

## Art, Music, and the Emotions in the Aesthetic Movement

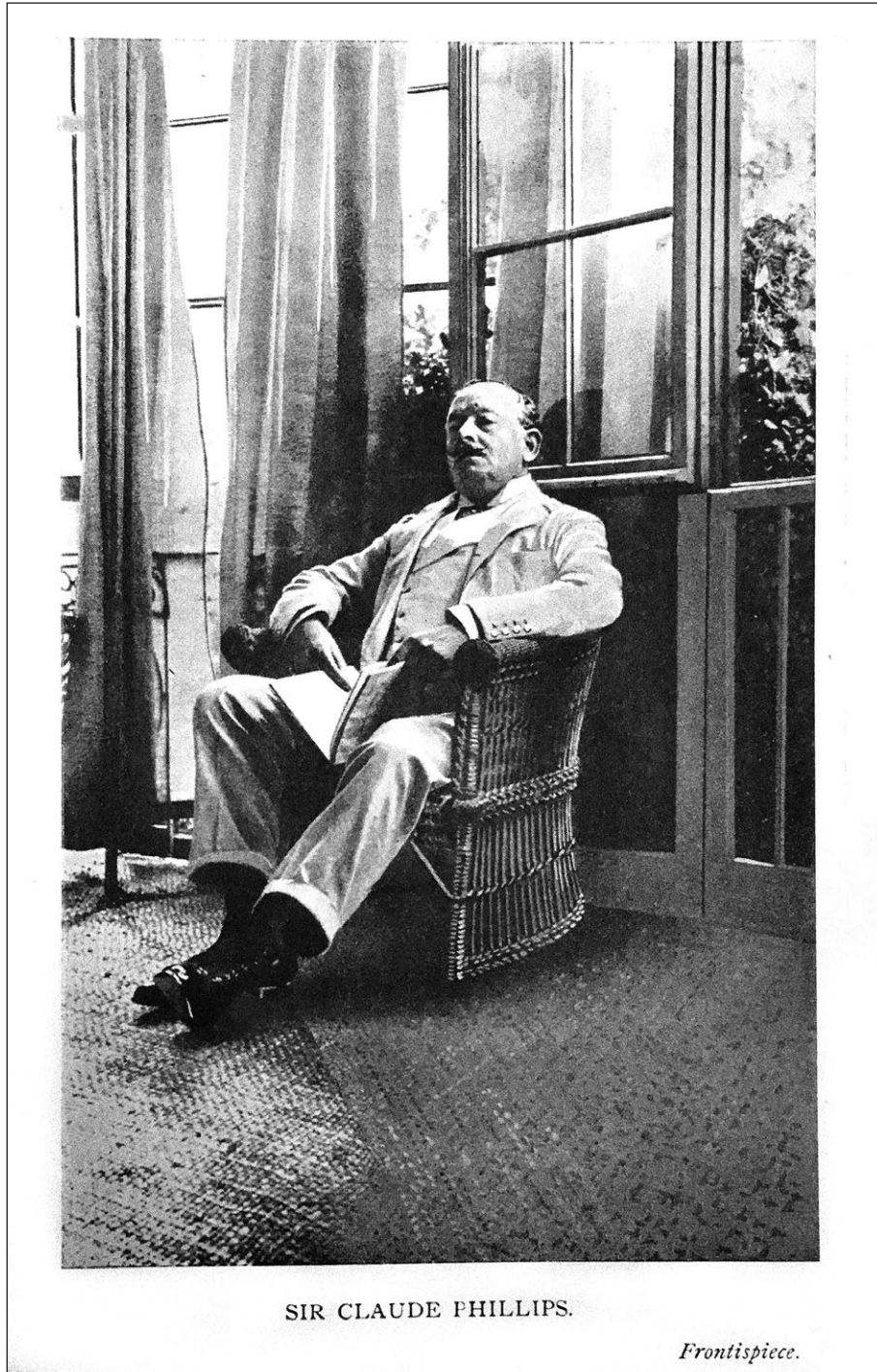
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This article examines historical objects that exist at the point of intersection of two radically incompatible media: art and music.<sup>1</sup> How does a time-based medium, whose realization depends upon re-creative performance, relate to one whose product, the art object, is, though subject to the processes of time, static? At issue will be the ways these phenomenologically distinct aspects of cultural production overlap, exist in counterpoint or in harmony (here as elsewhere I purposely borrow musical terms, which operate so effectively as metaphors beyond their disciplinary home), and coalesce around specific themes and preoccupations to represent, articulate, produce, or, indeed, repress feelings. The relationship of art and music sits at the fulcrum of at least three academic disciplines — art history, musicology, and cultural history — and is methodologically troubling to each, as presently constituted. Where the visual and the musical combine, as in the realm of opera, further complexities emerge.

In addressing ‘feeling and the Victorians’ we inevitably confront the Bloomsburian caricature in which, under the endless reign of an unsmiling queen, the denizens of Britain remained irredeemably repressed and unable to emote. A photograph of Claude Phillips, director of the Wallace Collection, for example, displays the stiffest of stiff upper lips, adorned with an exquisitely waxed moustache (*Fig. 1*). In 1902, the year after Victoria’s death, Phillips took upon himself the task of addressing ‘The Quality of Emotion in Modern Art’ in an essay for the *North American Review*. Born in 1847, Phillips had behind him a distinguished career as lead critic of both music and art for the *Daily Telegraph*, and boasted a wide range of contacts

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a lecture given at Birkbeck, University of London in July 2015 as part of the conference ‘The Arts and Feeling in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture’. I am grateful to Vicky Mills for the invitation to participate in the conference and for her help with this article. The paper has been only lightly edited and is intended to retain the tone of a spoken text, with the addition of basic references and hyperlinks to the key visual and musical works included in the conference presentation. The intention here is to introduce a wide range of material. A revised and expanded version with comprehensive bibliography will appear in my forthcoming book *Broken Pastoral: Art and Music in Britain, Gothic Revival to Punk Rock*.



