs.[22] The 'unperformable' elements are not practical ones but intrinsic, existential ones that derive from the interaction between poem and music in the intimate small-scale form of song as it undergoes a process of transformation in the 1830s and 1840s in France.

In order to help us understand this concept of inherent 'unperformability' of a musicopoetic text which nonetheless aspires to performance, it is helpful to consider it in the light of a Derridean process of iterability. Iterability anticipates that the same thing (event, utterance, performance) will happen again (it is repeatable), yet it is also always something different and never the same. The inherent difference that underpins repeated performances of the same (musicopoetic) text in different contexts means that the very condition of song is its iterability, which acknowledges that at each repeat performance, other possible performances remain unperformed as elements of the text and score go unheard. Singing, then, is always already different, and the iterability of the poem as song marks the poetic text as always already other (because it repeats existing words but in repeatedly different contexts).[23] What marks singing out from other uses of the performed voice (a lecture, a speech, a recitation) is its additional layers of sound (such as the addition of musical accompaniment, or extended note values over the temporal values of speech). And what marks song out from other forms of vocal music (such as opera) is its intimate engagement with words often already crafted for another textual context (such as poetry). The unperformability that resides at the heart of song derives from the repeated alterity of the existing words, as always-already-different, with multiple elements which are unable to be reactivated verbatim. This, in fact, is what the Gautier-Berlioz musicopoetic text points

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[22] Derrida, 'La Différance' pp. 4–5.

[23] Gary Tomlinson, *The Singing of the New World: Indigenous Voice in the Era of European Contact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 12.

towards, both because of its practical challenges, and because of its thematic engagement with the viability of an afterlife. The practical and thematic concerns lead us to discover a more deep-seated aesthetic framework which shapes the musicopoetic work and hinges on what happens both prior to, and in the aftermath of, performances. Considering that Derridean iterability reminds us of the alterity of repetition, and how sounds now passed and silent cannot be re-activated, the Gautier-Berlioz songs showcase a hitherto overlooked aesthetic of a musicopoetic space in which performances always remains incomplete and uncertain.

In *La Comédie de la mort* Gautier repeatedly draws attention to the poet's death and the death of his loved ones. In a number of poems, the figure of the poet and/or his lover pass into the undefined realm of an afterlife from which it is not clear if they can re-emerge. For example, in the opening 'Portail' poem of the collection, he talks of his poetry as 'une illusion morte' (l. 82) made up of verse lines which 'cachent un cadavre' (l. 80), and in poems set by Berlioz such as 'Le Spectre de la rose' and 'Lamento', Gautier hints at the idea of a spectre or ghostly soul being reawakened yet never fully restored to life.[24] The spectres' ability to speak or to sing therefore remains uncertain. In the opening stanza of 'Le Spectre de la rose', the ghost is able to use the first-person voice to state 'Je suis le spectre d'une rose' (l. 3), chastising the poet in the second stanza for being was responsible for the spectre's death ('Ô toi qui de ma mort fus cause' l. 9), yet the agency of the spectre's voice implies that it forms a stranglehold on the poet's voice by the final stanza 'j'ai ta gorge pour tombeau' (l. 20).[25] It remains unclear who has the power, or capacity, to use their voice in the context of the lover's death. Similarly, in 'Lamento', the poetic voice is haunted by the idea that an awakened soul is able to use their voice: 'On dirait que l'âme éveillée | Pleure sous terre à

[24] Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort*, p. 7.

