

## “‘Restless Mystical Ardours’: Decadence and Music’

Emma Sutton

Pre-publication Text:

**Please do not circulate or cite without permission of author**

[ess@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:ess@st-andrews.ac.uk)

Neo-Victorian novels are peppered with allusions to music. In Will Self’s *Dorian* (2002), the protagonist reads *À Rebours* to the ‘uneasily dreamlike music of Debussy, or possibly Respighi’.<sup>i</sup> Fevvers, the Cockney New Woman trapeze artist of Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984), has *The Ride of the Valkyries* as her theme tune.<sup>ii</sup> Even Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) evokes the parallels between its late twentieth-century setting and late nineteenth-century queer cultures through music: Will and James (like Dorian Gray and Lord Henry) attend the opera together, prompting a conversation about gay composers and operatic culture, and Will later describes his desire for a lover as ‘Straussian’.<sup>iii</sup> These novels are pitch perfect in their recognition of music’s centrality to *fin-de-siècle* culture and to Decadent art. Decadence (whether understood as an aesthetic or social phenomenon) was frequently articulated and conceptualised in terms of music.<sup>iv</sup> Similarly, musical terms and ideas about music pervade discourse about Decadence. Patchily acknowledged in criticism, the interdependence of music and Decadence is evident across the arts.

Within literature alone music’s importance is apparent in the titles, language and metaphors that suffuse the work of Decadent writers. Wilde’s poems include a ‘Symphony in Yellow’ (1881) and Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper write numerous ‘Songs’ as ‘Michael Field’; *Keynotes* is the title not only of George Egerton’s (Mary Chavelita Dunne’s) short story collection of 1893 but also of Lane and Matthews’s Bodley Head series;<sup>v</sup> Victor Plarr entitles his 1896 collection *In the Dorian Mood* and includes in it a ‘Nocturne’ whilst Olive Custance’s (later Lady Alfred Douglas’s) 1897 collection *Opals* includes ‘The Song Spinner’, ‘A Sleep Song’, ‘A Madrigal’, ‘Rain Music’, ‘The Song Bird’ and ‘The Music of Dvorák’. Those identified as figureheads of and apologists for Decadence deployed music prominently in their writing, art and criticism: Aubrey Beardsley produced over thirty drawings on musical subjects and wrote an erotic prose (per)version of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, *Under the Hill* (1896); Dorian Gray reads that famous French novel

depicting the ‘sins of the world’ accompanied by the ‘delicate sound of flutes’;<sup>vi</sup> Arthur Symons lauds the Goncourts’ proto-Decadent ‘opera-glass’ perspective, their ‘special, unique way of seeing things,’ in ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’ (1893);<sup>vii</sup> and in his influential 1913 study Holbrook Jackson speaks of the ‘new note’ corresponding to ‘the minor key in music’ that characterised Decadent writing.<sup>viii</sup> In the 1870s, Pater’s dictum that *‘All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music’* had famously placed music at the heart of what became in effect a manifesto of Decadent art;<sup>ix</sup> by the late 1880s, critical analyses of Decadence – most famously by Nietzsche, Nordau and Tolstoy – awarded music a central place in their definitions and diagnoses of the phenomenon.<sup>x</sup> Moreover, music fleshed out parodies of the Decadents and their aesthetics, such as Robert Hichens’s *The Green Carnation* (1894). In turn, works by Wilde, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé and Wedekind were set by composers including Debussy, Strauss, Berg and Schoenberg whose own music was charged with Decadence. Music’s role in Decadent art and debates about Decadence was varied, almost ubiquitous and at times contradictory: it cannot be confined to particular composers, to formal matters, to metaphor or even to musically-informed usage. This chapter makes this diversity (some would say messiness) a principle of the argument, embracing the breadth of meanings attached both to Decadence and to music’s role in it. Decadence is here understood broadly, acknowledging its currency in and across disciplines and discourses including (most pertinently to this essay, but not limited to) the mental sciences, art history, literary criticism, aesthetics and sexology. Recognising music’s importance to Decadent art and its reception involves acknowledging music’s intersection with discourses from evolutionary theory to sexology to mysticism to nationalism and consumerism. This chapter begins by briefly surveying the musical allusions that provided the soundtrack of Decadent writing and considering music’s importance to Decadent style and formal innovations. It turns then to music’s role in the cultural discourse of Decadence.

