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The Influence of Music on the Works of Robert Browning.

Marne A. Dezso, A.R.C.T., B.A.

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ABSTRACT

The Influence of Music

on the Works of Robert Browning.

Marne A. Dezso

Even a cursory look at the body of Robert Browning's poetry reveals his love of music. For Browning, music was the supreme communicator of Soul, and his concern with injecting musical awareness into his written words was specifically to awaken his readers' empathy, consciousness or Soul. He used a variety of means to incorporate music into language, ranging from describing his own feelings about music, to simulating musical forms and analysing musicians and the effects of their music on an audience. Paradoxically, Browning's unique musical ear produced some versification which many of his contemporaries found unmusical; but his purpose was always dramatic in that he chose language and metrics which suited his characters and the atmosphere of the poems. In this fusion of drama, word and music, Browning emulated a composer of opera. Like the composer of opera, too, Browning wanted to present his readers with images that would move them emotionally: he wanted to reach their Souls.

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Consider it well: each tone of our scale in itself
is naught:
It is everywhere in the world - loud, soft,
and all is said:
Give it to me to use! I mix it with two in my
thought:
And there! Ye have heard and seen: consider
and bow the head!

("Abt Vogler," Stanza VII)

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PREFACE

Robert Browning was a man of many passions, one of which was music. Although it was unusual for young gentlemen of his time to study music, Browning did study composition, violin, voice and piano. Throughout his life, alone or with friends, he enjoyed both attending concerts and making music himself, particularly performing upon keyboard instruments. One would naturally expect to find musical imagery and perhaps even some musical terminology in Browning's poetry; however, he was able to put music into his verse in a wide variety of ways. Indeed, he felt it most important to "put music" into his verse in the manner of Shelley, because he wished to make his written words as communicative as music can be without words.

Some of Browning's poetic forms are patterned after musical forms, for example, and range from the simplicity of Pippa's songs to the complexity of Master Hugues' fugue. Browning also employs both real and imaginary musical figures as characters through whom he argues diverse points of aesthetics, musicology, faith, philosophy and morality. Furthermore, Browning's schooling in harmony is apparent in the actual descriptions of chords used to illustrate his philosophical points.

Browning also utilizes his knowledge of counterpoint to contrapuntally weave his dramatic voices. Moreover, from the musical forms, musical voices are added to Browning's <u>dramatis personae</u>: they may be abstractions derived from the music described in the poem, but they are nevertheless voices which

become interwoven with the human voices. If these abstract musical voices are considered sublime and evidence of "angel mutterings," and the human voices concrete reality, then it is apparent how Browning's method of discourse is wedded to musical structure. The arguments in his poems are illuminated by both abstract and real qualities; furthermore, the dramatic and musical voices are joined by the reader's. With all of the differing viewpoints, some measure of truth emerges. Just as a piece of music presents its themes and then suffuses them in an intense harmonic mélange, finally resolving in a definitive conclusion, so Browning's music poems seek to harmonize conflict.

Because of his musical training, Browning was familiar with the concrete difficulties a performer or composer has in producing aesthetically-pleasing sounds. It is this awareness of technical limitations striving after sublimity which introduces us to the performers of Master Hugues' fugue, Galuppi's toccata, and to Abt Vogler: we actually get into the performers' minds as they grapple with musical difficulties and the composer's intentions.

It is likewise through his awareness of musical intricacies that Browning is uniquely suited to illustrate his non-musical themes: such themes as mortality and immortality, timelessness and endurance, the values of art, conflicting values of society, moral judgement, and faith are all illuminated by the musical framework and ideas. The most vital function of music within Browning's work is to

enlighten. Browning was alert to music's power to awaken consciousness and bring to it an awareness of Soul, which for him was evidence of divinity within the human being. Browning was expressly concerned with exposing Soul and examining its development; he thought nothing else was as worthwhile. Thus, he aimed to write poems which possessed the power and allure of music. It was through the appeal to our emotions, and then through our emotions to our intuitive selves, that Browning sought to reach the intellect of his readers.

A nineteenth-century man, Browning believed in progress, but, paradoxically, he also mistrusted knowledge which seemed always to be changing and temporary. He believed that it was only through our intuitive selves, our conscious awareness of Soul, that we could trust our judgements of eternal questions and universal human problems. Browning's background in a Dissenting religion taught him to rely on his own conscience; and music, like voices from Heaven, was the supreme communicator to that inner human voice that could enlighten.

This thesis traces Browning's use of music from his earliest published work, Pauline, to one of his last poems, "Flute Music with an Accompaniment." The so-called "music poems," "A Toccata of Galuppi's," "Abt Vogler," and "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," while extremely important, show only a part of Browning's reliance on musical imagery and allusion. Thus, a number of works are examined from Browning's Dramatic Lyrics and Romances to Fifine at the Fair and the late Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day.

I. Browning's Affinity for Music.

A Gifted Amateur.

Critics of Robert Browning's poetry have looked at his music poems and at his allusions to music within the works which are not specifically related to music, and have generally concluded that, while Browning was certainly a music lover, he was really no more than a gifted amateur. Although, for example, Browning maintained that he possessed and had played a toccata by Baldassare Galuppi which was the inspiration for "A Toccata of Galuppi's," critics have chosen not to believe him, but to argue that there are no known toccatas by Galuppi. They have also pointed to the fact that Galuppi's diminished sixth interval ("...sixths diminished, sigh on sigh," stanza VII, l.19) is really the interval of a fifth, which suggests that Browning was ignorant of elementary musical theory. Furthermore, musicologists have complained that in Browning's most successful music poem, "Abt Vogler," the descending chromatic chords played by Abt Vogler are merely clichés of Romantic music and not worthy of Vogler's genius.[1] The ubiquitous accusations of Browning's

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[1] See Herbert E. Greene's "Browning's Knowledge of Music" in PMLA LXII (1947), 1095-99; George M. Pidenour's "Browning's Music Poems: Fancy and Fact" in PMLA LXXVIII (1963), 369-77; and Wendell Stacy Johnson's "Browning's Music" in Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism XII

"difficult" and "cacophonous" language and metrics, moreover, would seem to prove Browning's lack of musicality, giving credibility to the notion of Browning's amateur status and to the idea that while his affinity for music is interesting, it is of minor importance to an understanding of his work.

Evidence abounds, however, that music was an integral part of Browning's life from the days of his youth through to his old age, that he was musically talented and received excellent training in musical theory and compositon from the notable John Relfe among others, and that he was an able keyboard performer of difficult Beethoven sonatas and fugues by Bach. He also possessed a remarkable knack for picking up and remembering tunes by ear. During his trip to Russia in 1834, for instance, he was fascinated by Russian folk melodies, and remembered them so exactly that he was able to sing them fifty years later for the Russian Prince Gagarin, whom he met in Venice.[2] To have retained this long in his memory a variety of musical fragments from a culture not his own is an astounding feat, and indicates an extraordinary musical ear.

Browning was also in the habit of performing a variety of musical works, both singing and playing them, as well as improvising his own compositions on the piano, or other

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(Winter, 1963), 203-7.

[2] W. Hall Griffin & H.C.Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning, Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1966, 64.

keyboard instruments. The Flower sisters were early musical companions who shared this interest with Browning, and, in later life, Browning would enjoy performing on a spinet during his frequent visits to his friend in Asolo, Mrs. Arthur Bronson.[3] An American journalist, G.W.Curtis, recorded an instance of Browning's performing talents from the year 1847. Curtis was travelling with the Brownings in Italy when they toured the monastery of Vallombrosa; it was here that Browning played Gregorian chants and a hymn by Pergolese on the very organ on which, apparently, Milton had played two hundred years earlier.[4]

Browning was also skilled enough in musical composition and theory to set John Donne's poem, Go and Catch a Falling Star, to music and to write fugues while still in his teens. Indeed, he felt confident enough in his musical abilities to cherish the ambition to write an opera. His literary interests took precedence and we shall never know what calibre of opera he might have produced; however, Browning did incorporate actual musical manuscripts into three of his works: Strafford, "Pietro of Abano," and Parleying with Charles Avison. While these musical fragments are not operatic or complex by any means, it is interesting to see how Browning included music which suits the qualities of the verse. In much the same way

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[3] See Mrs. Arthur Bronson's "Browning in Asolo" in Century Magazine, April, 1900.

[4] Griffin & Minchin, 161.

as an opera composer and librettist would consider literary and musical judgments, Browning chose his characters' language to suit their individual natures and music which complemented the moods of the poems.

In these poems where Browning actually presents the reader with musical scoring, we have visible evidence, as it were, of the notion voiced by many Romantics that language was simply not adequate to express every emotion. In Strafford, Act V, Browning wrote a tender lullaby for the scene wherein Strafford bids his children goodbye. He also composed the lilting melody at the end of "Pietro of Abano" and it almost concretely appends the poetic dreams of "that dear land which I so oft...revisit"; the rhythm of the music exactly matches the metre of the poem, and thus extends its mood and sentiment. Finally, incorporating the music of Avison's rousing march at the end of Parleying with Charles Avison reinforces the patriotic conclusions of the poem.

Certainly, research suggests that Browning's use of actual music, and, more importantly, his continual references to music and many musical images in his poems are more than caprice. Browning was a student of music, an avid concert-goer, and a performer of musical works throughout his life. It is a significant element in Browning's life that so many of his friendships should be formed with men and women who shared his love of theatre and music. The home of the young Browning's close friends, Eliza and Sarah Flower, was alive

with the music that they and their guests, such as Browning, enjoyed. It is important to remember that these amateur musicians were actively creating their own music; they were not just passively, or even actively, listening to others perform musical works, such as we in the twentieth century have become accustomed to doing. Sarah Flower composed hymns, the famous "Nearer, My God, to Thee" among them, and Browning invited Eliza to compose the music for his songs from Pippa Passes, an accomplishment she was unfortunately never able to complete. Amateur musicians of the nineteenth century, such as the Flower sisters and Browning, possessed an understanding of the structure of music because they were involved with its creation or recreation, and were not just auditors of the finished product of someone else's work.

This is not to say that Browning was not appreciative of high art and the formal concert experience. From his days as a teenager, he and his most congenial cousin, James Silverthorne, attended as many of the London concerts and theatres as they could. Later, in his twenties, he met Henry Chorley, the music critic of the Athenoeum, and was included in Chorley's many musical soirées at which the greatest instrumentalists of the day - including Moscheles, Mendelssohn, and Liszt - performed.[5] Leigh Hunt, one of Browning's closest friends, wrote a great deal of poetry which describes the experience of listening to the finest music of

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[5] Griffin & Minchin, 137.

the time, and to the best musicians, notably Paganini.[6] An interesting anecdote relates how Browning proudly enlightened Leigh Hunt, as he was accompanying him on the piano, that the song Hunt was singing, Stanco di pascolar de pecorelle, was one of Shelley's favourites and was mentioned in Shelley's Triumph of Life.[7] Browning also frequently attended John Ella's musical events. John Ella was a noted violinist and concert director "whose wide acquaintance with continental musicians drew the highest talent to London"[8] and to his own programmes; and it was at John Ella's that Browning met, among other continental musicians, Anton Rubenstein, who became one of his favourites. Later in his life, after Elizabeth's death, Robert returned from Florence to live in London where

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6 The Italian violinist, Nicolò Paganini, along with his peers, Franz Liszt and Frederic Chopin, raised the art of concertizing to its highest degree to date, their virtuosity and histrionics on stage causing audiences both to wonder at their genius and suspect them of having Satanic powers! Actually, Paganini encouraged the idea that he must be in league with the devil because it boosted ticket sales. See Leigh Hunt's Poetical Works, ed. H.S.Milford (Oxford,1923) particularly "Paganini" and "The Fancy Concert" first published in 1834 and 1845 respectively. Additionally, for a discussion of Leigh Hunt's works and their relation to Browning's use of music in his own poems, see John Hollander's essay "Robert Browning: The Music of Music" in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, H. Bloom, A. Munich, ed., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979, 100-22.

7 Griffin & Minchin, 262. See also Letters of Robert Browning, collected by Thomas J. Wise, Thurman L. Hood, ed., New Haven, 1933, vol. 1, 48-9.

8 W.C.DeVane & K.L.Knickerbocker, ed. New Letters of Robert Browning, London: John Murray, 1951, 167.

he resumed his enjoyment of the London theatre and concert season. Miss Anne Egerton Smith was his companion at this time and was apparently the first friend since his mother's death who could as thoroughly share Browning's passion for music.

While Betty Miller, in her biography of Browning, makes much of the idea that Browning's musical life was severely curtailed during the years he was married to Elizabeth, the evidence refutes this claim. Naturally, living in Italy cut the Brownings off from the London theatre scene, but their evenings together at Casa Guidi or at the homes of their friends, such as the sculptor William Story and his wife, were spent enjoying good conversation and making music. Furthermore, Elizabeth's letters express her delight in the Venetian opera house and the memory of drinking "their coffee in the Piazza San Marco in a setting of 'music and the stars'."[9] Elizabeth also wrote of how cheaply they could live in Florence, using as her example the fact that they could attend the opera at fivepence halfpenny. While it is true that Elizabeth was not the fervid music lover or capable musician that Browning was, and that her ill health kept her from attending much that Browning could enjoy, Betty Miller is wrong to suggest that marriage to Elizabeth deprived Browning

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[9] See Elizabeth Barrett Browning's letters of the year 1851 about the Browning's travels to Venice. The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, F.G.Kenyon, ed., London, 1897.

of this aspect of his life.

There are many more examples of Browning's lifelong interest and active participation in the art of music, which began in his boyhood with the accomplished piano-playing of his mother and the singing and song-collecting of his father. One need only look carefully at Browning's lifelong commentary on music to know that he was much more than a gifted amateur: he was very knowledgable about the structures of music, about its history and, most significantly, about its effects. Indeed, for him, the knowledge and love of music is more than simply another facet of an accomplished gentleman.

Blending Music and Verse.

It is precisely because Browning knew as much as he did about music that he was able to manipulate musical detail to suit the characters, situations and other aspects of his poems. That Browning took liberties and had occasional lapses with musical facts is true (those "diminished sixths" in "A Toccata" for example), but the evidence of his life and writing would seem to suggest that he did this, not from ignorance of musical detail, but in order to accomodate poetical requirements. He was, after all, writing poetry, not music, and he used his understanding of the art of music to

enhance the ideas and objectives of his poems. Likewise, he drew on his musical knowledge to manipulate the readers' emotions in ways only music can. Browning was very conscious of what he first responded to in Shelley's verse - the techniques for wedding music to verse - and he experimented with these and a vast array of original techniques to produce different effects.

Throughout his literary career, at least until the later years when he wrote more didactically, Browning was a musical poet, to whom rhythm and meter, sound and song came naturally, but for whom the attempt to blend "sound with sense" was an ever-present goal. From his mother, Browning had inherited his talent and interest in music, but it was from his father that he learned rhyme. Browning's father would rhyme everything, and as father and son would go for long walks around Camberwell, satirize something in cartoon form, or when Mr. Browning would sing his son to sleep at night, they would invariably sing or speak together in rhyme. This penchant for finding a musicality in the spoken language gave the young Browning a uniquely practiced ear for, and a facility with, rhyme that few people have. It came so easily to him that his first critic, the Rev. W. Johnson Fox, advised Browning that his language was far too splendid, in that it overshadowed the intellectual content of his poems. Even Browning admitted later in life that "in his youth [he] wrote only musically."[10]

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[10] Griffin & Minchin, 42.

When he read Shelley, however, Browning was most impressed by that poet's ability to marry music and verse. His first exposure to Shelley was to some of the "most perfect examples of Shelley's art - his lyrics."[11] Frederick Pottle writes of how Browning's copy of his first collection of Shelley's work, a piracy of Mrs. Shelley's 1824 edition of Posthumous Poems, is filled with Browning's commentary, some margins almost black with writing and exclamations. It is obvious that with Shelley, Browning found a poet with a mind and spirit akin to his own. In Pauline, Browning writes admiringly of Shelley's ability to "send forth hopes and longings / Clothed in passion's melodies.../...gather sense from song."

> And my choice fell
> Not so much on a system as a man - (l.286-7)
> Who sent forth hopes and longings for their sake,
> Clothed in all passion's melodies: such first
> Caught me and set me, slave of a sweet task,
> To disentangle, gather sense from song:
> Since, song-inwoven, lurked there words which seemed
> A key to a new world, the muttering
> Of angels, something yet unguessed by man.
>
> (Pauline, 1.293-9)

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[11] Frederick A. Pottle, Shelley and Browning: A Myth and Some Facts, Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1965, 17.

Browning learned from Shelley how he could "recreate the same effects as music with words and images that would enable the poet to see a vision."[12] Shelley's poetry inspired the young Browning to incorporate structure, cohesiveness, emotion, and, most importantly, ideas into his melodious language.

Browning already understood that music had the capacity to evoke ideas, fantasies, memories, dreams, and feelings of all descriptions. Moreover, he comprehended that music had a universal appeal, being able to communicate without words, and was a powerful medium for expressing whole vistas of imaginative, intellectual or emotive ideas. Browning appreciated, too, the drama and whimsy of music, and he had studied musical theory enough to know how music united pattern, texture, beauty and skill so that it could, in a very tight structure, produce beautifully ethereal effects. Shelley inspired him to think in terms of using language, and the metrical patterns of his poems, in the same manner as a musician carves out musical form, to produce the same effects in his poetry. Pauline and Paracelsus are Browning's first attempts to wed music and verse and, although they are not the amalgamation of music, language and thought that he achieves in his later music poems, they do show the origins of what was to become Browning's personal stamp: a musically metrical

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12 Robert Preyer, "Robert Browning: A Reading of the Early Narratives" in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, Philip Drew, ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957, 542.

exploration of ideas and feelings. The early pieces definitely display Browning's keen interest in and love of music. Indeed, it is in these early endeavours that we most clearly recognize Browning's quest to emulate music's affecting power and to express himself in words as passionately and fully as he felt music to be capable of doing.

II. The Early Works: Pauline, Paracelsus, Strafford and Sordello.

In his first published work, Pauline (1833), Robert Browning wrote some of his most significant lines about music, significant because Browning was to retain these feelings throughout his long career, often restating them:

> For music (which is earnest of a heaven,
> Seeing we know emotions strange by it,
> Not else to be revealed), is like a voice,
> A low voice calling fancy....
>
> (Pauline, 1.365-8)

Like Shelley, the major poetic influence at this point in his life, Browning finds music a near-perfect expression that far surpasses other efforts at communication, such as painting or poetry. Browning's narrator muses that because we are stirred by passions which are brought to our conscious awareness by music and which are revealed by no other earthly source, music must, therefore, bring evidence of Soul, or Heaven, to our imagination. He goes on:

> And she [music] fills all the way with dancing shapes
> Which have made painters pale, and they go on
> Till stars look at them and winds call to them
> As they leave life's path for the twilight world
> Where the dead gather....
>
> (Pauline, 1.370-4)

Again like Shelley, Browning describes music's radiating

powers of communication with images of hushed voices (Shelley's Prometheus listens to the low voice of love and music), and musically-inspired, amorphous shapes whirling through the ethereal gases. Additionally, Browning plays with the idea that music ascends to a heaven wherein the dead are "gathered," waiting to be enlivened by divinely-inspired works of art (such as the music that Abt Vogler or Charles Avison are capable of producing). Pauline is Browning's first exposition of musical ideas he will use again and again: music awakens imagination or consciousness; music speaks to us of eternal truths and allows our conscious awareness to soar heavenward along with it; and only man's divinely-inspired artistic endeavours are vigorous enough to connect earthly and heavenly elements.

Not only does Browning articulate music's powerful charms in Pauline, but, as well, his style is decidedly musical. As Donald Hair notes in his book, Browning's Experiments with Genre, Pauline's speaker "sings" his confession as if it were an operatic aria "full of coloratura passages."[13]

Hair reminds us that the early Romantics had this tendency toward a natural outpouring of emotion, which the Spasmodics exaggerated in mid-century. This style was generally centered around one or more recurring themes and the variations on those themes which is also the basis of a wide variety of

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[13] Donald S. Hair, Browning's Experiments with Genre, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972, 5-14.

important musical forms, including sonata form and symphonic music. A theme with variations is also at the core of Browning's Waring and his masterpiece, The Ring and the Book.

