

2004

# Female Performances: Melodramatic Music Conventions and 'The Woman in White'

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## eCommons Citation

Vorachek, Laura, "Female Performances: Melodramatic Music Conventions and 'The Woman in White'" (2004). *English Faculty Publications*. Paper 7.

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# The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction

Edited by  
SOPHIE FULLER AND NICKY LOSSEFF

ASHGATE

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Published by	
Ashgate Publishing Limited	Ashgate Publishing Company
Gower House	Suite 420
Croft Road	101 Cherry Street
Aldershot	Burlington, VT 05401-4405
Hants GU11 3HR	USA
England	

Ashgate website: <http://www.asghate.com>

#### British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

The idea of music in Victorian fiction. – (Music in nineteenth-century Britain)

1. English fiction – 19th century – History and criticism
2. Music in literature 3. Musicians in literature
- I. Fuller, Sophie II. Losseff, Nicky, 1962-  
823.8'09357

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The idea of music in Victorian fiction / edited by Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff.

p. cm. – (Music in nineteenth-century Britain)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-7546-0577-9 (alk. paper)

1. English fiction–19th century–History and criticism. 2. Music and literature–History–19th century. 3. Musical fiction–History and criticism. 4. Music–Great Britain–19th century. 5. Music in literature.

I. Fuller, Sophie. II. Losseff, Nicky, 1962- III. Series.

PR878.M87I34 2004

823'809357–dc22

2003064700

ISBN 0 7546 0577 9

Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

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and codes they communicate, Hardy finds music an effective art form to lend stability to his own. However, even the best representation of a musical performance can never reproduce the experience, because language renders it into a different medium altogether. Hardy finds no better means for suggesting that language functions only because those who use it require it to operate in a way that can communicate experience.

## Female performances: Melodramatic music conventions and *The Woman in White*

Laura Vorachek

He put the length of the room between himself and the enchantress, and took his seat by the grand piano, at which Lucy Floyd was playing slow harmonious symphonies of Beethoven. The drawing-room at Felden Woods was so long, that, seated by this piano, Captain Bulstrode seemed to look back at the merry group about the heiress as he might have looked at a scene on the stage from the back of the boxes. He almost wished for an opera-glass as he watched Aurora's graceful gestures and the play of her sparkling eyes; and then turning to the piano, he listened to the drowsy music, and contemplated Lucy's face, marvelously fair in the light of that full moon ... the glory of which, streaming in from an open window, put out the dim wax-candles on the piano.<sup>1</sup>

In this passage from Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, the piano music played by Lucy Floyd sets the tone, the 'drowsy' and 'slow harmonious symphonies' reflecting the peaceful and happy domestic scene, in much the same way the musical accompaniment in a melodramatic stage play would alert the audience to the mood of the scene. Braddon reminds us of this connection with the narrator's comment that Bulstrode looks at Aurora 'as he might have looked at a scene on the stage from the back of the boxes'. He is a spectator of this domestic scene, but the reader also watches Aurora from a distance, reflecting this spectatorial position. Like Bulstrode, who wishes for an opera-glass with which to better observe the scene, we too are voyeuristically enjoying the view. Providing the musical accompaniment and thereby contributing to the domestic harmony is, appropriately enough, Lucy who has been educated to be the ideal Victorian woman. Beethoven's symphonies would not typically be characterized as 'slow'.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (1863), ed. Richard Nemesvari and Lisa Surridge (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1998) 93.



But Braddon presumably wanted to introduce the particular atmosphere suggested by 'slow', 'harmonious' and 'drowsy' music as well as the concept of high cultivation evoked by the name Beethoven. This ideal woman at the piano is contrasted with 'the enchantress' at the other end of the room, an opposition emphasized by Bulstrode's deliberate contemplation of each. This binarism hints at a love triangle between Bulstrode, Aurora and Lucy, and thus the music also accompanies the tension underlying this happy scene. Lucy loves Bulstrode and suffers in silence as she watches him fall in love with Aurora, who is unaware of her cousin's feelings. Lucy's perfection and silent suffering earmark her as the heroine of a melodrama, destined to be cruelly used by the villain and rescued at the last minute by the hero. But the heroine of this sensation novel is the enchantress, Aurora Floyd, suggesting a crucial difference between melodrama and sensation fiction – in sensation fiction not everything is as it appears.

While the similarities between melodrama and sensation fiction are often noted, the similar use of music in each has been overlooked. Melodrama is characterized by excessive emotion, flat character types, a focus on plot at the expense of characterization and exaggerated expressions of right and wrong. As its name implies, it also relied heavily on musical accompaniment. For much of the first half of the nineteenth century, only the patent theatres were allowed to present drama with spoken dialogue due to grants from Charles II in 1660 giving to two royal favourites, Killigrew and Davenant, exclusive rights, which came to belong to the companies at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Incorporating music in the form of songs and instrumental accompaniment provided the minor theatres with a means to skirt this restriction, since lyrics could convey meaning verbally and instrumental music could convey meaning non-verbally to the audience. Additionally, it served to convey action to audience members who were far from the stage, with poor sight lines. In theatres like Convent Garden and Drury Lane, the large size and poor acoustics meant that 'only show and noise reached the uttermost corners'.<sup>2</sup> Thus melodrama was well suited to the patent houses as well as the smaller minor theatres which had good views but were required by law to include music.<sup>3</sup> Melodrama was not devoid of spoken dialogue, however; music accompaniment and a certain number of songs were enough to satisfy the authorities.<sup>4</sup> The genre continued to be popular after restrictions on spoken dialogue were lifted in 1843 with the Theatrical Regulation Act.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: H. Jenkins, 1965) 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 52, 61.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

Melodrama's cousin, sensation fiction, is a subgenre of the Victorian novel, so classified by literary critics to account for the novels of the 1860s that deal with the violent crime, adultery and bigamy lurking under the surface of proper middle-class domestic life. These works are characterized by coincidence, mystery, suspense, moral ambiguity and, most famously noted by Kathleen Tillotson, by secrets.<sup>5</sup> Influenced by Gothic mysteries and Dickens' crime novels, as well as by melodrama, the genre was also influenced by the bigamy trials of the period, by divorce law reform, such as the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, and by crime reporting in tabloids of sensational murders. Additionally, Jonathon Loesberg argues that sensation fiction, concerned with identity and its loss, was a product of ambiguous attitudes toward class structure in the years leading up to the Second Reform Bill of 1867.<sup>6</sup>

Most critics of melodrama, when addressing the use of music, point to modern cinema, skipping over nineteenth-century authors' attempts to incorporate it for similar effect. Nor have critics of sensation fiction addressed its musical references in the context of melodrama.<sup>7</sup> I contend that for both genres music was a recognizable convention, a sign that made certain scenes and actions legible to the audience. Music in sensation fiction has only recently begun to receive attention, in a chapter within Phyllis Weliver's *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction* and in articles by Allan Atlas and Nicky Losseff.<sup>8</sup> While Weliver focuses on music in relation to Victorian theories of identity formation, Atlas

<sup>5</sup> See Kathleen Tillotson, 'The Lighter Reading of the Eighteen-Sixties', Introduction to *The Woman in White*, ed. Anthea Trodd (Boston: Houghton, 1969) ix–xxvi.