### **The Music of Decadence**

Certain composers, genres and musical forms appear with frequency in Decadent writing. The instruments and genres of classical antiquity – lyres, songs, choruses – appealed: for their associations with queer Hellenistic culture; for the access they provided to female literary predecessors such as the poet-singer Sappho; for their associations with the Dionysian, sensual and instinctual; and for the opportunity they

offered to explore alternative configurations of the relationship between artist and public. The late Romantic/proto-modernist operas of Wagner and Strauss were invoked with frequency too, often with an emphasis on their affective, emotive qualities as well as a perception of the sensual and formal excesses of (some) opera. At the other end of the spectrum, intimate chamber music such as Chopin's and Debussy's piano work was enlisted by Decadent writers in their explorations of subjectivity and interiority, the unspoken and inscrutable, as well (particularly in the case of the consumptive Chopin) as enabling exploration of the relationship between disease, Decadence and creativity. Popular genres and venues were also fruitful topics for Decadent writers, particularly those interested in the social frissons of, and varied alterity on display at, metropolitan performance spaces such as the music hall. Implicit in these allusions to music was the idea that some music was Decadent in itself as well as being congenial to Decadent literary appropriation, whether because of its subject matter (such as, in the case of Wagner's and Strauss's operas, eroticism, obsession, renunciation, pessimism) or because of formal qualities (extreme chromaticism, harmonic instability or irresolution, *unendliche Melodie* [infinite melody], pastiche, stylistic hybridity, or 'miniaturism'). Whilst this is a subject towards which this essay can only gesture, recent Critical Musicology has provided rich definitions and formal analyses of musical Decadence.<sup>xi</sup>

Music's prevalence in and important to Decadent writing was the result of a number of contextual and formal factors. The formal innovations and subject matter of some *fin-de-siècle* music appeared thrillingly innovative or unsettling (both fruitful stimuli to Decadent writers), some offering possibilities of literary imitation. Preliminary examples might point to the parallels between leitmotivs – that created temporal suspension, unsettling closure through repetition – and Decadent uses of repetition, doubling and disrupted syntax to explore the processes of memory and to resist the teleology of plot. David Toop's proposal that 'sound is a haunting, a ghost, a presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory' is particularly relevant to leitmotivic compositions;<sup>xii</sup> his hypothesis makes clear music's usefulness to Decadent evocations of the uncanny and experiments in suspending or complicating narrative time. We might note too the parallels between lush orchestration and the densely textured surfaces of much Decadent writing with its interest in arcane, imported and recherché language; both suggest a pleasure in variety, exoticism and sensual sonorous effects. Whether through their subject matter

or formal qualities, introspection, moral ambivalence and sensuality are frequent foci of Decadent literature and music.

Moreover, nineteenth-century philosophy and aesthetic theory had awarded music an exceptional status among the arts. In the seminal ‘The School of Giorgione’ (1877) Pater had, like Hegel and Schopenhauer in the preceding decades, positioned music at the top of the hierarchy of the arts.<sup>xiii</sup> Its apparent fusion of form and content made it the ‘ideal’ art, lending it connotations of spirituality and transcendent purity; its apparently unsurpassed formal purity invited literary re-workings that displayed their own virtuosic formal intricacy. Yet, crucially, Pater had also emphasised the potential for the arts to evoke or take on each others’ qualities: ‘each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art’. The idea of *Anders-streben* and the language in which it was framed catalysed Decadent interest in intermediality, synaesthesia and the sensory aspects of aesthetic experience.<sup>xiv</sup> An example from Wilde suggests the potential for self-referential sensual writing offered by this position – and its relation to Decadent (sexual) politics too. At the crucial point of Dorian and Lord Henry’s first meeting, Dorian’s exposure to the ‘fresh influences’ espoused by Lord Henry catalyses a sexual and philosophical revelation that is framed in musical language – Lord Henry’s words touch ‘some secret chord’. Dorian immediately reflects on intermedial relations:

Music had troubled him many times. But music was not articulate. It was not a new world, but rather another chaos, that it created in us. Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute.<sup>xv</sup>

Wilde’s account seems at first glance to privilege words over music, the latter trumped as a result of its apparently non-referential qualities (it is not ‘articulate’). Yet his language here relies on a fusion of the two media, celebrating the ‘sweetness’ that they share (a sweetness that can itself exist only metaphorically in both music and words). Just as he ostensibly differentiates the arts, Wilde’s language suggests instead their affinities: words only ‘seem’ to give ‘form’ and have, we learn, a ‘subtle magic’ not unlike the ‘chaos’ of music – they are not as semantically stable as they first

appear. The passage, rather than distinguishing the arts, seems on closer examination a meta-textual celebration of his own ‘sweet’, musical Decadent prose. Of course, the point here, as for many contemporaries, was not rigorous aesthetic theory but the imaginative possibilities generated by these comparisons and affinities.

