

“Some Mad Scarlet Thing by Dvorák”: Notes on Oscar Wilde’s Engagement with Music

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Introduction

In recent decades, an increasing amount of attention has been paid to the interaction between Victorian literature and music. No critical work of consequence, however, has been written regarding Oscar Wilde, who is not popularly perceived as an artist with strong connections to music. It is a biographical fact that Wilde was neither a musician, nor an ardent worshipper of music like his contemporaries, Arthur Symons and George Bernard Shaw. Nevertheless, Wilde’s belief that music is the perfect art form recurs in his writings, which contain multiple references to musical culture in the late nineteenth century.

This paper broadly investigates Wilde’s relationship to music in terms of biographical information, in the context of his aesthetic beliefs, and within the cultural framework of his time. It examines the writer’s treatment of music both as a cultural phenomenon and as an idea, in order to highlight this neglected but important aspect of his work. Chapter One surveys biographical accounts which indicate the relevance of music in the life of Wilde, and traces how his intellectual appreciation of the art is represented both in his fictional characters and in his critical writings. The second chapter shifts its focus to Wilde’s depiction of the state of music in late-Victorian England, by considering his appreciation of a number of renowned musicians and their work, particularly of Frédéric François Chopin and Richard Wagner. As the paper will show, the relevance of music to Wilde’s writings exceeds the interest of an aficionado, and the manner in which he engages with music as an idea, together with his use of music to sketch the contemporary cultural scene, are a crucial aspect of his oeuvre.

I. Wilde and Music

1. Oscar Wilde — a Musical Dilettante?

Oscar Wilde’s attachment to music is a subject that critics past and present have found difficult to assess in precise terms, and general readers do not think of him as a committed music aficionado. According to both *The New Grove Dictionary of Music* and Richard Ellmann’s influential biography, as a child Wilde was noted as an avid reader, and as someone with more

sympathy for books than with music. Ellmann states, "Oscar had no musical talent" (21), which makes an ironic contrast to his acknowledgement that Oscar's brother Willie played the piano and became "skilled enough to alter Chopin's *Prelude* with his own 'improved' endings" (122). Even under the instruction of his erudite tutor, the Reverend J. P. Mahaffy at Trinity College, Dublin, music was "always a closed book" to Wilde (26), according to Ellmann.

And yet, it is easy to recall Wilde's own references to his love of music, his knowledge of musical forms, and his alertness to the nuances of interpretation, as may be found in his lecture entitled "The Grosvenor Gallery, 1877."

. . . those who were in London last May, and had in one week the opportunities of hearing Rubenstein play the *Sonata Impassionata*, of seeing Wagner conducting the Spinning-Wheel Chorus from the *Flying Dutchman* . . . have very little to complain of as regards human existence and art-pleasures. (5)

There is an error here, in his apparent crediting of Anton "Rubinstein" with Beethoven's *Sonata "Appassionata,"* although Wilde would give the correct references in "The Critic as Artist" (1890). Although the passage is thus recorded with a lack of referential accuracy, it offers a proof of Wilde's enthusiastic interest in music and his sensitivity towards the possibilities of the form.

Judging by the biographical accounts, Wilde's musical knowledge was as rich as that of anyone of his class, despite his lack of specific musical training or his inability to play an instrument. Wilde's college friend Hunter Blair recalled Wilde's hospitality during their days at Oxford, in parties which featured music, with a pianist and a singer provided for the occasion, as well as coffee, drinks, and tobacco in the common room, in the same manner as the writer's mother Lady Wilde (Ellmann 44). From his early days Wilde was a musical entertainer, as he even appeared in a cello-like costume at the aforementioned lecture of the Grosvenor Gallery:

No ordinary clothing would serve for what he [Wilde] recognized to be his London début, so he was pranked out in a new coat even more astonishing than the yellow-brown one which had dazzled the Genovese The coat was cut to meet the dream specifications: in some lights it looked bronze, in others red, and the back of it (Wilde was proud of his back) resembled the outline of a cello. (Ellmann 75-76)

