

# Andrzej Dorobek

---

## E. A. Poe: the music of the word as (un)translated into the music of the sound

---

Społeczeństwo. Edukacja. Język 3, 101-106

---

2015

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

## E. A. POE: THE MUSIC OF THE WORD AS (UN) TRANSLATED INTO THE MUSIC OF THE SOUND

### Abstract

Having briefly reviewed various criteria of the musicality of a literary text, identified by Polish scholars, such as Szulc, Zgorzelski, Błoński, or Makowiecki, the author proceeds to approach selected works by Edgar Allan Poe, such as „The Raven”, or „The Fall of the House of Usher”, whose musicality is based, to a considerable extent, upon the techniques of ostinato and crescendo as well as on the prosodic orchestration. Consequently, he tries to establish to what degree and for what reasons this quality has been preserved in selected musical adaptations of these works (Peter Hammill, The Alan Parsons Project, Lou Reed).

**Keywords:** romanticism musicality adaptation modernization crescendo ostinato prosody

### 1. Diverse views upon the relationship between music and literary word

Music and literature have been related practically from the beginning of their existence. In ancient Greece or medieval France, poems were usually sung, in the Romantic era, with its postulate of the fusion of arts, the revival of this unity was systematically insisted upon (first of all, by R. Wagner) – just as, one hundred years later, in times of the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat Generation (e. g. by Kenneth Rexroth or Allen Ginsberg). At the same time, however, the ways of music into literature, especially poetry, have never been easy: possibly because, for most of the European cultural history, both these disciplines existed independently.

With respect to their relationship, one of the most extreme views is offered by Szulc, who considers any speculations on the parallels between poetry and music as academically illegitimate [Szulc, 1937, s.77, 84]<sup>1</sup>. Makowiecki presents a more balanced approach, distinguishing a few ways of music being present in literature: for example, a writer may analyze a real or fictitious piece of music or include general discussions of musical issues in his works (see at least Th. Mann’s Doctor Faustus). He also maintains that the structure of a poem or a piece of fiction may, at least partially, succumb to the formal devices of music, such as *leitmotiv*, variation or the reworking of overture thematic material [Makowiecki, 1955, s.7, 29]. Finally, Zgorzelski claims that, in order to make his work „musical” or „sonorous”, a writer, especially a poet, may introduce intonation patterns, regularly falling and rising, unconventional arrangements of rhymes, changes of meter, assonance, alliteration or onomatopoeia [Błoński 1980, 111].

Still, according to Błoński, the very idea of literature being „musical” is hazy and virtually inadequate, as euphonic or acoustic charms of a poem or a piece of prose are incom-

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paragraph we refer to the views of Polish scholars, which, presumably, may be of some universal relevance.

parably poorer than the sonic qualities of any work of music [ibid.] Thus, concentrating on the modernist avantgarde poems by T. S. Eliot, G. Benn or J. Czechowicz, commonly considered obscure, the Polish scholar sets out to find a less objectionable criterion of musicality in the poetic sense. Consequently, he discovers that a poem progresses in time towards some climax, lacking any clear syntactic, semantic or formal logic, but preserving, paradoxically, the sense of organic unity of development. By virtue of the same paradox, the reader both understands and fails to understand it: exactly like a listener to a piece of any classical music, which also progresses in time towards its climax and escapes any immediate understanding due to the obscurity of its language of „meaningless” sounds [ibid., s.111, 117].

It may be concluded, then, that the poets whose formal and syntactic patterns are more orderly and messages less obscure would not be primarily relevant to this topic, even though their works have been deservedly quoted as prime instances of musicality in the poetic sense: to mention only „The Raven” by E. A. Poe. Still, in order to exemplify his point, Błoński refers also to one of the last sonnets by S. Mallarme, bringing indirectly the aforementioned American writer into the focus; the writer whose influence upon French symbolism in general and Mallarme in particular was remarkable (to quote, at least, the latter’s another sonnet, „Poe’s Tombstone”).

## 2. Edgar Allan Poe’s music of the word

Indeed, Poe, one of the chief spokesmen for the Romantic synthesis of arts (with music in the supreme role), abundantly exemplifies all the aforementioned criteria of musicality in literature: both in his poems and short stories, meant to be read *at one sitting*, for a single aesthetic or emotional *effect* to be successfully conveyed [Poe, 1983, s.312-313]. The most relevant, for the present discussion, seem to be „The Raven”, „Ulalume”, and „Bells” (among the poems), along with „The Fall of the House of Usher” and „The Tell-Tale Heart” (among the short stories).