Decadent writers also responded to changes in the conditions of musical production, performance and reception. The vastly increased scale of concert halls and some performances in the late nineteenth century made questions of music’s affectivity more conspicuous and pressing; the trope of overwhelming music that engulfs, even penetrates, its listeners’ bodies and consciousness is one of the most common figures in Decadent writing. Anxieties about music’s affectivity were amplified too by the publicity industry that increasingly surrounded composers and performers: in a period of burgeoning discourse about the personalities, lives and opinions of these figures more was at stake in exposing oneself to the work of a potentially uncongenial other. As many apparently subjective accounts of musical experience make clear, music became a way of exploring (consciously or unguardedly) subjects that could not otherwise be explicitly addressed. As we shall see, these formal and social conditions prompted reflections on subjectivity, gender and sexuality; on ethnicity and national identity; and on the relationship between art and commerce.

### **Aesthetes, Feminists, Inverts: Music and Individualism**

In 1900, the American music critic and novelist James Huneker published his study *Chopin: The Man and his Music*. In it he asserts that the ‘musical’ and ‘psychical’ history of the nineteenth century would be incomplete without Chopin.<sup>xvi</sup> Huneker’s portrait of the composer combines formal analysis of the music with a narrative of Decadent psychopathology: ‘Chopin’s violence was psychic, a travailing and groaning of the spirit [...] He fought his battles within the walls of his soul’; he was a ‘neurotic man’.<sup>xvii</sup> The study is exemplary in its account of music as a record and site of intimate subjective experience; Dorian Gray similarly perceives *Tannhäuser* as ‘a presentation of the tragedy of his own soul.’<sup>xviii</sup> Huneker’s perception that music was the product of, represented and could elicit from listeners states of extreme interiority was an almost ubiquitous trope in Decadent writing about music. As we shall see, music was a means of exploring new ideas about the mind and selfhood.

Decadent writing on music frequently explores its effects on memory, introspection and subjectivity – Symons's 1892 'Music and Memory' concludes by equating the two terms.<sup>xix</sup> Often, music is presented as a threat to autonomous subjectivity. Thus in Vernon Lee's (Violet Paget's) essays of the 1880s and 1890s, Wagner's *Tristan* is described as erasing 'our real selves', 'our past, our present, our future'; 'violati[ng]' 'our innermost secrets' it leaves only 'the shapeless primaeval nudity of confused instincts'.<sup>xx</sup> In Custance's 'A Madrigal' the speaker implores 'My soul is silent – trouble not / Its secret reveries with thy songs!',<sup>xxi</sup> whilst her 1902 collection *Rainbows* registers anxiety about the irresistible affectivity of late Romantic music which 'storms' 'the citadel of my heart'.<sup>xxii</sup> In these accounts music is a way of exploring new ideas about subjectivity and aesthetic affect; these tropes had not only rhetorical weight but also support from the observations of emerging disciplines and scientific research (particularly in associationist psychology, mesmerism and other mental sciences) that substantiated the ancient idea that music is the most emotional and sensual art.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In some Decadent accounts music chronicles or catalyses 'abnormal' mental states – be these neuroses, hallucinations, 'insanity', monomanias or 'aberrant' desires – or physical illness. In Arthur Symons's story 'Christian Trevalga' (1905), the Decadent composer becomes increasingly introspective and dislocated from the exterior world, an account anticipating Symons's own serious breakdown of 1908 that he later attributed to the effects of Wagner's music.<sup>xxiv</sup> In Thomas Mann's short story 'Tristan' (1903) the frail heroine's performance of Wagner's opera, against her doctors' proscriptions, precipitates her death in the sanatorium. In Vernon Lee's fraught 1890 short story 'A Wicked Voice' the composer-protagonist succumbs to physical and creative collapse following his compulsive desire for the voice of a ghostly castrato. The female composer who is the protagonist of Stanley Makower's 1895 *The Mirror of Music* (published in the *Keynotes* series with a cover by Beardsley) ends the novel delusional. Having charted the obstacles and prejudices facing the brilliant composer and her experimental opera, the text ends with a mystical revelation:

'The world has been unfolded to you, and you know its beauty.