Wilde's move to England after receiving his undergraduate degree in 1874 was to bring him into greater contact with musical society. As his correspondence shows, he availed of the new opportunities at the London stage, for example, attending a performance of Haydn's *Creation* on December 17, 1876 (*Letters* 27, 29). As was shown in the Grosvenor Gallery lecture, Wilde was present at the momentous performance of *The Flying Dutchman* (*Der fliegende Holländer*) with Wagner himself as conductor, and he also attended a Rubinstein piano concert sometime in 1877. One of his earliest poems written in the same year is entitled "Sonnet on Hearing the *Dies Irae* Sung in the Sistine Chapel." Although the speaker rejects the traditional belief in the Judgment, it is certain that Wilde experienced the music composed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart¹. A number of Wilde's poems written in this period were in fact inspired by or written for music, although this aspect is often neglected. Aside from the poem just mentioned, the list

includes “In the Golden Room (*A Harmony*),” “Serenade (*For Music*),” “Endymion (*For Music*),” and “Chanson.” Although not collected in his *Poems* (1881), there are other titles of the kind such as “From Spring Days to Winter (*For Music*),” “Symphony in Yellow,” and “Canzonet.” Wilde’s *Salomé* (originally published in French in 1891), as is commonly known, is largely a musical play²). In fact, there is a record of a particularly noteworthy incident associated with its composition. Sitting in the Grand Café in Paris, Wilde asked the orchestra of Tziganes to play something in harmony with his thoughts, after which he completed the play (Ellmann 324).

In addition to these examples of Wilde’s appreciation of music in performance, there are many indications of his broad, often scholarly knowledge of music history. This may be seen, for instance, in another of Wilde’s lectures, “The English Renaissance of Art,” presented in 1882 in New York. He makes the bold but persuasive claim that “the progress in modern music” is due to the invention of new instruments (252). Wilde’s review of John Addington Symonds’s work on the Renaissance evidences his intimate knowledge of medieval music. He identifies some inaccurate details in the book, as is discernible in the following passage:

Some small details should perhaps be noticed. It is hardly accurate, for instance, to say that Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* was the first form of the recitative-Opera, as Peri’s *Dafne* and *Euridice* and Cavaliere’s *Rappresentazione* preceded it by some years, and it is somewhat exaggerated to say that “under the regime of the Commonwealth the national growth of English music received a check from which it never afterwards recovered,” as it was with Cromwell’s auspices that the first English Opera was produced, thirteen years before any Opera was regularly established in Paris. The fact that England did not make such development in music as Italy and Germany did, must be ascribed to other causes than “the prevalence of Puritan opinion.” (“Mr. Symonds’ *History of the Renaissance*” 43)

This is not the kind of observation which one would expect of someone with scarce knowledge in music. Wilde’s familiarity with medieval music is reminiscent of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s novel *Against the Grain* (*À Rebours*) — purported to be the book Lord Henry gives Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891) — the protagonist of which has a particular interest in medieval monastic music. Wilde indeed refers to Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, an Italian Renaissance composer, in one of his earliest poems, “The Burden of Itys” (14).

While comments such as these could be dismissed as part of the grand claims expected of Wilde, who sought both to challenge and entertain his audience, his writings are rife with references to music ranging from earlier composers to his contemporaries. Wilde was, it may be concluded, an appreciative, knowledgeable, and intelligent music aficionado, whose comments on the art-form and whose engagements with performed music were often presented in a way which undercut scholarship with a dilettantish attitude.

2. Characters Embodying Wilde’s Musical Interests

There are a number of characters displaying musical proficiency in Wilde’s texts, including pianists such as Dorian Gray, Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist,” and Algernon in *The Importance*

of *Being Earnest* (1895), as well as characters with musical voices or even characters who actually sing in the text. It must also be noted that musical dilettantes and philistines also appear in Wilde's social comedies and in his only novel, where they are sometimes lampooned³.

Since Wilde's first venture into prose in the 1880s, his work presents a wealth of characters which display musical proficiency, a sensibility to the nuances of music, or a keen auditory sense. The most illuminating example can be found in "The Canterville Ghost" (1887), a story about the redemption of the eponymous ghost, written as a mixture of farce and gothic. The surname of the American family which moves to England to live in the mysterious Canterville Chase mansion, is *Otis*, a Greek word which generally means "ear," but which used as a first name means "one who hears well." It is no coincidence that the Otis family's main contention with the ghost — who is confronted and chastised by them — is the cacophonous sounds that he makes in the house at night, which they do not find frightening (as the ghost had intended), but merely irritating.