*Fig. 1:* Claude Phillips, frontispiece to *Emotion in Art*, ed. by Maurice W. Brockwell (London: Heinemann, 1925).

in the circles of late-Victorian high culture. He launched into his topic with gusto. ‘The keynote to the Art of the Nineteenth Century’, he began

is sadness, heart-searching, melancholy — now spiritual, now sensuous — revolt against surrounding circumstance. [. . .] It is the sweeping into the domain which has not previously held them of a thousand visual and mental impressions, of a thousand subtleties of thought and feeling. [. . .] It is the effort, partly, it may be, out of resentment and rebellion, but mainly out of pity and love, to face the grimmest, saddest aspects, the most heart-shattering problems of modern life; to force them, not always with due regard for aesthetic fitness or unfitness, into art; to intensify the atmosphere of tragic horror which surrounds them, to drive into the flesh the thorns which pierce those of humanity, to bleed with its wounds, to curse with its curses, to despair with its despairs.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of this rather adamant statement of realism — in tune with the verismo operas of the day that Phillips admired — we might want to place him somewhere on the spectrum between Émile Zola and Charles Dickens, or perhaps between William Powell Frith and Édouard Manet. Yet here, from the same volume, is the same author on a painting then attributed to Giorgione, now writing in a style of Aesthetic criticism that owes much to Walter Pater:

Here, indeed, is a moment of pause and peace, when the waves of passion droop and subside, when it is not lost but in suspense; when recollection and expectancy afford a moment of higher beauty and rapture than fruition can ever give. The Music of lute and pipe and clear, live water are here the outward expression of the love that [. . .] harmonizes fair, human creatures and keeps ever-young the world that environs them.<sup>3</sup>

Present within Phillips’s work is an apparently unresolved binary between the claims of a realism in which the representation of emotions is achieved through narrative forms and close description of the material world, and a formalism which claims that the manipulation of abstract structures in art or music can directly affect the emotional state of the viewer or reflect that of the creator. Below, I explore some ramifications of each of these paradigms in late-Victorian Britain. Before leaving Claude Phillips,

<sup>2</sup> Claude Phillips, ‘The Quality of Emotion in Modern Art’, in *Emotion in Art*, ed. by Maurice W. Brockwell (London: Heinemann, 1925), pp. 3–31 (p. 3) (first publ. in *North American Review*, 174 (1902), 348–67).

<sup>3</sup> Claude Phillips, ‘Music in Art’, in *Emotion in Art*, ed. by Brockwell, pp. 117–31 (p. 129).



Fig. 2: Edmund Dulac, *La Legende de Joseph* (Sir Claude Phillips), 1914, gouache.  
© The Wallace Collection, London.

however, I want to add a further image, a caricature of him later in life by Edmund Dulac. In it, the portly critic now at the seedy end of a long Edwardian heyday, is inserted into the action of Richard Strauss's opera for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, *The Legend of Joseph* (1914), which retells the story of the chaste Joseph's refusal to be seduced by Potiphar's wife (Fig. 2). Although this could be a sly, possibly homophobic, allusion to Phillips's status as a confirmed bachelor, it also introduces another key theme of this article: the relationship between sexual desire and aesthetic pleasure at the point of intersection of art and music.

### Passions at the piano

There is no better instantiation of Phillips's realist paradigm — 'sadness, heart-searching, melancholy — now spiritual, now sensuous — revolting against surrounding circumstance' — than *The Awakening Conscience*, exhibited by

the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt at the Royal Academy in 1854 (*Fig. 3*). Hunt's fanatical realism conducts an inventory of the elaborate array of objects on display, lavishing unseemly care on the vulgar furnishings of a rented apartment in mid-Victorian St John's Wood. Lynda Nead, Kate Flint, and Caroline Arscott among many others have offered richly accomplished and rightly celebrated readings of this work.<sup>4</sup> I want to focus here, however, on the musical elements — beginning with the piano itself.<sup>5</sup> Hunt portrays a brand-new upright piano whose compact action relied on an industrially produced cast-iron frame — a device patented by Wheatley Kirk as recently as 1836. It swiftly replaced the smaller square design, typical of the early nineteenth century. Various rather ungainly intermediate forms had attempted to make the tessitura and dynamic range of a grand piano available within the confines of the bourgeois interior — one such can be seen looming silently in the left margins of Richard Redgrave's *The Governess* of 1844 with its soundboard and strings reaching to the ceiling (*Fig. 4*). In Redgrave's painting the silencing of the piano's emotional power straightforwardly echoes the plight of the governess herself, the text of her black-lined letter from home as mutely significant as the unplayed music on the piano. Such an instrument would have cost almost as much as a grand piano, placing it within the reach only of wealthy patrons such as the unseen parents of the governess's well-dressed charges. The emergence of cheaper, mass-produced uprights allowed piano playing and accompanied singing to become the preferred leisure activity of the well-to-do middle-class Victorian home, and the extended dynamic range and more extensive keyboards of the new instruments made possible a wider scope of musical effects — they had, in short, a far greater expressive range than the square piano.<sup>6</sup> D'Almaine's upright pianos were priced at between twenty-five and forty guineas in 1856, but later in the century a new piano could be obtained for twelve guineas.<sup>7</sup> So ubiquitous has the piano become that it is important to note the flexibility of this remarkable keyboard instrument, the first to play notes

<sup>4</sup> Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Kate Flint, 'Reading *The Awakening Conscience* Rightly', in *Pre-Raphaelites Re-viewed*, ed. by Marcia Pointon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 45–65; Caroline Arscott, 'Employer, Husband, Spectator: Thomas Fairbairn and the Commission of *The Awakening Conscience*', in *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth-Century Middle Class*, ed. by Janet Wolff and John Seed (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 159–90.

<sup>5</sup> The musicologist Richard Leppert was the first to draw out the musical dimensions in this work, in *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 189–212.

<sup>6</sup> See Rosamond E. M. Harding, *The Piano-Forte: Its History Traced to the Great Exhibition of 1851*, 2nd edn (Old Woking: Gresham Books, 1978); Cyril Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Derek B. Scott, *The Singing Bourgeois: Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room and Parlour*, 2nd edn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 46.



Fig. 3: William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853, oil on canvas, 762 × 559 mm. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hunt-the-awakening-conscience-to2075>>.