The theme and variations motif comes somewhat into play in Browning's second work, Paracelsus (1835), in that the poem is a thematic exploration of the powers of knowledge and love. But the poem is closer in design to a Shakespearean play than a piece of music. Like Shakespeare, Browning incorporates isolated songs into a few scenes, and these songs, which are poignant expressions of Paracelsus' moods, "help in pointing up the irony of his aspirations."[14] In Part IV of the poem, Paracelsus tells his friend, Festus, of his frustrated dreams in a song, cynically saying that to "make songs" (to be the fashioner), is all that he is capable of in comparison with Aprile, the real poet (the seer). Paracelsus feels he is a craftsman who can only approximate beauty, while Aprile is, to Paracelsus, the epitome of beauty. Paracelsus sings of his lost dreams:

> ... Still, dreams
> They were, so let them vanish, yet in beauty
> If that may be. Stay: thus they pass in sorg.
>
> (Paracelsus, IV, l.193-5)

His dreams have been tarnished, but may retain their hope and idealism, interestingly, if they are sung in the form of a quasi-romantic ballad.

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[14] Hair, 25.

This aspiration of Paracelsus' brings to mind Shakespeare's dying Hamlet who entreats Horatio to tell the world his story. In life, the two heroes, Paracelsus and Hamlet, have been unable to communicate their causes or fulfill their ambitions, but they seek consolation in the fact that others will plead their cases for them in legendary fashion.[15] Paracelsus hopes that, if he puts his findings into the form of a beautiful poem, "fitting dignity might be preserved" (IV,1.216). He feels his life has been a failure because he has been misunderstood and unappreciated, his conscientious search for scientific and medicinal knowledge has been laughed at, and he has been treated like a fool. Perhaps the only way his work can achieve the notice that he feels it deserves is in the sympathetically appealing form of a ballad.

Paracelsus sings a second song in this section which

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[15] The striking similarities between the language of Paracelsus and Hamlet attest to a strong Shakespearean influence in this poem. Note the following fragments of Paracelsus' speeches just before his song in Part IV:

to love, to know: has ever
One stumbled, in his search, on any signs
Of a nature in us formed to hate? To hate?
If that be our true object...
Whether to sink beneath such ponderous shame,
To shrink up like a crushed snail...
...or to bow
Cheerfully....
Then, one may feel resentment like a flame

The whole metrical tenor of this speech closely matches Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy and even borrows some of Hamlet's words and sentiments:

...or one may mope
Into a shade through thinking, or else drowse
Into a dreamless sleep and so die off.

hints at musical counterpoint:

> . . . While we read,
> The sharp salt wind, impatient for the last
> Of even this record, wistfully comes and goes,
> Or sings what we recover, mocking it.
> This is the record; and my voice, the wind's.
>
> (Paracelsus, IV, l.459 63)

As in Pauline, music becomes part of the elements as it soars upward. Here, ethereal voices sing imitatively, as it were, in echoes which seem to weave contrapuntally with the singer's. It is interesting to note that the wind echoes Paracelsus' song in an imitative but altered fashion which is somewhat like the subject and tonal answer of a fugue. In fugal style, the Subject, or the main theme (Paracelsus' song), may be answered by another voice with a Real Answer, one that is an exact replication of the subject but in the dominant key, or a Tonal Answer, one in which parts of the subject are modified (the wind's "mocking" echo). In this poem, Paracelsus' song is the Subject which is answered by the wind's "mocking" voice, the mocking suggesting modification of the echo, and therefore, a tonal answer. Finally, when the singer's voice becomes the wind's, the two merge just as Subject and Answer merge in a fugal stretto which is at the conclusion of a fugue and where all voices are contrapuntally drawn together.

In Part V, Paracelsus calls Aprile's music magical and

mysterious, and compares it to starlight:

> . . . filled him full
> With magical music, as they freight a star
> With light ...
>
> (Paracelsus, V, 1.116-8)

The later works, "Pied Piper" and "Saul," also record the magical and mystical charms of music, while Abt Vogler's music is so nearly perfect that "out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star" ("Abt Vogler," 1.52). Both David, in "Saul," and Vogler are musicians whose music is divinely-inspired, and is, therefore, imbued with truth, beauty, and the capability of evoking strong emotions, or awareness of soul, in its listeners. Paracelsus thinks this is true of Aprile at this point in the poem, but he learns that, as much as he has erred in his pursuit of Knowledge at the expense of everything else in life, so too, Aprile has erred in living only for Love.

The play, Strafford, written in 1837, is the first of Browning's works in which he incorporates eight bars of printed music. He originally composed the music for Macready's production of the play, but the actors who were playing the parts of William and Anne, Strafford's children who sing the song in Act V, apparently preferred the more pretentious Venetian boat-song which appears in the work, and which is translated thus:

> And faint, and fainter, and then all's quite gone,

Music and light and all, like a lost star.

(Strafford, V,ii,5 6)

In fact, these are not the words of the song, but are the character, William's translation of them, and, thus, Browning's embellishment of the Italian, "O bell'andare,/ Per barca in mare,/ Verso la sera,/ Di primavera!" (How beautiful to be sailing on the sea toward evening in springtime). As Browning translates it, music is once again compared to stars and light, and once more, drifts upwards into the unknown. The star image and the fading away to nothing are Browning's ideas which he repeatedly associates with music: music soars into the heavens and becomes lost to us until some artist, like Abt Vogler, is able to bridge earth and Heaven with divinely inspired work.

The music Browning originally composed for Strafford was "purposely no more than a crooning [lilt],"[16] the subtlety and tenderness of which would have far better suited the profound sadness of this scene wherein Strafford is parting forever from his children; in such a scene, it seems rather incongruous to introduce the Italian boat song that MacReady and the actors wanted. Browning should have insisted they use his simpler lilt. He was well schooled by Charles Avison's treatise on musical expression, and frequently displayed his agreement with many of Avison's principles, including the

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16 The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning, Cambridge Edition, Boston & New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1895, 49.

following:

> . . . a pompous Display of Art will destroy its own Intentions: on which Account, one of the best general Rules, perhaps, that can be given for musical Expression, is that which gives Rise to the Pathetic in every other Art, an unaffected Strain of Nature and Simplicity.[17]

This is something Browning proclaims consistently: the simplest music holds the most affecting power; we see the evidence of it in "The Pied Piper," "Saul," and Parleying with Charles Avison. A comical antithesis to this maxim of Avison's and Browning's occurs in "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," wherein the music is complex enough virtually to torture its interpreter.

Sordello was in the process of being written when Browning began the first poems for Bells and Pomegranates, and was published in 1840. Sordello is a troubadour (as is Rudel of "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli," a poem which was originally part of Bells and Pomegranates), and, after winning the prize as a trouvère (Book II), he ponders his new-found power to enrapture an audience with his singing. Sordello comes to realize that it is his love of singing which transforms him into someone who discovers an inner beauty, and who is then able to share this with his audience:

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[17] Charles Avison, An Essay on Musical Expression, New York: Broude Brothers, 1967, 70.

True, this snatch or the other seemed to wind
Into a treasure, helped himself to find
A beauty in himself; for, see, he soared
By means of that mere snatch, to many a hoard
Of fancies; as some falling cone bears soft
The eye along the fir-tree spire, aloft
To a dove's nest. Then how divine the cause
Why such performance should exact applause
From men, if they had fancies too?

(Sordello, Book II, l.140 8)

Note the repetition of themes. As in the previous poems, Sordello's song is divinely-inspired as it awakens Soul, and, again, music soars aloft and into the realm of beauteous nature (tree and dove) and Imagination (fancies).

In Sordello there is, for the first time, the openly expressed concern for the reaction of an audience. The music is not only wafting upwards into a mysterious realm above the natural world, thereby allowing its performer to transcend along with it, but it is also reaching that part of the audience who also possess Imagination. Sordello wonders about the power of music to cause men and women to crystallize their thoughts, or even to acknowledge and articulate their long silent feelings to themselves:

. . . Have they fancies - slow, perchance,
Not at their beck, which indistinctly glance
Until, by song, each floating part be linked

To each, and all grow palpable, distinct?

(Sordello, Bk.II,l.164-7)

For Browning, music has the power to awaken Soul in its listeners as well as in its performers: inspiration produces higher awareness in both performer, or artist, and audience.

Sordello consciously decides to devote himself to poetry which ennobles and enriches the lives of those who hear him, but because he makes a conscious decision to manipulate art in this way, he fails. Interestingly, whereas the audience is stimulated to a higher level of consciousness, the performers, who inspire the audience, must suspend their conscious awareness in order to allow their intuitive truths to become evident to the audience. In Pippa Passes, Pippa succeeds, unknowingly, because she, herself, is the instrument of God. And in "Saul," David succeeds when he ceases merely to display his art, the act of which has actually divorced his being from his craft, and, instead, allows his love and inspiration to shine forth unfettered by his technique.[18] Suspending rational thought and "artificial" artistry, and thereby exhibiting true inspiration, allows these artists successfully to touch their audiences: for Browning, they have literally

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[18] Refer to Griffin & Minchin, 126; Roma A.King, Jr., The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning, Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1968, 47; and Charles Leo Rivers, "Robert Browning's Theory of the Poet, 1833-41," in Romantic Reassessment, #58, Dr. James Hogg, ed., Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Salzburg: Universitat Salzburg, 1976, 138.

become vehicles of God's message.

As audience members, listening to music affects us all in non-verbal ways, when, like the performer, we momentarily suspend conscious awareness. In her Philosophy in a New Key, Susanne Langer calls this phenomenon our "myth of the inner life," while Aaron Copland explains it this way:

> We all listen on an elementary plane of musical consciousness....we respond to music from a primal and almost brutish level...experienc[ing] basic reactions such as tension and release, density and transparency,...the music's swellings and subsidings...its speed, its thunders and whisperings - and a thousand other psychologically based reflections of our physical life of movement and gesture, and our inner, subconscious mental life.[19]

The key word here is "subconscious," if we compare Copland's theory of listening to music and Robert Browning's theory. Browning's own experience as musical performer, church goer, composer and listener removed his personal experience from the subconscious level and placed it on a highly conscious level. He felt that our imagination was a powerful intellectual tool with which we could intuit truths which are eternal. He also felt that these truths lie dormant within our Souls, waiting

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[19] Aaron Copland, Music and Imagination, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970, 13-4.

to be revived to our conscious awareness by some activity or strong emotional experience, such as love or listening to music. Thus, the listener, once having been touched by the sincere inspiration of the performer, must go on to use the inspiration quite consciously, in an attempt to better him or herself. In this necessary propulsion toward action, Browning reveals his Victorian temperament.

Listening to music could, for Browning, activate imaginative thinking and lead the thinking processes to reflections about life's eternal questions. Browning's listeners may respond initially at a "gut" level, such as Copland describes, but they go much further than Copland's reflexive, reactive responses. Browning's listeners begin to think as creatively as the original artist, or as he phrases it in Sordello, "...each floating part be linked / To each, and all grow palpable, distinct." Music was obviously, for Browning, a revelatory source of clarification and organization.

Up to this point, then, before he had actually written any so-called "music poems," and even before he had specifically determined to put more music into his verse, Browning had already outlined quite an extensive philosophy of music. He had proclaimed his beliefs that the Poet was a Singer, and that as a singer of simple, spontaneous and sincere music, could evoke Soul both in himself and in his audience. Further, Browning had professed that Music and

Imagination were inextricably linked, and that Music expresses human feelings more absolutely than any of the other arts. He had also described music metaphysically as an almost visible entity that rises into the heavens and meets with the dead gathered there, and he had declared music to be magical, star like and fleeting, its ephemeral nature adding to its magic. This philosophy, established in Browning's mind well before his major poetry was even begun, was to remain basically intact throughout his career, but, as we will explore, Browning expanded the philosophy with distinctly musical addenda.

III. The Music of Bells and Pomegranates: Operatic Arias, Symphonies, and Cacophony - Browning's Music of Life.

Pippa's Operatic Structure.

Pippa Passes was being written at the same time as Sordello, and was published the year following Sordello in 1841, as the first pamphlet of Bells and Pomegranates. While Pippa Passes is labelled a drama, it could very well have been the libretto of the opera Browning had had ambitions to write. As far as we know, however, Browning thought of it only as a dramatic piece, although he did ask Eliza Flower to set Pippa's songs to music. But it is most interesting that, for the first time in one of Browning's poems, we see an overarching structure which is akin to musical structure: there are five sections in the piece, each section connected by Pippa's songs which act as a kind of "leitmotif" running through the poem; and the four mini-dramas are truly operatic in their characterizations, and in their dramatic and visual effects.

Furthermore, the way Browning uses the songs in Pippa Passes is a distinct departure from what he has done before. Whereas, in his previous poems, Browning has discussed the poet as singer, explored the effects of music, or had his characters sing songs that didn't really advance the plot

(with the exception that the narrator in Pauline could be viewed as singing an extended aria), in Pippa Passes the songs are used for quite specific and dramatic purposes. Browning has more than one character sing: as well as Pippa, who sings six songs, Browning has the Intendant's pawn, the prostitute, lure Pippa with a song in part three; and the character, Sebald, sings a brief fragment at the beginning of part one which contrasts grotesquely with Pippa's freshly innocent morning song. Sebald sings:

> Let the watching lids wink!
> Day's ablaze with eyes, think!
> Deep into the night, drink!
>
> (Pippa Passes, 1, l.1 3)

Both the prostitute's and Sebald's songs immediately establish the sinister atmosphere required of their respective scenes. The prostitute knowingly and cunningly brings the naive Pippa into danger with a sweetly-appealing ballad; and Sebald, his lids heavy with lust, drink and guilt, doesn't even see the sun of the new day trying to peek through the closed shutters of the Shrub-house.

As much as these songs add to the atmosphere of the play, it is Pippa's singing around which the entire plot of the drama revolves. As her heart-felt songs spill out of her in pure joy, they affect all who hear them and cause the hearers to reevaluate their actions. After hearing Pippa's "God's in his heaven," Sebald begins to fully fathom his guilt in the

murder of his lover's husband. Actually, Sebald rejoices in the fact that his is a soul which can feel guilt when he sees how Ottima's lust has destroyed any sense of morality she may have once possessed. In Act II, Jules makes the decision, after hearing Pippa's song, to forget revenge and instead celebrate the love that he and Phene have found together. From Pippa's song about a benevolent ruler (Act III), Luigi gathers the courage to get on with his task of assassination, a task he considers to be his patriotic duty. And in the fourth act, when the Bishop hears Pippa singing in all innocence, he renounces his plan to have her killed (Pippa is actually the Bishop's brother's heir and in line for an inheritance of land that the Church wants). Charles Rivers writes of Pippa:

> Even as a sculptor reveals the 'clear primordial creature' in a block of marble, Pippa evokes a new soul in Sebald, Jules, Luigi and even the Bishop. Her art not only produces form from unshaped stuff; it also evokes soul from form.

Rivers goes on to say that "Browning agrees with Shelley that poetry...redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man."[20] Here again we see the theme Browning had introduced in his earlier works: music allows us to realize our own souls. Pippa's music proves to be extremely powerful in that it causes instantaneous revelations in the individuals who

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[20] Charles Leo Rivers, 150.

hear it, and revelations, moreover, which lead to action, producing profound changes in their lives. Because the music itself is divinely-inspired, it ignites the spark of divinity within the listeners which alters their behaviour, bringing it to a new level of morality.

Cacophony: Browning's Music of Life.

The third and seventh pamphlets in the Bells series contain the Dramatic Lyrics and Romances respectively. Donald Hair suggests that Browning's interpretation of the lyric form was meant to be rather a "classical concept of community sentiment than a personal outpouring of intimate feelings."[21] Lyrics such as "Cavalier Tunes," "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix," "Through the Metidja to Abd el Kadr," "Home Thoughts from Abroad," "Home Thoughts from the Sea," and "Here's to Nelson's Memory" are all communal marching songs designed to "inspire valour and patriotism."[22] In this list of communal songs, Hair also includes "The Lost Leader" which expresses the Liberal disillusionment with Wordsworth's defection to the other side.

"Cavalier Tunes" is actually three poems all rousing, patriotic marches; but while two of them are appropriately

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21 Hair, 88.

22 Hair, 90-1.

written to conform to the rhythm of a March (Common or 4/4 time in music), the second poem, "Give a Rouse," whose rhythm is almost an exact replica of the oldest existing war-song (Tyrtaeus' fragment),[23] doesn't fall as neatly into its pattern. On the other hand, the choruses from number one, "Marching Along," and number three, "Boot and Saddle" perfectly illustrate typical march rhythm:

From "Marching Along:"

Marching along, fifty-score strong,

1 / / 2 3 / / 4

Great-hearted gentlemen, singing this song.

1 / / 2 / / 3 / / 4

From "Boot and Saddle:"

Boot, saddle, to horse, and away

1 2 / / 3 / / 4

Proof of their strong musical kinship can be found in the fact that all three poems have been set to music by Charles Villiers Stanford.[24] "The Lost Leader" was also set to music by John Hullah and published in New York by L.Cock.[25]

"Good News" and "Through the Metidja" are typical

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[23] H.H.Hatcher, The Versification of Robert Browning, New York: Phaeton Press, 1968, 180.

[24] Complete Works, 163.

[25] Browning wrote his appreciation to John Hullah for setting "The Lost Leader" to music in January of 1877. Two copies of the music are at Baylor University - one original - one photostat of the published song. See New Letters of Robert Browning, 237.

examples of Browning's talent for blending the sounds of life's experiences with idea, as their thrilling, galloping rhythms make it easy to imagine riding a horse in such adventurous times as described within the poems. "How They Brought the Good News" begins:

> I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
> I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;
> "Good speed!" cried the watch, as the gate bolts undrew;
> "Speed!" echoed the wall to us galloping through;
> Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
> And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

The words "sprang," "galloped" (used so repetitively), and "speed," plus the alliterative use of the consonants "s" and "g," and the hard "k" sounds of "Dirck" and "echoed," add to the hard-driving, catapulting tetrameter rhythm to give the poem its breathless excitement. In "Through the Metidja," it is the steady repetition of "As I ride, as I ride!" which propels the poem.

Browning's love of meter, rhyme and sound effects is highlighted in such poems as "Up at a Villa - Down in a City," "The Pied Piper" and "A Grammarian's Funeral." "Up at a Villa" features the noise and excitement of a small town parade with its "bang-whang-whang[ing]" drums and "tootle te tootle[ing]" fifes. This is the very language which causes critics to cringe, proclaiming it to be cacophonous and unpoetical, but they miss Browning's point completely when they don't see the

prosaic drama, humour, and, yes, the music, in this language. The language of "Up at a Villa - Down in a City" imitates music which may not be that of the salon or concert hall, but is certainly that which belongs to such processionals as described here. The musicality of this poem is not just related to that of the band, however, but is also imitative of the sounds of life in a small town. As Eleanor Cook phrases it, "The repetition simulates the town patter...and has the predictable repetition of town life."[26] From the balcony of Casa Guidi, which is just across the way from Florence's Pitti Palace, the seat of government at the time, Browning was frequently an onlooker at similar parades with his son, Pen, who was completely enamoured by their spectacle and sounds. How better to capture the atmosphere of such events than to use words and poetic meter to imitate their noise, bustle and provincial music?

"The Pied Piper" is the Browning classic which perhaps best exemplifies how onomatopoeia, alliteration, and repetition can match the hypnotic and magical effects of music:

...At the first shrill notes of the pipe,

I heard a sound as of scraping tripe,

....And it seemed as if a voice

(Sweeter far than by harp or by psaltery

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[26] Eleanor Cook, Browning's Lyrics: An Exploration, Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1974, 178-80.

Is breathed) called out, 'O rats, rejoice! (Stanza VII)

...And ere he blew three notes (such sweet
Soft notes as yet musician's cunning
Never gave the enraptured air)
There was a rustling that seemed like a bustling
Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling;
Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
Little hands clapping and little tongues chattering,
And, like fowls in a farm-yard when barley is scattering,
Out came the children running. (Stanza XII)

Interestingly, Henry Charles Duffin finds that the musicality of this poem lies not only in its rhythmical effects and rhymes, but in its overall, and, as he intimates, almost symphonic, design:

In "The Pied Piper"...the rhymes flow with
delicious naturalness out of the incidents
and characters....Though apparently nothing
but exquisite talk in exquisite verse, the
whole poem has a musical movement, rising
and falling as under a conductor's baton:
there are climaxes, beautifully worked up to
...and a score of cunning modulations of tone,
subtly linked with the phases of the story.[27]

Just as the music of the piper possesses primitive charms

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[27] Henry Charles Duffin, Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning, London: Bowes & Bowes, 1956, 177.

powerful enough to woo man and beast, so too, Browning's adept handling of language and poetic devices produces a poem as compelling and mesmerizing as the piper's music. If its enduring popularity is any indication, perhaps this poem was the poem which most effectively fulfilled Browning's goal of blending sound with sense, at least to this point in his career.