As a counterpart to this interest, in Wilde's work one also finds a strong interest in voice. In fact, the musicality of Wilde's own voice was remarked on by many of his contemporaries (Ellmann 35). British actress Lillie Langtry vividly recalls how alluring his voice was, "round and soft, and full of variety and expression" (76). Wilde himself often stresses the quality of the voice of his characters. In his melodramatic tragedy *The Duchess of Padua* (1891), Guido asks Moranzone about his father, who is thought to be dead but now reported to be alive: "Was his voice low? The very bravest men have voices sometimes full of low music; or a clarion was it that brake with terror all his enemies?" (578). In *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889), the character known as Erskine is said to have a voice whose tone has "a slight touch of bitterness" that excited the curiosity of the narrator (1150). In *Salomé*, the eponymous princess of Judæa is first attracted to Jokanaan because of his voice, exclaiming "Speak again, Jokanaan. Thy voice is wine to me" (558), while her mother Herodias shows her incapability to suffer his voice. At Jokanaan's death, Salomé even declares, "Thy voice was a censer that scattered strange perfumes, and when I looked on thee I heard a strange music" (574). The protagonist of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, who has an extraordinarily sensitive ear, finds Lord Henry's "low, musical voice" (29) and "languid voice" (31) very fascinating, which will later have a mesmeric effect on Dorian, encouraging him to realise himself and "to cure the soul by means of the senses" (31). These and other examples leave no doubt as to the deliberate use of musical and melodious speech as an intrinsic part of characterisation in some of the most celebrated characters created by Wilde.

In this context, it is worthwhile noting the fact that Wilde has written on the significance of vocal quality in literature:

Since the introduction of printing, and the fatal development of the habit of reading amongst the middle and lower classes of this country, there has been a tendency in literature to appeal more and more to the eye, and less and less to the ear, which is really the sense which, from the standpoint of pure art, it should seek to please, and by whose

canons of pleasure it should abide always. ("The Critic as Artist" 1016)

"Yes: writing has done much harm to writers," he continues in the imperative, "We must return to the voice" (1017). As a distinguished story-teller himself, Wilde was very much engaged with the function of the voice in his fiction. As Critic Peter Raby also points out, "In much of his writing, . . . the notion of the speaking voice is prominent: behind the tales one is conscious of the voice of the story-teller; in the critical dialogues and the drama the form itself acknowledges and exploits the oral medium" (6).

3. The Pursuit of Music in Style

Wilde also pursued musicality in his writing style, and he frequently commented on that quality in other authors. In "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert praises the style of John Ruskin in such terms, referring to "That mighty and majestic prose of his, so fervid and so fiery-coloured in its noble eloquence, so rich in its elaborate symphonic music . . ." (1028). Likewise, as an apostle of Walter Pater, Wilde mentions the musical quality of the critic's essay on Leonardo's painting *La Gioconda*: "the music of the mystical prose is as sweet in our ears as was that flute player's music that lent to the lips of La Gioconda those subtle and poisonous curves" (1029). Wilde's criticism on Pater's prose is, however, tough-minded and objective, because in an earlier part of the essay, he subtly points out its losing the profound and well-constructed musicality: "Even the work of Mr. Pater, . . . seems, here and there, to lack the true rhythmical life of words and the fine freedom and richness of effect that such rhythmical life produces" (1016).

Wilde's writing itself is often admired for its "limpid and lyrical effects" (Max Beerbohm) and its "sonorous and majestic music" (H. L. Mencken)⁴. Arthur Symons once claimed that *De Profundis* (1905), Wilde's essay-letter to Alfred Douglas written in Reading Prison, has a cadence composed with the speaking voice in mind:

. . . there are pages in *De Profundis* which are among the finest pages he has written. The book should be read aloud; its eloquence is calculated for the voice, and a beauty which scarcely seems to be in these lucid phrases as one reads them silently comes into them as they are spoken. (*A Study of Oscar Wilde* 87)

It is obvious that Wilde was often eager to make his writing sound musical, which is likely to be the reason for the interest of many composers in creating musical adaptations of his work⁵, most famously Richard Strauss's opera version of *Salomé*. A crucial fact which is largely unknown to general readers is that Wilde harboured an interest in writing for musical performance. This may be seen in his plans for a libretto for *Daphnis and Chloé*, an opera to be composed by Dalhausie Young which ultimately failed to materialize.

4. As a Musical Aesthete

Wilde's theoretical interest in music deserves further investigation, as it lasted all his life and resonates throughout his work. The theoretical debates in nineteenth-century European cultural circles were invigorated by the incorporation of music into aesthetic discourse, with

discussions on the transcendent nature of the art sharing some common ground with the *l'art pour l'art* movement. Wilde unequivocally and forcefully encouraged the shifting of music from the periphery to the centre of contemporary intellectual concerns. This is evidenced perfectly in a comment from his *Oxford Notebooks*, where, quoting Arthur Symons, Wilde states that music is "the essentially modern art as sculpture was essentially the Greek art" (139). Beyond endorsing and promoting this idea, Wilde was also enthusiastic about tracing the genealogy of an interest in music among critics. "The English Renaissance of Art," presented in 1882, would be the earliest example which shows the expansion of his interest in music as aesthetic ideal. When one encounters the subsequent passage, it is apparent that he repeats Pater's well-known dictum that "*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*" (italics in original) (135):