All of them feature the narrative tension progressing towards the climax, i. e. tragic coda (death in „Bells”, physical and mental deterioration in „The Fall of the House of Usher” and „The Tell-Tale Heart” respectively), with the help of some devices regularly employed in music. For example, in the story of Roderick and Madeline’s gloomy manor, a minor initial motif, *a barely perceptible fissure... extending from the roof... down the wall in a zigzag direction* [Poe, 1983, 110], rises to prominence towards the end: the collapse of „The House of Usher” is caused precisely by this fissure, rapidly becoming widened, which ultimately recalls the technique of reinforcing single themes/motifs in dynamic volume and sonic scope in the conclusion of a musical piece (see at least the first movement of the famous Romantic Symphony in C major D. 944 by F. Schubert). Moreover, the carefully planned increase of dramatic tension in the final section (the tempest outside, the simultaneity of noises described in the story read to Roderick by the narrator and the ones actually heard in the house, Madeline rising from her coffin and, by contrast, the building falling down) may be easily associated with the popular musical device of crescendo, exemplified e. g. by G. Rossini’s operatic overtures or, already in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by M. Ravel’s Bolero.

Another instance of literary crescendo is provided by „The Raven”: the poem being also a perfect example of „musicality” in Zgorzelski’s sense, due to the unusually sophisticated pattern of internal and external rhymes and abundance of alliterations, assonance or onomatopoeic effects (with respect to the latter, surpassed maybe only by „The Bells”). In the structural aspect, the pivot of the poem is *Nevermore*, spoken by the Raven in the last line of each stanza, in the manner of *the refrain... for the most part, unvaried* [Poe, 1983, 316], or

the ostinato repetition, to use a pertinent musical term<sup>2</sup>. This recurrent word determines the melancholy tone of the poem and, to an extent, its prosody (being involved in majority of rhymes), as well as produces the aforementioned crescendo effect: this time only in a subjective, emotional sense, as every time the Raven speaks, his interlocutor's despair grows. As far as concrete musical pieces are concerned, the obvious association is, again, with Bolero – even though Ravel's renowned work is obviously out of chronological step with Poe's lyrical masterpiece.

As for other criteria of musicality in literature, it should be observed that, in Poe's writings, there are also instances of music being discussed (rather modestly, though: see the passages of „The Fall of the House of Usher”, where Roderick's guitar improvisations are mentioned). Finally, we come across a remarkable example of poetic obscurity „musically” developing in time (according to Błoński) – in „Ulalume”, one of the least accessible works of the writer in question<sup>3</sup>. Anticipating symbolists, he ornamented here his favourite topic of the beloved woman's death with obscure details and references<sup>4</sup>, introduced repetitions and variations of selected lines, far from the rather mechanical ostinato of „The Raven”, and, instead of the predictable trochaic pulse of the latter, chose a more complex, unstable meter<sup>5</sup>, evoking musical associations with Chopin's *tempo rubato*. Ultimately, in „Ulalume” Poe probably came the closest to the „absolute music” of poetry, heard, at least by the aforementioned Polish scholar, in Mallarmé's, Eliot's or Benn's lyrical works<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. Musical translations of E. A. Poe's writings

Given such an impressive wealth of diverse musical references in Poe's works – and at least equally impressive number of musical transpositions of these works<sup>7</sup> – one may be naturally tempted to examine in detail how, in this particular case, the music of the word becomes translated into the music of the sound. One may also expect a remarkable diversity of approach here: considering that the works of the writer in question attracted the attention of musicians ranging from renowned classical composers (C. Debussy) to contemporary heavy metal bands (Iron Maiden).

So far, hardly any attempts at such interdisciplinary analyses have been made – at last to the knowledge of this author – considering that even Pollin's essential works basically come down to the listing of musical adaptations and providing basic information about them. The possible reason for this negligence is that the authors of these adaptations did not aspire, for the most part, to recreate the mood or musical qualities of Poe's originals, using them rather as a departure point or just an occasional reference. Thus, the famous story „The Murders in the Rue Morgue” may have been either reduced to a heavy metal song format

<sup>2</sup> Another musical reference here may be to bourdon, a constant bass note, functioning as a primitive form of accompaniment in folk music or in early examples of medieval vocal polyphony.

<sup>3</sup> To such an extent that a number of readers, enthusiastic about „The Raven”, found „Ulalume” almost impossible to follow and, consequently, considered it written in some forgotten language [Quinn, 1963, s.502].

<sup>4</sup> To mention only the non-existent *dim lake of Auber* [Poe, 1983, s.46], probably intended as an allusion to the name of a popular French opera composer of the time and thus of some relevance to our „musical” topic.

<sup>5</sup> Relatively free combination of amphibrach and anapest.

<sup>6</sup> It would be highly interesting to see how „Ulalume's” musicality was reflected in the eponymous symphonic poem by the undeservedly forgotten Polish postromantic composer, Eugeniusz Morawski [1876–1948]; unfortunately, the piece, originally performed in Warsaw on March 27, 1925, has never been recorded so far – similarly to his other Poe-inspired symphonic poems, Nevermore (first performance in Warsaw on April 16, 1925) and Hop-Frog (probably never performed, the score having been lost during the WWII).