In the poem, "A Grammarian's Funeral," Browning uses for his theme the idea that man wastes his life when he devotes himself exclusively to only one thing, an idea he also explores in Paracelsus and "Youth and Art." "A Grammarian's Funeral" is included in this section on cacophony because its rhythms are irregular and jarring. Browning purposely writes this way to give the impression of people trying to philosophize about a dead man's lifestyle, while they are at the same time struggling to carry his heavy coffin up a hill to its gravesite. It is a ludicrous circumstance, but also typical of life's ironies. Northrop Frye says of "A Grammarian's Funeral":

> Only a musical poet could have been interested enough in the stumbling rhythm of a procession scrambling up the hillside.[28]

Both the rhythm and the subject of this poem are full of vigour and vitality: the poem champions life, with all its

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[28] Northrop Frye, Sound and Poetry, English Institute Essay, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1956, Introduction, xx.

pitfalls, and preaches Browning's belief that one should shun exclusivity and experience all of life. In this poem, as in the other "cacophonous" poems, Browning attempts to capture the sounds and the music of life: its hypnotic or jarring effects, as in "The Pied Piper" and "A Grammarian's Funeral," or its steady, rhythmically-primal appeal, as in "Cavalier Tunes," "How They Brought the Good News From Ghent to Aix," and "Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr." Moreover, these poems are dramatically musical, combining Browning's passions for drama and music, because they endeavour to match the appropriate sounds and rhythms to their images and characters.

Browning had always been fascinated by the sounds and rhythms of language. His sister, Sarianna, remembered that, even as a small boy, Robert would tap out the scansion of his lines on the dining room table as he marched around it.[29] Later in life, Browning would read his poems to audiences "with his foot stamping vigorously in time,"[30] and when talking with people he liked, apparently Browning's "talk would assume the volume and tumult of a cascade, his voice ris[ing] to a shout, sink[ing] to a whisper, [and running] up and down the gamut of conversational melody."[31] It is obvious that Browning felt his verses with his whole being;

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29 Ian Jack, Browning's Major Poetry, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, 2.

30 Clarence Tracy, Browning's Mind and Art, London: Oliver & Boyd, 1968, 94.

31 Ian Jack, 82.

they possessed, for him, both mental and physical energy and movement, qualities which are as musical as they are poetic. This was not only a natural phenomenon to Browning; he also learned from Charles Avison's little book on musical expression that "a dull, lifeless, even monotone reading of a poem can destroy both its beauty and its meaning."[32] As Browning was equally interested in incorporating both beauty and meaning into his poetry, this was a lesson he evidently took to heart.

Northrop Frye writes that music is concerned not only with beauty of sound, but also with organization of sound, and poetry shares this aspect of music, along with rhythm, movement, continuity, and stress accent.[33] Despite the fact that Browning was fascinated by both the beauty and organization of sound, he has often been accused of using unpoetic and unmusical effects in poems such as those described above. Oscar Wilde, for example, wrote, "There are moments when Browning wounds us by monstrous music."[34] Tastes continuously change, however, and twentieth-century poets and readers have accepted cacophonous language as poetic, just as twentieth-century musical audiences have accepted, in large measure, harsh dissonances, percussive instrumentation, and

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[32] Avison, 120.

[33] Frye, Sound and Poetry, Introduction.

[34] Park Honan's "Browning's Lyric Versification" in Tracy's Browning's Mind and Art, 82.

irregularities of rhythm.

We shouldn't lose sight of the fact, however, that in Browning's mind, his unique brand of "sound effects" was unquestionably musical. He commented once, "In the course of my musical exercises, and according to the moods of many a year, I may have treated myself to an occasional whistle, cherrup, and guffaw, besides the regular symphonies."[35] Browning used musical/sound effects in a dramatic or operatic sense, the cacophony being present purposefully to intensify the poem's atmosphere, drama and characterizations. It was also a conscious effort to secure the reader's attention, or as Browning referred to it in the preface to Paracelsus, the reader's "co-operating fancy." As well, Browning was less interested in traditional metrical accents and smooth versification than he was in the total effect being presented by the poem. As he himself wrote in a letter to Ruskin:

> You ought, I think, to keep pace with the thought tripping from ledge to ledge of my 'glaciers,'as you call them; not stand poking your alpenstock into the holes... [36]

He wished to give "expression to the diversity of thought and emotion," feeling that as long as poets merely looked for "mechanical construction," they would never hear the more

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[35] Eleanor Cook, xiii.

[36] Victorian Poetry and Poetics, 2nd edition, Walter E. Houghton, G. Robert Stange, ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968, 166.

"complex harmonies" of their subject.[37] And it must be remembered that Browning could utilize more complex "harmonies" and metrical schemes than most because of his unique musicality.

Actually, most of Browning's works should be read aloud for the sheer delight in the sounds of the words, as well as for the accompanying humour which is also sharpened by an oral reading. The musicality of the verse also becomes more apparent when one hears the poem read aloud. Just as notes on manuscript paper appear unmusical until they are sung, or played on an instrument, and the organization of sounds takes its proper shape, so some of Browning's verse may seem disjointed until it is spoken aloud ("sung") in the manner that Browning most probably used himself.

Browning's "Symphonies."

We definitely see more of Browning's "symphonies" and less of his "guffaws" in the poetry which deals with love. Margaret Willy notes, for example, how "the long running lines [in Saul] onomatopoeically suggest harp melodies as David's

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[37] Arthur Beatty, Browning's Verse-Form: Its Organic Character, Folcroft, Pennsylvania: Folcroft Press Inc., 1897, 65.

fingers sweep the strings."[38] As beautiful as David's music is, however, it is his love which finally saves Saul when David "himself [becomes] the harp of God, vibrating at the touch of the Master's fingers."[39]

Furthermore, notice how the lilting and lovely meter of "Love Among the Ruins" seems to suggest a Viennese Waltz:

Where the quiet-colored end of evening smiles

Miles and miles

On the solitary pastures where our sheep

Half-asleep

Tinkle homeward through the twilight, Stray or stop

As they crop

("Love Among the Ruins," I, l 6)

The long, lyrical and legato lines, followed by three contrastingly short and staccato accents throughout, give the poem a waltz-like sway which is highly reminiscent of waltzes by Johann Strauss. If the poem were written to musical accompaniment, the rhythm would exactly fall into the pattern of three-quarter time:

Where the quiet-colored end of evening smiles

2 3, 1 2 3, 1 2 3, 1

Miles and miles

2 3, 1

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[38] Margaret Willy, A Critical Commentary on Browning's Men and Women, London: McMillan, 1968, 82.

[39] Anna M. Stoddart, "Saul", Browning Society Papers, vol.2, 1885-9, 269.

On the solitary pastures where our sheep

2 3, 1 2 3, 1 2 3, 1

Half-asleep

2 3, 1

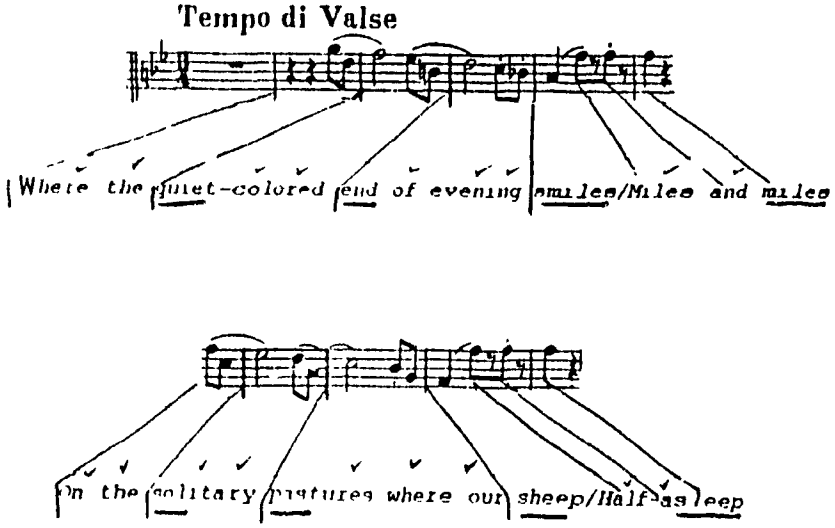
Tinkle homeward through the twilight, Stray or stop

2 3, 1 2 3, 1 2 3, 1

As they crop

2 3, 1

The three-quarter time begins on the first syllable of "quiet," the two previous unaccented words being the upbeat, and, thereafter, a steady waltz rhythm is maintained throughout. If, moreover, the attempt is made to fit Browning's words to Strauss' "Wine, Women, and Song" waltz, it can readily be seen that the match is identical.



We cannot know if Browning wrote "Love Among the Ruins" with this particular waltz in mind, but the waltzes by Johann Strauss (father and son) were extremely popular in the nineteenth century and it is very likely that Browning, who kept himself abreast of the latest in music, was familiar with them. The Viennese waltz is unlike other waltzes in that its rhythm is more freely flowing: it possesses a "curious anticipation of the second beat and delay of the third which gives such charm to what is otherwise plain three quarter time."[40] Likewise, "Love Among the Ruins" delays the heavier accents, rushing the verse along via anapests, and, too, the run-on lines (each stanza is one complete sentence except for the sixth and the eighth) keep the verses flowing without pause.

The love poems, "In a Gondola" and "A Serenade at the Villa," could be viewed as taking the form of operatic arias. The "Serenade" could easily be transcribed as an aria; like an aria in an opera, it is the emotional outpouring of a character, in this case a frustrated lover, during an isolated moment in the drama. The "Serenade" could just as easily be considered a strophic folk or art song, however, because all of its twelve stanzas share the same rhythm (iambic tetrameter) and rhyme pattern (A B A B A). "In a Gondola" is a duet for a man and woman, who both sing and speak to each

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[40] Yehudi Menuhin and Curtis W. Davis, The Music of Man, Toronto: Methuen Publications, 1979, 183.

other in the course of the action. Each character also "muses," in a kind of recitative, before speaking or singing. It is most interesting that, when asked to compose verses on the spot for the Maclise painting called "The Serenade," Browning immediately assigned an operatic play to it which became his "In a Gondola." That this format should come to his imagination so quickly and naturally shows how love and music, tragedy and drama were uppermost in his mind. Charles Avison describes Italian Serenatas in his Essay as elegant, little "musical productions"[41] and I would venture to say that "The Serenade" and "In a Gondola" are proof that Browning shared this view.

A similar "production" which is almost operatic in its drama is "The Laboratory." Ian Jack points out how Browning's use of the passionate speaking voice in this instance is almost Jacobean, and, by its use, we are convinced that the speaker "is intent on murder...and will be successful."[42]

> He is with her, and they know that I know
> Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow
> While they laugh at me, at me fled to the drear
> Empty church, to pray God in, for them! - I am here.
>
> ("The Laboratory," II, 5-8)

The inherent evil in this speaker, and the relish with which he contemplates his revenge against his lover, brings Verdi's

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[41] Avison, 85.

[42] Ian Jack, 102-3.

Otello, Act II, scene ii to mind, wherein Iago virtually shakes his fist at God and professes his own Credo in a darkly dramatic aria. The last three words of Browning's speaker in the above stanza stand grimly apart in "sinister, heavy emphasis,"[43] in much the same way that Verdi achieves musically-dramatic effects in his operas.

Critics have found musical impressions in several of Browning's poems from Bells and Pomegranates. In "The Flight of the Duchess," for instance, Northrop Frye has noted that the "run-on lines, and rhymes that sharpen the accent" in the following lines are "essentially musical in their cumulative rhythm:"[44]

Heightened the mellowness of her cheeks yellowness,
(To get on faster) until at last her
Cheek grew to be one master-plaster

Henry Charles Duffin has written that the five part structure of "By the Fireside," Browning's exquisite poem about married love, parallels Beethoven's String Quartet in A , which is also in five parts and which is called "the most human" of Beethoven's works.[45] And C.Willard Smith notes elements of fugal structure in "Waring:"[46]

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[43] Jack, 103.

[44] Frye, Sound and Poetry, xiv.

[45] Henry Charles Duffin, Amphibian, 89.

[46] C. Willard Smith, Browning's Star Imagery: The Study of a Detail in Poetic Design, New York: Octagon Books, 1965, 141-2.

> ...the number of parts and voices that combine to present the single theme of friendship are Browning's biographical and fanciful recollections of his friendship with Alfred Domett. From its apparently casual beginning, the simple statement of the fugue theme, the poem rises to its quasi-mystical conclusion.

Smith also finds "A Grammarian's Funeral" fugal in design, but neither it nor "Waring" come close to "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" in its fugal elements, or to "A Toccata of Galuppi's" in its rendering of contrapuntal dramatic voices.

The music of Bel's and Pomegranates runs the gamut from cacophony to literary symphony and highlights Browning's experiments with musically-dramatic or operatic impressions. With the poems of Bells, it is evident that Browning is continuing his attempt to blend sound and sense by cultivating his ability to draw the audience into his mini-dramas, or discussions of ideas and emotions, by using arresting sounds and rhythms, and, further, by employing language and meter which is peculiarly appropriate to his characters or situations.

IV. "Putting More Music into Verse": Browning's Efforts at Communication and Popularity.

Before we turn to the Men and Women (1855) collection of poems from Browning's middle period, let us take a moment to note the rather interesting anomaly that, as much as he loved music, specifically the music of the keyboard, Browning never wrote panegyrics to his most cherished composers, Beethoven or Handel, or even to the performers he admired, such as Anton Rubenstein. Neither did he write many songs, hymns, ballads, dirges, or even odes to music as did Shelley, Shakespeare, Dryden and Milton, to name but a few. On the other hand, Browning's friend, Leigh Hunt, did compose musically laudatory poetry, proclaiming his amazement at the talent of the current European rage, Paganini:

> . . . the pale musician of the bow,
> Who brought from Italy the tales, made true,
> Of Grecian lyres; and on his sphery hand,
> Loading the air with dumb expectancy,
> Suspended, ere it fell, a nation's breath.
>
> ("Paganini," 1.37)

Certainly, Browning was not unwilling to pay homage to those he revered; Percy Bysshe Shelley becomes Browning's "Sun treader" and poetic mentor in Pauline. He also praises the musicians, Abt Vogler and Charles Avison, in poems which are

as near to the panegyric form as Browning permits, but these talents were not the stars that Bach and Beethoven were. They could not even have been the musicians from whom Browning received his most enriching musical experiences, although he makes the point in Parleying with Charles Avison, that Avison's Little March in C and book of theory, Essays on Musical Expression, were definitely influential in his learning to know and love music.

It is rather the case that Browning avoided eulogizing, and used more musically-obscure figures in his works, in order to focus on his points of philosophy. Even if these styles of poetry could have made him a more accessible and popular poet, Browning refused to allow their facility to compromise his rather complex style. He made use of his love for music and musicians in a more thoughtful manner: for Browning, music was a source of inspiration for philosophical discussion, and not an end in itself. Even his poem about the famous extemporizer, Abt Vogler, is, as Wendell Stacy Johnson says, "more a poetic essay on the meaning of music,"[47] with which I would agree, while adding that it is also a poem about the creative experience in general.

Browning used musical references as poetic tools. Music was so much a part of his life and being that it would have been impossible for him not to use its vocabulary. Moreover, he knew music well enough to utilize its fund of metaphoric

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[47] Wendell Stacy Johnson, "Browning's Music", 205.

images in ways that could heighten the emotions of the reader, thus bringing the reader into the argument of the poem. Browning embraced musical allusions in order to illuminate poetic and philosophic ideas. Preferring to concentrate on musical effect, Browning made a conscious decision not to worship the artist but rather to probe the disposition of the art form and of imaginative experience especially. Margaret Willy writes, "He was more fascinated by art in the making than by the finished result."[48] For Browning, the probabilities of mankind achieving the penultimate finished, or perfected, art form, were extremely rare, if indeed ever possible: creativity resided instead in aspiring to an ideal, and in the ongoing stages of interpretation and reinterpretation. In the latter conviction, Browning reflected the thinking of his contemporary, Thomas Carlyle, as well as the German philosophers, Friederich and A.W.Schlegel, and Samuel Coleridge. For these Romantics, Browning included, human intuition and imagination were continually directing a process of creation and re-creation.[49] The arousal of the

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[48] Willy, 43.

[49] Browning's tour de force, The Ring and the Book, is his best example of this credo, whereby each person reinvents or reinterprets the facts as he or she understands them. Only the artist, who coordinates all the versions of the story into a structured whole, retains the truth, as Browning concludes in his final book of the poem, Book XII:

> But Art, - Wherein man nowise speaks to men,
> Only to mankind, - Art may tell a truth
> Obliquely....
> So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
> Beyond mere imagery on the wall, -

Imagination, or Soul in Browning's terminology, by means of musical experience (music being the supreme communicator), was a potent creative force: music had the power to communicate truths to the inner being, which could then be reinterpreted or re-created in an alternate fashion. This held true both for the poet, who was ideally both a fashioner and a seer, and for the reader who, when "moved" by the poet's vision, could also begin to see more clearly and to think more creatively.[50] Much of Browning's work is purposely open ended to allow the reader the freedom, accompanied by some guidance by the poet, to reach his or her own conclusions. As early as 1835, in his preface to Paracelsus, Browning writes:

> It is certain...that a work like mine depends on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success, - indeed were my scenes stars, it

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> So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
> Deeper than ever e'en Beethoven dived, -
> So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,
> Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.

[50] Browning writes in his An Essay on Shelley, "[The poet] is rather a seer...than a fashioner, and what he produces will be less a work and more an effluence." Browning discusses objective and subjective poets, and concludes that Shelley is the best of both because he connects humankind with the absolute via his own insight. Complete Works, 1009.

Browning believed that "in working for his own perfection, the individual is at the same time working for that of collective man. And if the individual is a poet, he imparts 'the gift of seeing to the rest.'" See Browning's letter to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1845 -220 - 1, volume I, and Charles Leo Rivers, 131.

> must be his cooperating fancy which, supplying all chasms, shall collect the scattered lights into one constellation....I trust for his indulgence...and that even should he think slightingly of the present...he will not be prejudiced against other productions which may follow in a more popular, and less difficult form.

It is touchingly ironic to note here that Browning almost foresees the lack of popularity that awaits him, and that he actually expects it with Paracelsus. He knows that his poetic style is difficult for the reader. Nevertheless, he asks that the reader meet him on his own ground; he will not compromise.

Browning's endeavour to ask for full participation from the reader is, furthermore, a function of his philosophic and religious belief that human beings must strive to reach a fuller awareness and consciousness of life, and that, even if we are finite creatures with limited understanding and capabilities, our ceaseless struggle to understand brings us closer to infinity. As J. Hillis Miller explains:

> Man's perpetual striving is his most God-like attribute....The uncouth, half-finished statues of Michelangelo are more in correspondence to the deity than any smooth perfection, and the form of Browning's poetry, in its internal contradictions, its rough-hewn quality, its

> open endedness, is the very image of infinity, and of the limitless perfection of God.[51]

For Browning, Mankind is the limited seeker after truths, - the finite being in search of infinity; our rational being seeks answers to eternal questions, the answers to which our finite nature makes impossible for us ever to reach or understand. Miller finds Browning's philosophy of this vital struggle musical:

> Browning's yearning after God and the primal chaos is fluid, capricious, vital, turbulent, shifting, ...like music gets into your body, consciousness permeates the world....like music, too, this vast Browning-sea is full of motion, an indistinct trembling and swelling...[moving the world onto] more complicated forms of life.[52]

In fact, it is this aspect of Browning's nature that best explains his use of musical allusion in his poetry: his intellectual and musical natures are so intricately combined as to be inseparable. For Browning, the essential struggle to participate fully in life is as ever-changing and tumultuous, but also as transforming and aspiring to resolution, as is music.

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[51] J.Hillis Miller, Victorian Subjects, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, 59.

[52] J. Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1963, 82.