Fig. 4: Richard Redgrave, *The Governess*, 1844, oil on canvas, 711 × 915 mm.  
© Victoria and Albert Museum.

at subtle gradations of loudness in response to how firmly the keys are struck (*piano*, *forte*); rhythmic or lyric, grand or intimate, suitable to demonstrate genteel feminine accomplishment in the home or the public performance of masculine romantic ardour, and industrially produced, it provided the nineteenth century's ideal musical vehicle. An important parallel development was the cheap production of sheet music, often with elaborate illustrations, on lithographic presses from the 1840s onwards. This allowed for the quick circulation of new music and the development of a commercialized mass culture that linked musical and visual production in a single object.

John Ruskin, then, was right to sense the 'newness' of the piano — and to identify this as a 'fatal' quality, noting that its 'perfect polishings' derived from industrial mass production.<sup>8</sup> In Hunt's painting the piano appears as an instrument of torture rather than of delight. Hunt presents us with a vivid scenario: a kept woman, her body defiled in a relationship

<sup>8</sup> 'The Author of "Modern Painters"' [John Ruskin], letter to *The Times*, 25 May 1854, reprinted in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library Edition, 39 vols (London: Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, 1903–12), xii: *Lectures on Architecture and Painting, etc.* (1904), pp. 333–35 (p. 334).

which perverts the normative familial structure, is seen at the very moment when she realizes the errors of her ways: her conscience is awakening as we watch. The woman's expression, although repainted by Hunt some years after the work was first exhibited, suggests an aural stimulus; her mouth opens silently while her seducer toys with the keyboard and with her.

She has been singing from the sheet music that sits on the piano, 'Oft, in the stilly night', from Thomas Moore's collection of Scotch Airs published in 1815, set to music by Sir John Stevenson, vicar-choral of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin with refined, harp-like, Italianate accompaniments (Scott, p. 26). This nostalgic ballad, marked 'with melancholy expression', based on a slow, downwards traversal of the C major arpeggio, figures in the painting as an agent for moral good. The simplicity of the popular ballad, easy to play and to sing, contrasts with the overwrought, suffocating intricacy of the Victorian interior. The musical language of this ballad is frankly sentimental and explicitly nostalgic. References to the quotidian feelings of childhood — smiles and tears — are swept up in a torrent of melancholy: loved ones have died, fortunes have turned, and purity has been lost. The falling melodic lines, emphasized by the slow tempo, amplify the dolorous sentiments.

A further musical score appears in *The Awakening Conscience*, this one newly published by Hunt's friend, the painter Edward Lear, who was also a keen musician. It is a setting of Tennyson's song 'Tears, Idle Tears' from *The Princess* (part IV), in which 'tears from the depth of some divine despair' recall 'the days that are no more'. Lear points up the emotional force of Tennyson's poem by using the full dynamic range of a piano, to draw the most from the instrument depicted in *The Awakening Conscience*. The last page of the score alone includes a plethora of markings: *piano* (quiet), *sforzando* (with sudden emphasis), *forte marcato* (loudly and emphatically), and with an arpeggiated (rippled) chord undergirding the word *fresh*, as if tingling the spine. Lear invokes a range of dramatic effects derived from the German lieder tradition and Italian opera, with the intention of heightening the emotional effect of the parlour ballad.

An iconographic reading of *The Awakening Conscience* would suggest that art and music combine here didactically to implore us to sympathize with the young woman — the sister arts together aspire to the condition of the sermon; image and sound are subordinated to the word in true Protestant style. Music contributes, in a subordinate role, to the larger narrative and enhances the poignancy of the scene. The diegetic function of music within the composition also offers a paradigm for the functioning of Hunt's canvas for its audience at the Royal Academy of 1854; far from being merely a dry exercise in didacticism, the painting itself was intended to evoke a powerful emotional reaction from the viewer whose sympathies are awakened by the painting, just as the conscience of the young woman



is being awakened by the sound of music. This might, in turn, incite the respectable middle-class viewer to renounce the kind of masculine behaviour portrayed or to support charitable efforts to help 'fallen' women.

Yet, reading *The Awakening Conscience* against the grain, we might begin to suspect that the pleasures of music, the bodily vibrations which generate emotional states, exceed the sweet nostalgic sentiments of 'Oft, in the stilly night'. Even those very words alert us to what now happens during the night: this woman is not alone but selling sex for money. Surely the male patron's pawing of the keyboard indicates an equivalence between music and sexual desire — perhaps even sexual violence. Hunt ostensibly uses music as an emblem of childlike purity — a bulwark of innocence against corruption. Yet the association of music with sex is so deeply enculturated that it cannot be erased and is, indeed, powerfully restated by this work.

### Rossettian vibrations

Nowhere is this theme of music's bodily, fleshly resonances more prominent than in the work of Hunt's fellow Pre-Raphaelite, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. For an 1857 edition of Tennyson's poems, Rossetti illustrated lines from 'The Palace of Art':

Or in a clear-wall'd city on the sea,  
Near gilded organ-pipes, her hair  
Wound with white roses, slept St. Cecily:  
An angel looked at her.<sup>9</sup>

Rossetti's image, rich beyond the confines of its small size, so far exceeds Tennyson's conception as to be a quite independent work of the imagination (*Fig. 5*). The tiny, square composition is as replete with details as a Gothic illumination. Far from rendering Tennyson's chaste encounter between sleeping girl and sexless angel, Rossetti locks the patron saint of music in rapturous physical embrace with a distinctly masculine suitor, who wraps his cloak about her. The composition includes enough pipes and orifices for a Freudian field day. The portative organ stands in for the Victorian piano, an instrument of passion, its harmonic vibrations those of the body rather than of the celestial spheres. St Cecilia's distractedness is not the mystical sleep that Tennyson describes, but musical rapture, a condition which merges into orgasmic delight in Rossetti's version. Is it the music itself or the very physical presence of the male figure that has brought about the ecstasy of St Cecilia? Rossetti's female protagonist could,

<sup>9</sup> 'The Palace of Art', in *The Early Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. by John Churton Collins (London: Methuen, 1900), pp. 86–100 (p. 90).



*Fig 5:* Wood engraving by Dalziel brothers after Dante Gabriel Rossetti's design, taken from Alfred Tennyson, *Poems* (London: Moxon, 1857).

perhaps, be any Victorian Cecily at the piano, rather than the Roman martyr who resisted the blandishments of secular music at her wedding, thinking only of God. St Cecilia's rapture, in Raphael's celebrated canvas of 1513 (with which Rossetti would have been familiar through engraved reproductions), derived from the divine music above her, rather than the worldly strains of the organ or piano. At a time when society pathologized female sexual pleasure, associating it with prostitutes and the degenerate, this was a challenging image both of music and of woman: within the familiar form

of the piano in the parlour lay, then, the radically disruptive potential of heightened emotion and unbridled female desire.