<sup>6</sup> See Jonathon Loesberg, 'The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction', *Representations* 13 (1986) 115–138. The Second Reform Bill redistributed Parliamentary seats and more than doubled the electorate, giving the vote to many working-class men in towns.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976) and Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', in *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987) 5–39. Little critical attention has been paid to the music that scored melodramatic stage plays, with the exception of David Mayer's work; see David Mayer, 'The Music of Melodrama' in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama: Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film and Television, 1800–1976*, ed. David Bradby, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 49–63. One reason for this might be a patronizing attitude toward the music because the composers were relatively anonymous.

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900: Representations of Music, Science and Gender in the Leisured Home* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Allan W. Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins on Music and Musicians', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 124 (1999) 255–70; Nicky Losseff, 'Absent Melody and *The Woman in White*', *Music and Letters* 81/4 (2000) 532–50.



and Losseff examine how music history and Wilkie Collins' novels mutually inform each other.<sup>9</sup>

Both melodrama and sensation fiction rely on plot contrivances, playing on feeling – emotional sentiment in the former and bodily sensation in the latter – and employing music to heighten drama and identify characters.<sup>10</sup> Melodrama's use of music to convey meaning thus provides a springboard for the examination of music in sensation fiction. But sensation fiction departs from melodrama's clear-cut morality, its 'world of certainties ... world of absolutes'.<sup>11</sup> Complex characters replace the flat stereotypes of melodrama, and moral ambiguity replaces defined notions of right and wrong. This departure extends to melodrama's use of music to convey non-verbal meaning as well; music in sensation fiction has multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings.

The piano replaces the full orchestra in domestic melodramatic scenes in sensation fiction and characters, most often female, must play their own accompaniment.<sup>12</sup> This troubles the traditional Victorian conception of the separation of private and domestic spheres.<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>9</sup> Weliver notes that Victorian mental scientists such as William Hamilton 'thought identity was partially formed through performative actions, like playing the piano' (Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, 111). Atlas reviews musical attitudes expressed in Collins' novels and letters and finds him representative of the conservative musical taste in the nineteenth century. Losseff argues that musical scenes and examination of cultural associations of composers provide a sub-narrative of Laura Fairlie's 'descent into a private hell' (Losseff, 'Absent Melody', 532).

<sup>10</sup> The ties between melodrama and sensation fiction are numerous. Many sensation novels were adapted for the stage: the two most popular adaptations were of *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. Collins wrote stage melodrama including *The Frozen Deep* (1857), *The Red Vial* (1857) and a stage adaptation of the novella *No Thoroughfare*, which he co-authored with Charles Dickens in 1867. Mary Elizabeth Braddon acted on provincial stages from 1857–60, when melodrama was still popular fare. According to Robert Lee Wolff, Braddon acted under the stage name Mary Seyton and appeared in melodramas by such popular dramatists as Tom Taylor and Edward Bulwer Lytton. For a discussion of the roles she played, see Robert Lee Wolff, *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (New York: Garland, 1979) 45–54. The structural similarities between the two genres are enumerated in Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37 (1982) 4–5, 12–13.

<sup>11</sup> Booth, *English Melodrama*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Melodramatic stage plays were most often supported by a full orchestra, but on tour or when funds were low they were reduced to one or two instruments, usually a piano, for musical accompaniment (Mayer, 'The Music of Melodrama', 55).

<sup>13</sup> Historians such as Martha Vicinus, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, and literary critics like Elizabeth Langland, have demonstrated that, despite cultural representations to the contrary, the boundary line between spheres was permeable. See Vicinus's Introduction to *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*

private music of the drawing room retains an element of the public music of the theatre in that the musician takes the stage. Ironically, in removing to the private middle-class lives of its characters, music leaves the orchestra pit. Female performances are in full view, enacted for the reader and characters alike. I suggest that music's performative nature enables the depiction of different models of femininity that are lurking beneath the construction of ideal Victorian womanhood. Sensation fiction complicates this female stereotype by revealing a discrepancy between appearances and reality, and music is an apt means of communicating this to the reader since it too carried contradictory meanings in the nineteenth century. Many contemporary intellectuals argued that music was a moral and spiritual influence, and thus an appropriate pastime for the angel in the house. John Ruskin believed that music was 'the first, the simplest, the most effective of all instruments of moral instruction'.<sup>14</sup> Rev H. R. Haweis similarly stressed the benefits of music, arguing that music provides an emotional outlet for women, thereby maintaining domestic harmony: 'That domestic and long-suffering instrument, the cottage piano, has probably done more to sweeten existence and bring peace and happiness to families in general, and to young women in particular, than all the homilies on the domestic virtues ever yet penned.'<sup>15</sup> However, other nineteenth-century intellectuals noted that music had a sensual, even erotic side, indicating its sexual possibilities as well. In *The Descent of Man* Charles Darwin contends that vocal music is a pre-linguistic means of conveying strong emotions in courtship. Furthermore, 'women are generally thought to possess sweeter voices than men, and as far as this serves as any guide, we may infer that they first acquired musical powers in order to attract the other sex'.<sup>16</sup> Thus Darwin links music to sex drive, notably in women, suggesting a sexual rather than spiritual source for musical pleasure.

While music is prominent in sensation fiction from Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Mrs Henry Wood, I will focus on Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860), as it is exemplary of this genre's incorporation of melodramatic musical conventions. In this novel, musical

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977) ix–xix; Davidoff's and Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Langland's *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> John Ruskin, *The Queen of the Air* (London: Smith, Elder, 1869) 59.