Indeed, to separate music from the rest of life, such as a paneqyric to music may do in its praise of that specific art form, is totally contrary to what Browning believed. Because, like Carlyle, Browning sees evidence of the Divine in this world ("for God is glorified in man," Paracelsus, V), his philosophy is to live life to the fullest; he berates those artists who cheat themselves of life in exclusive dedication to art. In "Youth and Art," Browning writes of a sculptor and a singer who miss their chance at love and happiness together because of their single-minded pursuit of excellence in their chosen fields:

Why did not you pinch a flower
  In a pellet of clay and fling it?
Why did not I put a power
  Of thanks in a look, or sing it?

. . . .

No, no: you would not be rash,
  Nor I rasher and something over:
You've to settle yet Gibson's hash,
  And Grisi yet lives in clover.

But you meet the Prince at the Board,
  I'm queen myself at bals-paré,
I've married a rich old lord,
  And you're dubbed knight and an R.A.

Each life unfulfilled, you see;
It hangs still, patchy and scrappy:
We have not sighed deep, laughed free,
Starved, feasted, despaired, - been happy,

Both artists have met with a measure of socially-acknowledged prominence, but they are also destined to live with the realization that all of their efforts have only deprived them of the satisfaction and happiness they would have found in each other. At the same time, they have reaped relatively meagre material rewards, and, certainly, not the popular success they dreamed of having. Browning was concerned with portrayals of men and women as the complex entities that they are; he was not interested in merely highlighting people's triumphs. In fact, unlike Carlyle but like Wilde and Ruskin, Browning finds failure more interesting than success.

Neither was Browning interested in only one facet of music. He was a connoisseur of a wide variety of music which included that of his contemporaries as well as of the Classical and Baroque eras. Browning was not averse to "modern" music, as is his Bishop Blougram, who prefers the more classical Rossini to the "noisy" Verdi with his "orchestra of salt-box, tongs, and bones" ("Bishop Blougram's Apology," 1.384). He enjoyed the work of Liszt, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Anton Rubenstein. Moreover, he must have admired the revolutionary Wagner because it is said that Browning was thrilled to be assisting in the production of an opera, in

Venice in 1880, at which Wagner was in attendance.[53]

With such musical openness and attention to the art, it is surprising that so few of his poems are directly inspired by pieces of music. In the whole of Browning's works, there are abundant allusions to music, and there are poems that feature the process of creating music, poems about music's power to evoke Soul, and those which lament the fleeting nature of music, the seemingly-perfect human creation. But of all of these poems, only "A Toccata of Galuppi's," Parleying with Charles Avison, and "The Flight of the Duchess" are actually born from musical works, having their origins in music from Browning's youth. Browning learned to play a toccata by Galuppi, as transcribed by his father in the family album of collected works; Avison's Little March in C was one of Browning's favourite pieces that his mother would play for him as a child; and "The Flight of the Duchess" was based on a fragment of a song the young Browning heard one Guy Fawkes' Day (the song was likely a variation of the Scottish ballad, The Gypsy Laddie, and the line Browning remembered, which spawned the idea for the poem, was "Following the Queen of the Gypsies, O").[54]

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[53] R.W.S.Mendl, "Robert Browning, The Poet-Musician," Music and Letters, 42, April 1961, 148 9. Apparently, Browning and some of his friends arranged an encore performance of the original Barbiere di Siviglia (by Paesiello) which had been presented just once as a musical curiosity.

[54] William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd ed., New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, Inc., 1955, 172.

The poem "Founder of the Feast" might be included with these poems which are musically derived, because its origins are the many musical events Browning shared with his friend, Arthur Chappell:

> A host so kindly, in as great a way
> Invites to banquet, substitutes for show
> Sound that's diviner still, and bids us know
> Bach like Beethoven....
>
> My cup was filled with rapture to the brim,
> When night by night, - ah, memory, how it haunts! -
> Music was poured by perfect ministrants,
> By Halle, Schumann, Piatti, Joachim.

A brief mention belongs at this point, also, to Fifine at the Fair, owing to the fact that Schumann's Carnaval inspires Don Juan's reverie. However, although the Schumann piano piece makes a perfect vehicle for Don Juan's musings about his day at the fair, clearly the poem itself is not founded on Schumann's musical ideas.

If Browning preferred neither to eulogize his musical heroes nor to write in typically musical forms, and if, further, the vast catalogue of musical works that he knew did not inspire him to write, how exactly did Browning "put more music into [his] verse?" We know that this was important to him as early as Pauline, wherein he makes it clear that, for him, the poet is a Singer of Songs. Later, he writes letters

which specifically outline his poetic purpose to marry song and idea. The letters are almost defiant explanations of why he has chosen to write the way he does, and they are rather pathetic pleas for understanding and a wider readership. To the eighth and final pamphlet of his Bells and Pomegranates series, published in 1844, Browning attached the first of these letters which explained that the title of his series was "intended to express something like an alternation, or mixture of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought."[55] The second note was written to his friend, Joseph Milsand, in February, 1853, as Browning was composing the poems that would comprise Men and Women, to be published in 1855. He wrote that he was "writing some of those lyrics with more music and painting than before...as a first step toward popularity."[56] And in March of the same year, he wrote to Elizabeth's cousin, John Kenyon, "I am trying if I can't take people's ears at last by the lyrical tip, if they have one, - and make songs and such like."[57] This last letter shows him to be more determined than ever that he is on the right path, and that it is his audience that need to be shaken by their "lyrical ears."

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55 Griffin & Minchin, 123.

56 Betty Miller, Robert Browning: A Portrait, London: John Murray, 1952, 174.

57 Ian Jack, Browning's Major Poetry, 136. The letter to Kenyon is dated "Florence, March 17, '53" [exactly 21 days after the letter to Milsand] and is now at Wellesley College.

The ten years between the publications of Bells and Pomegranates and Men and Women were critical ones for Browning, who, during this time, married Elizabeth, moved with her to Italy, and became a father. He suffered rejection at the hands of the reading public because his works, after the well received Paracelsus of 1835 were thought to be too difficult. At the same time, Elizabeth was hailed as a very popular poet. As she was the one who was earning their money, Robert determined to discipline himself to the task of writing more frequently, and, for a while, he actually did write one poem a day. It is interesting that he still adhered to the notion that all he needed to do to gain favour was to inject more music and art into his poems, so that his readers' ears and eyes would be opened to what he was trying to communicate. Sadly, neither popular nor critical success would be enjoyed by Browning until the 1860's, after Elizabeth's death.

Success came gradually as his readership shifted to the young men of Oxford and Cambridge, who rediscovered Browning from an 1863 reissue of older works, from the 1864 publication of Dramatis Personae, and as the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites spread (D.G.Rossetti had been an admirer since Pauline). His success was also largely due to the fact that, in the poems from his middle years, Browning had perfected his particular treatment of the dramatic monologue form, blending together his many interests: dramatic, artistic, historic, psychological, religious, metaphysical, and musical. His

instincts to touch the senses of his audience were not wrong, only perhaps, untimely.

V. Men and Women

It is fascinating to witness the shift of interest to art in the Men and Women poems. Browning was living in Florence at the time most of these poems were written, and he had become so interested in art that he decided to become a sculptor. Apparently, he rented the room immediately adjacent to his study in Casa Guidi in order to carry out this plan, and even purchased a full skeleton to study, much to his delight.[58] Consequently, there are more poems about art and artists than music during this period.

A frequently expressed theory about Browning's seeming loss of interest in music at this time in his life is that Elizabeth's interests did not lie in that direction, and that, therefore, she somehow held Robert back from enjoying the music he so loved. However, I think it would be more accurate to say that love, specifically Robert's love for Elizabeth, superseded his need for music. To him, as we have seen, music was the most nearly-perfect expression of Soul, but no art form was more meaningful for him than love. In "The Last Ride

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[58] This was told to me by the guide at Casa Guidi. At the time I was in Browning's study, there was restoration going on on the ceilings and walls of the rooms in an effort to recover all of the original frescoes. In Browning's study, a frescoe has been beautifully restored to the full ceiling of the room: it is a painting of angels and its recovery, after years under various coats of paint, suddenly explained to Browning scholars Elizabeth's writing that Robert was working as angels watched!

Together," he writes about the fleeting nature of art, and of all human endeavour, except love. William DeVane notes that Browning's theme, "that as makers of happiness, life and love, even when love is rejected, are superior to all the arts," is prevalent in his poetry after 1850.[59] After Elizabeth's death, Browning expresses this conviction in "Dis Aliter Visum" (Dramatis Personae) with these few touching lines:

...what's the earth

With all its art, verse, music, worth -

Compared with love, found, gained, and kept? (l.33-35)

Before marriage to Elizabeth, the value of music for Browning had been that it awakened consciousness which led to keener understanding, music brought forth Soul and inner truth, making one more fully alive. At the time he was compiling and writing the Men and Women poems, however, he was actively involved in a loving relationship which accomplished all those things and more. Love was now the medium for experiencing the infinite in the finite; love, the most profoundly felt and all-enveloping emotion, was, in a sense, Browning's replacement for music's affecting power. Thus, in Men and Women, there are many more poems about relationships and love than music. During this time, music was not the only interest which took second place to love: Browning was also not writing poetry to the same extent as before, and he was only playing with the idea of becoming a sculptor. He was wholly dedicated

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[59] DeVane, Handbook, 238.

to Elizabeth, and to their son, Pen.

Of the fifty-one poems in Men and Women, there are eight musical works. Browning incorporates the poems we have already examined from his Dramatic Lyrics and Romances: "Love Among the Ruins," "Up at a Villa - Down in the City," "A Serenade at the Villa," "A Grammarian's Funeral," and "Saul." Two of his official "music poems" are also included: "A Toccata of Galuppi's" and "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha." Also, Browning articulates his theory of combining music with poetry perhaps more succinctly than ever before in the poem "Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books" which begins:

> Stop playing, poet! May a brother speak?
> 'Tis you speak, hat's your error. Song's our art:
> Whereas you please to speak these naked thoughts
> Instead of draping them in sights and sounds.

Browning almost preaches his doctrine that the poet "speaks" more effectively through visual and auditory mages. He uses the idea of song here in the sense that it gives expression to his function as a poet, which is to activate, and cause to vibrate or come to life (as the Aeolian harp), forces that were formerly dormant or passive. This, as we have seen, had also been the function of Pippa and David. The same purpose is assigned to Galuppi's music in "A Toccata of Galuppi's" and in the flute music of the 1888 poem, "Flute Music with an Accompaniment."

Of "Transcendentalism," Roma A. King writes in The

Focusing Artifice:

> By song [Browning] means more than lyrical expression or words capable of musical annotation. He refers to the mode of expression that transcends rational statement and, by uniting intellect with emotion and sense, communicates meaning beyond that of ordinary language. The poet is a magician, not a philosopher; a maker, not a sayer. He illuminates rather than instructs. [60]

Browning's poet is no longer simply a singer of songs: he has evolved and matured into, as Roma King says, "an illuminator," someone who enables the reader to more readily comprehend the ideas, philosophy, or characterizations and situations drawn from life, that the poet chooses to display. He uses words in ways that allow the reader to reach beyond the language and achieve the deeper meaning. Music had raised Browning's conscious awareness and he sought to blend its influence with language by using musical allusion; now, however, he refines his technique so that the poetry itself holds its own power to enlighten. The words themselves should, as music does, affect the emotions, the senses and the intellect of the reader. Interestingly, when translated into a musical idea, this function of the poet, as outlined in "Transcendentalism," is

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[60] Roma A.King,Jr., The Focusing Artifice, 90.

akin to that of a conductor who must orchestrate and direct, not musical notes, but ideas and feelings.

The "Music Poems" of Men and Women.

"A Toccata of Galuppi's"

"A Toccata of Galuppi's" is the first of Browning's so-called "music poems." Unlike previous poems in which musical allusions have been little more than interesting appendages to the literary venture, "A Toccata" puts music and musicians in the forefront of its concerns. In point of fact, Baldassare Galuppi's toccata is the very heart of this poem: the poem's rhythm flows throughout in toccata-like rhythm; there is an improvisatory and quasi-fugal section[61] in the middle of the work which is typical of toccata form; the toccata "speaks" to its listeners via the affecting intervals which Browning describes in musical terminology; and the voices of the various speakers in the poem (which include Galuppi's music itself, two Venetian lovers, and the nineteenth-century narrator) intertwine as contrapuntally as would the melodic lines of a toccata.

In Pauline the young Browning had longed for the ability

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[61] Stanza VIII can be classified as either a fugal form (in that it contains a subject, or question, and answers) or as an improvisation; both are typical of toccata form.

to communicate in words as effectively as music. In "A Toccata," he has used his technical knowledge of music to its best advantage as the music becomes essential to the communication of the poem's message. Browning is not merely describing an artist, a composition, or the effects of music, nor is he just adding songs or musical rhythm to his verse. He does more with musical effects and rhythm in "A Toccata" than in all the other poems to date, effectively creating as much of a musical realm within the poem as is possible without actually hearing the music. The music of this poetically musical realm becomes indispensable: it is the subject of the poem, it is one of the important speakers, and it is the argument and the meaning of the work. Although they would be dramatically diminished, Pauline could endure without Browning's references to music, Strafford could certainly survive without its song, and "Up at a Villa Down in the City" would still remain true to its purposes without its musical sound effects. But without the music in "A Toccata," there would simply be no poem.

Perhaps the best known toccatas today are the Toccatas and Fugues by Johann Sebastian Bach. First composed for harpsichord or organ, they are primarily played on the organ now. Bach's toccatas are the pinnacle of German Baroque toccata form and are far more complex than the original Italian toccatas. The first published toccata was in a 1536 collection of lute music by Baldesar Castiglione, the author

of The Book of the Courtier. Castiglione writes why the Renaissance courtier thought it necessary to round out his personal development with musical skills and appreciation:

> I shall...remind you how greatly [music] was honoured in the ancient world, and held to be sacred, and that the wisest of philosophers held the opinion that the universe was made up of music, that the heavens make harmony as they move, and that as our own souls are formed on the same principle they are awakened and have their faculties, as it were, brought to life through music.[62]

Three hundred years later, Robert Browning could very well have written this. For Browning, the most valuable study of one's life was the development of soul, and his attempt to incorporate the affecting and communicative powers of music into his verse was expressly to awaken soul.

At the same time as Castiglione was publishing his toccata for lute, his contemporaries in Venice, Annibale Padovano, Andrea Gabrieli and Claudio Merulo, the organists of St. Mark's Basilica, were adapting the toccata form from a chamber piece to something more complex for organ.[63] Their

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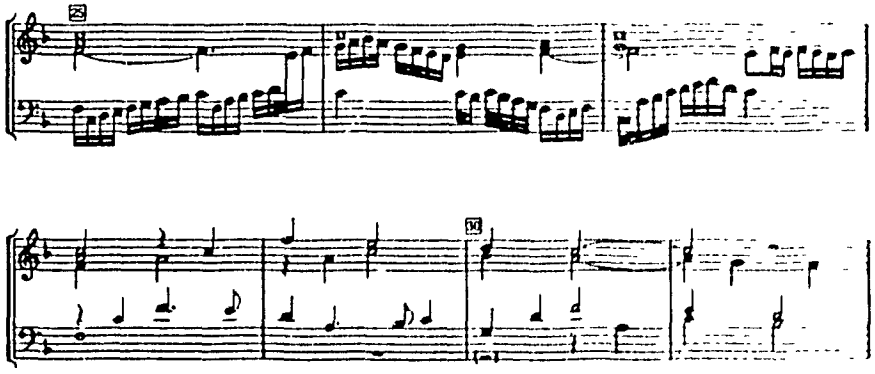
[62] Baldesar Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier, George Bull, translator, Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1967, 94-5.

[63] Baldessare Galuppi was also organist at St. Mark's Basilica in his time.

Baroque toccata:

> exploited the resources of the keyboard in a glittering display of chords, arpeggios and scale passages. It was free and rhapsodic in form, marked by passages in harmonic style alternating with fugal sections.[64]

Note the alternation between the contrapuntal figures and the quieter three-part, imitative section in this characteristic fragment from The Toccata in F[65] by Claudio Merulo:



Later, in the time of Baldassare Galuppi (1706-85), Rococo tastes would refine the toccata into elegant music with more whimsy and a bit less ardour, or as Browning phrases it, music

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[64] Joseph Machlis, The Enjoyment of Music, 3rd edition, New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 1970, 314.

[65] Claude V. Palisca, Baroque Music, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968, 88.

which was both "grave and gay" ("A Toccata," 1.26). The "grave and gay" designation is most appropriate, indicating, as it does, a balance between harmony, the "grave" or more serious rendering of the music, and the "gay," the contrapuntal or melodic touches. Galuppi favoured almost arietta-like melodies in his works, "miraculously distilling the essence of Italian song into a pure keyboard idiom."[66] Browning's poem itself is also both "grave," in its contemplative message, and "gay," in its depiction of Venice, its dramatic and contrapuntal voices, and its toccata-like rhythm.

"A Toccata of Galuppi's" is written in three-part, or quasi sonata form, which should alert us to the fact that, in Galuppi's day, sonatas were also labelled "Toccatas." Actually, other than operas, the majority of Galuppi's compositions were harpsichord sonatas, and Browning claimed to have an album of Galuppi Toccatas / Sonatas.[67]According to Sonata form, the first six stanzas of Browning's poem would be the Exposition wherein the Venetian carnival scene is depicted. The middle four stanzas are a more rhapsodic and

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[66] Gerald Abraham, The Concise Oxford History of Music, Oxford & New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985, 514.

[67] In his recent book, There is No Truer Truth: The Musical Aspects of Browning's Poetry (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), Nachum Schoffman attempts to prove that Browning had Galuppi's Sonata-Toccata in F in mind when composing his poem (See Chapter 8, pp.101-125). Schoffmann also points out that in Galuppi's day, the titles "Sonata" and "Toccata" were interchangeable.

contrapuntal interlude, and also serve as a Development section in which the ideas from the Exposition are improvised and expanded upon. The final five stanzas represent a Recapitulation section in that they are a restatement of the original themes from the Exposition, now modified by the new perception reached during the Development section: the initial "old" music becomes "cold" music; Shylock's bridge elicits "Venice spent what Venice earned"; the Venetian's "fresh adventures" contrast the narrator's pastime, Mathematics; and the lady's "small face buoyant, like a bell flower" is transformed into Venetian "people born to bloom and drop."

Browning does not specify in "A Toccata" whether the narrator, a nineteenth-century scientist, is playing Galuppi's toccata on an instrument or whether he is hearing it being played. It is likely, however, that Browning envisioned his speaker playing the toccata whilst imagining the Venetian scene the music brings to mind:

> [Browning] is known to have enjoyed playing Galuppi toccatas on the organ; and his poem on this subject shows both his technical familiarity with the form...and his response to the music's evocative quality.[68]

Browning portrays so many other performer-narrators in his works that it is natural to assume that "A Toccata" is no exception. Abt Vogler, the organist in Master Hugues, and Don

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[68] Willy, 43.

Juan in Fifine at the Fair are all performers on keyboard instruments who have musically-inspired visions or reveries. Furthermore, in Parleying with Charles Avison, it is Browning himself who plays Avison's March as he reviews the power of music to bring the past to life.

Galuppi's music also brings the past to life for the nineteenth-century narrator. At first, the music is described as "old" and the speaker is disdainful of his vision of eighteenth-century life in Galuppi's Venice:

> Here you come with your old music, and here's
> all the good it brings
> What, they lived once thus at Venice...(Stanza II, l.1-2)
>
> Did young people take their pleasure when the
> sea was warm in May?
> Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning
> ever to mid-day,
> When they made up fresh adventures for the
> morrow, do you say? (Stanza IV)

The music of the toccata, being light and charming, lends itself to the picture of people who are superficial and flighty as they live only to enjoy the sensuous pleasures of life, and, in turn, Browning's lilting trochees, terza rima, and rapidly moving four-measure dipodic lines capture this light touch.[69]

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[69] H.H.Hatcher, 111.

As well as being light and charming, the nature of a toccata is improvisatory, and it is appropriate that the narrator's imagination follows improvisatory flights of fancy. The music actually brings to mind such vivid pictures for the speaker that he admits, "I was never out of England - it's as if I saw it all"(Stanza III, l.3). Part of the panorama visualized by the narrator is a carnival scene with two young costumed lovers who are impatiently listening to Galuppi playing "stately at the clavichord" (Stanza VI, l.3) while they long to continue their furtive flirtation. Their love making is arrested by Galuppi's music with its plaintive intervals of minor thirds, diminished sixths, and commiserating sevenths. Just as Galuppi's music conjures up impressions of a vanished Venice for the narrator, it also conveys a bittersweet doubt to the Venetian lovers' imaginations - might they not go on forever just as they are?