The playing of music is central to *The Blue Closet*, an opulent, chromatic watercolour of 1857, in which Rossetti depicts four mysterious women in a fairy-tale medieval setting. Their costumes and accoutrements cohere visually but not historically (*Fig. 6*). Liz Prettejohn has persuasively linked *The Blue Closet* to a panel by Bernardo Daddi painted around 1340, which Rossetti would have seen at Christ Church, Oxford, depicting four angel musicians — a truly pre-Raphaelite reference.<sup>10</sup> From the Florentine work, Rossetti intuited the potential of pictorial balance as a metaphor for harmony, adopting Daddi's symmetrical geometry ordered around a central vertical division, but reworking the arrangement of colours with a complex antiphonal exchange between the two sides of the composition of greens and reds, with a secondary group of blue, gold, and white passages. Two women play a strange, double-keyboard instrument with bells and harp-like strings rising up behind it; two sing from manuscript scores. Rossetti insists on a parallel between the solemn harmony of their music and the harmonious relationships of colour and line within *The Blue Closet* itself.

Rossetti emphasized the formal and musical elements in his work, deliberately disavowing decodable meaning in works such as *The Blue Bower* of 1865; the blue tiles of earlier watercolour remain, but the space is even more constrained. The single, opulent figure is closer to us; closer, perhaps, than Victorian propriety would allow (*Fig. 7*). Moreover, there is no suggestion of medieval religiosity, no whiff of incense; this is a corporeal work in the fleshly medium of oil painting, which focuses on the delights and desires of the body. In the gentle motion of the woman's fingers across the strings of a musical instrument — the image of a sound being produced and the bodily sensations involved in releasing and receiving it — Rossetti found an exact analogy with the objectives of his paintings. The atmosphere of sensuality is heightened by Rossetti's reference — through the tiles and the instrument, an *ayame-koto* from Japan — with the Far East.<sup>11</sup> The instrument, which resembles a zither and is played with an ivory plectrum, usually has thirteen strings made of silk (although Rossetti gives us fourteen); one hand is positioned behind the bridge to alter the pitch of the note. Rossetti, of course, had no interest in ethnomusicology: it was the physical contact of the languid hand and string to produce an exotic sound that concerned him in this work. And here we encounter the proximity of feeling — the realm of the tactile — with feelings and the emotional and even

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 20–23.

<sup>11</sup> See Paul Spencer-Longhurst, *The Blue Bower: Rossetti in the 1860s* (London: Scala Publishers/Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 2000), p. 12.



Fig. 6: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blue Closet*, 1857, watercolour, 354 × 260 mm.  
 © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-the-blue-closet-no3057>>.

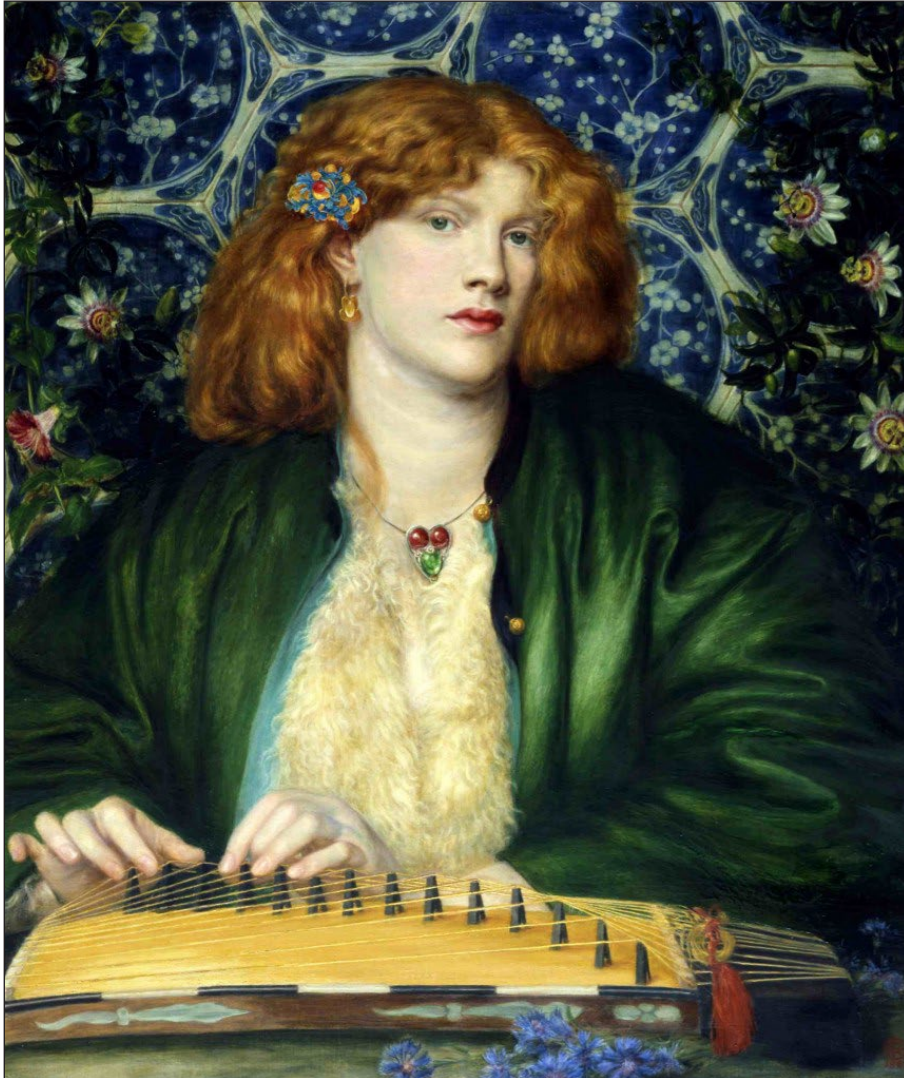


Fig. 7: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blue Bower*, 1865, oil on canvas, 840 × 709 mm.  
 © The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham. Art UK.

sexual sphere. Rich with colours and scents — the smell of passion flowers and cornflowers (punning on the name of the model, Fanny Cornforth) — and oppressively rich in texture and colour, the image appeals simultaneously to vision, hearing, touch, and smell.