. . . music is the art in which form and matter are always one, the art whose subject cannot be separated from the method of its expression, the art which most completely realises the artistic ideal, and is the condition to which all the other arts are constantly aspiring. ("The English Renaissance of Art" 262)⁶

In Wilde's "The Decay of Lying," an essay published seven years later, Pater's idea is articulated again by Vivian:

Art never expresses anything but itself. This is the principle of my new aesthetics; and it is this, more than that vital connection between form and substance, on which Mr. Pater dwells, that makes basic the type of all the arts. (987)

This notion thus reappears in a number of Wildean texts of the time. In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde declares again, "From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician" (17).

The year 1890 saw the publication of "The True Function and Value of Criticism" (later retitled "The Critic as Artist"), Wilde's first attempt to place music within his own aesthetic discourse. At many points of discussion, one may see Wilde placing music especially highly. Gilbert expresses his idea that music is one of a few arts which are free from imitation, as it is amenable to interpretation as much as etching and sculpture. In his theory of criticism as a creative art, a singer or a player on lute and viol is a critic of music, just like an actor is a critic of a play (1034). Music is an art which allows individual players to realise themselves at every moment. The idea is echoed in Chapter 19 of *Dorian Gray*, when Lord Henry says, "What a blessing it is that there is one art left to us that is not imitative!" on his request to Dorian to play Chopin (162).

Like other *fin de siècle* authors and Symbolist poets, Wilde appears to present music as the higher expression of *l'art pour l'art*, partly because music appears to be untrammelled by moral concerns: music is inscrutable and abstract, so it can be a channel of unspeakable truth. In this context, it could also be argued that Wilde's appreciation of music is somewhat connected to his sexual orientation, which was famously considered amoral or morally subversive at that time. In "The Critic as Artist," written in dialogue form, there is a scene in which Gilbert proposes

that he could play “some mad scarlet thing by Dvorák [sic]” (1015) for his friend Ernest, and towards the end of Part One, Gilbert describes his belief that music is the perfect art form, because “Music can never reveal its ultimate secret” (1031). In the sense that it requires no verbal explanation and that its affect defies logic, music may be said to suggest, for Wilde, something similar to “the love that dares not speak its name.”⁷⁾

Wilde’s intimate knowledge of music, and his appreciation for it as an art form, cannot be neglected, particularly in the light of the effect of music on his style, characterisation, and aesthetic theory. In the next chapter, Wilde’s sketches of the contemporary musical scene in England will be considered, in order to further demonstrate the important role of music in his work and his thinking.

II. Wilde’s References to Contemporary Music

1. Wilde’s Sketches of Music in England

Biographies of Wilde make little mention of the significance of music to him, but it is abundantly clear that his works are rich with musical scenes, themes and references. Many of his writings, both fiction and non-fiction, offer sketches of the contemporary music scene in England, focusing on music and musicians of the late-Victorian period. The more popular Wilde became as an author of social comedies and as witty critic and commentator in the late 1880s, the more likely the reader would be to encounter scenes referring to music in his work. It is no exaggeration to say that his work amounts to a documentation of the social function of music in his time, place, and class, as well as a critique of contemporary music in England and Europe.

A number of texts by Wilde, among a number of Victorian authors, illustrate the role of music in late nineteenth-century England, where people especially from upper and middle class enjoyed and appreciated classical continental music. The musical London appearing in Wilde’s social comedies and stories is depicted as having been a vigorous world. The following passage from the opening of “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” (1887) is particularly interesting:

As soon as she [the Princess Sophia of Carlstrühe] had gone, Lady Windermere returned to the picture-gallery, where a celebrated political economist was solemnly explaining the scientific theory of music to an indignant virtuoso from Hungary, and began to talk to the Duchess of Paisley. (168)

This scene seems to encapsulate the state of music in Victorian England, for it casually depicts a British social life in which anyone — including those without musical literacy — would enthusiastically talk of music at social gatherings.

Act Two of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), opens with a musical performance: a band plays in the ballroom on the evening of Lady Windermere’s birthday ball. In *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and in *An Ideal Husband* (1895), characters are encountered who enjoy listening to music in their music rooms. To name but one example, *An Ideal Husband* opens

with a scene in which "the sound of a string quartette is faintly heard" (482). Many of Wilde's characters regularly go to "The Opera," now known as the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. This is the place where Dorian Gray watched *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser* with Lord Henry Wotton, and where Dorian and Alan Campbell "used to be always seen together" (128). Lord Goring, in *An Ideal Husband*, is reported to attend the Opera three times a week by Mabel Chiltern, who is herself a connoisseur of music (483).