[25] Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort*, pp. 225–26.

l'unisson | De la chanson' (ll. 13-15).[26] In this way, the themes of absence, death, and silence

that emerge in Gautier's poems form part of a wider nexus of interrogation concerning the

idea of textual afterlives through speaking or singing in poetry. Terence Cave's examination

of textual afterlives in Gautier, focused around the fictional figure of Mignon, enables us to

revisit the implications of the afterlife of a musicopoetic text which, in turn, fuels a wider

discussion about the necessary death of the poet, of the composer, of the singer/performer,

and/or of the addressee in order for song to exist. Cave's emphasis on fictional (and therefore

unheard) song suggests that the respective deaths of poet, composer, singer, and addressee,

are never fully represented and yet the metaphorical presence of these deaths, in fiction, is

essential to the afterlife of that song. As Cave has argued, the figure of Mignon, and her

famous unsung song, have cast a long and productive shadow over the creative output of the

nineteenth century in France. Yet the status and implications of her song, and the importance

of the French transfer of that song, have only been partially understood by the critical

scholarship on word-music relations during this era. Mignon's afterlives in nineteenth-

century France were in large part due to Gautier's 1861 translation of Goethe's two *Wilhelm

Meister* novels (1795-96; 1821). Prior to translating the novels, however, Gautier had written

an 1833 poem entitled 'La Chanson de Mignon' which contains what Cave describes as a

'free translation or adaptation' of Mignon's song 'Kennst du das Land' from Part III of the

first novel (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*).[27] Cave argues that Gautier creates an important

'antithetical doublet' of a yearning to die and to live in a place known as 'la terre du poète'

(l. 25, which is later famously echoed by Baudelaire particularly in the prose version of

'L'Invitation au voyage', and also by Gautier in another *Comédie de la mort* poem, 'L'Île

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[26] Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort*, p. 306.

[27] Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort*, pp. 213–19.

inconnue', which became the sixth song of the *Nuits d'été* set).[28] In the 130 lines of 'La Chanson de Mignon', a dialogue is established between the poet and his muse ('Ange de poésie, l. 1). As the poetic voice questions why his muse wishes to leave him in order to 'courir par le monde' (l. 2), the muse adopts Mignon's voice to answer the poet, choosing to recite Mignon's song:

> — Ô mon maître, sais-tu
>
> La chanson que Mignon chante à Wilhelm dans Gœthe:
>
> "Ne la connais-tu pas la terre du poète,
>
> La terre du soleil où le citron mûrit,
>
> Où l'orange aux tons d'or dans les feuilles sourit?
>
> C'est là, maître, c'est là qu'il faut mourir et vivre,
>
> C'est là qu'il faut aller, c'est là qu'il me faut suivre". (ll. 23–27)

Yet Mignon's song here remains unsung, even though, as Cave puts it, the fictional song is presented as a lyric poem 'which is said to be sung'.[29] In Gautier's French incarnation, the unsung song is also laden with irony because the poet to whom it is addressed refuses to adhere to his muse's requests to follow her, devising excuses which range from the pragmatic (such the risk that she will get sunburnt: 'Cette terre sans ombre et ce soleil de feu | Brûleraient ta peau blanche et ta chair diaphane.', ll. 29–30) to the risible (including the risk of being bitten by your dog upon your return because it no longer recognizes you: 'Et votre chien vous mord, ne sachant plus connaître | Dans l'étranger bruni celui qui fut son maître', ll. 71–2). As the poem later finds its place in Gautier's 1838 collection *La Comédie de la Mort*, it takes on an important role as emblematic not only of the beginning of a 'Mignon

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[28] Cave, *Mignon's Afterlives*, p. 92.

[29] Cave, *Mignon's Afterlives*, p. 233.

craze' in nineteenth-century France, but also of a pivotal development in the relationship between poetry and music.