<sup>7</sup> See, in the first place, Burton Pollin [2003] „Music and Edgar Allan Poe: A Fourth Annotated Checklist”

(the eponymous track from Iron Maiden's second album of 1981), or casually alluded to in Bob Dylan's „Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues” (from the album *Highway 61 Revisited* of 1965), a ballad far removed in mood and themes from the original detective tale of horror. Still, under a closer examination of a larger body of examples, the problem of the successful transposition of Poe's „word music” into the medium of music itself shall reveal more promising aspects.

For the sake of the clarity of this discussion, we shall limit ourselves to the musical renditions of the writings mentioned so far. In this way, the scope of our analytical material will initially comprise *The Bellsop*. 35 (1913), a symphonic cantata or, according to the subtitle, *a poem for a symphony orchestra, choir and soloists* by Sergei Rachmaninov, along with a number of selections from the „popular” field. Among them, we shall consider two eponymous renditions of „The Raven”: by The Alan Parsons Project, a British rock group, from their first album *Tales of Mystery and Imagination: Edgar Allan Poe* [1975], and by the distinguished American rockman Lou Reed from the double CD set *The Raven* [2003]. We shall also take into account „The Tell-Tale Heart” from the same album by the Project, as well as four reworkings of „The Fall of the House of Usher”: Peter Hammill's rock opera of identical title, first recorded in 1991, the album *La Chute de la Maison Usher* [2009]<sup>8</sup> by the French group Art Zoyd, inspired by Jean Epstein and Luis Bunuel's film adaptation of the story from 1928, and two eponymous tracks from the aforementioned records by the Project and Reed<sup>9</sup>.

The above list is, obviously, by no means exhaustive. What is more, even among the works included there only a minority would really qualify for the discussion from the perspective of (un)translatability of the music of the word into the music of the sound.

The first one to be eliminated, despite its worldwide renown, unquestionable musical charms and relatively successful rendition of changing moods of the pertinent poem, would be Rachmaninov's cantata: simply because it was composed not to the original „The Bells”, but to the free Russian translation by Konstantin Balmont, an eminent symbolist poet, who, nonetheless, hardly managed to reproduce the unique rhythms and onomatopoeic effects of the English version. Lou Reed's reworkings of „The Raven” and „The Fall of the House of Usher” do not fit our thematic perspective for another simple reason: they almost totally dispense with the music, the first being a spoken delivery of the actual poem, evidently updated throughout on the level of content, the second – a dramatic scene summarizing the main events of the plot and also visibly modernized<sup>10</sup>. Art Zoyd's *La Chute de la Maison Usher* will also have to be disregarded here, since the album, conceived as a kind of film soundtrack, was not, in fact, meant as an attempt to translate Poe's actual text into the medium of music. Not surprisingly, then, static, minimalist soundscapes of this sixty six-minute avant-rock disc fail to render the conciseness, „unity of effect” and growing dramatic tension of the original story – quite successfully, however, transmitting its gloomy mood.

Thus, we are left with Hammill's and the Project's readings of the same story, as well as with the latter band's transpositions of „The Raven” and „The Tell-Tale Heart”. As for the six-act, seventy seven-minute progressive rock opera by the former leader of Van Der Graaf Generator, it is, again, too long to successfully render the *effect* of the source text, the latter's subtle escalation of suspense and horror being almost literally drowned in the stream

<sup>8</sup> The title being a literal translation of the original one into French.

<sup>9</sup> Recalling that „The Fall of the House of Usher” also provided the basis for the unfinished opera by Debussy [1908-1917] and a much more recent one by the American minimalist, Philip Glass, the story may be possibly claimed to be a record holder among Poe's works as far as the number of musical transpositions is concerned.

<sup>10</sup> To such an extent that Roderick and the narrator smoke opium together.

of exalted, logoreic vocal *Sprechgesang*<sup>11</sup>, based on minimalist repetition. Conversely, in the Project's adaptation of „The Raven”, the lyric of the four-minute song equals more or less one sixth of the original text – the ultimate artistic results being even less satisfactory. Sonic and prosodic richness as well as intricate rhyme patterns of Poe's lyrical masterpiece are completely lost – and so is the feeling of dramatic emotional crescendo, reduced here almost to pop rock-banality, where the conventional sweetness of vocals and mellowness of instrumental sound belie the atmosphere of spiritual/existential despair, i.e. the very essence of the literary source.