Dorian Gray is likely the greatest music enthusiast in Wilde's oeuvre. An amateur pianist, Dorian agrees to play for a philanthropic gathering at Whitechapel, an anticipated performance which, Lady Agatha confirms, "would be quite invaluable" to the event, and which his audience "would love" (*PDG* 43). His friend Lord Henry attempts to steer him away from charity work, extolling the merits of self-realisation instead, and declaring, "You are too charming to go in for philanthropy, Mr. Gray — far too charming" (27). And yet, even after Dorian's inner mutation, his fascination with music — an art form associated with social bonding and implicitly requiring the generosity of the performer — lasts until the end.

It is telling that, even after he shuts himself out from society when unhealthy rumours begin to circulate about him, Dorian still resorts to music as a form of "ventilation" for social contact:

Once or twice every month during the winter, and on each Wednesday evening while the season lasted, he [Dorian] would throw open to the world his beautiful house and have the most celebrated musicians of the day to charm his guests with the wonders of their art.
(103)

As Stoddard Martin points out, Dorian changes his taste in music from the European and Romantic to the exotic and primitive, something which can be taken as a sign of his mutation⁸. When devoting himself to the study of exotic music, Dorian discovers that Schubert, Chopin and Beethoven fall "unheeded on his ear" (*PDG* 107).

2. Continental Composers

Wilde is never reluctant to introduce a variety of contemporary musical pieces and musicians into his writing. A list of continental composers who appear in Wilde's works would include Mozart, Mendelssohn, Strauss, Beethoven, Berlioz, Schubert, Dvořák, Chopin and Wagner; the last three are mentioned more frequently and more deliberately than the others. Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" is played by Algernon at a particularly inappropriate moment, prompting Jack to cry out: "For goodness' sake don't play that ghastly tune, Algy! How idiotic you are!" (*IBE* 334). One of Wilde's best-known poems, "The Harlot's House," includes a reference to "Treues Liebes Herz by [Johaann] Strauss," a waltz by the Viennese composer (6)⁹.

Ludwig van Beethoven, mentioned in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in "The Critic as Artist," is often referred to by Wilde on account of his passionate music and "the mighty harmonies" it contains (*PDG* 107). It is important to bear in mind that, for mid-Victorians, as Regula Hohl Trillini argues, Beethoven meant intellectual rigour (132). The Austrian Franz

Peter Schubert is also mentioned in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with Dorian describing his music as a “grace” (197). The French Romantic composer Louis Hector Berlioz, best known for his *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830), is mentioned in “The Critic as Artist,” when Gilbert discusses his liking for reading memoirs, giving as an example the letters exchanged between “personalities so different,” such as “Flaubert and Berlioz” (1009). It is significant that in England, Berlioz was also known for his appreciation of English literature, and for being married to Irish actress Harriet Smithson.

Interestingly, the opening paragraph of the second chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* depicts its protagonist at the piano in Basil Hallward’s studio, after showing an interest in the score of Schumann’s “Forest Scenes (Waldszenen).” References such as these may be easily dismissed as mere adornments, inconsequential background detail. And yet, a moment like this, with Dorian reinterpreting “Forest Scenes,” provides a sophisticated link to a piece which purposefully goes beyond the depiction of nature to strongly suggest eeriness, in keeping with the strong influence of German Romantic writers such as E. T. A. Hoffmann and Jean Paul on the composer. As Eric Jensen states, the first piece entitled “Entrance (Eintritt)” “begins as a bucolic and pleasant piece in B-flat major Suddenly, there is no clear tonal center and the rhythmic flow is abruptly altered; a new and nebulous region has been entered” (86). In this way, therefore, Wilde refers to Schumann not only to denote a refined taste, but also to emphasize the singularity of the piece and, by extension, its performer. Further, the scene implies that Dorian is now opening a door into that forest, where inscrutable mysteries await.

Another composer dealt with in greater detail in Wilde’s work is the Czech Antonín Leopold Dvořák, one of the greatest influences on British composers (Taruskin 803). Dvořák’s first visit to England took place in March 1884. In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert asks his friend Ernest: “And now, let me play Chopin to you, or Dvorák [sic]? Shall I play to you a fantasy by Dvorák? He writes passionate, curiously-coloured things” (1010). Later, Gilbert insists, “let me play to you some mad scarlet thing by Dvorák” (1015). The year of publication of “The Critic as Artist,” 1890, saw the appointment of Dvořák as a professor at the Prague Conservatory, which assured him greater recognition both at home and in Europe at large (and later, in the United States). Even within the limited use of the reference in the essay, it may be argued that Dvořák becomes in the text a metaphor, a byword for something different and fresh in character. Indeed, his music left an impression chiefly for its innovative style, being often directly inspired by Czech, Moravian, and Slavic traditional music.