It is at this point that the heretofore steady poetic rhythm is interrupted by an improvisatory rhythm (harmonic and fugal sections alternating in typical toccata fashion). Stanza VIII allows the lovers to converse in appropriately natural speech, and their voices intertwine in a quasi fugal question and answer pattern:

"Were you happy?" - "Yes" - "And are you
still as happy?" - "Yes. And you?"
- "Then more kisses!" - "Did I stop them,
when a million seemed so few?"

The poem subsequently returns to its previous rhythm and harmonic density as Galuppi's music demands attention:

> Hark, the dominant's persistence till it
>
> must be answered to!

In this one stanza, we hear three distinct voices: those of the music itself and of both lovers.

Actually, Browning contrapuntally weaves a variety of voices throughout the poem. At first, the narrator addresses the dead composer, and when the "old" music comes in in Stanza II and the narrator begins to visualize Venice, we hear the voice of Baldessare Galuppi through his music. The music's voice becomes less abstract in Stanza VII with its construction exposed: lesser thirds, suspensions, solutions, sevenths, and the "sixths diminished" which are, in all likelihood, the popular eighteenth-century Neopolitan sixths (the interval of a sixth built on the minor second of the scale producing tension and a mournful sound).[70] When these intervals are characterized by the personifying adjectives "commiserating" and "plaintive," the music says even more than its structure suggests: it appears to be posing the question,

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[70] "Musicologist Eric Blom says that in the eighteenth century the Neopolitan 6th chord acquired a reputation as a discord with a strongly pathetic or dramatic effect." Charles W. Johnson, "Lost 'Chord,' Wrong 'Chord,' and other Musical Anomalies in 'A Toccata of Galuppi's'" in Studies in Browning and His Circle, 4/1, 1976, 34. [It seems reasonable to assume that the pathetic effect of a Neopolitan 6th would be what Browning wanted to match his other plaintive and commiserating intervals.]

"Must we die?" The music answers its own question with a persistent dominant chord and a resolving octave in the home key, two chords which give finality and closure to the dreaming. They suggest that death is inevitable, despite the lively quest for immortality. In fact, the music is the only thing that has achieved longevity here, and its melancholy taunts its listeners.

The narrator's voice is heard again in Stanzas X and XI as he contrasts the morality of the hedonistic Venetians with the pride he, a Victorian scientist, derives from his work. Again, Galuppi's music, "cold" music now, creeps through his consciousness as lively as ever, the only surviving ghost of a Venice that exists no more. Throughout Stanzas XII to XIV, Galuppi's music speaks to the narrator and, this time, woos him, as it had the Venetian lovers, into believing that his soul might be immortal:

> The soul doubtless is immortal - where a soul can be
> discerned. (Stanza XII, l.3)
> Yours for instance. You know physics, something
> of geology,
> Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise
> in their degree;
> Butterflies may dread extinction, you'll not
> die, it cannot be! (Stanza XIII)

The music seduces the narrator into believing that his soul is worthy of immortality because of his industriousness. It

makes him think that since he is a rational and moral man, his life must be of more value than the capricious Venetians'. The irony is that the "butterfly" Venetians dreaded extinction no less than the serious-minded scientist: to them, Galuppi's music also spoke of immortality.

At the end of the poem, the Victorian moralist begins to think of the Venetian women's sensuality:

Dear, dead women, with such hair too -

What's become of all the gold

Used to hang and brush their bosoms? (Stanza XV, l.2-3)

With this light touch (the toccata is a "touch piece") of physicality and human emotion, the narrator's imagination pulls him back from abstractions and into reality; he feels "chilly and grown old" as he faces his own mortality. At the same time, he feels empathy for, and a bond with the eighteenth century Venetians who are now only "Dust and ashes," as, the music reminds him, he will also be. The only timeless entity in this poem proves to be art - the poem itself and Galuppi's music - which rather mawkishly reminds the audience, as the music had reminded the Venetians and the narrator, of its own mortality.

In "A Toccata of Galuppi's," Browning again presents his favourite musical theories: music activates Imagination to contemplate life's eternal questions; music, a source of revelation and clarification, allows a heightened awareness of oneself and of the mystery of Soul in the world; and music

keeps love, beauty and personality alive as it is recreated through the generations. For the first time, the entire poem is devoted to the expression of these theories.

"Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha"

The second of Browning's "music poems" in Men and Women is "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" which features the elements of fugal design in a literary tour de force. Although this poem is a remarkable achievement, Browning is not unique in his attempt to incorporate fugal intricacies into written language. DeQuincey used the fugue as a literary form in his Dream Fugue. Other poets have described the form without attempting to imitate it, for example, Milton in Paradise Lost, XI, 554-9, and James Joyce in Ulysses.[71] Of the many facets of music Browning studied, which included voice, piano and stringed instruments, it was the analysis of musical composition to which he was most drawn.[72] Possessing such a keen interest in musical analysis explains Browning's equally keen interest in one of the most elaborate musical forms, the fugue, which readily lends itself to analysis. Moreover,

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71 Calvin S. Brown, Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts, Athens, Georgia: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1963, 159.

72 Penelope Gay, "Browning and Music" in Writers and Their Background: Robert Browning, Isobel Armstrong, ed., London: G. Bell & Sons, 1974, 213.

Browning's affinity for not only music, but also drama and dramatic voices explains his interest in fugal structure with its diverse contrapuntal voices.

The fugue adheres to precise patterns of exposition and development, of voice interaction, and of interchanging keys and modulations. At the beginning of the fugue, the central theme, the Subject, is introduced. It then weaves its way throughout the piece, being enunciated and imitated by different voices in various keys; hence the name "fuga" which is the Latin for "flying after." At the same time, the Subject is answered by contrapuntal counterparts in different voices and in corresponding keys. Finally, all melodic lines are brought together in a culminating Stretto which is the climax of the fugue.

A fugue generally has three sections which perform specific functions: the Exposition introduces the Subject and Answer in the tonic and dominant keys respectively; the Modulatory section allows the Subject and Answer to be changed in a variety of ways through key changes and by the expansion, diminution, or inversion of the themes; finally, the Recapitulation section restates the Subject and Answer in the home, or tonic, key. These fundamental rules are only the skeletal structure for a musical model which can become extremely complex. Note, for example, the detailed description of Johann Sebastian Bach's five-voiced fugue,

Fugue No. IV in C# minor from Bach's Well Tempered Clavier,[73] and keep in mind, too, the fact that the fugue of Browning's notorious Master Hugues is also an exacting and complicated five-voiced fugue:

ENUNCIATION SECTION.

		Keys
Bars 1 — 4(1)	Subject in Bass	C♯ minor
" 4 — 7(5)	Real Answer in Tenor	G♯ minor
" 7(5) — 10(9)	Subject in Alto	C♯ minor
" 11 — 12	Codetta	
" 12(9) — 14(9)	Answer in Second Treble. Compare this with the previous Answer in Tenor. It is to be noted that except its first note it is in F♯ minor instead of G♯ minor	
" 14(9) — 17	Subject in First Treble	C♯ minor
" 18 — 19	Codetta	
" 19(9) — 22(1)	Answer in Tenor	G♯ minor
" 22(4) — 25	Subject in Tenor	F♯ minor
" 25(3) — 29	Answer in Alto	C♯ minor

MODULATORY SECTION

" 29(9) — 32	Answer in Bass	B major
" 32(9) — 35	Subject in Alto	E major
" 35(3) — 38	Counter subject I. in First Treble (this being its first appearance)	
" 35(3) — 38(4)	Subject in Tenor	C♯ minor
" 34(3) — 41(4)	Answer in Alto. Counter subject I. in First Treble	G♯ minor
" 41 — 41	Episode I., modulating from G♯ minor to C♯ minor. The Tenor is in inversion of the Counter subject of the Treble in an ascending sequence	
" 41(9) — 47(3)	Subject in Second Treble. Counter subject I. in Bass	C♯ minor
" 46(6) — 48(4)	Counter subject I. in First Treble	
" 49 — 51	Subject in First Treble. Counter subject I. in Second Treble. Counter subject II. in Tenor, this being the first appearance of the latter	F♯ minor
" 51(3) — 54	Subject in Bass. Counter subject I. in Tenor	F♯ minor
" 53(6) — 54	Counter subject II. in First Treble	
" 54(3) — 57	Answer in Second Treble. Counter subject I. in Tenor	A major
" 55(6) — 57	Counter subject II. in Bass	
" 57 — 59	Counter subject I. in First Treble. Counter subject II. in Second Treble	
" 59 — 62	Subject in First Treble. Counter subject I. in Second Treble	C♯ minor
" 60(3) — 62	Counter subject II. in Alto	
" 62(3) — 65	Episode II., modulating from C♯ minor to G♯ major. Counter subject II. in First Treble. Counter subject I. in Second Treble.	
" 64(9) — 66	Counter subject II. in Tenor	
" 66 — 66(6)	Counter subject II. in Bass	
" 66 — 68	Subject in First Treble. Counter subject I. in Bass	D♯ minor
" 67(3) — 69(3)	Counter subject II. in Second Treble	
" 69 — 71	Counter subject I. in First Soprano. Counter subject II. in Tenor	
" 71(3) — 73	Counter subject II. in Second Treble	
" 73 — 76(1)	Subject in Bass. Counter subject I. in Alto	C♯ minor
" 74(3) — 76	Counter subject II. in Tenor	
" 76 — 79	Subject in First Treble. Counter subject I. in Bass	C♯ minor
" 77 — 78(6)	Counter subject II. in Second Treble	
" 78(3) — 81	Counter subject I. in Second Treble	
" 79(3) — 81	Counter subject II. in Bass	
Bars 81 — 84	Subject in Tenor. Counter subject I. in First Treble	C♯ minor
" 82(3) — 84	Counter subject II. in Alto	
" 84 — 86	Episode III., modulating from C♯ minor to F♯ minor. Counter subject I. in First Treble. Counter subject II. in Tenor	
" 85(3) — 87	Counter subject II. in Second Treble	F♯ minor
" 86 — 88	Counter-subject I. in First Treble. Counter subject II. in Bass	
" 89 — 92(1)	Subject in First Treble	C♯ minor
" 90 — 92	Counter subject II. in Bass	
" 92 — 94(1)	Counter subject I. in Tenor. Counter subject II. in First Treble	
" 93(3) — 95(3)	Counter subject II. in Second Treble	
" 94 — 96	Subject in First Treble. Counter subject II. in Tenor	E major
" 96(3) — 97	Counter subject II. in Alto. Answer in Second Treble	B major
" 96 — 98	Counter subject II. in Tenor. Subject in First Treble	F♯ minor

RECAPITULATORY SECTION

" 97 — 100	Answer in Bass. Counter subject II. in Alto	C♯ minor
" 98 — 100	Counter subject II. in Second Treble, in Tenor, in First Treble successively in Stretto	
" 100 — 102(5)	Codetta. Subject in Tenor. Counter subject II. in Bass	C♯ minor
" 102 — 104	Counter subject II. in Tenor	
" 103(3) — 104(3)	Counter subject II. in Alto	
" 104 — 106(1)	Counter subject II. in Second Treble	
" 105(3) — 106(3)	Counter subject II. in Tenor on Dominant Pedal	
" 107(3) — 108(3)	Subject in First Treble. Counter subject II. in Second Treble and Alto in thirds simultaneously	C♯ minor
" 108(3) — 109(6)	Counter subject II. in Tenor	
" 110 — 116	Coda	C♯ minor

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[73] Frederick Iliffe, The Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues of Johann Sebastian Bach, London: Novello & Co., Ltd., 1897, 13-4.

Is it any wonder that Browning's organist becomes so frustratingly tangled up in the musical problems presented by Master Hugues? He is not capable of deciphering the fugue's messages, if indeed there are any, and herein lies the poem's central theme, or Subject.

It might be speculated that Browning's Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha must be Bach. Bach, the master of the fugue, spent much of his career in Saxony, Germany working in Saxe-Weimar, and for twenty-seven years he was cantor of St. Thomas's in Leipzig, Saxony. Furthermore, Bach's twelfth fugue is indeed in the key of F minor, as mentioned in Browning's poem (stanza XXVI), although it is a fugue written for four voices, not five. It is interesting to note that in 1829, when Browning was seventeen and just beginning to attend important concerts, Bach's music was resurrected by Felix Mendelssohn after a period of neglect, and became the focus of much attention during the nineteenth century. It is said that Chopin practiced Bach before his concerts, Liszt transcribed some of Bach's organ works for piano, and Schumann was one of the founders of the Bach Society.[74] Browning knew both Mendelssohn and Liszt and was assuredly caught up in the excitement generated by their rediscovery of Bach's genius. Thus, in a letter to Reverend Henry Spaulding in 1887, Browning expressed his veneration for Bach, definitely refuting the idea that Bach was the model for his Master

[74] Joseph Machlis, 303.

Hugues:

> As to "Master Hugues"...had he been meant for the glorious Bach it were a shame to me indeed; I had in my mind one of those dry-as dust imitators who would elaborate on some [simplistic] subject ... for a dozen pages together.[75]

Consciously or not, Browning may very well have been poking a little fun at a giant of the Baroque era, many of whose works are beyond the capacity of average keyboard artists. Moreover, some music teachers in the nineteenth century advised their students to "stay away from Bach fugues because they did not follow the rules!"[76] On the other hand, based on what Browning says in this letter, the assumption must be made that, despite the obvious allusions to Bach provided by the Saxony locale and the name "Hugues" which epitomizes a master of fugues, Browning meant not Bach, but rather one of those musical technicians, and imitators of Bach, who try but fail to reach the creative heights of true genius. Indeed, this would be consistent with other poems such as "Andrea del Sarto," who like Master Hugues is exposed as a "mere practitioner."[77] Browning's conscious intent, as he sat in

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75 H.E.Greene, "Browning's Knowledge of Music," 1098.

76 Yehudi Menuhin & C.Davis, 133.

77 In his letter to Felix Moscheles, also in 1887, Browning writes, "There is little ambiguity about our use of the word 'Musician' which generally designates a practitioner merely." DeVane, New Letters of Robert Browning, 352.

an organ loft composing this poem, was to express the labyrinth of fugal construction which leads nowhere, much like life's maze of events.[78]

In point of fact, it is the word "Gotha" of Saxe-Gotha which reveals more of Browning's purport in this poem than his accidental or droll intimation of Bach. "Saxe-Gotha" brings to mind the image of a Lutheran Gothic church, the setting for resplendent fugues, and Browning exploits its architecture with his spider web metaphor of obliterated meanings. Also, however, it must be pointed out that "Goth" literally means "one who destroys art"; thus, Browning reenforces the idea that both Hugues and the struggling organist are merely crude practitioners and not artists.

Margaret Walker Dilling notes that the whole structure of "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" can be divided into five parts:

> It is of interest in this poem describing a five-voice fugue that the material should fall into five sections: the speaker's bid for help, stanzas one to eleven; a description of fugal voices, stanzas twelve to eighteen; an analogy between fugue and spider web, stanzas nineteen and twenty; a proposed parallel to life, stanzas twenty-one to twenty-four; and the reluctant decision to

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[78] Richard D. Altick, "The Symbolism of Browning' 'Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha'," VP III, 1965, 1.

once again try the fugue, stanzas twenty

five to twenty-eight.[79]

This five-part segmentation certainly alludes to the five voices but it is not a basis for argument that the entire poem is fugal in design. The second portion, however, comprised of stanzas twelve through eighteen, definitely goes beyond a routine description of fugal voices to closely outline fugal structure.

The opening line of stanza twelve, "First you deliver your phrase," refers to the Subject of the fugue. Line four of the same stanza, "Answered no less," refers to the Answer to the Subject, and "Off start the Two on their ways" reflects how Subject and Answer combine contrapuntally. Stanza thirteen brings to our attention the third, fourth and fifth voices of the fugue:

Straight must a Third interpose,

Volunteer needlessly help; (l.61 2)

The third voice here is probably the Countersubject. This is the name for the contrapuntal development that follows the introduction of Subject and Answer when the melody sung by the first voice against the second voice is subsequently sung by the second voice against the third, and so on as in the

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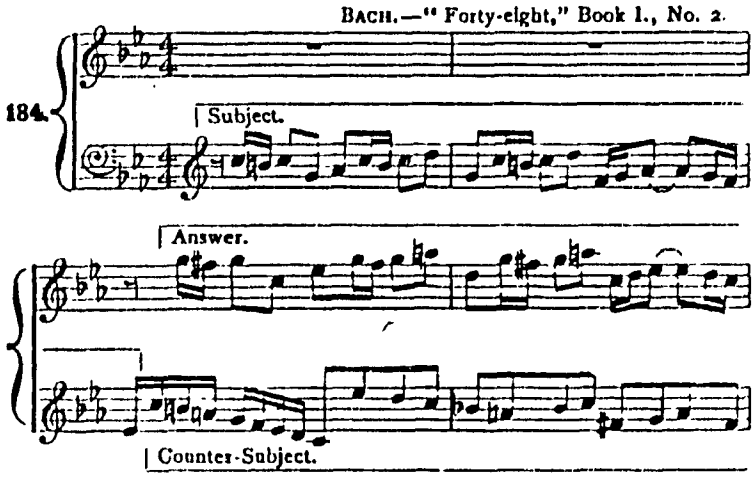
[79] Margaret Walker Dilling, "Robert Browning's 'Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha'," in Studies in Browning and His Circle, I, 1973, 37-43.

following example:[80]



Browning's Countersubject occurs after the first Subject and Answer. Thus the fourth voice implies the second entrance of the Subject with its corresponding Answer, the fifth voice:

"In strikes a Fourth, a Fifth thrusts in his nose,"

(1.63)

With all five voices introduced (the first Subject and Answer, the Countersubject, then the Subject and Answer again), Browning has effectively delineated the Exposition or Enunciation of the fugue. One thing Browning has neglected to incorporate into this fugal outline is the interplay of tonic and dominant keys between Subject and Answer. Traditionally, the Subject is introduced in the home key and is answered

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[80] Stewart Macpherson, Form in Music, London: Joseph Williams, 1930, 208.

immediately in the dominant key. Subsequently, the third voice enters with the subject in another key followed by the fourth voice answering in the corresponding dominant.

Additionally, the five voices of the fugue refer to treble, second treble, alto, tenor and bass ranges and it is in these various ranges that the Subject, Answers and Countersubjects enter. Browning pays homage to the basic rule of counterpoint that each voice assumes equal importance when he describes how all five voices demand to be heard at once in his amusing "hot argument":

So the cry's open, the kennel's a-yelp,
Argument's hot to the close.

One dissertates, he is candid;
Two must discept, - has distinguished;
Three helps the couple, if ever man did;
Four protests; Five makes a dart at the thing
wished: (l. 64 9)

Browning then brings this Expository section to a close (technically a Codetta) with his reference to the restatement of the Subject, "Back to One, goes the case bandied" (l.70).

With the next stanza, stanza XV, he introduces the Modulatory section wherein the themes are altered via changes in key, voice, time values, inversion or expansion:

One says his say with a difference;
More of expanding, explaining!

All now is wrangle, abuse and vociference;

The Subject, "One," is now heard in a key other than the tonic. The expanding, explaining, wrangle, abuse and vociference describe fugal Episodes which are the musical developments of various segments or figures from the Subject, Answer and/or Countersubject. At the end of this section, the home key begins to make its reappearance as signified by the words "truce" and "subdued":

Now there's a truce, all's subdued, self-restraining:

Five, though stands out all the stiffer hence.

The fifth voice is now being highlighted: it may still be in a key other than the tonic or the dominant, is probably being played in its entirety in contrast to the other fragmented voices, and it is likely alone with very little counterpoint against it.

The final section, the Recapitulation, begins in stanza XVI as each voice has its say once more. "One is incisive" portrays the Subject as it reclaims and insists on the tonic key; "Two retorts," imitating "One," is a reference to the fact that in this last section, all voices must emerge in the tonic key. A complete fugal stretto follows when all the voices are brought together. The relentless fury of Hugues' stretto is heard in Browning's language: "nettled," "crepitant," "explosive," and "strepitant" (derived from the musical term "strepitoso" which means "noisily"). And when the exasperated narrator denounces the fifth voice with the

exclamation, "O Danaides," he conclusively brands the fugue excessive and interminable. The language continues in the next stanza as the stretto persists:

Now they ply axes and crowbars;

Now they prick pins at a tissue

The cacophonous language accomodates the organist's frustration and exertion as well as the clamour he is producing. In a musically-based poem, the use of this language is the mark of Browning's poetic genius as he "aggressively imposes upon obstreperous words a metrical pattern."[81]

The lonely organist feels that the composer is peeping through the pipes of the organ as he practices so diligently and he calls on Hugues to come "Forth and be judged." He demands that Hugues let the world know what the meaning is within his complicated, "mountainous" music and the composer seems to answer with a question of his own and a challenge:

\- Good, the mere notes!