In this context, it is genuinely intriguing to observe how successfully the popular song format was employed by the same band in their transposition of „The Tell-Tale Heart”. The original story is also based on emotional crescendo: the murderer, vexed by pangs of conscience, i. e. acoustic illusions of his victim's heartbeat, gradually goes insane and pleads guilty in the end. The lyric, as an epitome of the tormented hero's narration, does, arguably, greater justice to the literary source than the one of „The Raven” - first of all, however, the growing tension of the story is effectively rendered by the music: the steady two-beat pulse, i. e. *the beating of his hideous heart* [Poe, 1983, s.260], clever dynamic shifts, brief but devastating coda and, above all, frenzied vocals of Arthur Brown, one of the most distinctive and intense voices in British rock of the psychedelic/progressive era.

Even greater plaudits are due to the Project's instrumental reworking<sup>12</sup> of „The Fall of the House of Usher”, converted into a fifteen-minute suite in five parts, arranged for the rock band and large symphony orchestra and conceived, to some extent, in the spirit of late Romantic programme music. The recreation of the story's plot and mood is admirably perceptive (see acoustic „Pavane”, probably intended as an approximation of Roderick's guitar productions), and the musical narration ending in the sonic explosion that literally illustrates „the fall”: just as admirable in its consistence with Poe's meticulous building up the tension in the closing section.

#### 4. Conclusion

Given the above, rather limited body of analytical material, hardly any general, authoritative conclusions could be attempted. Still, it is worth observing that, among many examples of musical transpositions of literary – in this case, Poe's – works, only a small number may be claimed to have any ambitions of translating the music of the word into the music of the sound. As we have seen, one of the most successful ventures in this rather risky field is the instrumental reworking of „The Fall of the House of Usher” by The Alan Parsons Project – which suggests that similar projects (*nomen omen*) may dispense with the literary aspect altogether, concentrating on purely sonic recreation of the mood and structural development of the source text. Whenever words are involved in such a „translation”, the results are either acceptable („The Tell-Tale Heart”) or, more likely, almost disastrous (the Project's reading of „The Raven”).

The latter instance indirectly confirms the well-known fact that great literature cannot be effectively translated into any other medium: if we consider film adaptations of modernist masterpieces, such as *Ulysses*, *Lolita*, or, in the first place, Roger Corman's ridiculous productions based on Poe's classics. It also goes some way towards explaining why „Ulalume”, Edgar Allan's most sublime lyrical achievement, has never encouraged a number of reworkings comparable to „The Raven” or „The Fall of the House Of Usher”. There, however, still

<sup>11</sup> A German term denoting a kind of vocal delivery, half way between singing and recitation.

<sup>12</sup> Only in the original LP version: in the CD edition the piece is preceded by Orson Welles's enthralling rendition of Poe's aesthetic observations.

remains a question why Poe's works should generally provide so much inspiration for so many – and so diverse – artists of sound.

Perhaps it is because of the intrinsic structural musicality of the works discussed above, i. e. of Poe's natural ear for ostinato and crescendo – or perhaps, at least among rock artists, it is due to the writer's being *more peculiarly attuned to our new century's heartbeat than he ever was to his own...* [Reed, 2003]. Given this, he will probably keep being translated into other media, first and foremost into music: even if some amount of literary charms of his works is lost in the process.

## E. A. POE: (NIE)PRZEKŁADALNOŚĆ MUZYKI SŁOWA NA MUZYKĘ DŹWIĘKU

### Streszczenie

Po zreferowaniu różnych kryteriów muzyczności w dziele literackim na podstawie prac polskich badaczy (Szulca, Zgorzelskiego, Błońskiego i Makowieckiego) autor analizuje wybrane utwory E. A. Poe'go („Kruk”, „Zagłada Domu Usherów”, „Serce oskarżycielem”), których muzyczność opiera się między innymi na efekcie ostinato i crescendo oraz na instrumentacji głoskowej. Próbuje też dociec, jak dalece i z jakich względów owe efekty udało się zachować w wybranych adaptacjach muzycznych tych utworów (Peter Hammill, The Alan Parsons Project, Lou Reed).

**Słowa kluczowe:** romantyzm, muzyczność adaptacja unowocześnienie crescendo ostinato prozodia

### REFERENCES

- Błoński Jan. 1980. „Ut musica poesis?” *Twórczość* 9: 110-122.
- Makowiecki Tadeusz. 1955. *Muzyka w twórczości Wyspiańskiego*. Toruń: PWN.
- Poe Edgar Allan. 1983. *Prose and Poetry*. Moscow: Raduga Publishers.
- Pollin Burton. 2003. „Music and Edgar Allan Poe: A Fourth Annotated Checklist”. *Poe* tom 36: 77-100.
- Quinn Arthur Hobson. 1963. *Edgar Alan Poe. A Critical Biography*. New York: Appleton-Century Crofts.
- Reed Lou. 2003. *Liner notes to the album The Raven*, Warner Bros. 9362-48373-2 (no pagination).
- Szulc Tadeusz. 1937. *Muzyka w dziele literackim*. Warszawa: Skład Główny w Kasie im. Miąnowskiego.