It is Wilde’s references to the music of Chopin and Wagner that deserve particular attention. They are mentioned regularly and in particularly meaningful contexts, so brief biographical sketches are warranted before these references are considered in detail. Chopin, according to Victorian music critic James William Davidson, was first introduced in England around 1842 by the publisher Wessel and Stapleton, and his music became popular for “its original and novel beauty, its touches of romantic and gloomy grandeur, its sickly and hysterical strain” (43). The music of this Polish virtuoso pianist and composer enjoyed popularity mostly

among women, perhaps because the great majority of his compositions were written for the piano as a single instrument. According to Paula Gillett, another reason may be that Rev. Hugh Reginald Haweis, the London Broad Church clergyman, influentially recommended the therapeutic value of Chopin's music to female pianists. Indeed, Sir Charles Hallé, himself a friend of Chopin's, once remarked that the composer had become "the property of every schoolgirl" (Gillett 5).

This context adds another dimension to the fact that Chopin is one of Dorian's favourite composers in *Dorian Gray*, and that a Chopin nocturne is the last piece the protagonist plays in the novel. Throughout Chapter 19, Lord Henry yearns for Dorian's interpretation of Chopin. He first suggests, "Let us have our coffee in the music-room, Dorian. You must play Chopin to me" (159), and later requests, "Play me something. Play me a nocturne, Dorian, and, as you play, tell me, in a low voice, how you have kept your youth. You must have some secret" (162). In fact, this scene is symbolic when the importance of the protagonist's name itself is realised. Dorian links himself to ancient Greek culture, as the Dorians were one of four major ethnic groups in Greece of that era, and a curative property of their music is highlighted in "The Critic as Artist": "the noble Dorian music of the Greek . . . may perform the office of a physician, and give us an anodyne against pain, and heal the spirit that is wounded, and 'bring the soul into harmony with all right things'" (1030). By playing Chopin, Dorian actually heals Lord Henry, who is grief-stricken after his wife ran away with another man.

Playing Chopin also functions as a self-purification for the protagonist who, urged to make atonement for his evildoings, takes a chance and asks, "What would you say, Harry, if I told you that I had murdered Basil?" (160). Dorian unexpectedly decides that he is "going to be good" in this chapter (163), after reflecting on his past sins and the accidental death of James Vane. He becomes both obedient and honest before his mentor, and a shared music experience with his old friend alters Dorian's fibre, and the pathos in his music greatly impresses Lord Henry: "You have never played so well as to-night. There was something in your touch that was wonderful. It had more expression than I had ever heard from it before" (163).

It is also evident in other references to Chopin that Wilde believes the composer to have a curiously sympathetic effect. In "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert, who prefers Dvořák himself, remarks, "After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own" (1011). Chopin is also referred to in *De Profundis*, in the context of a discussion on the inevitability of sin and the merit of suffering (927, 936). When one extrapolates these associations to self-reflection and atonement in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the reader may begin to appreciate Wilde's thoughtful and creative use of musical references more fully.

3. Appreciation of Wagner

Among celebrated composers influencing Wilde, Richard Wagner is perhaps the most important figure. Admired by some and disliked by others, the German maestro had a powerful

influence on the arts throughout Europe, to the extent that, in the words of musicologist Ruth Solie, “there is no question that Wagner (or, at any rate, ‘Wagnerism’) was the primary debate topic of the day as far as music was concerned” (54).

Still a “poor, unknown, struggling man,” Wagner landed in England in 1839, and subsequently, in 1855, when he was welcomed by British audiences with great enthusiasm (Hueffer 29). His musical talent, which later revolutionised music, had to await full recognition until the foundation of the London Wagner Society in 1873 and his third visit to London in 1877, now at the zenith of his fame¹⁰. The first performance of Wagner’s work in England took place in 1870 (Davidson 286), although it has been claimed that *The Flying Dutchman* had already been performed before 1870, at Drury Lane Theatre (Hueffer 70). According to Hueffer, “In 1875, *Lohengrin*, and in 1876, *Tannhäuser*, saw the light of the Anglo-Italian stage” (70). It is important to note, however, that Wagner became known in England for his “provocative writing” before his musical dramas made an impact (Solie 116-117). It was not until 1892 that his prose works were to be published in full in English.