That this version of the Mignon song talks in terms of alterity (travelling to another place) and antithesis (doing so to die and to love) marks the beginning of an attitude toward word-music relations that has more far-reaching consequences than perhaps Gautier himself could have envisaged. The desire to be elsewhere, coupled with the antithetical desire to both die and live in that non-specified location, signals a marked shift in outlook. The Goethe text talks of being elsewhere and of living there, but does not talk of dying there too. That Gautier has manipulated this into a location that is designated as the poet's place, and that he has suggested first dying, and then living, is significant. Whilst it true that the necessity of rhyme requires Gautier to put 'vivre' after 'mourir' (to rhyme with 'suivre' in the next line), the positioning of the verb signalling death before that of life implies either something alluring or erotic (that the Mignon-muse is hinting at that cliché of 'la petite mort'), or – more likely – something more sinister (that the Mignon-muse is luring the poet to his death). The prospect of an afterlife is, however, unproblematized by the Mignon-muse figure. The poetic voice's response to this song-call picks up on the seemingly naive assumption that access to an afterlife is straightforward through the way he highlights his concerns about his own death alongside hers. The inclusion of the life and death binary which requires an (uncertain) afterlife signals that the iterability of Mignon's song is predicated not just on the absolute absence of the addressee (the muse) but also on the absolute absence of the poet (the 'maître'), *and* of the performer (Mignon). Mignon's song is made up of something more than the Derridean *différance* which constitutes the mark of writing as always already temporally and spatially absent (even in its present inscription), because it is not just writing. Moreover, Derrida's claim that the concept of iterability 'structure la marque d'écriture elle-même, quel que soit d'ailleurs le type d'écriture (pictographique, hiéroglyphique, idéographique,

phonétique, alphabétique) is challenged by the additional layering of song in the Mignon myth.[30] The song may be inscribed through its lyrics (albeit in translation in Gautier's poem), but it is not inscribed in any other kind of writing (such as a musical score). It also highlights its difference from that which is sung in one context and that which remains unsung in another. Song is not, therefore, just another form of writing, but contains its own otherness predicated on absolute absence (or death) of each of the protagonists involved (poet, composer, performer, audience). As Derrida indicates, written language needs to be iterable even when its addressee is no longer present : 'Il faut, si vous voulez, que ma "communication écrite" reste lisible malgré la disparition absolue de tout destinataire déterminé en général pour qu'elle ait sa fonction d'écriture, c'est-à-dire sa lisibilité. Il faut qu'elle soit répétable – itérable – en l'absence absolue du destinataire'.[31] Because, however, song is both written and unwritten, the legible trace of Mignon's song is only her lyrics, not the full mark of song as a performance. The suggestion, then, is that Mignon's song as transcribed by Gautier is unperformable because of its inherent iterability which foretells its own afterlife in the wake of the death of its makers, its singers, and its addressees.

While 'La Chanson de Mignon' is a specific example of iterability which reveals the absolute absence of song, further examination of the poems in *La Comédie de la mort* demonstrates how these texts also are repeatedly predicated on notions of absence and death approached from a number of angles. The central theme of death as signalled in the collection's title is played out in the liminal 'Portail', and the two main sections 'La Vie dans la mort' (chapters I-III) and 'La Mort dans la vie' (chapters IV-IX), which collectively take up just over 80 pages of the publication. These sections are followed, however, by an extended set of stand-alone 'poésies diverses' that not only close the collection but also make

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[30] Derrida, 'Signature événement contexte', p. 375.

[31] Derrida, 'Signature événement contexte', p. 375.

up a substantial part of the volume (56 poems over 290 pages). Emblematic of Gautier's exposition of death and absence in this collection is the poem which takes as its title one of the key terms, 'Absence'.[32] Made up of eight octosyllabic quatrains of *rimes croisées*, it begins with a direct imperative in the familiar *tu* form to a now-absent female beloved: 'Reviens, reviens, ma bien-aimée!' (l. 1). Although the poem itself does not overtly refer to death (the beloved could simply be far away in another country, as implied by the lines 'Au pays qui me prend ma belle, / Hélas ! si je pouvais aller' (ll. 13–14), Gautier's insistence throughout the collection on the common literary trope of absence and death as quasi-interchangeable means that we cannot ignore the addressee's absolute absence in the form of her death. The fact that in *Les Nuits d'été* Berlioz also later placed this poem next to one which is suffused with very similar diction to 'Absence' but which overtly refers to death, 'Lamento' (which Berlioz also renamed with the more direct title *Au Cimetière*), confirms the strength of the alliance between absence and death in Gautier's volume and his readers' interpretation of that alliance. From its opening line 'Lamento' exploits imagery of the cemetery setting by referencing the graves found therein: 'Connaissez-vous la blanche tombe?' (l. 1).[33] In the even more lugubrious song 'Lamento – La Chanson du pêcheur' (recast as *Sur les lagunes: Lamento* by Berlioz), the poet once again overtly refers to death, specifically the death of his beloved, but this time metaphorically situating himself and their love alongside her in the grave:[34]

Ma belle amie est morte:

Je pleurerai toujours;

Sous la tombe elle emporte

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[32] Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort*, p. 283.