*Veronica Veronese* (1872), presses further on questions of harmony (Fig. 8). Wholly grounded in a single tonality, it is ‘chiefly a study’, Rossetti



Fig. 8: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Veronica Veronese*, 1872, oil on canvas, 43 × 35 in.  
© Delaware Art Museum, Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial.  
<<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s228.rap.html>>.

wrote, ‘of varied Greens’.<sup>12</sup> The title associates the work with the great sixteenth-century colourist Paolo Veronese: the sheen and the luxuriant green of the woman’s velvet sleeves — a colour closely identified with Aesthetic Movement dress — particularly recall Veronese’s Lucretia, painted in the 1580s. *Veronica Veronese* was commissioned by Frederick Leyland, the Liverpool shipping magnate who assembled an unrivalled collection of Rossetti’s paintings in his opulently decorated residence at 49 Palace Gate in Kensington. Leyland had risen through the ranks of John Bibby & Sons in Liverpool, beginning as a bookkeeper and ending by buying out his employers to form the Leyland Line with twenty-five steamships plying the Atlantic.

Leyland’s most extensive acts of patronage involved James McNeill Whistler, who arrived in London from Paris in 1859 and joined Rossetti’s bohemian circle in Chelsea. Whistler played a crucial role in generating a visual art emerging out of London that was premised on the idea of formal harmonies, which held music as its most powerful analogy. In two now familiar compositions, *The White Girl* (1862) and *The Little White Girl, No. 2* (1864), Whistler began to experiment with the careful balancing of tones. Each explores a range of the subtle whites and creams, and, in *The Little White Girl, No. 2*, the blues of the porcelain and pale flesh tints, and the pinks of flowers and lips are carefully orchestrated into a formal balance which is also emphasized by the reflections in the mirror (*Fig. 9*). Pushing the principle even further in a third painting, Whistler came up with the title *Symphony in White*; the horizontal canvas became the third of these symphonies (*Fig. 10*), and its predecessors were retrospectively named *Symphony in White No. 1* and *No. 2*. The idea that a painting could share the formal qualities of the symphony, the most complex and abstract of musical forms — and share also its lack of ostensible subject in the outside world, unlike opera or oratorio — was provocative to the critics. P. G. Hamerton pedantically insisted that the works were ‘not precisely a symphony in white’ since they contained other hues: ‘one lady has a yellowish dress and brown hair and a bit of blue ribbon.’ Whistler’s riposte was barbed with his characteristic wit: ‘does he then [. . .] believe that a symphony in F contains no other note, but shall be a continued repetition of F, F, F? . . . Fool!’<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by William H. Fredeman, 10 vols (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2002–15), v: *The Chelsea Years, 1863–1872: Prelude to Crisis III. 1871–72* (2005), pp. 228–29.

<sup>13</sup> Hamerton’s critique was published in ‘Pictures of the Year’, *Saturday Review*, 1 June 1867, pp. 690–91 (p. 691); Whistler’s reply, dated June 1867, appeared in James McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, 2nd edn (London: Heinemann, 1892), p. 45.



Fig. 9: James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White No. 2: The Little White Girl*, 1864, oil on canvas, 765 × 511 mm. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/whistler-symphony-in-white-no-2-the-little-white-girl-no3418>>.



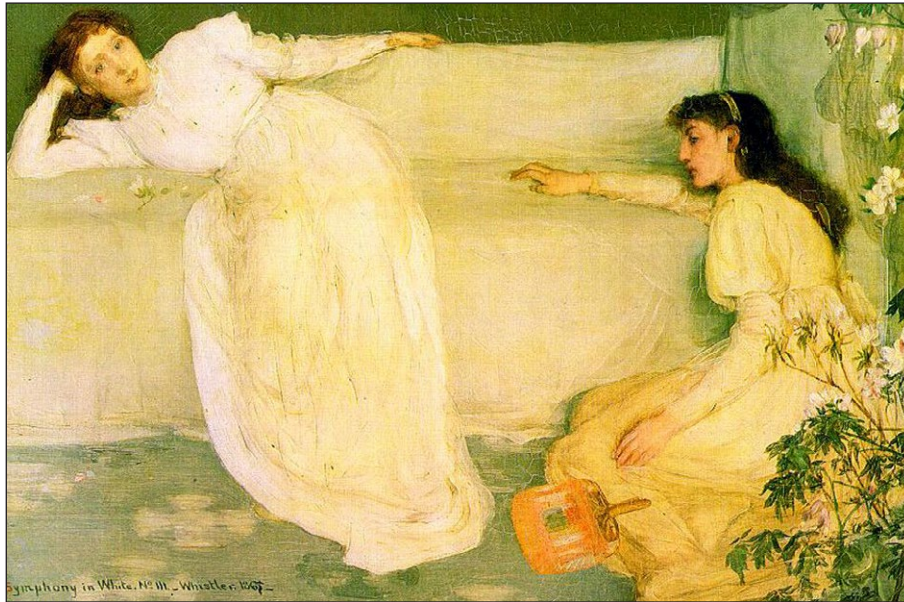


Fig. 10: James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White No. 3*, c. 1865–67, oil on canvas, 514 × 769 mm. © The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham. Art UK.

Whistler expounded his theory of the relationship between art and music in his ‘Ten o’clock Lecture’ of 1885:

Nature contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music.

But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful — as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony. (pp. 142–43)

These words surely suggest the idiom of Whistler’s friend and collaborator, Albert Moore, exemplified by *A Musician* (Fig. 11). The critic F. G. Stephens described another of Moore’s works as ‘a sort of pictorial music drawn as from a lyre of but few strings’, referring to his use of a careful balance of tones, and the description holds for *A Musician*.<sup>14</sup> Music gave the work its subject, but more importantly suggested the formal aspects of the composition; music seemed emblematic of clear proportions and self-contained

<sup>14</sup>F. G. Stephens, ‘Mr Humphrey Roberts’s Collection: Modern English Oil Pictures’, *Magazine of Art*, 1896, pp. 41–47 (p. 47). See Robyn Asleson, ‘Nature and Abstraction in the Aesthetic Development of Albert Moore’, in *After the Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. by Elizabeth Prettejohn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 115–34 (p. 126).