Still, coulds't thou take my intent,

Know what procured me our Company's votes (l.46 8)

The organist imagines Hugues' pride in the title of Master given to him by the town's corporation. Perhaps, he thinks, it was enough for him that his music was lauded as masterly and that he received recognition as someone with superior musical knowledge and ability. But these accolades prove just

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[81] H.H.Hatcher, 28.

as superficial as the music itself, in that they exist outside the realm of the interior meanings of the music. Neither the intimidating reputation of the composer nor the tremendous complexity of his work assists the organist in his search for meaning. He wants to know the composer's intentions so that his re creation of the piece will not distort its meaning or beauty.

After the organist performs the musical gymnastics of the fugue, becoming increasingly sarcastic as he reaches its conclusion at the "Two-bars," he asks if such effort doesn't demand the satisfaction of knowing there must be a higher purpose, a reason for it all:

What with affirming, denying,

Holding, riposting, subjoining,...(Stanza XIX)

So your fugue broadens and thickens,

Greatens and deepens and lengthens,

Till we exclaim - "But where's the music..." (Stanza XX)

Again, as the organist makes his demands, Browning's language restates fugal structure and also reaffirms the complexity of the fugue. The "affirming" and "denying" above harken back to the Subject and Answer; "riposting," a fencing term for quick thrusts or counterstrokes is a clever parallel to the Answer, the Countersubject or to the nature of counterpoint in general; and the broadening, thickening, "Greatens," "deepens and thickens" all refer to the Episodic development of the

Modulatory section.

Browning's use of a spider web to metaphorically depict counterpoint is brilliant. Counterpoint is as intricate, as perfectly balanced in design and as beautiful as a spider's web. It is used to great effect here as the narrator imagines the music ascending to the ceiling of the church, its dense web of contrapuntal excess blackening the gilded mouldings. Seeing similarities to Man's bustling and meaningless activity blotting out "God's gold," Browning also uses the idea of weaving as he correlates the effort expended in life to this fugue:

Is it your moral of life?
Such a web, simple amd subtle,
Weave we on earth here in impotent strife,
Backward and forward each throwing his shuttle,
Death ending it all with a knife? (Stanza XXII)

Hugues' spider-web counterpoint is as interlocking and dense as the man-made woven web; both prove to be merely impotent activity because they both shut out the Truth. With these metaphors, as T.J.Collins suggests, the Browning question is posed: "What is any art worth that means nothing?"[82]

The meaning of Browning's art becomes clear as we reflect that, for him, music must lift conscious awareness, must reach the Soul and reveal eternal truths. Master Hugues' fugue

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82 T.J.Collins, Browning's Moral Aesthetic Theory, Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska, 1967, 148.

fails to do this; it is so intellectually and technically oriented that it prevents the performer from reaching any higher understanding. The Baroque music represented in this poem lacks the emotion of the nineteenth century classical romantic music, which, because it evokes true feeling, can reach a depth of soul in its listeners. Browning is critical of this aspect of Baroque music for being so intellectually based that it limits both the performer and the audience's experience to respond and grow spiritually; thus, he "plays one more variation on a favourite theme of his: the overwhelming superiority of intuition over intellect as a means of reaching religious truth."[83]

While we reproach Master Hugues who can only "produce abstract and intellectual fugues which have no flesh, and thus cannot capture meaning,"[84]we are also led to examine the judgements of the organist. Although it is easy to sympathize with his frustrations, it is not so easy to understand his insistence that the art form should explain all of its nuances. As a performing artist, it is his task to accept the work of art for what it is and to interpret it as best he can. Thus, Browning portrays performer and composer alike as woefully detached from humanity and from artistic sublimity. In Browning's aesthetics, these are necessary allies: artistic

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83 Altick, "The Symbolism of Browning's 'Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha'," 2.

84 T.J.Collins, 145.

sublimity is impossible without an empathetic association with the rest of humanity. Hugues' vanity and both Hugues' and the organist's obsession with technique clearly restrict their ability to appreciate or impart the full significance and pleasures of their music.

At the conclusion of the poem, the narrator proposes to "Blare out the mode Palestrina" (l.140). Edward Berdoe describes the mode Palestrina as "the grave, pure, truthful music of the Church" and the composer, Giovanni P. da Palestrina (1524-1594), as:

> The Prince of Music who emancipated his art from the trammels of pedantry which, ignoring beauty as the most necessary element of music, was tending to reduce it to mere arithmetical problems.[85]

By choosing to play something by Palestrina, the organist is literally trying to clear the Hugues-inspired cobwebs away and fill the church with such pure and beauteous music that the truth of the Heavens will once again shine through. In the 1887 letter to the Reverend Henry Spaulding cited previously, Browning writes:

> The mode Palestrina has no reference to organ-playing; it was the name given by old Italian writers on Composition to a certain simple and

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[85] Edward Berdoe, The Browning Cyclopaedia: A Guide to the Study of the Works of Robert Browning, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 15th edition, 1964, 267-8.

severe style like that of the Master.[86]

The "Master" Browning refers to in this letter is not Master Hugues but Palestrina, whose simpler style of composition appealed to Browning much more than the excessively intricate style he describes in his poem. We have seen Browning's preference for simple but affecting music before in Stratford, "The Pied Piper," "Saul" and Pippa Passes.

In "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," the music is as essential to the poetic meaning as it is in "A Toccata of Galuppi's." Browning presents two very different types of music in these two poems: Galuppi's toccata is a delicately evocative chamber piece meant for an audience; Hugues' fugue is an imposing exercise meant for musicologists. Galuppi's music unites emotion and imagination so, according to Browning's theory, successfully arouses consciousness. Hugues' music is capable only of encouraging analysis. Galuppi's music is transcendent; Hugues' is earth bound. Also, each poem examines the performer and the composer of the music, and the ability of those artists to derive meaning from their musical experience; but while both performer and composer in "A Toccata" achieve enlightenment, neither artist can go beyond his technical concerns in "Master Hugues."

It is very evident in such works as "A Toccata of Galuppi's" and "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" and in the other

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[86] John J. Joyce, "The Music Poems and Robert Browning's Knowledge of Music," Studies in Browning and His Circle, 8/2, 1980, 83.

Men and Women poems, such as "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Andrea del Sarto," and "Bishop Blougram's Apology," that Browning has reached a high point in his poetical development. The blend of image, characterization, thought and versification achieves a new unity: so that, in a musical sense, these poems are Browning's works of harmony. Browning was as intrigued by the mysteries of Life as was his contemporary, Thomas Carlyle, and this interest manifested itself, in Browning's work, as an exploration into the depths of the human soul and psyche. The results are clearly evident in the richly-drawn portraits of Men and Women. In the portrayals of the artists, Fra Lippo Lippi and Baldessare Galuppi go together as men who are of this world, yet reach transcendent heights in their art; and Master Hugues and Andrea del Sarto are paired as artists whose hubristic quest for technical perfection makes them unreceptive to the God-given spark of creative genius. Browning also gives us a picture of the hypocrisy of the Church in Fra Lippo and the Bishop of St. Praxed's, and of materialistic greed in the latter; we see adultery in Andrea's wife, and Andrea's own lust and greed which diminish his talent, making his work mediocre. We see ugliness, distortion, conflict and discord, but we also see a movement toward resolution: we see the faith, rationally chosen and rationally defended by Bishop Blougram, and we see the humour and joyfulness experienced by Fra Lippo. That perfect harmony can never be achieved in this life was Browning's strong

belief, but his goal was always to strive toward new understanding and awareness, or concord, if you will, even if only momentary and fleeting.

Between the 1833 publication of Pauline and Men and Women of 1855, Browning's use of music took many forms. His poet had begun as a Singer of songs, with the songs only incidental to the verse. From there, he experimented with musically dramatic effects and versification, and he outlined a philosophy of music as the near-perfect communicator of Soul. By 1855, especially in his music poems, song and sense had so merged as to have become one comprehensive entity: the whole poem had become the Song, or, as Browning termed it, a symphony.

VI. "Abt Vogler"

"Abt Vogler" was published in 1864 as one of the poems in Dramatis Personae. Critics generally agree that this work is the masterpiece of Browning's music poems. The poem features all of Browning's conceptions of the spiritual powers of music: music, the supreme communicator, reaches the Soul of Mankind's past, present and future generations as it mystically connects earth and Heaven. In "Abt Vogler," Browning's endeavour to "put the infinite within the finite" becomes an acclaimed extemporizer's visualization of Heaven reaching downward to meet his musical "palace" as it ascends note by note:

> Up the pinnacled glory reached, and the
> pride of my soul was in sight. (III, 24)
> And the emulous heaven yearned down, made
> effort to reach the earth,
> As the earth had done her best, in my passion,
> to scale the sky. (IV, 27-8)

One of Browning's fundamental beliefs, as he continually demonstrates in his poems, is that human intuition and desire are indicative of the divinity within us. This conviction

finds its greatest expression in "Abt Vogler." When Vogler freely expresses his passions in the performance of his own creative and intuitive composition (his extemporization), he reveals and acknowledges the divinity within himself; moreover, he is able to realize a momentary communion with God.

As the poem begins, Abt Vogler is contemplating the improvised music he has just been performing on his own invention, the orchestrion. The music has evidently been exquisite, and Vogler imagines that, as it soars heavenward, it is building a quasi-Crystal Palace, complete with illuminated dome. This has been improvised music and probably can never be duplicated exactly; thus, Vogler's imagination, still awed by the beauty of what he has created, tries to reify the rapidly-disappearing musical sounds.

Tennyson uses similar imagery in his "Palace of Art," and nineteenth-century German aesthetic theory labels music "frozen architecture," but it is primarily Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" that Vogler's imaginary palace brings to mind. In "Kubla Khan," Coleridge's poet seeks to regain Paradise through his poetry as his Muse, the Abyssinian maid plays her dulcimer, seemingly at one with the universe:

> Could I revive within me
> Her symphony and song
> To such delight 'twould win me,
> That with music loud and long,

I would build that dome in air.

("Kubla Khan," l. 42-6)

Like Coleridge's Abyssinian maid, Vogler has actually felt an alliance with Heaven through inspiration as well as through his own efforts: "This which my keys in a crowd pressed and importuned to raise!" ("Abt Vogler," l. 10). The tactile nature of touching the orchestrion's keys or strumming the dulcimer's strings provides the artists with a physical sense of connection to the metaphysical beauty which they produce and this physical connection, added to creative energy, makes Vogler dream of capturing his music for posterity in some concrete form. Thus, his soul-inspired music builds a palace of such magnificence that he envisions Heaven's gates opening and the dead drifting through his palace, a structure worthy of angelic visitation.[87] With this imaginary accreditation from heavenly beings, Vogler feels he has been "made perfect too" (l. 40). He is the ideal Browning hero: he has striven to attain, and has attained a perfect, albeit fleeting,

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[87] Browning's conception is consistent both with his own view of what music can do and with reports of the real Abt Vogler's improvisations. Browning writes in Pauline how music is a "A key to a new world, the muttering / Of angels" (Pauline, l. 298-9). And Vogler's most ardent admirers, his students, described his music as sounding like angelic voices: Weber, his student, said of him, "Never did Vogler in his extemporization, drink more deeply at the source of all beauty than when, before his three dear boys, as he liked to call us [Gänsbacher, Weber and Meyerbeer], he drew from the organ angelic voices and words of thunder." Helen J. Ormerod, "Abt Vogler, the Man," Browning Society Papers, vol. 2 (1885-9), 230.

moment.

In the second section of the poem, stanzas six and seven, Vogler recounts how he created such powerfully moving music:

All through my keys that gave their sounds to
a wish of my soul,
All through my soul that praised as its wish
flowed visibly forth,
All through music and me! (l.41-3)

Vogler is completely open to the voice of Heaven, and thus his creativity is divinely-inspired. God, speaking to Vogler through his soul and his desires, becomes the guiding force which seems to cause the orchestrion's keys to respond, and, in the end, Vogler and the music are synonymous. Like David in "Saul" or Pippa in Pippa Passes, Vogler and his improvisation become a vehicle for God's message.

Browning is using the phenomenon of improvisation to illustrate Vogler's momentary comprehension, but also the poignant brevity of beauty. As Vogler extemporizes, the music builds beauteous sound upon sound in the dissipating air which is then gone from earth forever. The perfect musical measures, only heard by Vogler, and by Heaven in Vogler's fantasy, are also perfect expressions of art. Their ingenious spontaneity gives them unmatched creative power:

For think, had I painted the whole,
Why there it had stood, to see, nor the process so
wonder-worth:

> Had I written the same, made verse - still, effect
> proceeds from cause,
> Ye know why the forms are fair, ye hear how the
> tale is told;
> It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws,
> (VI, 43-8)

As he does in other poems, Browning maintains that the external constraints of an artist's schooling or catering to public tastes can interfere with and limit his genius: both Master Hugues' and Andrea del Sarto's talents are diminished by their slavery to precision and to the particular laws of their art form, as well as by their own pride and greed. Vogler's extemporizations are entirely unfettered in that they are neither the product of other musician's laws nor are they attempting to please an audience. Abt Vogler is a visionary, in momentary communion with God, his intuitive music being the ultimate communicator. Moreover, his music produces not only sounds but a "star" - a vision of eternity:

> An aesthete [like Master Hugues and the Venetians] may achieve immediacy, but he can seldom express or prolong it. A moralist [like the nineteenth-century narrator in "A Toccata"] can communicate his ideas, but his truths remain universal and abstract. Only a seer like Abt Vogler can communicate to others all that is most immediate

in his own experience.[88]

Vogler is the personification of his art: he doesn't stand apart from it making demands of it, as does the organist in "Master Hugues," nor does he intellectualize it to the point where it is limited in scope, as does Master Hugues. Vogler's art perfectly blends expression, beauty, emotion and intellect, and its immediacy causes it to be frozen in time.

Apart from all earthly laws of aesthetics which govern art, Vogler's musical technique is wedded to a spiritual boost which completely frees his imagination and perfects his talents:

> But here is the finger of God, a flash of
> the will that can,
> Existent behind all laws....
> And I know not, save in this, such gifts be
> allowed to man,
> That out of three sounds he frame, not
> a fourth sound, but a star. (l. 49-52)

The Michelangelo image of God reaching down to give life to Adam by the touch of a finger is particularly appropriate here. The strength and agility of the fingers are of utmost importance to a keyboard artist who must use a countless variety of touches to achieve different musical effects. Moreover, as God gives life to Adam with a touch, Vogler, too,

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[88] W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968, 140.

assumes creative power through his touch of the orchestrion's keys. Through his fingers, and through the "flash" of creative inspiration, Vogler becomes capable of artistry that is perhaps exclusive to musicians: the tactile nature of producing an abstract or spiritual entity perfectly mirrors God's spiritual power to create physical beings.

Browning's allusion to Michelangelo is interesting for a couple of reasons. Browning must have felt a special affinity to Michelangelo, having lived for fifteen years in Michelangelo's city, Florence, and being so close to the Buonarroti house, to the Uffizzi museum and to Michelangelo's works all over the city, and, moreover, having been inspired to become a sculptor himself. In addition, Browning was a faithful reader of Vasari's Lives of the Artists, using many of the ideas and characters from the book for his own poems, and Vasari idolizes Michelangelo, naming him "divine" and the accepted leader of all Renaissance artists. Like Browning, Michelangelo also wrote in his sonnets about the need to strive for perfection, and that transcendence could be achieved through art. Furthermore, in his sculptures, Michelangelo sought to create (through his touch) concrete expressions of abstract ideas just as Vogler attempts in his imaginary palace. Vogler, as depicted by Browning, is also an artistic genius with divine gifts, one who strives for perfection, and who reaches a moment of perfection and transcendence through his art. Unlike Michelangelo's art,

however, Vogler's music is transient.

The second section concludes with Vogler's hubristic declaration that his talents can humble all others because, through his adaptations of the commonplace, he can produce visions:

> Consider it well: each tone of our scale in
> itself is naught:
> It is everywhere in the world loud, soft,
> and all is said:
> Give it to me to use! I mix it with two in
> my thought:
> And there! Ye have heard and seen: consider
> and bow the head! (VII, 53 6)

With this assertion of almost God-like power, we hear an ecstatic Vogler speaking while still feeling the effects of his heady experience. But Vogler also voices Browning's own beliefs that the successful artist creates works which awaken all senses, inspiring the audience to get a glimpse of the truth reached by the artist while in the act of creation:

> The artist is one whose personality is especially
> rich in the sensitiveness favourable to the
> excitation of these moments of vision. Hence
> he not only has his own richer stores of vision
> to pass on to the rest of us; he has also the
> faculty...to excite in us the apprehensiveness
> which gives us the faculty of experiencing the

> vision for ourselves. His work is literally a revelation, and carries the conviction of actual revelation. He is, next to God, the surest guide to truth.[89]

Prophecy is the Romantic poet's mission, and surely what Browning sought to effect in his work. In the lines from "Abt Vogler," "Ye have heard and seen," we hear echoes of Browning's letter to Joseph Milsand when he wrote how he intended to incorporate more music and art into his work to let the reader see and hear. His interest perpetually lay in exposing soul, in seeking out the truth of the person, and "Abt Vogler" is no exception. This is the point in the poem upon which Browning's irony turns. Is Vogler really such an artist? He has had a supremely spiritual experience but is it one he will be able to communicate? As Vogler is extemporizing, there has been no audience, nor will there be in the future because this music is not written down. The music can never be repeated in the inspired form Vogler alone has heard: it is gone forever. Even though it is soul-inspired, and therefore communicable like Galuppi's music, no future generations will be able to derive any pleasure or insight from it. Thus, has Vogler fulfilled the requirements of Browning's visionary if he has failed to "excite in [others] the faculty of seeing the vision" for themselves?

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[89] H.B.Charlton, "Browning: The Poet's Aim," BJRL XXII, 1938, 120.

As the imaginary palace, the structure of music, fades, Vogler begins to reexperience the doubt which has been interrupted by his temporary burst of brilliance:

> For one is assured at first, one scarce can
> say that he feared,
> That he even gave it a thought, the gone
> thing was to go.
> Never to be again! But many more of the kind
> As good, nay better perchance: is this your
> comfort to me? (VIII, 59 62)

Vogler wonders if he will ever again experience the perfect moment as he bitterly challenges God. Eventually, however, he cultivates the consoling rationalization that his musical talents, while perhaps never again as extraordinary here on earth, will yet bear fruit after death: "On earth the broken arcs; in the heaven a perfect round" (1.72). In heaven, he reasons, "When eternity affirms the conception of an hour" (1.76), we shall realize our dreams and passions, and shall experience nobility and beauty, even though in life they have been but briefly held.

The concluding stanzas characterize a man who is no stranger to frustration or failure, but whose faith in a life after death allows him to resign himself to human limitation:

> And what is our failure here but a triumph of
> evidence
> For the fulness of the days? Have we withered

or agonized?

Why else was the pause prolonged but that the

singing might issue thence? (XI, 81-3)

For Vogler, life on earth is just a pause between our real lives in Heaven before birth and after death. Moreover, life on earth is full of failure and agony, sorrow, doubt and suffering: "Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear/ Each sufferer has his say" (l.85-6). What is worse for Vogler, human life is silent, bereft of celestial music: "Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes her reign" (l.89). Again, like Michelangelo who was often bitterly disappointed and frustrated in his artistic endeavours, Vogler must return from his sublime experience, "Surveying awhile the heights I rolled from into the deep," to the "C Major of this life" (Stanza XII).

As glorious as his depiction of Heaven is in this poem, we should not ignore Browning's ironic bent when analysing "Abt Vogler." Over the course of the work, Browning portrays Vogler as a man who is alienated from society yet who yearns for acknowledgement, a man who is as full of pride as he is of self doubt, and a man who experiences spurts of genius but is all too familiar with his limitations. Along with "Andrea del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi," this poem is Browning's finest analysis of creative genius. There are three distinct sections of the poem: the first five stanzas describe Vogler's reverie, the middle two outline his musical aesthetics, and the final

five verses reveal the man. It is worthy of notice that, with five stanzas each, parts one and three command most of the reader's attention: the first part, which presents Vogler's spiritual yearning and growth, reaching ecstatic levels, is followed hard upon by the last five verses, which show the man to be full of sorrow, resignation, acquiesence and inactivity. In light of this, it seems quite possible that Browning is representing a person whose creative pursuit involves him in manic and depressive episodes.