<sup>15</sup> Rev H. R. Haweis, *Music and Morals* (1871; New York: Harper & Brothers: 1876) 104.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871, 2nd edn (1874; New York: D. Appleton, 1922) 585.



performances allow characters to manipulate ideals of gender and sexuality while seemingly executing their conventions.<sup>17</sup>

### Music in melodrama

Music is utilized in melodrama to convey to the audience mood and the moral value of characters. Depending on mood in a play, composers pieced together stock works: agitados, 'slows' (for serious situations), 'pathetics', 'struggles', 'hornpipes', 'andantes'.<sup>18</sup> From Michael Booth's survey of melodramatic scripts, we see that music was used to express everything from pain and disorder to joy and remorse, from astonishment to confusion.<sup>19</sup> Characters had identifying music for their entrances and exits which became standard for character type: 'an ominous rumble of the contrabass for the villain, a trumpet fanfare for the hero, flute trills for the heroine, and a ribald guffaw from the bassoon for the comic'.<sup>20</sup> Music also propels action in melodrama. According to David Mayer, 'music is an affecting and effecting device to underline and emphasize the emotional content of a play's action, to further concentration, very probably masking the improbabilities that we so often recognize in melodrama, and maintaining momentum of the play's headlong rush from sensation to sensation, from crisis to emotional crisis'.<sup>21</sup> Thus music keeps the plot moving from event to event, not giving the audience time to question its logic. Similarly, Peter Brooks suggests that music functioned in melodrama the way that myth functioned in pre-modern literature, its patterning investing the plot with 'inexorability and necessity'.<sup>22</sup>

However, contemporary comments on music in melodrama contest twentieth-century theories of its effectiveness in propelling the plot. The description of a melodrama by 'Our Eye-Witness' in *All the Year Round* (1860) indicates how music could function as a cover for improbabilities: 'The Dumb Guide, with one of the opportunely discovered swords in each hand, tackles both his enemies at once, and

<sup>17</sup> I extend this argument to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–2) and *Aurora Floyd* in my forthcoming dissertation *Instruments of Desire: Women's Musical Performance in Victorian Literature and Culture*. For additional discussion of *The Woman in White*, see Irene Morra's chapter in this volume.

<sup>18</sup> Mayer, 'The Music of Melodrama', 51.

<sup>19</sup> Booth, *English Melodrama*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967) 121.

<sup>21</sup> Mayer, 'The Music of Melodrama', 51.

<sup>22</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 14.

accommodates them with every kind of up stroke, and all sorts of fancy strokes, keeping time to the music all the while.'<sup>23</sup> While the music in this scene likely maintained the play's momentum and heightened tension, the author's tone demonstrates that it did little to mask the absurd plot. Braddon likewise suggests that Victorian audiences were not so swept away as Brooks and Mayer imply. In *Aurora Floyd*, a sea captain attends a nautical melodrama at an East End theatre, and he is disgusted with its lack of reality, including 'the proportion of horn-pipe-dancing and nautical ballad singing gone though, as compared to the work that was done'.<sup>24</sup> The use of music to propel the plot was likely transparent to nineteenth-century audiences.

As these functions indicate, music was descriptive in melodrama, taking equal place with language in conveying information to the audience. The efficacy of this form of communication was a matter of debate during the nineteenth century. The author of the prefatory remarks to Samuel Arnold's *The Woodman's Hut* (1814) contends that 'music is not more remote from nature than the blank verse or the rhymes of tragedy, and if it [melodrama] err [*sic*] in having too much action, it has a counterbalancing advantage in not being clogged by excess of speech; in fact the music supplies the place of language'.<sup>25</sup> Toward the end of the century the naturalness of this supplantation came into question. Percy Fitzgerald writes in *The World Behind the Scenes* (1881):

Still flourishes that mysterious music which always strikes in when melodramatic emotion is waxing strong. What more natural, when the lion-hearted sailor (who is so droll all through, so ready at the cry of female distress), when he engages in that truly terrific combat, at unprecedented odds – seven to one – what more natural than that his feelings should be translated by hurried and agitated music, by fiddle and gallopade of bows? Again, what so natural as that when smugglers, or robbers, or captives trying to make their escape should, when moving lightly on tiptoe past the unnatural tyrant's chamber, be kept in time by certain disjointed and jerking music, with a grasshopper or robin-red-breast rhythm? Again, what more desirable than that when the greyhaired Count in the braided frock, whose early life will not bear much looking into, turns to the villagers, and, in tones that seem to come from the region of his boots, says that 'Adela is indeed his chee-ild!' – what so becoming as what is called 'A chord!' of starling character, making listeners jump from their seats? Still more in keeping is that slow, agonizing strain which steals in when all the guests are

<sup>23</sup> 'Our Eye-Witness "Sitting at a Play"', *All the Year Round* 65 (21 July 1860) 354.

<sup>24</sup> Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, 458.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Booth, *English Melodrama*, 38–9.



crowding into the drawing-room, with horror and consternation in their countenances, and gather slowly about the lady in white, whose father, husband, lover, or brother has just disappeared, or been shot in a duel, or absconded. Sad uplifting of hands – characteristic grouping, and effective tableau, as the drop-scene comes down slowly to the agonizing music, closing in all decency!<sup>26</sup>

Excess of speech has been replaced by an excess of music. Fitzgerald's satiric questions, 'what more natural?', 'what so natural?' signal that he finds musical accompaniment extremely artificial. Nevertheless, his ironic look at the use of music in melodrama indicates that its formulae were firmly entrenched and therefore legible to the audience. I contend that music as a form of communication, descriptive of scenes, characters and plots, was an established convention due to its pervasiveness in melodrama, and Victorian audiences could be expected to extend their 'reading' of music to other art forms.<sup>27</sup>

These melodramatic musical conventions all appear in sensation fiction. While authors do not have stock mood pieces at hand, they create the same effect by reference to well-known composers, types of music (symphonies, fantasias, ballads, etc.) or, at the very least, the tempo of music being played. As characters must be at the piano to play their own accompaniment, their entrances and exits are not often coupled with music, but they themselves do still come to be associated with musical themes. Notably, the music women most often perform in sensation novels is instrumental, or for unaccompanied voice, like

<sup>26</sup> Percy Fitzgerald, *The World Behind the Scenes* (London, 1881; reprinted, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972) 312–13.

<sup>27</sup> According to Michael Booth, the notion that theatre audience composition moved from working-class domination to middle-class patronage in the nineteenth century is 'a serious over-simplification': 'Even before the 1860s thoroughly respectable middle-class audiences were attending Charles Kean's seasons of Shakespeare, gentlemanly melodrama, and refined comedy at the Princess's Theatre in the 1850s, stimulated in part by the Queen's patronage of Kean at court theatricals in Windsor Castle and her regular attendance at the Princess's'; Michael Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 9, 7. Jane Moody similarly contends that middle-class withdrawal from theatre-going during the nineteenth century has been exaggerated, 'for who was reading all those theatre reviews and buying scenes and characters from juvenile drama otherwise?'; Jane Moody, 'The State of the Abyss: Nineteenth-Century Performance and Theatre Historiography in 1999', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 5 (2000) 124. And, I would add, who was reading journalistic and sociological depictions of melodramatic stage plays which appeared in periodicals with a middle-class readership such as *All The Year Round*? Deborah Vlock argues that the Victorian public read novels 'through the lens of popular [melodramatic theatrical] performance,' and 'their reading skills were cultivated in the theatre'; Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 3, 91.

melodramatic incidental music. And, as we will see, music is also used to heighten tension in dramatic moments and to propel action.