*Fig 11:* Albert Moore, *A Musician*, 1867, oil on canvas, 286 × 387 mm, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund.

forms, of the careful balancing of elements producing harmony; moreover, music offered a model of apparently direct connection to the listener's emotions and even to the fleshly responses of the body. Furthermore, in the rapturous, perhaps erotic, reverie produced in the listeners by the sound of the lyre, Moore offers us a paradigm for the experience of art more generally. The painting should have the same sensuous effect on its viewers as the music does on its aurally intoxicated listeners — producing feelings without producing meaning. Music, refined and divested of all extraneous associations, seemed the perfect riposte to the vulgarity of the material world and for the excessive textuality of British art.

#### **'Full band' and 'Fritthy Lucre'**

Perhaps the most ambitious of harmonic structures of the period was the Peacock Room, designed by Whistler to display Frederick Leyland's Asian ceramics in his London townhouse (*Fig. 12*). But the painter's most cherished project for his patron was never completed. Whistler (so one of his associates, the American printmaker Otto Bacher recalled) planned to include in the decorative scheme 'a grand concerto-like picture with the title "Full Palette"'. Bacher remembered Whistler explaining his ambition



Fig 12: James McNeill Whistler, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, 1876–77, oil paint and metal leaf on leather, canvas, and wood, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. <<http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/current/peacockRoom/gallery.asp>>.

to emulate the way that ‘in music [. . .] when they employ all the instruments they make it “Full Band.” If I can find the right kind of thing I will produce a harmony in colour corresponding to Beethoven’s harmonies in sound.’<sup>15</sup>

Whistler had no ear for music whatever, but Leyland was a keen amateur musician who struggled daily in a gloomy and ultimately unsuccessful quest to master the sonatas of Beethoven. In the end, it is said, he hired a professional pianist, perhaps the composer Luigi Albanesi, to sit beside him and play Beethoven’s works in accordance with his patron’s distinctive interpretations.<sup>16</sup> Leyland’s taste reached beyond Beethoven towards the music of Richard Wagner, which seemed to offer a closer sonic analogy to the powerfully coloured and sensual works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, his prized possessions. Whistler inevitably quarrelled with his melancholic, musical patron, and, after their disastrous falling-out, created a vicious portrait of him transformed into a scabrous peacock. The caricatured Leyland manically plays from a score entitled ‘The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre (the creditor)’ — in which the only note is an

<sup>15</sup> Otto Bacher, *With Whistler in Venice* (New York: Century, 1908), pp. 57–58. See also David Peters Corbett, *The Word in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England 1848–1914* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 114.

<sup>16</sup> Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 116.



Fig 13: James McNeill Whistler, *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre (the creditor)*, 1879, oil on canvas, 187 × 140 cm, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. <<https://www.famsf.org/>>.

F sharp — F for Frederick and the sharp signifying Leyland's business practices and his refusal to pay Whistler the two thousand pounds he demanded for the Peacock Room (*Fig. 13*). Leyland's maniacal, solitary pianism is here conflated with his miserliness to produce a portrayal of the collector as obsessive sociopath. The flaring up of tensions in this work surely signifies the competitive relationship between art and music as well as that between Whistler and his patron.

### Synaesthesia in Kensington

As Whistler and Rossetti were creating an avant-garde Bohemia by the Thames in Chelsea, Frederic Leighton, one of the rising stars of the Royal Academy, and an accomplished singer and linguist, explored the parallels between fine art and art music in the more genteel confines of Kensington. In *Lieder ohne Worte* (1861), Leighton explicitly responded to Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* for piano, and created throughout the 1830s and 40s a series of groups of Romantic miniatures notable for their insistence that feeling — true sentiment — could be produced without textual association (*Fig. 14*). Leighton embodies the musical melancholy in an adolescent girl's reverie which, like Mendelssohn's lyrical piano miniatures, eludes verbal expression. The painting, whose setting is vaguely suggestive of the classical world, remains bereft of stable signifiers of time and place. The composition suggests that the aural sensations playing on the girl's ears — the water pouring into a vase by her feet, the blackbird singing in the upper right, and perhaps the music running through her head — speak to her as the painting should speak to us, in purely formal terms. Music once again offers a visual metaphor for a heightened emotional condition.

Independently wealthy and increasingly successful, Leighton settled in London in 1859 and created a studio/house, a large villa designed by George Aitchison, notable for its refined Aesthetic interior. Its development culminated in 1877 with the building of the Arab Hall, erected to house Leighton's remarkable collection of Islamic tiles, many from Damascus. Unlike the mosques from which many of the tiles were forcibly removed, the Arab Hall was not a religious space but a reception room without distinctive function. It is a space of pure beauty, the zenith of Aestheticist architecture. The artist himself, his leonine mane immaculately groomed and an Alexander curl teased on his forehead, became the most exquisite exhibit, framed by the finely calculated visual effects of the interior. Replete with Leighton's completed canvases and illuminated by a handsome north-light window, the large studio provided the backdrop for refined musical evenings which became a highlight of the London season for a select few. Leighton was a capable singer and moved in musical circles; the opera singer Adelaide Sartoris was one of his closest friends. Through his



Fig. 14: Frederic Leighton, *Lieder ohne Worte*, 1861, oil on canvas, 1016 × 629 mm.  
 © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/leighton-lieder-ohne-worte-to3053>>.

education in Frankfurt, he was well acquainted with leading figures in the world of music, such as the pianist Clara Schumann and violinist Joseph Joachim, whose performances were the *pièce de résistance* of Leighton's musical evenings. Through Joachim, Leighton came to know what he called the 'strange, fiery, stirring composition[s]' of Johannes Brahms, a composer with whom Leighton had much in common.<sup>17</sup> Both remained loyal to the conventional genres and forms of their respective media (symphony in four movements/sonata/quartet; history painting), yet each has been recognized as a pioneering figure of modernity.<sup>18</sup> The Leighton 'Musics' were carefully staged exercises in synaesthesia, in which the most rarefied visual experiences were offered in equivalence to the rare feats of musical virtuosity and good taste. Of one such event, Leighton wrote to his sister:

To me perhaps the most striking thing of the evening was Joachim's playing of the Bach 'Chacone' up in my gallery. I was at the other end of the room, and the effect from the distance of the dark figure in the uncertain light up there, and barely relieved from the gold background and the dark recess, struck me as one of the most poetic and fascinating things that I remember. At the opposite end of the room in the apse was a blazing crimson rhododendron tree, which looked glorious where it reached up into the golden semi-dome.<sup>19</sup>

If Leighton experimented in pairing absolute music with abstract visual phenomena, he also greatly admired the distinctive tradition of German art song, from Beethoven and Schubert to Brahms and Hugo Wolf. His preferred singer of lieder was George Henschel, a distinguished German musician whose career took him to London, Boston, and New York. A fine pianist, Henschel accompanied himself in Schubert and Schumann lieder for Leighton through the 1880s and was painted by Alma-Tadema in 1879 in a canvas that presents the body of the singer as an aesthetic artefact at one with the surrounding interior (*Fig. 15*). Astonishingly, in 1928, at the age of seventy-eight, Henschel was able to record a song, 'Ich grolle nicht' from Schumann's *Dichterliebe* ('I bear no grudge even as my heart is breaking'), in which the text is very clearly audible and the harmony, melody, and text operate together to produce a heightened emotional effect. Henschel was present in March 1895 when the artist, fatally ill, hosted his last musical

<sup>17</sup> Michael Musgrave, 'Leighton and Music', in *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*, ed. by Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 295–314 (p. 300).

<sup>18</sup> 'Brahms the Progressive', in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. by Leonard Stein (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 398–441.

<sup>19</sup> Mrs Russell [Emilie] Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Baron Leighton of Stretton*, 2 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1906), II, 216–17.



*Fig. 15:* Laurence Alma-Tadema, *Portrait of the Singer George Henschel*, 1879, private collection. Wikiart.



evening. Leighton's biographer, Emilie Barrington, recalled the evening as follows:

All who were present must ever remember the last 'Music' [. . .], when (contrasting so strongly in colour and sentiment) 'Lachrymae' and 'Flaming June' stood on the easels, and for the first time the silk room was open, hung with the work of Leighton's friends; how, through all the beautiful strains from Joachim and the rest, a tragic note rang out to tell, as it seemed, of the waning life of the centre of it all. No one said it, but all felt that the last chapter was ending of those many, many perfect pages in life known as 'Leighton's music.'

A voice [Henschel] sang with emotion Charles Kingsley's soul-searching verse 'When all the world is old, lad, | And all the trees are brown'. (11, 335)

Henschel's simple setting of the words was perfectly calculated to draw out the affective power of Kingsley's poem 'Young and Old' from *The Water-Babies*: Barrington's description alludes to the powerful emotions generated among the gathered audience, many of them advancing in age as was Leighton himself:

When all the world is young, lad,  
And all the trees are green;  
And every goose a swan, lad,  
And every lass a queen;  
Then hey for boot and horse, lad,  
And round the world away;  
Young blood must have its course, lad,  
And every dog his day.

When all the world is old, lad,  
And all the trees are brown;  
And all the sport is stale, lad,  
And all the wheels run down;  
Creep home, and take your place there,  
The spent and maimed among:  
God grant you find one face there,  
You loved when all was young.<sup>20</sup>

In this description of this highly charged event, the formal properties of music and of Leighton's own paintings — the vibrant *Flaming June* and dark, brooding *Lachrymae* — commingle with the affective qualities of

<sup>20</sup> Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy-Tale for a Land Baby* (Boston: Burnham, 1876), p. 76.

narrative and association. It was a significant token of esteem that Leighton presented Henschel with the small, intimate oil study for the great *Flaming June*, which the artist must have realized was to be among his last works.<sup>21</sup>

### Wagnerism and degeneracy

If Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms were the presiding deities of the Leighton 'Musics', by the late 1870s, the controversial figure of Richard Wagner came to loom larger than all other living composers, and productions of Wagner's operas in London were breathlessly received by what *The Times* (14 February 1883, p. 9) referred to as a 'rapt and enthusiastic crowd'.<sup>22</sup> *Der fliegende Holländer* was the first to be produced in London in 1870; *Tannhäuser* followed in 1876; with *Die Meistersinger*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and the complete *Ring* appearing in 1882. By the 1890s, as Emma Sutton reveals, debate about Wagner in London was influenced by English translations of texts by Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Nordau which established the concepts of 'decadence' and 'degeneration' in relation to Wagner (Sutton, p. 11).

The illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, a keen Wagnerian, suggested in a sly illustration for *The Yellow Book* in 1894 titled *The Wagnerites*, how the performance of Wagner's operas, and particularly the great music drama of passion and betrayal, *Tristan und Isolde*, brought the public and private into uncomfortable juxtaposition. Where an oratorio performance — such as the annual renderings of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* by large choral societies in the great industrial cities — constituted a ringing public endorsement of dominant values, *Tristan's* intoxicating music of seduction and betrayal, and especially its culminating 'Liebestod', brought the most private of passions, the most excessive of feelings, to the public stage in a musical language which sundered all the bounds of propriety: technical, aesthetic, and even moral. Wagner's music, considered transcendent by many, was condemned as decadent by others; the rapt attention of the audience over the lengthy spans of his operas was understood as devotional by Wagnerites, unhealthy and even auto-erotic by their detractors. Beardsley's illustration, reproduced photolithographically from a pen and ink drawing (*Fig. 16*) emphasizes the darkness of the theatre, a space of solitary and almost entirely female vice, despite the brilliant light flooding from the stage. The opera itself is invisible, and all we can see of the audience is the shoulders and breasts of women, with lush hair falling in ringlets onto their pallid skin. Could there be prostitutes invisibly among the wealthy

<sup>21</sup> 'George Henschel', *Musical Times*, 1 March 1890, p. 159.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 8.



Fig 16: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Wagnerites*, 1894, pen and India ink heightened with white on paper, 206 × 177 mm. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

women gathered to experience the orgasmic climaxes of Wagner's consummate opera of adultery and death? In *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche had noted, 'Wagner is bad for youths; he is calamitous for women' (quoted in Sutton, p. 96). So Beardsley would have us believe. With their exaggerated

profiles, sensuous lips, and thick, flowing hair, they allude to the type of female beauty promoted by Rossetti, based on the dark hair and saturnine features of Jane Morris. Unlike the ethereal Jane, these figures are venally materialistic, dripping with jewels, jealous of their social status, as is made clear by one witchlike figure glancing viciously to the left and another to the right, thrusting her hand suggestively into a muff as her programme drops on the floor. There is no hint of awakening conscience here and, where Holman Hunt saw music acting in support of virtue, here it is the agent of sensuous excess.