Wagner’s great charisma enthralled many British as well as continental artists, and his musical pieces provided inspiration for many artists of the Aesthetic movement, such as Edward Burne-Jones and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Wilde’s fellow Irish writer George Bernard Shaw, a prolific playwright and critic, extolled the composer in *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung’s Ring* (1898). The book quickly went through several editions, and to this day many critics still rely on Shaw’s basic interpretation of *The Ring*, Wagner’s complicated tetralogy (DiGaetani 176). Arthur Symons was also an admirer, and he perceived a universal quality in Wagner’s music:

. . . it seems to me that Wagner, alone among quite modern musicians, and though indeed he appeals to our nerves more forcibly than any of them, has that breadth and universality by which emotion ceases to be merely personal and becomes elemental. (“Reflection” 275)

In “Notes on Wagner at Bayreuth,” Symons concludes that this remarkable quality essentially comes from Wagner’s artistry to unite mysticism with the senses (301). Symons closes his essay with a eulogy which, though overstated, may be considered sincere:

Here music is like a god speaking the languages of savages, and lowering his supreme intellect to the level of their speech. The melodious voice remains, but the divine meaning has gone out of the words. Only in Wagner does God speak to men in his own language. (314)

Wagner plays a particularly important role in the work of Wilde, whose first Wagnerian experience appears to have been his attendance, in one of Wagner’s British tours, of a performance of *The Flying Dutchman* sometime in 1877 (Ellmann 75). The London Wagner Festival, which was held in May at the Albert Hall, took place that year. Intriguingly enough, Wilde’s references to Wagner are inconsistent from then on. In the earliest period, for example, Wilde treats Wagner rather lightly, making jokes on the maestro’s name. Wilde was particularly fond of the “Wagnerian-loudness” cliché. When his second son Cyril was born in early June of

1885, he wrote in a letter to Norman Forbes-Robertson that "The baby is wonderful: it has a bridge to its nose! Which the nurse says is a proof of genius! It also has a superb voice, which it freely exercises: its style is essentially Wagnerian" (*Letters* 177). In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the farcical comedy which gained the instant favour of the public, there is a scene in which Algernon comically responds to the door-bell: "Ah! That must be Aunt Augusta. Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner" (327).

These comical remarks reflect the general conception of Wagner's music as being loud, intense, and unique. In spite of this light-heartedness, however, later writings of Wilde show how seriously he took the composer, finding his music theoretically profound, aesthetically distinguished, and very relevant to Wilde's own aesthetics. In his 1891 essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde sets up Wagner as a Christ-like figure, as someone who "realised his soul in music" (1087). Considering how important the trope of the soul was to Wilde in this context, this is akin to an exaltation of Wagner as a true artist. Wagner's collection of letters to his Dresden friend, August Roeckel, is actually on a book list Wilde requested from jail during his imprisonment (*Letters* 523), an irrefutable sign of his esteem for the composer.

A close reading of Wilde's references to Wagner in his texts would reveal how he received the maestro's music over the course of time. Wilde's adoption of Wagnerian motifs has already been pointed out by several critics. One of the earliest studies on the topic would be Martin's *Wagner to the Waste Land*, which exclusively spotlights Wilde in one of the chapters¹¹). In addition, that the barren almond tree blooms at Virginia's return in "The Canterville Ghost" would be an echo of *Tannhäuser*, as Philip K. Cohen (67) and Vicki Mahaffey (58) both recognise. Almond flowers work as a token of the remission of sins, as Virginia lays a large cross made of almond-blossoms at the funeral for Sir Simon.

More Wagnerian references appear in *Dorian Gray*, in which Wilde employs Wagner's operas as a signal of eroticism and Decadent debauchery. Wagner remains most enthralling for Dorian who is a wide-ranging connoisseur of music and musical instruments. In Chapter 4, for instance, Victoria states that he attended *Lohengrin* with Lord Henry (47). Even after studying and consuming a variety of indigenous music in Chapter 11, it is Wagner's music to which Dorian reverts in the subsequent chapter. Dorian appears especially absorbed in the sympathetic property of the music:

The fantastic character of these instruments fascinated him, and he felt a curious delight in the thought that Art, like Nature, has her monsters, things of bestial shape and with hideous voices. Yet, after some time, he wearied of them, and would sit in his box at the Opera, either alone or with Lord Henry, listening in rapt pleasure to *Tannhäuser*, and seeing in the prelude to that great work of art a presentation of the tragedy of his own soul.
(107)

As Weliver points out, the family name of Lord Henry Wotton is also reminiscent of Wagner's opera, as the name is "strikingly similar to the ruler of the gods and the main character in the *Ring* (Wotan)" (Weliver 344). Much as Wotan turns out to be a failed ruler and father, Lord Henry

and his influence on Dorian indeed appears to be waning towards the end of the novel.