This brings up an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the piano in the nineteenth-century had both class and gender associations; it was a legible sign of middle-class respectability, economic status and womanhood. Moreover, women's piano-playing traditionally carried with it associations of domestic harmony. On the other hand, the sexual scandals that lurk beneath that domestic harmony are the source of sensation fiction's thrills. Women's piano-playing becomes emblematic of sensational moments in this genre. Thus, music's function as marker of middle-class respectability and indicator of dramatic tension are not always compatible.<sup>28</sup> Rendering empirical knowledge questionable, sensation fiction suggests we cannot rely on surface impressions, including those produced by music. Unlike Weliver, who argues that sensation novels 'depict fear of domestic, amateur music, and end in ways that validate this anxiety', I suggest that Collins and other sensation fiction authors embrace the complex meanings available in women's domestic music-making.<sup>29</sup> This is best exemplified by looking at the characters who embody this contradiction in their performances at the piano.

### 'Let the music speak to us': Emotional resonance in *The Woman in White*

In *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins presents us with the prescribed

<sup>28</sup> Winifred Hughes titles the first chapter of her book, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, 'The Sensation Paradox'. She defines this paradox as 'the violent yoking of romance and realism' which 'strains both modes to the limits, disrupting the accepted balance between them'; Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 16. The paradox to which I refer is the specific instance of women's piano-playing.

<sup>29</sup> Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, 100. The political nature of sensation fiction has long been under debate, with critics such as Winifred Hughes and Thomas Boyle contending that it is subversive, while critics such as Ann Cvetkovich and Phyllis Weliver argue it is conservative. See Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*; Thomas Boyle, *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Sensationalism* (New York: Viking, 1989); Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*. Lyn Pykett, however, contends that sensation fiction offers no coherent range of perspectives on gender, sexuality, class, marriage and the family due to the shifting perspective of the narration which does not align the reader with any one view; Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992) 81.



ideal Victorian woman.<sup>30</sup> Laura Fairlie is 'fair', 'delicate', 'sensitive' and 'nervous', 'truthful', 'innocent', 'simple' and 'childish' and having, of course, acquired all the appropriate feminine accomplishments, 'plays delightfully' (WW, 41–4, 28). Additionally, her beauty 'fills a void in [her lover, Walter Hartright's] spiritual nature' (41). Marian Halcombe sums up her half-sister's character best, saying, 'in short, she is an angel' (27). Laura's ideal womanhood is highlighted by contrast with Marian who, in addition to having masculine facial features and enjoying masculine pastimes, doesn't 'know one note of music from the other' (28).

We are given a demonstration of Laura's musical ability when, on Walter's first evening with the family at Limmeridge House, he asks her to play. The 'heavenly tenderness of the music of Mozart' completes the 'peaceful-home picture of the drawing room' (47, 46). Laura performs her role as the Angel in the House, bringing a spiritual repose to the home with her playing. Her identifying theme music is Mozart, an appropriate choice as mid-nineteenth-century music critics 'tended to dwell on [his music's] purity, beauty and sweetness', all characteristics that Laura shares.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Losseff argues that within the context of the novel, Mozart's music comes to symbolize 'order, sanity, and simple happiness'. She suggests that the 'little melodies' that Walter, an uninformed listener, loves to hear are likely a sonata, the form of which has been theorized by nineteenth- and twentieth-century musicologists alike as reflecting ideals of social order including paradigms of masculinity and femininity.<sup>32</sup>

Thus Laura's choice of music reinforces the domestic order enacted by her performance. Losseff suggests a tension inherent in this domestic happiness, since Walter is 'reading' Laura's choice of music in his narration of the scene and the reader is unaware of Laura's intent. But, as Losseff herself points out, Walter is an uninformed listener who does not recognize that Laura is playing a sonata. While it seems unlikely that Walter is imposing this reading on Laura's musical choice, it is more likely that Collins, an informed listener, has chosen music to underscore domestic harmony in this scene.<sup>33</sup> However, looking at this in the context

<sup>30</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860), ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) [hereafter WW].

<sup>31</sup> Stanley Sadie, 'Johann Chrysostom Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart' in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1st edn, ed. Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980) vol. 12: 724.

<sup>32</sup> Losseff, 'Absent Melody', 540, 541.

<sup>33</sup> See Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins on Music', Losseff, 'Absent Melody', and Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), on Collins' musical knowledge. Losseff notes that 'although Laura chooses her own repertory, and is

of melodramatic musical conventions, I argue that the meaning of Mozart's music is not static. Mayer notes that musical 'themes [in melodrama] are stated, repeated, quoted ... for reasons of sentiment, subliminal association with other actions or characters, or for deliberate irony or mockery, transposed in major and minor keys, varied in tempi and volume, and above all, performed in various combinations ... to give the play colour and variety and bold or subtle shifts in mood'.<sup>34</sup> As we shall see, Laura's theme is repeated for these reasons, but when shifting in mood, it also shifts in meaning. The signification of Mozart's music varies in a short period of time from traditional, gender-appropriate domestic harmony to meanings not often associated with the ideal Victorian woman – sensational discovery and sexual expression. The 'sense of peace and seclusion' Laura creates with her initial performance is soon to be disrupted (WW, 47).

Laura's music-making soon accompanies the sensational unraveling of a mystery connected with her family. Marian peruses her mother's letters in hope of finding some clue to the identity of the woman in white who stopped Walter on the road to London, and calls Walter in from the terrace where he has been walking with Laura. While Laura continues to walk, Marian reads from a letter about the new pupil who has come to Limmeridge:

'Four days ago Mrs. Catherick came here to see me, and brought her only child with her, a sweet little girl about a year older than our darling Laura –'

As the last sentence fell from the reader's lips, Miss Fairlie passed us on the terrace once more. *She was softly singing to herself one of the melodies which she had been playing earlier in the evening.* (WW, 48, emphasis added)

Collins begins the gradual revelation of the woman in white's identity, hinting that the similarities between Mrs Catherick's daughter Anne and Laura extend beyond their ages, by drawing Marian's and Walter's attention, as well as the reader's, to Laura at this moment. Her singing

in some sense thus responsible for articulating her own musical "voice", it is not she who interprets her own choices for the reader' ('Absent Melody', 539). While I would agree that we see Laura's first musical performances through Walter's lens, the latter performances related by Marian do not vary significantly. Such a uniform presentation of her performances in a novel that emphasizes personal knowledge and perspective through its use of multiple narratives indicates that we can read Laura's performances as unmediated by narrator, though not by culture. Atlas similarly argues that the views expressed by Collins' narrators and characters 'are strikingly consistent' and 'echo those offered privately in his letters' so may be interpreted as his own ('Wilkie Collins on Music', 256).

