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Program

Beneath a Dark and Melancholy Grove From <i>Silent Shades</i>	Henry Purcell (1659-1695)
La mort d'Ophélie	Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)
Der Fischerknabe Die Lorelei	Franz Liszt (1811-1886)
“Regnava nel silenzio” from <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i>	Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848)

Program Notes

The trope of female madness is a topic which commonly appears in song and opera. Especially prominent in the seventeenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, the prevalence of this trope seemed to mirror a societal fascination with madness. This fascination continues today with the madwoman being a common trope used in nearly every medium of art and media. This has led to many artistic interpretations of female madness. All of the music presented on this recital concerns this phenomenon in some way. With a variety of composers and styles, these differing interpretations of madness provide insight to the perception of mental illness and gender throughout history. From victims of circumstance to harbingers of revenge,

these variations on the madwoman trope in classical music continue to captivate audiences and artists alike. This recital will explore some of the repertoire surrounding the madwoman trope, and examine the historical and musical context around these pieces. Additionally, it will analyze what musical and compositional devices the composers used to bring these characters to life. Lastly, it will ask the question: Why do we find this trope so interesting?

Beneath a Dark and Melancholy Grove & From Silent Shades

In the seventeenth century, psychiatry was still in its infancy, and treatments were experimental at best.¹ Bethlem Royal Hospital (nicknamed Bedlam) was one of the first institutions to specialize in the treatment of mental illness.² However, Bedlam eventually became a place of infamy and societal fascination, and continues to be referenced in art and pop culture today. In the seventeenth century, mental illness was seen as the result of some moral shortcoming on the part of the patient.³ In the case of Purcell's "Beneath a Dark and Melancholy Grove" and "From Silent Shades," the moral shortcoming of both characters seems to be related to longing or lust. In both songs, "lovesickness" and longing for a dead or absent lover is referenced as the reason for their madness. Sappho's madness manifests itself as a deep depression, clearly shown by a slow, chromatic melody with large leaps. Meanwhile, Bess is shown to be erratic through the constant shift between recitative and melody. These shifts and the subversion of typical form seem to indicate Bess's shifts between lucidity and delusion. Additionally, there are several instances where the melody does not seem to reflect the text, further establishing her instability.

¹ Silvette, Herbert, "On Insanity in Seventeenth-Century England," *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 6, no. 1 (1938): 22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44438204>.

² Silvette, "On Insanity in Seventeenth-Century England," 23.

³ Silvette, "On Insanity in Seventeenth-Century England," 22.

La mort d'Ophélie

Even though Ophelia is only present in a few of the scenes in *Hamlet*, she is featured in other works of art more than any other Shakespeare heroine.⁴ Despite her prominence in art, Ophelia was rarely discussed by Romantic literary critics. Instead, she was seen as the epitome of femininity, idealized by men for her obedience and loyalty.⁵ One of these men was Hector Berlioz, who very famously became infatuated with the actress Harriet Smithson after seeing her portrayal of Ophelia in *Hamlet*.⁶ This obsession led to one of his most famous compositions: *Symphonie fantastique*.

Therefore, it is no surprise that Berlioz composed a song about the ill-fated heroine. In his setting of Ophelia's tragic end, Berlioz creates the impression of rushing water with a flowing piano line, which continues through the majority of the song. This is only interrupted when Ophelia falls into the water, but it quickly resumes as she begins to sink. Meanwhile, the voice floats over this flowing line, creating a sense of serenity. Much like in the piano, this serenity in the vocal line also continues until Ophelia falls. However, it too resumes as the weight of her dress drags her deeper into the water. Throughout the song, both the voice and the piano feature a motif, which depicts the song Ophelia sings in this scene. Though there are slight changes to the melody, this haunting song continues throughout the piece, even after Ophelia has fallen into the water. Despite her fall and imminent demise, Ophelia's song remains unchanged. There is no frantic variation on the melody or any sign of her fighting to remain afloat. Instead, the continued tranquility of her song suggests acceptance of her death. In perhaps the ultimate display of

⁴ Showalter, Elaine, "Ophelia, Gender and Madness," British Library, last modified March 15, 2016, <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/ophelia-gender-and-madness>.