In addition to such affinities between Wagner and Wilde, like most of the intelligentsia in the late nineteenth century, Wilde was keenly attracted by the sensuality which can be experienced through Wagner's music. In "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert takes Wagner's *Tannhäuser* as an example:

Sometimes, when I listen to the overture to *Tannhäuser*, I seem indeed to see that comely knight treading delicately on the flower-strewn grass, and to hear the voice of Venus calling to him from the caverned hill. But at other times it speaks to me of a thousand different things, of myself, it may be, and my own life, or of the lives of others whom one has loved and grown weary of loving, or of the passions that man has known, or of the passions that man has not known, and so has sought for. (1029)

With the phrase "the passions that man has not known," Wilde mentions the quality of Wagner's music which grasps and evokes the eroticism innate in human experience. Dorian's veiled behaviour after hiding his altering portrait is also related to the hidden pleasure expressed in Wagner's music. The influence Wagner exerted on Wilde and the analogies between their works cannot be overlooked in the context, as they reveal more critical significance than one might have expected.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the potential of discussing Wilde's biographical intimacy with music, the links between his aesthetic theory and the debates on the musical form, and his textual representation of musical culture in late-Victorian England. While Wilde was not a musical connoisseur of the highest order, his interest in music and music history as an intellectual pursuit was obviously strengthened during his most prolific period, around 1890. After embarking on plays and prose writings, he started to present many characters as musical, often associating them with musical instruments or sonorous voice. Almost simultaneously, as the argument continues, Wilde showed and enhanced interest in the musicality in writings. As may be acknowledged in his endorsement of Pater's views on music at that time, at one point Wilde saw the form as the perfect artistic expression, which also cannot be neglected as it crucially affected his aestheticism.

As the second chapter has shown, by investigating Wilde's references to the contemporary music scene in his literary texts, a great deal of meaningful information may be found. In his social comedies and prose works, the reader may encounter his characters enjoying music as a cultural activity. Wilde consistently referred to a variety of composers, among whom Chopin and Wagner were particularly favoured. A number of his characters express their enthusiasm for their music, which is significant as they play a role, particularly in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In Wilde, every musical detail connotes something beyond its agreed-upon meaning,

deliberately linking itself with the specific context of a scene or a character.

The present paper has dealt exclusively with the relevance of contemporary European music and music-related debates. The subject of music in Wilde's writing, however, offers many other critical areas urgently requiring analysis, such as performers, various musical instruments, and the exoticism in his use of non-continental music. While it is not within the scope of this paper to investigate any of these issues, the present paper seeks in part to encourage such a study. An interdisciplinary approach to Wilde's literary and critical approach to music is bound to reveal yet another aspect to an artist who wrote so eloquently for the performing voice, and so musically for the quiet voice of the individual reader.

Notes

- 1) According to *Letters*, the poem's original title indicates that Wilde heard the piece in Magdalen Chapel, Oxford (44). It is unclear when he switched the venue to the Sistine Chapel, which he might have visited in Rome earlier in 1877.
- 2) My description of *Salomé* as "largely a musical play" derives from Wilde's own frequent references to the play in musical terms, and his stating that recurring phrases in the text bind it together like a piece of music (*Letters* 475). *Salomé* merits a section of its own, in which we could also address his interest in synesthesia.
- 3) Cf. Hitomi Nakamura, "The Image of Musicians in Oscar Wilde's Texts c. 1890," *Ritsumeikan Eibei-bungaku* 23 (2014). In the paper I discuss such musical characters in Wilde's work around 1890, in relation to gender ideologies of the era.
- 4) Quoted in Parr, 382.
- 5) See, for example, Gooch and Thatcher.
- 6) This passage must be one of Wilde's favourites as he repeats it in "L'Envoi," an introduction to Rennell Rodd's collection of poetry published in 1882. See *Miscellanies*, 31.
- 7) A phrase from Lord Alfred Douglas's poem, "Two Loves," published in 1894.
- 8) See Martin, 38-9.
- 9) The poem was first published in *The Dramatic Review* in April, 1885. "Treues Liebes Herz" means "The Heart of True Love," although it seems to be misattributed.
- 10) For a general background of the impact of Wagner in England, *Half a Century of Music in England: 1837-1887*, by Wilde's contemporary Francis Hueffer, offers a scholarly rigorous account. See Chapter Two. Wagner's tours of England are also thoroughly documented by Anne Dzamba Sessa, in *Richard Wagner and the English*. See particularly Chapter One.
- 11) See Martin, 33-54.

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(本学大学院博士後期課程)