[33] Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort*, p. 305.

[34] Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort*, p. 227.

Mon âme et mes amours. (ll. 1–4)

The emphasis (once again) on the death of the poet alongside that of his muse is such that it

situates the poet's very art form in the particular locus of the graveyard. This imagery of

graves and gravestones pervades *La Comédie de la mort*, right from the opening poem of the

collection 'Portail', in which Gautier declares that 'Mes vers sont les tombeaux tout brodés

de sculptures' (l. 79).[35] While the 'tombe' of 'Lamento' is merely the space in which the

deceased lies, the 'tombeau' of 'Portail' signals a more crafted reference to the deceased (the

monument as opposed to the hole). The linkages created by Gautier's diction of absence,

death, graves, and gravestones is tightly wedded to the very act of writing poetry. The

embellished 'tombeau' which characterizes his poetry (according to his own description)

alludes to the Renaissance tradition of the 'tombeau poétique', an elegiac verse form, often

designed to be sung or accompanied by music, written in homage to a deceased person,

which Peter Dayan describes as 'writing on the death of a writer', and François Brunet

qualifies as a 'monument littéraire'.[36] Because song resides at the origin of the literary

monument of crafted poetry (the 'tombeau'), Gautier implicitly signals his awareness of how

poetry might enjoy an afterlife only if it is iterable in the way that song is iterable: through

repeat performances which unavoidably reveal the unperformable elements of the

musicopoetic text, and which demand the absolute absence of its author(s), its singer(s), its

addressee(s), and the work itself as an unassailable concept.

The concept of the 'tombeau' as a literary monument inscribing the poet's death not

only creates resonances with Barthes' work on the death of the author (and the critical-

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[35] Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort*, pp. 1-10.

[36] Peter Dayan, *Music Writing Literature from Sand via Debussy to Derrida* (Aldershot:

Ashgate, 2006), p. 115; François Brunet, 'Le Tombeau de Gautier, par ses disciples et

quelques autres', *Romantisme* 33:122 (2003), 81–91 (p. 81).

analytical freedom this opens up), but also has its place in Derrida's later work, bookending his theorizations of absence and death in writing from the abstract (iterability, writing and difference, *différance*) to the concrete (the deaths of his writer contemporaries). Derrida's 2001–03 collection of memorial essays on the deaths of his friends and fellow writers including Barthes and De Man first appeared in English as *The Work of Mourning* (2001) containing essays which honour 'friendships in the wake of passing'. The expanded French edition, entitled *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (2003), includes further essays on Blanchot and Granel. Although the essays in *Chaque fois unique* come at the very end of his career, they intersect with Derrida's earlier publications, and in so doing remind us of a preoccupation in Derrida's work with the status of death and absence. We learn repeatedly from Derrida's writings that death is the locus of both poetry and music, because death, which cannot represent or be represented, is a form of absence that resides in the gap between signification and meaning. As Derrida stresses in *Béliers: Le dialogue ininterrompu: entre deux infinis, le poème* (the pendant volume to *Chaque fois unique*, writing on the death of his friend the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer), the absence of death is triggered already by everyday language, such as the '*cogito* de l'adieu, ce salut sans retour'.[37] He goes on to suggest how the absence of death bears even more significant ramifications, in that it triggers an end to the world (and therefore to language and communication):

> Car chaque fois, et chaque fois singulièrement, chaque fois infiniment, la mort n'est rien de moins qu'une fin *du* monde. Non pas *seulement une* parmi d'autres, la fin de quelqu'un ou de quelque chose *dans le monde*, la fin d'une vie ou d'un vivant. La mort ne met pas un terme à quelqu'un dans le monde, ni à *un* monde parmi d'autres, elle marque chaque fois, chaque fois au défi de l'arithmétique l'absolue fin du seul et même monde, de ce que chacun ouvre comme un seul et même monde, la fin de l'unique