⁵ Camden, Carroll, "On Ophelia's Madness," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1964): 247, <https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.2307/2867895>.

⁶ Bloom, Peter, "Berlioz and Liszt 'in the Locker Room,'" *Studia Musicologica* 54, no. 1 (2013): 80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43289705>.

obedience, Berlioz's Ophelia allows the madness caused by her love for Hamlet and the death of her father to consume her, and she embraces her death with open arms.

Der Fischerknabe & Die Lorelei

While searching for repertoire, I stumbled upon the German legend of the Lorelei. According to the legend, the Lorelei was a woman who had her heart broken by an unfaithful lover. Driven to madness, she threw herself from a cliff into the Rhein. However, instead of falling to her death, she became a siren who lured men to their doom with her beautiful voice.⁷ Often, while looking at portrayals of female madness, the character is a victim of circumstance. The story of the Lorelei challenges this trope. Instead of being completely powerless, the Lorelei seeks revenge for her heartbreak.

In this recital, we begin our tale of the Lorelei with Liszt's "Der Fischerknabe." In the beginning of the song, Liszt paints the picture of a boy enjoying a serene day on the banks of a river. The piano features fast moving, flowing line, which gives the impression of the flowing water. Meanwhile, the vocal line floats over with a lullaby-like melody as the boy is lulled to sleep. Suddenly, the flowing line becomes more frantic as the boy realizes he is chest-deep in the water. However, this panic is interrupted by the entrance of the voice. The piano line changes to rolled chords as a mysterious voice begins to sing a seductive melody. After the final note in the vocal line, the piano takes over again. The repeated notes in the right hand gives the impression of suspension while the left hand plays the melody lower and lower, depicting the boy's slow descent beneath the water.

⁷ Tikkanen, Amy, "Lorelei," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed October 29, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lorelei-German-legend>.

In “Die Lorelei,” the song opens with a playful speech-like narration, which tells the listener that the following song is an old story. Then, the song shifts to a pleasant, lilting melody as the narrator describes a beautiful day next on the Rhein. As this melody continues, the narrator’s focus shifts to a beautiful woman singing while combing her golden hair by the water’s edge. Abruptly, the piano line shifts to a more frantic tone as a fisher approaches the woman, enraptured by her song. Then, the piano takes on a turbulent line as the narrator describes the fisher and his boat being swallowed up by the water. After this, the storm-like line in the piano begins to wind down as the narration from the beginning of the song takes over, nonchalantly stating that this is what the Lorelei’s singing has caused. The narrator repeats this text on the lilting melody once again, emulating the Lorelei’s song.

Regnava nel silenzio

Of all the madwoman tropes seen in opera, the most famous is arguably Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*.⁸ The opera tells the story of Lucia, who is secretly in love with her brother’s rival, Edgardo. Upon discovering the romance, her brother (Enrico) convinces Lucia that Edgardo is no longer faithful and forces her to marry a man of his choosing. However, on the wedding night, Lucia emerges from her room, revealing that she has gone mad and murdered her husband. Lucia then sings the famous mad scene, which features large leaps and fast passages in the vocal line to depict her madness.

However, there is some discord on whether the mad scene is indeed where Lucia’s madness truly begins.⁹ Was it Enrico’s actions that caused Lucia to go mad, or are there hints of what’s to

⁸ McClary, Susan, “Excess and Frame: The Musical Representation of Madwomen,” in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002): 91, muse.jhu.edu/book/27688.

⁹ Smart, Mary Ann, “The Silencing of Lucia,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4, no. 2 (1992): 133, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/823740>.

come from the beginning of the opera? In Lucia's first aria ("Regnava nel silenzio"), she is waiting with her maid (Alisa) to meet with Edgardo. As they wait, Lucia describes a frightening vision in which the ghost of a woman who died tragically appears before her and water turns to blood. Terrified, Alisa states that this is a bad omen and that Lucia's relationship with Edgardo can only end in death. Of course, she is correct in her assumption. Additionally, there are other moments in this aria that foreshadow the tragic events at the end of the opera. Throughout the aria, Lucia sings many fast passages and large leaps. This is very similar to the mad scene, which causes one to wonder if Lucia is merely anxious and excited, or if this is the true beginnings of mania and instability.

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