In 1864, when the poem was written, the great psychological discoveries were yet to be made and documented, but the following psychological profile (written in 1970) proves extremely interesting when considering Browning's portrayal of Vogler:

> The characteristics of a creative illness are: depression;...a sense of utter isolation, of ordeal, and of searching for 'an elusive truth'; continual doubts about one's ability to reach that great and secret principle; and a euphoric return to health once the discovery...has been made.[90]

Browning juxtaposes Vogler's euphoric declarations, "I was made perfect too," "out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star," and "consider and bow the head," with his feelings of desolation, sorrow and an acceptance of failure

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[90] Frank J. Sulloway, Freud, Biologist of the Mind, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1979, 216.

and suffering as the norm, and this juxtaposition raises questions about both Vogler's psychological state and Browning's intentions.

In reality, Vogler was a man who knew failure and frustration well; his career did not run smoothly and his early musical compositions met with critical disdain and popular indifference. Of all his life's work, there were only two compositions which prospered: the opera Castor and Pollux, produced in 1791, and an organ fugue based on themes from another composer's work, the "Hallelujah Chorus" by Handel. If Vogler was truly a brilliant improviser, why could he not transcribe his musical innovations onto paper? He certainly had the training and knowledge to do so. Perhaps his innovations were ahead of his time, but musicians have yet to bring forward any happy rediscoveries of Vogler's work. It seems evident that Vogler was simply not a very good composer.

Aside from his compositions, Vogler was known for his extraordinary ability to improvise, for the music schools he founded, his books of theory, his teaching skills (his students included not only Meyerbeer, Gänsbacher and Weber, but also Browning's teacher, John Relfe), and for the orchestrion he invented. He travelled extensively giving concerts on this instrument which must have been like some sort of monster in miniature: it was a compact, travelling organ with four keyboards of five octaves each, a pedal board of thirty-six keys, and no fewer than nine hundred pipes!

Audience reaction to these concerts, to Vogler's orchestration, and to his contrapuntal skills were mixed, divided equally among those who thought he was a genius and those who labelled him a charlatan. Most of the praise still on record today stems from his students who were obviously devoted to him. Thus, through John Relfe, Browning probably thought very highly of him initially. On the other hand, Mozart wrote the following to his father after hearing Abt Vogler perform one of his, Mozart's, concertos:

> He took the first movement prestissimo, the Andante allegro, and the Rondo even more prestissimo. He generally played the bass quite differently from the way it was written, inventing now and then quite another harmony and melody. Nothing else is possible at such a tempo, for the eyes cannot see the music nor the hands perform it....it was unendurable ....it is much easier to play a thing quickly than slowly: in difficult passages you can leave out a few notes without anybody noticing it. But is that beautiful music? [91]

Beethoven, too, thought Vogler was a fake and a showman, contemptuously classifying him with Daniel Steibelt (1765 1823), another show-stopping pianist whose claim to fame was

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[91] Harold C. Schonberg, The Great Pianists from Mozart to the Present, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963, 40.

how fast he could play, as his wife would accompany him rhythmically on a tambourine![92]

Why would Browning choose such a musician for this poem which illustrates the creation of contemplative and spiritually-fulfilling music? Audiences may be thrilled by brisk, virtuoso performances, but performing at an unnecessarily rapid tempo is definitely not indicative of soulful interpretation. Nor would Browning have chosen Vogler because he needed a devoutly religious man. Although he was trained as an Abbe, Vogler chose to have a musical career rather than practise as a priest. The fact that Vogler was a renowned contrapuntist and extemporizer is the reason most critics legitimately offer for Browning's choice, in that he needed music which had reached perfection but that would be fleeting. They also suggest that he wanted to examine the mind of the composer in the act of composition, but this poses a problem. Browning specifically states in parentheses at the outset of the poem that Vogler is thinking about his music after he has been extemporizing. Vogler is no longer composing: rather, he speaks of the effect his music has had upon himself, his own audience, so that it is almost as if we get a second-hand review. As well, Vogler mythologizes the experience; he doesn't discuss the musical aspects of creation. He only briefly surmises what went into his composition in stanzas VI and VII. Furthermore, by saying

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[92] Schonberg, 85, and 65-70.

that the music was directed from above, he takes no credit for his creative ability. "Andrea del Sarto" is a much better exposé of the mind of the artist at work. Browning chose Vogler because of the nature of improvisatory composition, but not because he could exhibit the mind of a composer as his composition was being created.

It is more probable that Vogler was chosen as a subject so that Browning could show the inherent conflicts of the creative process and how those conflicts can shape a life. The painted portrait of George Joseph Vogler depicts a shrewd and good-humoured character, and this, along with the history of the orchestrion and Vogler's checkered career were facts which were "eminently calculated to awaken Browning's interest."[93] Browning puts himself into the heart of Vogler and examines the touches of genius that were indeed a part of the man but also examines the struggle for a sense of lasting artistic value and importance: he exposes the conflicts in Vogler's soul between his feelings of mediocrity and his striving for artistic perfection and spiritual fulfillment.

Vogler's faith is also put into question by the juxtaposition of his euphoria and depression. Certainly, Browning did not subscribe to the belief that this world is nothing but a vale of tears, and Vogler, himself, cannot truly subscribe to it: his urge to create here and now negates the idea of passively waiting for life after death. The poem ends

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[93] Griffin & Minchin, 231.

with Vogler cast as a Christian martyr which is difficult to accept in light of the rest of the piece. Vogler's initial exhilaration and his anxiety to reach that perfect moment again ("Never to be again! But many more of the kind / As good, nay better, perchance"), attest to his vital creativity. The artist's fundamental aspiration is phrased by Andrea del Sarto in similar language to Vogler's:

> I do what many dream of all their lives,
> - Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,
> And fail in doing. ("Andrea del Sarto," l.69-71)
> Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
> Or what's a heaven for? ("Andrea del Sarto," l.97-8)

The creative struggle and push to achieve, to reach for the stars, is not consistent with one who is content to remain in his "resting-place...The C Major of this life," and Vogler's last words in the poem bespeak the difficulty he will have: "now I will try to sleep." Ironically, in order to find peace, Vogler will have to ignore his God-given creativity and the drive that implies.

The larger irony of the poem and the reason for Browning's fascination with improvisation lie in the fact that Vogler presents the ultimate example of artistic experimentation. His music is inspired rather than ordered, yet it is still finite because it is man-made. Improvization comes closest to the infinite because it stems from an imagination which is free and open to all of life, but the

very expression of that imagination stultifies it. Human beings can imagine more that they can adequately express. Even artists, who can imagine most fully and can express most articulately are limited by their expressions because they are finite beings, and incapable of grasping infinity.

Browning chose Vogler, as he did Andrea del Sarto, to give expression to his Philosophy of the Imperfect. Andrea is financially successful but fails to broaden the scope of his art with Soul which could win him a permanent place in the hearts of Men. Vogler agonizes over his work, putting his whole heart and soul into it and is successful in achieving one perfect, blessed moment, but, in the eyes of the world, he is a failure. In expounding Browning's Philosophy of the Imperfect, "Abt Vogler" illustrates the artist who, aware as he is of his imperfections and limitations, nevertheless strives for perfection. Vogler reaches the apex of creative intuition in his extemporization, perhaps never to be experienced again. Nonetheless, he has seen the promise of beauty and thus, he sorrowfully resigns himself to the imitation of it in a humble and patient life here on earth. He submits to living his ordinary existence because he has achieved artistic fulfillment, "I have dared and done." Furthermore, God has "whispered" in his ear and this brush with eternity gives him hope.

VII. The Later Poems.

During the 1870's and 1880's, Robert Browning's popularity had reached celebrity status and he was the darling of London literary and social circles. The Browning Society had been created and had a healthy membership, which included George Bernard Shaw. After Elizabeth's death in 1861, Browning and Pen had moved back to London; thereafter, Browning spent much of his time and energy rearing his son and eventually fostering Pen's career in Art. Without Elizabeth's poetic influence and also, perhaps because of his advancing age, Browning's works grew increasingly unwieldy and didactic. The Ring and the Book is the highlight of Browning's post-Elizabeth career, written shortly after his return to London. Despite its immense proportions, it stands apart as one of the works from this period which is still critically acclaimed.

Fifine at the Fair met with success in 1872, but not so the Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day in 1886, although its obscurities remained the delight of eager Browning Society explicators. These two poems contain extensive musical episodes and they, along with a shorter musically-related work from Asolando, "Flute Music with an Accompaniment" (1889), will be looked at in depth in this

chapter. It is interesting to note that, in these works, Browning uses music to address three distinct social issues of his time: changing traditions and morality in Fifine, the Aesthetic Movement in "Flute Music," and the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions in Parleying with Charles Avison. His commentary is subtly suited to his dramatic monologues and other poetic designs; nonetheless, we hear more of Browning's own voice than in all of his previous works since Pauline. As well, he continues to rephrase the themes we have encountered before in his musical-linguistic pieces: music arouses an awareness of eternal questions, and the effectiveness of music exists not in its technical perfection or complexity, but in its ability to communicate ideas initially through the senses and human emotion.

Fifine at the Fair

Fifine at the Fair is comprised of four parts: the Prologue; a dialogue between Don Juan and his wife, Elvire at the Pornic Fair; Don Juan's dramatic monologue with a description of his dream; and an Epilogue. Although not exclusively, it is predominantly in the dream sequence that we encounter Browning's use of musical allusion in this poem. Don Juan relates to his wife his daydream of a Venetian carnival that he experienced while playing Schumann's Carnaval on the piano. The dramatic monologue within this poem can be

likened, therefore, to Browning's other music poems, because like "A Toccata of Galuppi's," "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," and "Abt Vogler," it also features a performing narrator.

In advance of the dream sequence, Stanza XLII reviews in a musical analogy the ideas which are explored throughout the poem:

> And, music: what? that burst of pillared
> cloud by day
> And pillared fire by night, was product,
> must we say,
> Of modulating just, by enharmonic change, -
> The augmented sixth resolved, - from out
> the straighter range
> Of D sharp minor - leap of disimprisoned
> thrall -
> Into thy light and life, D major natural?

The chord to which Browning refers is the second inversion of the third chord in D# Minor (III 6/4: Cx, or C double sharp, F# and A#). With the augmented sixth, A#, resolved to A natural, the chord becomes D (enharmonically, C double sharp is D), F#, and A which together make up the D Major tonic, or "natural," chord. The subtle freshness and excitement of a dissonant chord resolving by enharmonic modulations unleashes a heretofore imprisoned force.[94] Browning's musical metaphor

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[94] Browning repeats this image of enslaved musical notes or sounds having to be released. In "Abt Vogler" he writes:

spotlights his theme: Don Juan struggles intellectually to free himself from the constraints of domestication in order to re-experience passions which once were exhilarating but are now stale. As the musical modulation tames the tension of the dissonant chord, so Time tames ecstacies. Thus the liberation of the dissonant chord represents Fifine and Don Juan's urgent quest for new adventures and forbidden knowledge, while the tranquility of the common chord represents Elvire.

Don Juan is physically attracted to Fifine, the beautiful gypsy he sees at the Fair. Intellectually, his curiosity is peaked as he wonders how a gypsy, a non-Christian with a "questionable" soul, could have such a beautiful exterior:

> For me, I own defeat, ask but to understand
> The acknowledged victory of whom I call my queen,
> Sexless and bloodless sprite: though mischievous
> and mean,
> Yet free and flower-like too, with loveliness
> for law,
> And self-sustainment made morality. (Stanza XVI)

Comparing himself to a pennon that is rooted in earth but "Frenetic to be free" (Stanza VI), Don Juan ventures to

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> Would that the structure brave, the manifold
> music I build,
> Bidding my organ obey, calling its keys to
> their work,
> Claiming each slave of the sound,...

The image works well in Fifine as it reinforces the basic themes of freedom of expression, and of seeking depth of meaning beneath superficial appearances.

understand Fifine's freedom from the social restrictions to which he and Elvire must adhere. Moreover, he likens Fifine to a bird (Stanza IX) who comes to take only what it needs from society (a metaphor also used in Parleying with Charles Avison , and he yearns to experience the autonomy of these aloof creatures and to discover the mystery of their independence.

Fifine symbolizes this mystery but she also arouses Don Juan's physical passions. He attempts to rationalize his lust, arguing that by conquering Fifine physically, he would be triumphing over his own physicality and would therefore be free to find the spiritual answers he seeks. In "Amphibian," the Prologue, Browning introduces the same idea. The narrator of "Amphibian" is swimming in the sea, and as he floats and contemplates the sky, his physical self seems to ebb away as it is buoyed up, disappearing momentarily from his consciousness. When the mind ceases to be constantly aware of the body, the imagination becomes all-powerful. Similarly, through sexual fulfillment, Don Juan claims that we are "Emancipated through passion" (Prologue, stanza 14) and that self awareness arises only through the senses (Browning's "soul-sense fusing" of "Flute Music with an Accompaniment," 1.43). "What Don Juan hankers after is not forbidden pleasure but forbidden knowledge" in Browning's continuing Faustian conflict between Love and Knowledge.[95] This dissolution of

[95] Betty Miller, 254.

physicality and precedence of the Imagination produce Don Juan's daydream, as happens in all the reveries of the music poems, with the exception of "Master Hugues." The music allows the imagination to soar as the narrators escape the present and their very selves. Not only does music free the imagination, however, it also directs the reverie.

As Don Juan responds to Elvire's accusations that he is merely deceiving himself with his sophistry, he calls on Music to help:

> Ah, Music, wouldst thou help! Words struggle
> with the weight
> So feebly of the False, thick element between
> Our soul, the True, and Truth! which, but
> that intervene
> False shows of things, were reached as easily
> by thought
> Reducible to word, as now by yearnings wrought
> Up with thy fine free force, O Music, that
> canst thrid,
> Electrically win a passage through the lid
> Of earthly sepulchre, our words may push
> against,
> Hardly transpierce as thou! (Stanza LXI, 2 10)
> And, since to weary words recourse again must be,
> At least permit they rest their burden here and
> there,

Music-like: cover space! (Stanza LXI, 20-22)

Once again, we hear Browning's sentiments about the supremacy of music over words, and, as in "Abt Vogler," music's architectural propensity to "cover space." Moreover, in the subsequent stanza, Browning reiterates the musical link between earth and heaven:

> Clash forth life's common chord, whence, list how
> there ascend
> Harmonics far and faint, till our perception end, -
> Reverberated notes whence we construct the scale
> Embracing what we know and feel and are.
>
> (Stanza LXII, 3-6)

As in "Abt Vogler," life's "common chord" rises tremulously to heaven where it is met by an affirming higher wisdom. Don Juan seeks to know himself and to know the truth of his feelings. Eventually, he confers with "some musician dead...who feeling what I feel now, instead / Of words, sought sounds, and saved forever, in the same, / Truth that escapes prose" (Stanza XC, 5-8). He plays Schumann's Carnaval in an effort to substantiate his feelings by sharing the emotions of the composer.

While playing the piece, Don Juan observes that both the music and the composer's sentiments are perpetually renewed and refreshed by new "readings," or interpretations of the work:

> ...till one day, another age, by due

Rotation,...discovers old is new
And sauce, our sires pronounced insipid,
proves again
Sole piquant, may resume its titillating reign -
With music, most of all the arts, since change
is there
The law, and not the lapse: (Stanza XCII, 34 9)

Don Juan uses this assertion of change and continual renewal in music to justify his thirst for new sexual adventures and variety in life. It is interesting that while Browning proclaims that "change is the law" in music, and writes in the poems Parleying with Charles Avison and "The Last Ride Together," as well as in a letter to Elizabeth,[96] how musical tastes are fickle and change every thirty years, nevertheless, most of his music poems concern themselves with music and composers who are revived or kept alive through the art of the performer. Ironically, it is the very distance and altered perspective of a performer which can so revitalize an old musical work.

The poem goes on to describe the twenty one pieces of Schumann's Carnaval with its various characters, Columbine, Harlequin and Pantaloon, which remind Don Juan of his day at the Pornic Fair. Schumann's music is much more serious than

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[96] See Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I, E. Kinter, ed., Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969, 539-40 (letter dated March 7, 1846).

traditional Fair music, and its soulful expressiveness suggests to Don Juan that there may be a depth of character beneath Fifine's capricious and exotic exterior.

The music also brings scenes of Venice at Carnival time to Don Juan's mind. Browning writes the visions of Venice in a highly impressionistic fashion, a style he later uses in "Flute Music with an Accompaniment." Don Juan visualizes St. Mark's square at sunset when all the buildings, even the marmoreal domes, are blurred and transfigured by the haze of sky, sun and sea. These quavering mutations, along with the Carnival masqueraders, force Don Juan to rethink outward appearances. He concludes that just as the concrete buildings are distorted in his vision and take on new formations, so do "age-old" Truths which are unwavering for generations and then shift as the sands. The learning of the ages in Art, Theology and History all claim their new discoveries, their new knowledge to be <u>the</u> truth, but Don Juan proclaims these new truths to be nothing but "shape reshaped":

> ...till out of shapelessness
> Come shape again as sure! (Stanza CXIV, 6-7)

The only permanence we know is change upon change and Schumann's music illustrates this view. Schumann had had similar feelings with which Don Juan could identify, but those feelings lay dormant until Don Juan performed Schumann's music and brought them to life again in a new form.

As Don Juan finds change the perpetual truth of

Schumann's music, he deduces that lives must also change continually; old passions should be jarred into renewal. Thus, Don Juan justifies his desire for Fifine and for his own moral instability. It is the consciousness of life and of his being that Don Juan craves, and he rationalizes that the fulfillment of his desire for Fifine will give it back to him.

Parleying with Charles Avison.

Browning did not write an autobiography. Ever since the scathing reviews he had received for Pauline, he had been averse to revealing too much about himself. Browning's poetic style grew out of his interest in drama and his poems are full of diverse characters whom we come to know through their actions and speech. Browning's penchant for showing the development of his characters' souls in his works spills over into his quasi-autobiographical work, Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day, written in 1886 when Browning was seventy-four years old. In this lengthy work, for the first time since Pauline, Browning allows his readers to contemplate the various influences in his life, particularly the early influences which were responsible for the development and shaping of his own soul.

It is in Parleying with Charles Avison that we learn of Browning's early introduction to music and of the powerful

influence music effected upon him which was to last a lifetime. We know that the Browning library had a copy of Charles Avison's book Essay on Musical Expression (1752). Avison theorized that "music is defined in terms of its effects, as a tonal medium for **evoking** feelings in the listener," a theory which was in contrast to the previous Aristotelian concept of music as an "imitation" of passion.[97] The latter was the prevailing philosophy of music in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Browning's earliest poem, Pauline, reveals his espousal of Avison's theory when he writes, "For music ... is like a voice, / A low voice calling fancy..." Charles Avison wrote that the charm and "delicacy" of certain eighteenth-century music often made up for its harmonic "defects,"[98] thereby placing more importance on the emotive quality of a work than on its structure and device. Browning was convinced of this importance throughout his life as we see in all of his music poems.

In Parleying with Charles Avison, Browning also tells of his illustrious teacher, John Relfe. Relfe taught piano and composition to the young Browning using Charles Avison's Grand March as one of his pieces. This music is printed at the

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[97] M.H.Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953, 92.

[98] W. C. DeVane, Browning's Parleyings: The Autobiography of a Mind, New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1964, 256.

conclusion of the poem and looks comparable to what would be a grade one conservatory piece today. Although it was one of his earliest pieces, academic and uncomplicated, Browning lauds it for being true to its simplicity and all the more powerful for its honesty. Under Relfe's tutelage, Browning certainly possessed the technique to "dress up" Avison's March with rhythmic and dynamic excitement, and with "modulations fit to make each hair / Stiffen" (IX, 25-6); we know that he learned improvisation from Relfe, himself a student of Abbe Vogler, the improvisational genius. Nevertheless, Browning considers that such tampering would be, as he says, "irreverent innovation" (X,2). Browning respects the composer's efforts: no matter how simple the music may be, if it is honest and heart-felt, it contains soul and therefore, for Browning, it is a sacred thing.