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[37] Derrida, *Béliers*, p. 22.

monde, la fin de la totalité de ce qui est ou peut se présenter comme l'origine du monde pour tel et unique vivant, qu'il soit humain ou non.[38]

However, for Derrida, the form that death's absence takes is doubly unique, as Peter Dayan argues in his analysis of *Chaque fois unique* in *Music Writing Literature from Sand via Debussy to Derrida*:

> *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*: each death is the end of the world, and each time unique; as we are all individuals, so what dies with each of us is individual, and writing requires fidelity to that individuality if it is to be faithful to its value; and yet death itself is single, always the same; the death of each individual world is also thus a repetition or rehearsal of the death of the world in general. But the poem, the poem as song, places itself between them.[39]

According to Dayan's analysis of Derridean death, 'music alone can speak from the space between the absolutely universal, and the absolutely personal'.[40] Dayan's argument here is intriguing. He recognizes in Derrida's conception of death and absence that Derridean alterity, perceiving a difference, an elsewhere, an otherness, leads towards absence and death which is normally masked by language systems that generate meaning and sense. Yet death makes no sense. Dayan's argument is not that the poem (as song) makes no sense, but that the poem (as song) makes the distance (*différance*) between the no-sense of death/absence and the sense-making of language in the real (lived) world bearable. Dayan expands his argument to qualify the music to which he refers: it is unheard. What Dayan does not explore, however, is whether, in order for such music to be unheard, it also needs to be unperformable. Song's iterability derives, as we have seen, from its inherent unperformability because it is always

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[38] Derrida, *Béliers*, pp. 22–23.

[39] Dayan, *Music Writing Literature,* pp. 115–16.

[40] Dayan, *Music Writing Literature*, p. 118.

already other (unique) even though it is always also the same (single). Dayan does acknowledge, however, that only a certain kind of music is always unheard. When music is inscribed into literature, such as Mignon's song ('La Chanson de Mignon') or the dove's lament ('Lamento'), this is not the same as actually writing music. Instead, the author is trying to re-present (make present) a music that is always unheard:

> Literature writing music . . . shows how and why we see representations in music, and consider them determined by the music . . . This writing of music pushes it inexorably towards the point of an absolute singularity, which requires both that each musical experience be different from every other, and that music as such and in general be considered to exist as a singular entity beyond the reach of any science . . . This singular music is never 'entendue', never understood as it is heard; it remains unspoken.[41]

The inscription of music into the poetic text in this way (on the level of representation of music) is an attempt to break down a resistance to sense-making. However, what Gautier's *Comédie de la mort* points towards is a different kind of unperformable music. It goes beyond the fictional representations of music and song ('La Chanson de Mignon', 'Lamento') and points – more significantly – to the necessary silencing through the death of the author, his performer(s), and his addressee(s), to the unheardness and unperformability of his poetry outright. The 'tombeau poétique' of Gautier's verse as a whole is self-reflexive writing on the death of the writer (himself) which, unlike larger narrative forms, engages with the very possibility of the poem becoming iterable as song which makes such a death bearable. At the same time as he writes, Gautier is also dead. His poetic verse is inherently iterable in its written inscription: always repeatable, yet never the same; always present, yet distant in time

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[41] Dayan, *Music Writing Literature*, p. 131.

and location; always requiring the death of the author, his performer(s), his addressee(s), yet living on in the afterlife of possible performances.