<sup>34</sup> Mayer, 'The Music of Melodrama', 51.



echoes the music she had played on the piano earlier, reinforcing the association between Laura and Mozart and accompanying her entrance into the scene in a melodramatic fashion. But it also lends an eerie tone to the scene by providing a muted accompaniment to this sensational discovery. Interestingly, Laura's theme, which initially signaled domestic harmony and peace, here signals the immanent disruption of that harmony by the discovery of the woman in white's identity.

The unveiling of the woman in white's identity is carefully staged around the drawing-room piano. Marian sits 'on a low chair, at one side of the instrument' absorbed in her reading (WW, 47). 'The piano stood about half way down along the inner wall. On the side of the instrument farthest from the terrace, Miss Halcombe was sitting with the letters scattered on her lap, and with one in her hand selected from them, and held close to the candle. On the side nearest to the terrace there stood a low ottoman, on which [Walter takes his] place' (47-8). Walter and Marian are placed on either side of the piano; its presence as a centrepiece for their conversation is a mute reminder of the domestic harmony created by it a few moments ago, as well as of the music played – Laura's theme. As Marian continues to read from the letter, coming to the part where Anne vowed as a child always to wear white, she 'paused, and looked at [Walter] across the piano' (50). The evidence mounts that the woman Walter met on the road to London is Anne Catherick. When Marian reads from the letter of the likeness between Anne and Laura, Walter 'start[s] up from the ottoman' beside the piano before Marian can read the name of the person Anne resembles (51). The resemblance between the two women hints at one of the secrets of the novel, the identity of Anne's father, and prefigures the plot to fake Laura's death so that her fiancé, Sir Percival Glyde, will inherit her fortune. Thus the piano, emblematic of domestic harmony, ironically accompanies the prelude to the coming action of the novel, the disruption of the happy group at Limmeridge – creating dramatic tension through this incongruence.

This scene of sensational discovery is brought to a close with the piano. As Laura comes in from the terrace, Marian says, 'Come in, Laura; come in, and wake Mrs. Vesey [Laura's former governess] with the piano. Mr. Hartright is petitioning for some more music, and he wants it, this time, of the lightest and liveliest kind' (52). Walter has not, in fact, requested more music. That Marian frames her command to Laura in this manner suggests that appealing to her sense of social responsibility, providing domestic entertainment, is sure to gain acquiescence. Thus the female musician's dual roles of entertainer and melodramatic accompanist overlap congruously, resolving the tension created in this prelude. Upbeat music signals the end of this rather

ominous scene. Marian's comment about the kind of music Walter wants 'this time' also indicates the sombre tone of the music Laura was playing and singing previously to accompany both domestic harmony and sensational discovery.

This sombre music comes to signal the expression of Laura's sexual desire and love for Walter. After this eventful scene, in the close intimacy of their student-teacher relationship, Walter's love for Laura grows.

Not a day passed, in that dangerous intimacy of teacher and pupil, in which my head was not close to Miss Fairlie's; my cheek, as we bent together over her sketch-book, almost touching hers. The more attentively she watched every movement of my brush, the more closely I was breathing the perfume of her hair, and the warm fragrance of her breath. It was part of my service, to live in the very light of her eyes – at one time to be bending over her, so close to her bosom as to tremble at the thought of touching it; at another, to feel her bending over me, bending so close to see what I was about, that her voice sank low when she spoke to me, and her ribbons brushed my cheek in the wind before she could draw them back. (WW, 54)

As Walter describes it, teaching water-colour painting is a sensual, sexually charged pursuit with the senses of touch, sight, smell and sound all engaged. Tantalizingly, Laura's ribbons brush his cheek which has been hovering close to hers. The smell of her hair, which had sexual associations for many Victorians; her breath, which suggests kissing; the sound of her voice, sinking lower as she bends 'so close' to him, registering her somatic response to his presence; and his desire, so palpable that the thought of touching her bosom as he bends over her makes him tremble, all combine in an erotically charged proximity facilitated by his art.<sup>35</sup>

Collins suggests less directly that Laura's art is equally erotically charged. Walter's narrative continues: 'My natural fondness for the music which she played with such tender feeling, such delicate womanly taste, and her natural enjoyment of giving me back, by the practice of her art, the pleasure which I had offered to her by the practice of mine, only wove another tie which drew us closer and closer to one another' (54). The parallel Walter makes between his art and hers, closely following his description of the physical intimacy afforded by painting, suggests that music similarly affords these pleasures. Thus music allows the woman to facilitate sexual arousal. The reader is left to infer what the pleasures of physical intimacy are in this case, perhaps indicating

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the complex meanings associated with the image of women's hair in the Victorian period, including sexuality, see Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America* 99 (1984) 936-54.



that this is inexpressible according to nineteenth-century middle-class convention. Laura's ability and enjoyment in giving pleasure with the practice of her art – a multi-sensual erotic experience, based on Walter's description of painting lessons – departs from constructions of middle-class women as sexually apathetic; yet, because it is performed in the drawing room and is a sanctioned feminine accomplishment, it lies well within the bounds of this ideal.

Music further gives Laura the language to express that which would otherwise be inappropriate: her love for a man other than her fiancé. On Walter's last evening, Laura plays 'some of those little melodies of Mozart's, which [he] used to like so much' and asks him to 'take [his] old place' in the chair near the piano, indicating the habitual performance of these songs. This time, however, 'she kept her attention riveted on the music – music which she knew by memory, which she had played over and over again, in former times, without the book' (107). Laura attempts to hide her agitation by concentrating on playing, but Walter 'knew that she was aware of [his] being close to her, by seeing the red spot in the cheek that was nearest to [him], fade out, and the face grow pale all over' (107). His proximity allows him to read the somatic expression of her agitation, as her low voice revealed to him her attraction during drawing lessons.