This was the most potent influence that music had on Browning. He writes in Parleyings, as in his other poems, how the soul is captured by music and lifted heavenwards, and how music, more than any other entity other than love, has the power to awaken, envelop and bring to consciousness the inner and basic truths of the individual, his or her very essence or soul:

> There is no truer truth obtainable
>
> By Man than comes of music. "Soul" - (VI, 2 3)
>
> . . . who seeks shall find
>
> Distinct beneath that something. (VI, 12-3)

As he did at the beginning of his career, so too near the end of his life, Browning argues that the purpose of poetry, indeed of all art, is to expose soul.

Yet, in Parleying with Charles Avison, he says that as music comes closest to reaching soul, closest to allowing people to recognize a universality within themselves or even just their own individual well of deep emotion, even music cannot capture and hold "Soul's evanescent moods" (VIII, 14). He says that this, too, fails as do the other arts, even his own poetry:

> ...To match and mate
> Feeling with knowledge, - ... (VII, 35-6)
> All Arts endeavour this, and she [music] the most
> Attains thereto, yet fails of touching:
> ...Each Art astrain
> Would stay the apparition,
> The Poet's word-mesh, Painter's sure and swift
> Colour-and-line-throw ...
> ...Outdo both of them, Music!
> Could Music rescue thus from Soul's profound,
> Give feeling immortality by sound,
> Then were she queenliest of arts! (VIII)

Music may not be able to assure immortality, nor may it allow people more than a fleeting glimpse of eternity; but music does, nonetheless, have the power to stir strong emotions. Even the simplest music, like Avison's March, as Browning

writes at the end of the poem, can move people to feel passionately about their nation and its freedoms, where perhaps nothing else can. With the addition of Browning's words, the March becomes a rallying cry for the English to take pride in their heritage.

For music to touch the hearts and souls of its listeners, especially the music of past generations, it is necessary that a competent interpreter perform the music both intelligently and sensitively. In this poem, Browning writes of the performer's art as if it possesses supernatural charms. He uses chemical imagery as he describes how he, as a magical "enlivener," will sprinkle "dusts and dews...of chemical reactives" from his teacher, John Relfe's "laboratory shelf" of piano technique in order to rekindle the spark of life once held within the music:

> ...What, "stone-dead" were fools so rash
> As style my Avison, because he lacked
> Modern appliance, spread out phrase unracked
> By modulations fit to make each hair
> Stiffen upon his wig? See there - and there!
> I sprinkle my reactives....Straightway scanned
> By eyes that like new lustre - Love once more
> Yearns through the Largo, Hatred as before
> Rages in the Rubato. (Stanza IX)

By altering the basics of Avison's March, adding such techniques as used by modern composers and pianists, Browning

says he brings the music back to life in a fashion that will appeal to nineteenth-century listeners. But he later condemns the practice by calling these innovations "irreverent." Browning thereby ascribes magical and satanic powers both to the performers of music and to those other practitioners of "modern appliance," the composers who load their compositions with discords, frequent modulations, broken rhythmical patterns, stringendos and excessive dynamics. He suggests that the antique work of art should be appreciated for what it was, and that a performer has the obligation to respect the integrity of the work and to bring it back to life in its original form. That this is magical, he tries to prove in the concluding stanza as he writes of the march's effect on a nation's pride in its history.

The art of performing obviously intrigued Browning. In his poems "Abt Vogler," "A Toccata of Galuppi's," "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," and Fifine at the Fair, the reader shares in the contemplations of the performer as he is sitting at the keyboard playing a piece of music for himself. In Parleying with Charles Avison, we learn that even as a small boy, Browning himself experienced this kind of free-associative thinking whilst playing on his piano. The act of playing music was a springboard, as it were, for his imagination, becoming a "little fact / Which led my fancy forth" (I, 1-2), even as the blackcap does in the opening stanza of Parleying. Browning writes of how, while playing

Avison's Grand March, he could envision:

> Dream-marchers ...marching, slow and sure,
>
> In time, to tune...
>
> From nowhere into nowhere....
>
> With fife-shriek, cymbal-clash and trumpet blare,
>
> To drum-accentuation: pacing turned
>
> Striding, and striding grew gigantic, spurned
>
> At last the narrow space 'twixt earth and air,
>
> So shook me back into my sober self. (Stanza III)

The value of music for Browning, even from his youth, was that it inspired him to think visually, creatively, historically, and poetically. He did not appreciate music merely for the aesthetic pleasures of the musical sounds or for the art of the composer, but rather he used it as a tool with which he could mine and forge ideas.

The central idea weaving its way through Parleying with Charles Avison seems to be an old man's lament for the loss of what once was considered full of life, beauty and meaning. Browning mourns the fact that once-precious works of art are so readily replaced by new and seemingly-superior ones. Browning begins his poem with the thought:

> Oh, what a life and beauty filled it up
>
> Startlingly, when methought the rude clay cup
>
> Ran over with poured bright wine! (I, 12-4)

The narrator of the poem, Browning himself, is watching out of his window in the springtime as a blackcap tugs at a bit of

cloth from an espaliered tree, barren now of leaves and all its summer glories. This seemingly mundane occurrence conjures up an abundance of ideas (as playing on the piano can do for Browning). He thinks that just as the barren spot on the brick wall was once filled with the beauteous bounty of leaves and fruits from the espaliered tree, so too the world is left barren of the beautiful music of composers now dead and, sadder still, is deaf to the "soul" that produced it.

Charles Avison was an obscure composer, just a humble organist in a Newcastle church, and yet his work had meaning in its own day: its simple expressions of feelings were at least honest. Browning worries that as Avison has lost his appeal and has been replaced by the new musical works of geniuses like Wagner, Brahms, Liszt and Dvorak, that perhaps intellectualism and musical or artistic "manufacture," as he calls their more complex and urbane styles, will take precedence over basic human emotions:

> Music's throne
> Seats somebody whom somebody unseats,
> And whom in turn - by who knows what new feats
> Of strength - shall somebody as sure push down.(XI, 2-5)

Even the feelings that went into compositions such as Avison's, and were, perhaps, their only saving grace, can only be partially recaptured by talented "enlivener"-performers.

Browning's lament for the loss of simple beauty in the world is not limited to the world of music. In the opening

stanza of Parleying with Charles Avison, Browning calls the cloth that the bird is tugging at "a rag of manufacture, spoiled / By art" [that is, it is torn to make a tie for the artfully-cultivated orchard creeper], "...and yet by nature near unsoiled" (I, 33-4). With his use of the words "spoiled" and "unsoiled," Browning intimates a sympathy for nature and art that can work together to spoil manufacture. One of Browning's recurrent themes throughout the body of his work is that art should strive beyond material "perfection" to capture a divine spark. In the domestic episode of stanza one in Parleying, we witness Nature's desecration of an artfully achieved but man-made, and peculiarly nineteenth century gardening technique, the espaliered tree, as the blackcap forages the bit of cloth from the espalier ties for his own use; the man-made cloth, meant to achieve artistic splendour, succumbs to Nature's eternal cycle of birth and death. Fall and Winter have watched the espaliered tree lose its beauty, its active life, and, as it now lies dormant, new forces of life, in the form of the blackcap, benefit from it and go forward.

The blackcap becomes Browning's "little fact / which [leads his] fancy forth" (I, 1-2) as it inspires his poetic and philosophic imagination, and it is a metaphor which encapsulates the ideas of the poem. These ideas mushroom into the contemplation of questions such as whether new life which springs up to engulf and replace the old is really

progressive; further, is the Victorian age of manufacture a mark of Man's progress or is the nineteenth-century preoccupation with science and exploration actually pushing human concerns and humanity itself aside; and finally, are reason and intellectual pursuits again taking precedence over human emotions, man-made concerns over faith?

Browning does not directly discuss the many tragic and human concerns of the nineteenth-century's Industrial and Scientific Revolutions, but he subtly introduces them to the reader's imagination with his choice of language, a smattering of words which reflect industrialization, science and economics. The blackcap's prize is not called simply a cloth, but a "rag of manufacture," and nineteenth-century music is referred to as "today's music manufacture" (IV). Moreover, Browning cites the nineteenth-century preoccupation with work in stanza VII as he writes:

> We see a work: the worker works behind,
> Invisible himself....he digs, transports,
> Shapes, and through enginery - ....from
> the last turn of the winch
> That let the polished slab-stone rind its place,
> To the first prod of pickaxe at the base
> Of the unquarried mountain ....

Browning alludes to the disappearing human element in Victorian society as more and more people were becoming slaves to the new creed of productivity at all costs.

In stanza IX, as noted before, Browning uses the language of science, specifically chemistry, when he is describing his piano technique. And in stanza XII, it is the language of economics that is used to describe Man's pursuit of knowledge:

> Of all the lamentable debts incurred
> By Man through buying knowledge, this were worst:
> That he should find his last gain prove his first
> Was futile -

Finally, nineteenth-century musicians are reprimanded for their emphasis on experimentation and excessive analysis of their art and craft when, in stanza V, Browning suggests that the older music roused its listeners to its beauties without elaborate "explorations" and "explanations" of its aesthetics. By calling the contemporary musical giants musical "manufacturers," Browning relegates them to a rather demeaned stature. In this fashion, he ridicules the nineteenth century composers' propensity for monumental experimentation which seems to ignore basic sentiment in favour of intellectual appeal and grandiose, but empty gesture. He maintains that they, too, will be as forgotten as Avison and his contemporaries, Pepusch, Geminiani, and Buononcini, who had been equally as popular in their own time. In Parleying with Charles Avison, Browning uses the field of music as an argument which parallels the societal ills of his time, blaming much of society's problems on the drive for new knowledge at the expense of the old.

In this poem, as in so many of his others, Browning repeats the perpetually puzzling question: what is truth? One absolute truth, as he proposes in Fifine at the Fair, is that as soon as one truth is reached, another one comes along to challenge it. It's the proverbial Shakespearean quandary of appearance versus reality: what seems true today could be unrecognizably altered tomorrow. Browning consigns The Ring and the Book to this question and concludes that the artist holds truth in his or her power because of the artist's ability to oversee and imagine all sides of an issue, as well as the ability to perceive the inexplicable and non-visible entity that Browning calls soul. In Parleying with Charles Avison, Browning puts the question this way:

> Truth - this attainment? Ah, but such and such
> Beliefs of yore seemed inexpugnable
> When we attained them! E'en as they, so will
> This, their successor have the due morn, noon,
> Evening and night - just as an old-world tune
> Wears out and drops away, until who hears
> Smilingly questions - 'This it was brought tears
> Once to all eyes, - this roused heart's rapture once?'
> So will it be with truth that, for the nonce,
> Styles itself truth perennial: 'ware its wile!
> Knowledge turns nescience, - foremost on the file,
> Simply proves first of our delusions. (XII, 11-22)

Almost twenty years after The Ring and the Book, Browning is

in as much of a quandary about where to find absolute truth as ever and also seems quite sceptical about the direction he sees society taking. He resorts to sentimentality in the conclusion of the poem by suggesting that England's future lies in the hands of Avison's Grand March with its rousing martial passion that makes Englishmen proud of their history!

Edwin Muir writes that Browning's best poems are those in which "he states a point of view quite different from his own...for they call out and exercise his imagination," but that when Browning speaks for himself, he very often "greet[s] the unseen with a cheer [as he] bluff[s] himself by a display of pious geniality into mystical high spirits."[99] Browning's declamatory style of the last four stanzas is an abrupt departure from the contemplative nature of the rest of the work, and his conclusions are simply inadequate answers to the complex questions posed by the poem.

Browning's conservatism is as much due to his age as it is to disillusionment. But it is, perhaps, his abhorrence of Higher Criticism, the mid-nineteenth-century German inspired movement which closely examined the Bible historically and linguistically, which is partly responsible for propelling Browning into such a premature and facile ending. As William De Vane points out, Browning was extremely reluctant to give any credence to, or to bend his point of view to the new

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[99] Edwin Muir, "Robert Browning" in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, Philip Drew, ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957, 67.

religious and scientific ideas of Mankind and his relationship to God. Wishing to hang on to the faith his mother taught him, he "repudiates the mind, and turns to the emotions and instincts of man, and there builds back his faith".[100] Browning finds absolute truth only within Man's soul and thus music, which can elevate and ennervate man's spirit and soul, is the means by which the future is assured of meaning and continuity. Browning's promotion of Avison's Grand March as a "Truth that endures resetting" (XIV, 3) and as "March-music for the Future" (XIV, 9), makes the plea that the future should not be one bereft of tradition and history, but, rather, should be a time that respects the old as well as the new; that Man's universal and emotional response to the rousing nature of music will not be superseded by his intellectual approach to life, an approach which is often faulty and most assuredly temporary. The thread of permanence, Browning maintains, lies in Man's soul which is best appealed to by music.

"Flute Music with an Accompaniment."

"Flute Music with an Accompaniment" was written in 1888 and was published as one of the Asolando volume of poems on the day of Browning's death, December 12, 1889. The poem has sixteen twelve-line stanzas which are divided between two

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[100] DeVane, Parleyings, 269.

speakers, a man and a woman. The man's portion of dialogue both opens and closes the poem with four stanzas each, and he speaks for three stanzas in between the woman's groups of three and then two verses in the middle of the work.

Generally, Browning attempts to "imitate musical [and especially flute-like] effects in the light, quick lines of the poem:"[101]

Ah, the bird-like fluting
  Through the ash-tops yonder
Bullfinch-bubblings, soft sounds suiting
  What sweet thoughts, I wonder?
    Fine-pearled notes that surely
      Gather dew-drop fashion,
    Deep-down in some heart which purely
      Secretes globuled passion
Passion insuppressive
  Such is piped, for certain;
Love, no doubt, nay, love excessive
  'Tis, your ash-tops curtain.

(Stanza I - my indentation)

Each stanza consists of three four-line units. The first, second and fourth lines of each unit are written in trochaic trimeter while the third is in trochaic tetrameter. Even with its run-on lines and conversational tone, the poem is metrically consistent making it dance-like.

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[101] Wendell Stacy Johnson, 204.

Also, the tripartite nature of the stanzas and the profusion of trimetric lines lend a dance quality to the rhythm and make the poem comparable to a Minuet. The Minuet is a seventeenth-century dance written in triple time and in ternary form: ||:A:|| B A. The "A" section is repeated (represented by the first and second trimeter lines of "Flute Music"), the "B" section stands apart (Browning's third line tetrameter), and the "A" section completes the pattern (Browning's fourth line repeats the trimeter of the opening two lines). Furthermore, the structure of the entire poem is tripartite: the male speaker's four opening and closing stanzas act as a frame around a third section in the middle, which is in itself tripartite with Her three stanzas, His three and Her subsequent two. Musically, the middle section corresponds to a Trio which often accompanies a Minuet.

Aside from the musical framework, the subject of this poem revolves around musical impressionism and an audience's appraisal of music. Of all of Browning's music poems, this one is unique. The speakers are not at all involved in the creation of the music; nevertheless, they offer two fervent and opposing critiques of the flute music they overhear. The male speaker, who has the most to say, is awash with sensation as the music conveys to him a variety of emotions: assurance, trust, contentment, passion, sorrow, hope and joy. As he deliberates upon music's superior power to communicate, he describes the music with Keatsian sensuality: "Bullfinch-

bubblings," "globuled passion," and "soul-sense-fusing." She, on the other hand, ridicules him for his sentimentality. She recognizes the music as a routine practice-piece for an amateur flautist, an " Air" by Jean Louis Toulou. Moreover, she is able to discern several technical flaws: the flautist cannot play legato properly, playing staccato instead, he misses sharps and plays incorrect notes, and he cannot maintain the syncopated rhythm:

> So, 't was distance altered
>
> Sharps to flats? The missing
>
> Bar when syncopation faltered
>
> (You thought - paused for kissing!)
>
> Ash-tops too felonious
>
> Intercepted? (l. 133-8)

She, a realist, perhaps a cynic, cannot allow her emotions to overshadow her intellect. Her male companion, however, is caught up in the impressionistic effect of the music wafting through the treetops and maintains that it is the total effect of the music which wins his rapturous approval.

She, like the narrator of "Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha" who is also only concerned with the subtle but purely mechanical details of the music, misses the music's aesthetic subtleties and can find no meaning in it. He, on the other hand, is able to transcend the earth-bound music and find a meaning beyond the obvious; his imagination, spurred by the music, creates the message. Actually, the music becomes

irrelevant after a point, just as the "cold" music of "A Toccata of Galuppi's" does: it is the reverie itself that appropriates significance.

Like the narrators in other Browning music poems, the music inspires the male speaker to philosophize, although Browning's "monologuist would hear all that He hears but in, not apart from, what She does."[102] He does not hear the flaws, or else, he chooses to ignore them, being stirred rather by musical illusion. In the end, his reflections lead him to plead for illusion in love:

> Ugly traits were wholly lost or
>
> Screened by fancies flexile - (l.179-80)
>
> Ash-tops these, you take me?
>
> Fancies interference
>
> Changed . . .
>
> But since I sleep, don't wake me!
>
> What if all's appearance?
>
> Is not outside seeming
>
> Real as substance inside?
>
> Both are facts, so leave me dreaming: (l. 181-7)

Just as the flautist's faults are screened by the ash-tops, so, He says, let those of a lover also be hidden. In contrast to Don Juan's confusion about inner and outer beauty, and his quest to find the secret soul of the beautiful but anti-social

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[102] J. Hollander, 122.

gypsy girl, the male speaker of "Flute Music" is content to accept outward appearance. He is an aesthete making the case for "Art for Art's Sake."

It is the evocative and impressionistic nature of music that is at the heart of this poem. Interestingly, Browning imbues the work with visually impressionistic imagery to describe an auditory medium. When the poem was written in 1888, Impressionism was at its peak. Thus, Browning's ash tops screening of the music should not be viewed solely as Romantic affectation; it must also be seen as relating to Impressionism in painting. Like impressionist canvases, "Flute Music" captures an intimate scene en plein air with the fragmentary nature of the music simulating the painter's dappled light. With Browning's consistent alliterative use of the consonant "s," we can almost hear the hiss of the trees as the music filters through the ash-tops; and as the music mingles with the hiss of the leaves, it takes on a visually opalescent quality when Browning describes it as "fine pearled" and liquid as dewdrop globules. Whereas, for the female speaker, the ash-tops curtain is merely a mask for imperfections or "simulated unity," for the male speaker, it is the very impression of the music, and not the music itself, which is captivating. His imagination is stimulated not by the reality of the music but by its shimmering, mirage like appeal which generates his ideas of illusion in love. Once again, in this poem, Browning illustrates his thesis on

blending poetry, painting and music. As he phrases it in Balaustion's Adventure:

> What's poetry except a power that makes?
> And, speaking to one sense, inspires the rest,
> Pressing them all into its service. (l. 317-9)

For the male speaker of "Flute Music," the poetry of the impressionistic music is both beautiful and inspirational.

For Browning, the allusions to music and art infuse his poems with vitality. At the end of his life, Browning continues to teach that, after all, human emotion is of utmost importance, and that illusion and the mystery of the soul are precious.

* * *

Browning was in full accord with Carlyle's theory of Dynamics as Carlyle preached in Signs of the Times:

> There is a science of Dynamics, which treats of, and practically addresses, the primary, unmodified forces and energies of man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion, all which have a truly vital and infinite character.

In the final analysis, the influence of music on the works of Robert Browning was to summon this mysterious entity in protagonist and reader alike, to awaken consciousness, or "Soul" as Browning so often called it. To achieve a new

awareness, Browning used auditory imagery in much the same way he used visual imagery. More than any other facet of music, Browning chose to utilize its imaginatively-suggestive and mesmerizing powers as poetic and philosophic tools. Indeed, Browning cannot be considered a musical poet in the traditional sense so much as a dramatic and philosophic poet; his use of music was geared to suiting the speech of his characters, the mood and atmosphere of his dramatic situations, and the exposition of idea and philosophic or moral conflict.

This blend of literature, drama, art and music was not unusual in an era when musicians were composing music based on literary ideas (in forms such as the Symphonic or Tone Poem and the Program Symphony), and when artists catered to the public taste for "reading" paintings. All of the arts in the nineteenth century were striving to express the human condition, and to this end, they borrowed from each other. It was Browning's purpose throughout his career to explore the mysterious depths of the human soul and to find an eternal truth therein; and thus, in his "Soul-Sense" fusion, he incorporated into his verse music's powerful appeal to the inner voice and the source of divinity.

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