There remains, however, at least one challenge to this logic. The text we are primarily interested in interrogating is not just Gautier's, it is also Berlioz's. The combined musicopoetic text of Berlioz's settings of six of the poems from *La Comédie de la mort* extend the poems' own iterability beyond the written/textual to the sung inscription. Although Berlioz's song settings are inscribed in a different form of writing (the musical score), that inscription is itself also only unheard music. Only the possibility of it becoming heard music, as song, confirms the iterability of song. The diachronicity of live performance means song is always already dying-out and always already different, even as a performance repeats the same musicopoetic text. Recordings of live song performances may seem to complicate this further. However, while recordings constitute a written inscription or grapheme (to borrow Derrida's terminology) of that performance as they make their mark on vinyl, tape, CD, or other digital media, what a recording captures – paradoxically, and uniquely – is the unrepeatability of performance. The paradox of live performance and singing thus reveals the extent to which the musicopoetic text, at its core, always remains different, never the same, even when the same text is sung.

We have learnt, then, that Gautier's poetry does not sing in and of itself; it is different from song, while aspiring to be songlike in its yearning for absence, death, and repeatable difference in a textual afterlife. Inscribed on the page, it is not in the active process of singing, but it aspires to be sung, even though it does not know and cannot predict what form that song will take (whether actualized music or metaphorical). It aspires to the condition of residing in the gap that is constituted not just by writing and difference (iterability and *différance*) but also by singing and difference (the alterity of performance that lends it the quality of always being unperformable). The songlike qualities of Gautier's poetry are

signalled overtly in his choice of diction, for example in a number of the poem titles in *La Comédie de la mort* (a number of which Berlioz selects). Echoing a mid-nineteenth-century French predilection for the integration of music into poetry, in the collection we find Gautier deploying title words such as 'chanson', 'chant', 'barcarolle', 'villanelle', and 'romance'; and all of these terms are, or are derived from, musical forms. He represents music by writing unheard music. In other instances, Gautier references heard music by playing the role of music critic writing up a heard performance, such as in the poem 'La Diva' in which he describes the experience of hearing a soprano sing in an operatic setting.[42] Less overt techniques for signalling the songlike qualities of his poetry are found in the 'musicabilité' of his prosodic decisions.[43] Although the collection comprises a small number of sonnets, a pantoum, and some elegies, most of the poems are not based on a formal or fixed poetic form. The majority of the poems of the 'poésies diverses' section (and all the poems that Berlioz selects to set to music) do, however, bear a prosodic similarity: all deploy a short metrical line length, coupled with simple rhyme schemes and repetitive structuring devices such as refrains. These technical choices all point towards poetry's heritage as song, and in particular song of a relatively modest scale such as the *romance* or popular song, as Brigitte Buffard-Moret has argued: 'c'est ce jeu entre métrique, titre de poèmes et épigraphes liées à la chanson qui rattache de nombreux poèmes au "genre" de la chanson [populaire]'.[44] Berlioz's settings of these texts by Gautier bridge the gap between the type of straightforward song

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[42] Gautier, *La Comédie de la mort*, p. 153.

[43] Michel Gribenski, 'Vers impairs, ennéasyllabe et musique: variations sur un air (mé)connu', *Loxias*, 19 (2007) <http://revel.unice.fr/loxias/index.html?id=1988> [accessed 5 March 2015] (para 2 of 53).

[44] See Brigitte Buffard-Moret, *La Chanson poétique du XIXe siècle: Origine, statut et formes* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006), pp. 247–251.

such as the *romance* prevalent during the July Monarchy and the more complex *mélodie* which was yet to come into its own in France, and in so doing open up the question of the iterability of the poetic text as song. Of the six poems that Berlioz chose to set in *Les Nuits d'été*, none use the highbrow alexandrine poetic verse metre or complicated rhyme schemes, as outlined in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Metre and rhyme scheme of poems for *Les Nuits d'été*