He is also able to interpret the sonoric expression of her feeling. Under cover of the music and in the close physical intimacy afforded by the piano, they are able to exchange a few words in private. Laura tells Walter, "I am very sorry you are going", ... her voice almost sinking to a whisper, her eyes looking more and more intently at the music; her fingers flying over the keys of the piano with a strange feverish energy which [he] had never noticed in her before' (108). While Laura attempts to hide how she feels by staring 'intently' at the score, her playing belies her emotional state. She performs the Mozart piece rapidly, giving a melodramatic variation to this theme – earlier described as 'peaceful' and 'tender' – associated with her love for Walter and thereby highlighting her agitation. Laura verbalizes this when she tells Walter, 'Don't speak of to-morrow ... Let the music speak to us to-night, in a happier language than ours', 'happier' because of its associations with their pleasure in each other's society (108). She is unable to conceal her agitation, however. 'Her lips trembled – a faint sigh fluttered from them, which she tried vainly to suppress. Her fingers wavered on the piano; she struck a false note; confused herself in trying to set it right; and dropped her hands angrily on her lap' (108). Her performance reflects her emotional state, her confusion and anger at the situation.

While the music allows her emotional expression, it also affords her the means of maintaining control. As Walter leaves the piano at a hint

from Marian, Laura 'touched the keys again with a surer hand'. She regains her composure when he leaves her proximity and is determined to play. "I *will* play it", she said, striking the notes almost passionately. "I *will* play it on the last night" (108). Her determination to play the piece on Walter's last evening indicates its emotional significance as well as her limited agency in this situation. Laura plays 'almost passionately' as the music allows her to maintain command of her emotions. As Losseff notes, 'playing "by heart" on Walter's last night 'might have witnessed her losing control completely, whereas in following the notation she can confine herself to follow the imprisoning "orders" of the score'.<sup>36</sup> Despite this emotional restraint, her performance conveys strong feelings:

She played unintermittingly – played as if the music was her only refuge from herself. Sometimes, her fingers touched the notes with a lingering fondness, a soft, plaintive, dying tenderness, unutterably beautiful and mournful to hear – sometimes, they faltered and failed her, or hurried over the instrument mechanically, as if their task was a burden to them. But still, change and waver as they might in the expression they imparted to the music, their resolution to play never faltered. (WW, 108–9)

She repeats her theme music, the Mozart melodies, varying the tempo yet again. 'Peaceful' at its first occurrence, 'feverish' at its second, the music is now both melancholy and 'mechanical', tempo and expression imparting meaning to the audience and reader. Performing the piece softly, 'dying' and 'mournful', she communicates her sorrow at loss of love.

The 'happier language' of music does not speak to all in the audience, however, suggesting the ability music gives women to subvert gender stereotypes without raising alarm. Lyn Pykett notes that in sensation fiction:

the heroine/villainess ... may be presented as the object of a public gaze within the text, or the scene may be staged directly for the reader. In such scenes the female body becomes a sign (or system of signs) which is imperfectly read, or misread, by the characters within the text, but which is legible to the narrator, and hence to the reader – even if what is legible is finally the sign's elusiveness.<sup>37</sup>

I suggest that music as a sign functions in a similar way. Laura's performance is deeply expressive of passion and sorrow for the loss of a lover – transgressive emotions in that he is of a lower class status and she is already engaged to another – yet is misread as evening

<sup>36</sup> Losseff, 'Absent Melody', 543.

<sup>37</sup> Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 97–8.



entertainment by other characters. The lawyer, Mr Gilmore, writes: 'Miss Fairlie played to us in the evening – not so well as usual, I thought' (WW, 113). His straightforward and un insightful comment indicates that he had no suspicion of the musical communication between Laura and Walter, despite her noticeable agitation, and was unaware of the eroticism in her performance, 'her fingers touch[ing] fond[ly]' and 'tender[ly]'. Therefore, music can be a private communication between those who know how to read it.

The privacy afforded by musical language allows Laura to communicate other inappropriate feelings without breaching the rules of propriety. When her fiancé, Sir Percival Glyde, comes to stay at Limmeridge, Laura selects a different sort of music. Marian notes in her journal: 'She went to the piano, choosing new music of the dexterous, tuneless, florid kind. The lovely old melodies of Mozart, which poor Hartwright was so fond of, she has never played since he left. The book is no longer in the music-stand. She took the volume away herself, so that nobody might find it out and ask her to play from it' (WW, 148). With Walter gone, Laura takes care that their theme music is not repeated, indicating the emotional resonance of the Mozart melodies and the inappropriateness of music signaling her love for Walter occurring now. This 'new music' is an appropriate theme for her relationship with Sir Percival, signifying her attitude toward him. It is 'tuneless', or unmelodious, and therefore the converse of the music representing Laura's love for Walter, and this term also connotes being out of agreement, which accurately reflects Laura's desire to be released from her engagement to a man she does not love. According to Losseff, the 'new music' signals 'the fragmentary, the aphoristic, the unspoken, the melody that cannot actually be heard and never comes to completion, the love of masks, the play of genders – that form a complete antithesis to the idea of "Mozart"'.<sup>38</sup> While the identity of the composer is a matter of debate among critics, all agree that Collins was not fond of this 'new music', a sentiment suggesting that strong antipathy is latent in this situation.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Losseff, 'Absent Melody', 546.

<sup>39</sup> Harvey Peter Sucksmith, in 'Explanatory Notes' to Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), suggests that the 'dexterous, tuneless, florid' (608) music may refer to Wagner, a composer for whom Collins 'conceived a violent dislike' (Robinson, *Wilkie Collins*, 156). However, Losseff convincingly argues that the composer was more likely Robert Schumann, since the only piece of Wagner's piano music that had been published at the time of the novel, Sonata in B flat major, Op. 1 (Leipzig, 1832), was more classical than his later works (Losseff, 'Absent Melody', 543–7). Furthermore, according to Atlas and Losseff, Collins was even more vocal in his letters about his dislike of Schumann than Wagner; see Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins on Music', 256–7, and Losseff, 'Absent Melody', 544.

Although Laura never plays Mozart on the piano again after Walter leaves, the music continues to appear as a silent refrain conveying meaning to the reader through her bodily expression. While in conference with Mr Gilmore on the subject of marriage settlements, he asks her how she would like to leave her property in a will. She replies that she would like to leave it to Marian, but

'Not all of it', she said. 'There is some one else, besides Marian –'  
She stopped; her colour heightened; and the fingers of the hand that rested upon the album beat gently on the margin of the drawing [by Walter], as if her memory had set them going mechanically with the remembrance of a favourite tune. (WW, 128)

Her fidgeting, the somatic expression of her body, completes the sentence for her. Her blush, her hand on the drawing given her by Walter and her fingers beating out the notes of 'a favourite tune' – the Mozart that is their song, no doubt – indicate that she is thinking of Walter. Thus the music scores a performance that is legible to the reader. Her memory physically manifests itself in the action of playing music, which is conjoined with her expression of desire for Walter. As Weliver points out, 'learning to play keyboard instruments was frequently used as an example in associationist psychology, which proposed that the mind stored simple ideas derived from sense or introspection that were then linked in chains to form complex ideas'.<sup>40</sup> Laura's unconscious physical movements demonstrate how strongly she associates her performance of Mozart with her feelings for Walter. Thus, while she may have acquiesced to her engagement to Sir Percival, this action implies that her heart still belongs to Walter. This vestige of independence is enacted in the only means available for her to express it – musically.