### Coda: 'A new and original aesthetic opera'

As Claude Phillips's essay 'The Quality of Emotion in Modern Art' attests, Victorian culture was capacious enough to sustain contradictory modes of modern artistic practice — realist and Aestheticist — along with associated forms of criticism. The relationship between art and music lay at the core of formalist aesthetic theory: 'all art constantly aspires to the condition of music', as Walter Pater put it in his influential essay on 'The School of Giorgione', first published in 1877.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the most deftly brilliant of all critiques of the Aesthetic Movement was articulated through a medium employing both the visual and the musical. Gilbert and Sullivan's 'entirely new and original aesthetic opera' *Patience*, first performed at the Savoy Theatre, London in 1881, centres on the 'fleshy poet', Reginald Bunthorne. Clad in a green velvet suit, he bears a lily — an immediately legible reference to Oscar Wilde — and a streak of white in his hair which inescapably suggests Whistler's distinctive coiffure; refined in dress and manner, he recalls, too, the exquisite Leighton. The comic inversion of the operetta sees the sickly and effeminate Bunthorne ardently pursued by lovesick maidens who ignore a handsome and marriageable brigade of heavy dragoons, bewitched instead by his poetic musings and rarefied taste ('Sad and sorry is our lot! Ah, miserie!') (*Audio 1*).

In this least Wagnerian of music dramas, there is no Paterian conveyance of emotion through the formal confluences between art and music. The feelings that are presented here are false and absurd — the world is turned on its head. Rhetoric overpowers reality. Bunthorne's seductions

<sup>23</sup> Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', was published in the *Fortnightly Review* in October 1877 and added to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* in the third edition (London: Macmillan, 1888). The first edition, without 'The School of Giorgione', appeared under the title *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873). The edition used here is that introduced by Lawrence Evans (Chicago: Academy, 1978), reprinted from the New Library Edition of *The Work of Walter Pater* (London: Macmillan, 1922).



Audio 1: 'Twenty Love-Sick Maidens We', from Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*.  
Posted by LevineHow. <<https://youtu.be/rKsnVQZwxo4>>.



Audio 2: 'If You're Anxious for to Shine', from Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*.  
Posted by LevineHow. <<https://youtu.be/OHmsqQe4aro>>.

are achieved using a vocabulary that parodies the more perfumed utterances of Algernon Swinburne:

What time the poet hath hymned  
The writhing maid, lithe-limbed,  
    Quivering on amaranthine asphodel,  
How can he paint her woes,  
Knowing, as well he knows,  
    That all can be set right with calomel?

But when left alone, in a recitative accompanied by dramatic, faux-Verdian chords, Bunthorne admits that Aestheticism, with all its component parts (the Japonisme of Whistler; the medievalism of Burne-Jones; the lilies and cynical witticisms of Wilde; the Veronese greens of Rossetti) are a mere facade (*Audio 2*).

Am I alone,  
 And unobserved? I am!  
 Then let me own  
 I'm an aesthetic sham!  
 This air severe  
 Is but a mere  
 Veneer!  
 This cynic smile  
 Is but a wile  
 Of guile!  
 This costume chaste  
 Is but good taste  
 Misplaced!  
 Let me confess!  
 A languid love for Lilies does *not* blight me!  
 Lank limbs and haggard cheeks do *not* delight me!  
 I do *not* care for dirty greens  
 By any means.  
 I do *not* long for all one sees  
 That's Japanese.  
 I am *not* fond of uttering platitudes  
 In stained-glass attitudes.  
 In short, my mediaevalism's affectation,  
 Born of a morbid love of admiration!

But as soon as this is sung, the confessional darkness evaporates, the tempo rises, and soon Sullivan's music trips along — a lively synthesis of Rossini, Donizetti, and the music-hall patter song — and Bunthorne jovially shares his tactics:

If you're anxious for to shine in the high aesthetic line as a man  
 of culture rare,  
 You must get up all the germs of the transcendental terms, and  
 plant them ev'rywhere.  
 You must lie upon the daisies and discourse in novel phrases of  
 your complicated state of mind,  
 The meaning doesn't matter if it's only idle chatter of a  
 transcendental kind.



Audio 3: 'Love is a Plaintive Song', from Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*. Posted by LevineHow. <<https://youtu.be/rANHtyGsYtw>>.

There is, of course, an alternative at hand: Bunthorne has met his match in *Patience*, a simple shepherdess who stands for artless purity and honest emotions in a world ruined by artifice and pretension. Bunthorne is smitten, but, unlike the flock of lovesick maidens, she is entirely immune to his charms. Her music returns us to the simple strophic melody of 'Oft, in the stilly night'. *Patience's* aria 'Love is a Plaintive Song' opens in a melancholic A minor, in the voice of a 'suffering maid' (*Audio 3*). It opens with the heroine articulating a crisp feminist critique of the terms of marriage in late-Victorian Britain:

Love is a plaintive song,  
 Sung by a suffering maid,  
 Telling a tale of wrong,  
 Telling of hope betrayed;  
 Tuned to each changing note,  
 Sorry when *he* is sad,  
 Blind to his ev'ry mote,  
 Merry when he is glad!

Although simplicity is the keynote, the aria is embellished with hints of late-Victorian chromatic ornamentation. Note, for example, the Orientalist melismata that elongate the phrase 'Merry when he is glad' and, in the second verse, 'Nothing at all for her' — a hint of the harem. But *Patience*

resolves her aria into a gentle waltz in A major, affirming that despite the snares of modern marriage, modern life, and of Aestheticism itself — Rossetti, Whistler, Leighton, and Wagner — natural feelings (on this point, rising to a top A) and true love will triumph:

Love that will aye endure,  
Though the rewards be few,  
That is the love that's pure,  
That is the love that's true!<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>The libretto of *Patience* by W. S. Gilbert is most conveniently available from <<http://www.gilbertandsullivanarchive.org/patience/html/>> [accessed 19 November 2016].