Berlioz, *Les Nuits d'été* (1841, Op.7)	Form, verse metre and rhyme scheme
1. Villanelle	Three 8-line stanzas of 7 octosyllables, and a 2-syllable eighth line, on a rimes croisées structure (ABABCDCD, alternating masculine and feminine rhymes).
2. Le Spectre de la rose	Three 8-line stanzas of octosyllables, on a rimes croisées structure (ABABCDCD, alternating masculine and feminine rhymes).
3. Sur les lagunes: Lamento	Three 10-line stanzas of 6-syllable lines, on a rhyme scheme that goes from *croisées*, to *embrassées*, to *plates* (ABABCDDCEE); the final couplet of each stanza is in fact a 2-line refrain.
4. Absence	Three quatrains of octosyllables in rimes croisées (ABAB). [N.B. Berlioz inserts a refrain structure by repeating the first line of the poem in between each of the stanzas, and set only the first 3 of the original 8 quatrains]
5. Au Cimetière: Clair de lune	Six 6-line heterometric stanzas of 8-8-4-8-8-4 on a rhyme scheme of ABBACC.
6. L'Île inconnue: Barcarolle	4-line refrain (2-line on the third instance) and a 6-line verse stucture, over 3 verses, of 6-syllable lines, on a *rimes croisées* rhyme scheme for the refrains (ABAB) and CCDEED for the verses.

In fact, as we have seen, there are other less overt songlike qualities which extend from the Gautier poems toward the combined Berlioz-Gautier musicopoetic text; these revolve around key semantic clusters that recur throughout the collection and the song set, pertaining to

notions of absence and death. It is the combination of each of these 'songlike' qualities – both metaphorical and practical – that leads us to a renewed understanding of the role of song and singing in musicopoetic collaborations of the Romantic era.

Re-examining Gautier's poetry in this way, bringing it alongside not only Berlioz's song settings but also Derrida's theoretical formulations of the written text, thus helps to revise our thinking on musicopoetics, going beyond the work which interrogates the post-Romantic poets such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Instead of pointing towards a critical-theoretical vision of word-music relationships in nineteenth-century France as always bound up with the idea (and unattainable ideal) of music, and/or as characterized by a process in which each art form battled for its place in the aesthetic hierarchy,[45] the Berlioz-Gautier example points towards the underlying concept of the iterability of song which extends from the poetic text, and is framed by a revised view on singing and difference which, in turn, signals the inherent unperformability of the combined musicopoetic text. Where Gautier explored the songlike qualities of his poetry through subtle metrical and semantic means, Berlioz exploited the wordsmith qualities underpinning his own work. Gautier alone was not responsible for realigning the relationship between words and music through his interrogation of the possibility of song, but in combination with Berlioz's song settings of his work, the author and the composer are able to point towards the intrinsic aesthetic tension of singing and difference. As Alexandra Wettlaufer has suggested in her examination of genre hierarchy and the sibling rivalries that emerged from the Romantic notion of the *fraternité des arts* promoted by groups such as *Jeunes-France* (of which Gautier was a leading member), Berlioz played a particularly pivotal role in reframing the relationships between words and music through his engagement with poetic language:

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[45] See for example Joseph Acquisto, *French Symbolist Poetry and the Idea of Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

>As Pierre Bourdieu has shown us, every new position taken within the field of cultural production forces a reconfiguration of all of the other positions. . . . By the 1840s music had gained a secure spot in the Romantic pantheon, thus forever changing all of the other positions, which were then forced to recognize or resist it. The Romantic composer, as embodied by Berlioz, was not simply a man of music, but closely aligned with words as well. The critical over-emphasis in word and music studies in nineteenth-century France on the post 1850 era has focused on the position whereby music has gained primacy over all the other art forms. Berlioz was the catalyst in recasting this. [46]

The nature of the 'close alignment' between poetry and music that this article has sought to uncover emerges clearly in the context of the Berlioz-Gautier collaboration. Even though the musicopoetic collaboration is not 'conducted face to face'[47] (because it is predicated on absolute absence), it is nonetheless instrumental in repositioning the status of song not just in the hierarchy of the arts but in our critical-theoretical understanding of how poetic language can function beyond its inscription on the page, through perennially iterable unsung performances.

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[46] Alexandra K. Wettlaufer, 'Composing Romantic Identity: Berlioz and the Sister Arts', *Romance Studies*, 25 (2007), 43–56 (p. 52).

[47] Johnson, 'Avant-propos', p. xiii.