The issue of Laura's agency is a contested one. Weliver argues that Laura's playing suggests 'her strong personality through a virtuosity that violates class norms' because her repertoire includes Mozart and the 'dexterous' music by an unidentified composer.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Laura shows 'an adroitness in manipulating how she uses music' which demonstrates an ability 'to manipulate courtship relations with men'.<sup>42</sup> Losseff likewise indicates that Laura communicates through her performances, but argues that she is constrained by her class status. Thus, 'Laura's piano, though owned by family rather than husband, belongs not to her but to Limmeridge, and in generating music solely

<sup>40</sup> Phyllis Weliver, 'Music and Female Power in Sensation Fiction', *Wilkie Collins Society Journal* 2 (1999) 46. For a fuller discussion of Victorian theories of associationist psychology, see Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, chapter 2.

<sup>41</sup> Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*, 100.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 105, 106.



through it, she speaks from within a gilded cage'.<sup>43</sup> She further suggests that

although it might be unusual for a non-professional musician to be represented wholly in terms of art music, Collins did have the relatively unusual advantage of being able to draw on a real-life example of an 'amateur' pianist of real talent ... [Therefore] we should look beyond the kind of repertoires that young ladies usually drew on for evening entertainment in teasing out the nascent threads of Laura's musical activities.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, high art composers such as Mozart did compose piano pieces that were within the range of unskilled amateurs. I would suggest then that Laura's agency comes not from her skill level, as Weliver argues, but from the ways in which she uses music to convey her transgressive thoughts and feelings to Walter and to the reader. She may 'speak from within a gilded cage', as Losseff points out, but her message is not sanctioned by it. Laura is able to use musical conventions to her advantage, communicating with her lover both somatically and sonorically, thereby subverting the stereotype of the ideal woman by expressing sexual desire.

#### Musical villainy and sexual subtext: Count Fosco

Laura is not the only sensually transgressive musician in the novel. We also see Count Fosco play, performances which initially effeminize him and contribute substantially to the novel's melodramatic aspect. Critics of music in sensation fiction touch on Fosco only tangentially, focusing instead on the high art music played by Laura.<sup>45</sup> However, examining music in the context of melodrama allows for a cohesive reading of all the musical performances. As I have argued elsewhere, male musicians in Britain were feminized or foreign or, as is the case with Count Fosco, both.<sup>46</sup> An Italian living in exile, Fosco is both effeminized and demonized by his musical abilities. At Blackwater Park, Marian and Laura observe him

singing Figaro's famous song in the Barber of Seville, with that crisply-fluent vocalisation which is never heard from any other than

<sup>43</sup> Losseff, 'Absent Melody', 535.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> See Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins on Music'; Losseff, 'Absent Melody'; and Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*.

<sup>46</sup> See Laura Vorachek, "'The Instrument of the Century': The Piano as an Icon of Female Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century", *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies* 38-9 (2000) 26-43.

an Italian throat, accompanying himself on the concertina, which he played with ecstatic throwings-up of his arms, and graceful twistings, and turnings of his head, like a fat St. Cecilia masquerading in male attire. (WW, 205)

Like his penchant for sweets and small animals, music marks Fosco as feminine. Although the concertina, one of the most popular domestic instruments in the Victorian period, was typically associated with the working classes by the end of century, in the 1850s and 60s it was more commonly found in the drawing-rooms of the upper and middle classes.<sup>47</sup> Thus Fosco's instrument in this scene contributes to his domestication. His choice of an aria from Rossini's opera marks his first association with that composer. Recognized by contemporaries in the first half of the nineteenth century as the greatest composer of his time, Rossini appeared 'the indolent raconteur, the gourmet, the spirit of an elegant Second Empire Salon', a description which has certain resonances with the lazy, gluttonous, cultured and intelligent Fosco.<sup>48</sup>

Marian's characterization of Fosco as a woman in drag seems to belie the threat he poses to her and Laura. Like Laura, Fosco is able to use music to project a socially acceptable image of himself to others. But Fosco's musical knowledge also suggests a more menacing side to his character. Marian writes in her journal:

After dinner, [Fosco] took Laura by the hand, and asked her if she would be 'so sweet as to play to him'. She complied, through sheer astonishment. He sat by the piano, with his watch-chain resting in folds, like a golden serpent, on the sea-green protuberance of his waistcoat. His immense head lay languidly on one side; and he gently beat time with two of his yellow-white fingers. He highly approved of the music, and tenderly admired Laura's manner of playing – not as poor Hartwright used to praise it, with an innocent enjoyment of the sweet sounds, but with a clear, cultivated, practical knowledge of the merits of the composition, in the first place, and of the merits of the player's touch, in the second. (WW, 260-61)

The 'serpent' that rests on Fosco's belly and the contrast with Walter suggest his evil nature. Walter's 'innocent enjoyment' of Laura's playing suggests a prelapsarian appreciation of music, while Fosco's 'clear, cultivated, practical knowledge' of both music and musicians renders him all the more sinister with its devilish, postlapsarian associations. Thus, too much knowledge of music is a bad sign, a prevalent attitude

<sup>47</sup> Allan W. Atlas, *The Wheatstone English Concertina in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 7.

<sup>48</sup> Phillip Gossett, 'Rossini, Gioachino (Antonio)' in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: MacMillan, 2001) vol. 21: 755.



in the nineteenth century, which 'emphasized the moral superiority of the amateur musician over the crassness of the professional'.<sup>49</sup>

While Fosco's musical skill contributes to his characterization as a villain, it also aids him in his villainy. As their situation at Blackwater Park worsens, Marian writes letters to the only two men she and Laura can appeal to for protection, their lawyer and their uncle, and gives them to Laura's maid to be delivered. That evening, when Fosco hears Marian has no letters for the post, he 'sat down at the piano; and played the air of the lively Neapolitan street-song, "La mia Carolina", twice over' (WW, 286).<sup>50</sup> This is almost certainly a sign to Madame Fosco who, after a quick cup of tea, leaves the room. Before Marian can follow her, the Count stops her, first with a request for a cup of tea, and a second time with music.

He stopped me again – this time, by going back to the piano, and suddenly appealing to me on a musical question in which he declared that the honour of his country was concerned ... – And, without waiting for a word of assent or dissent on my part, looking me hard in the face all the time, he began thundering on the piano, and singing to it with loud and lofty enthusiasm; only interrupting himself, at intervals, to announce to me fiercely the title of the different pieces of music [selections from Rossini's 'Moses in Egypt'] ... The piano trembled under his powerful hands; and the teacups on the table rattled, as his big bass voice thundered out the notes and his heavy foot beat time on the floor.

There was something horrible – something fierce and devilish, in the outburst of his delight at his own singing and playing, and in the triumph with which he watched its effect upon me, as I shrank nearer and nearer to the door. (286–7)

In this passage, Fosco appears at his most threatening and dangerous. No longer an effeminate musician, his performance reveals him to be 'hard', 'loud', 'fierce', 'powerful', and 'devilish', with both his 'bass voice' and his playing 'thundering' in the room. Both 'horrible' and 'triumph[ant]', as villains usually are when menacing the innocent heroine, Fosco intimidates Marian, who shrinks 'nearer and nearer to the door' in an attempt to escape, and his disruptive effect on domestic harmony and tranquility is seen in its representatives, the 'trembl[ing]' piano and 'rattl[ing]' teacups. The music he chooses contains dramatic chords accentuating the vocal part and ominous rumbles, an appropriate accompaniment for villainy. As Frank Rahill notes, Rossini was 'famous for his musical storms and noisy crescendos'.<sup>51</sup> The threat

he poses to the tranquility of the piano and teacups suggests a veiled threat to Marian as well. Fosco's admiration of Marian and Madame Fosco's fierce jealousy suggest a sexual undertone to this scene.<sup>52</sup>

It is perhaps fitting that this ambiguously gendered character is sexually attracted to Marian, the other ambiguously gendered character in the novel. But as Losseff points out, while Fosco's musicianship feminizes him, he is firmly constructed as 'an "effeminate" man. ... He never loses his relationship with the prescriptive power of the word and the patriarchal order, since his is always *texted* music'.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, she notes this in conjunction with the previous scene, when Fosco comments on Laura's performance, rather than with this scene, in which he plays music specifically denoted as *texted*. The text of Fosco's last selection, 'Prayer of Israelites, at the Passage of the Red Sea', accompanies the scene in Rossini's *Moses in Egypt* in which the Israelites pray for aid as they stand seemingly trapped at the edge of the Red Sea, tensions mounting as the Egyptian hordes advance. According to the libretto, the Egyptians are advancing because Moses's sister Miriam has chosen God and her people over the man she loves, the Pharaoh's son; he then orders the Egyptians to chase the Jews, a scorned lover exacting his revenge. Thus Fosco's choice of music both sets and reflects the tone of the scene, innocence threatened by evil, and furthers the sexual subtext by hinting that a rebuffed sexual attraction underlies the threat.

This music is again associated with Fosco toward the end of the novel, when Walter goes to his house in St John's Wood to glimpse the man for the first time. Walter first hears Fosco and then sees him. 'The magnificent melody of the Prayer in Rossini's "Moses", sung in a sonorous bass voice, rose grandly through the suburban silence of the place. The front garden gate opened and closed. The Count had come out' (WW, 527). This music precedes and identifies Fosco for Walter, as he recognizes 'the deep ringing voice which Marian's description had made familiar to me' (527), much like the way music identified the villain for an audience at a melodramatic play. Recalling Mayer's point that musical 'themes [in melodrama] are stated, repeated, quoted ... for reasons of ... subliminal association with other actions or characters', Fosco's theme not only identifies him, but reminds us of his musico-sexual aggression against Marian even while she is safely out of his reach. This scene marks the transition in the novel from private music to public. Walter is familiar with Fosco's singing because Marian has made

<sup>49</sup> Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins on Music', 267.

<sup>50</sup> I have been unable to trace this song in any of the song indexes or library catalogues I have searched.

<sup>51</sup> Rahill, *The World of Melodrama*, 126.

<sup>52</sup> The threatened violence in this scene is realized not long after, when Fosco reads and writes in Marian's journal, an act which D. A. Miller refers to as a 'virtual rape' D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 162.

<sup>53</sup> Losseff, 'Absent Melody', 548, emphasis in original.



her journal public to him, 'read[ing] to him from the manuscript' while he takes notes (401). And it is when the Count leaves the privacy of his own home, singing his theme song, that Walter is able to identify him. Thus music is an identifying agent not only for the audience but for characters as well.

As the novel comes to a close and characters are restored or punished accordingly, music plays its final accompaniment to a sensational scene of discovery. The plot leaves its private, domestic footings and becomes one of political intrigue with the entrance of 'The Brotherhood', an Italian political secret society. Correspondingly, music also enters a public space, the opera hall, and is performed by professional musicians. Walter follows Fosco to a performance of Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* at the opera, bringing Pesca in the hopes that his friend will recognize the Count. Walter sees Fosco soon after entering, but waits until the end of the first act to put Pesca to the test. The music and the libretto at the end of this act combine to create a tense mood of heightened emotion and expectation. This emotional trajectory parallels that of the novel, thereby creating resonances with the musical accompaniment in melodramatic fashion.<sup>54</sup> The reader is in a state of heightened expectation, awaiting Pesca's recognition of Fosco, as the audience expects Gennaro's death. Reader and audience are each disappointed, but then rewarded with something more dramatic and sensational: Fosco recognizes Pesca and is visibly afraid of him, and Lucrezia saves Gennaro's life. The public recognition alerts an unidentified foreign operative to Fosco's identity and results in his death, closing the book on his villainy.

Both Laura and Fosco use music to convey sexual feelings, performances which defy melodramatic formulae by presenting a heroine with sexual agency and a villain who is effeminized by his instrument choices, among other things. While conforming to some gender conventions (Laura plays voiceless instrumental music and Fosco is associated with operatic texts), these characters both complicate the simple stereotypes of melodrama and render the novel's moral ambiguous. However, Collins characterizes music performance as a specifically feminine form of agency with a specifically sexual subtext, albeit only flirting with impropriety. Thus Laura is able to express herself within the middle-class conventions of domestic music without

causing anxiety. As this novel suggests, music's performative nature demonstrates that the seemingly fixed category of gender also can be orchestrated. Although borrowing from its musical conventions, melodrama's world of certainties and absolutes does not exist in sensation fiction.

<sup>54</sup> In the final scene, Lucrezia begs her husband Alfonso not to kill Gennaro who, unbeknownst to all but her, is her son from a former marriage. Alfonso refuses, believing that Lucrezia is in love with Gennaro, and has her administer the poisoned wine. After Alfonso departs, Lucrezia begs the skeptical Gennaro to drink the antidote. He finally drinks it and escapes unharmed.