'It is a great poem:

'And there is music to it: a chord in the minor.'

‘And the chord is unresolved.’<sup>xxv</sup>

Such accounts were amplified by criticism, aesthetic theory and literature that depicted certain composers themselves as invalids, whose sickness contaminated their music and their listeners. Nietzsche’s analyses of Wagner were formative – Wagner is a ‘sickness’, a ‘névrose’ [neurosis], whose characters are a ‘pathological gallery’<sup>xxvi</sup> – as were accounts of the consumptive Chopin. In Albert Giraud’s ‘Valse de Chopin’ from *Pierrot Lunaire* (1884), the music is itself blood-stained spittle:

As a bleached drop of blood  
Stains a sufferer’s lips,  
So lurks within this music  
The lure of annihilation.

[...]

Melancholy dismal waltzes,  
You cling to my consciousness,  
You are borne on my thoughts  
Like a bleached drop of blood.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Giraud’s reclaiming of pathological vocabulary enables him to articulate and celebrate the Decadent sensibility of both composer and aesthete.

Decadent writers perceive, that is, a formative connection between music and individual identity – an insight taken up in Critical Musicology of the last twenty years. Susan McClary and others have argued that music is constitutive of identity: the ‘principal cultural work’ of music is to narrate a process of ‘subjective becoming’ in which ‘the centred Self [...] is constituted from heterogeneous elements’.<sup>xxviii</sup> This perception is also apparent in the use of musical terms to provide a vocabulary for ‘new’, or newly visible, forms of individual identity. Such accounts identify Decadence as a property of the individual or of aesthetic experience rather than a formal or thematic matter. ‘Temperament’ is one such common and evocative term, drawing together as it does both musical and psychological connotations. George Egerton writes that the ‘keynote of woman’s witchcraft and woman’s strength’ is ‘the

eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament.' (The word 'keynote' alludes to the volume's title, suggesting that musicality as a subject and a formal influence is central to her experimental depictions of feminist protagonists).<sup>xxix</sup> In *The Renaissance*, Pater identifies the most important attribute of the critic as a 'certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects';<sup>xxx</sup> Wilde uses the term repeatedly in *Dorian Gray* (including in the narrator's observation that 'one had ancestors in literature, as well as in one's own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament');<sup>xxxi</sup> and Huneker's 1904 study of writers and musicians is entitled *Overtones: A Book of Temperaments*. 'Temperament' thus takes on connotations denoting a particular type of aesthete – a Decadent, or a homosexual.

Music played a particularly prominent part in discourse about (homo)sexuality. Havelock Ellis claims, for instance, in *The New Spirit* (1890) that: 'no other art tells us such old forgotten secrets about ourselves [...] It is in the mightiest of all instincts, the primitive sexual traditions of the races before man was, that music is rooted.'<sup>xxxii</sup> Ellis's observation is striking not only for its perception that music reveals 'forgotten secrets', generating knowledge about the individual or 'race', but also for its unequivocal alignment of music with sexual desire. This is a common point in Decadent texts whether manifested via highly sensual, erotic accounts of individual musical experience (Baudelaire writes of his 'rapture' on hearing Wagner whilst Lee's protagonist feels his 'body melt' like 'wax in the sunshine') or via plot clichés.<sup>xxxiii</sup> By the 1890s, for instance, the expectation that listening to *Tristan* would prompt uncontrollable desire and instantaneous affairs between its listeners was familiar from such works as Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Il Trionfo della Morte* (1894) and George Moore's *Evelyn Innes* (1898).<sup>xxxiv</sup> In her novel *Nobody's Fault* (1896) Netta Syrett manipulates and thwarts the expectation that attendance at a Wagner concert will lead to an affair between the New Woman protagonist and the man she meets at a Wagner concert: Bridget Ruan finds the music 'wonderful' and 'awful' and the experience 'set[s] all her pulses vibrating', but she is not immediately propelled into a liaison. The predictable Wagnerian plot is resisted and Bridget asserts her independence as a 'High School teacher'. The episode contributes to the novel's critique of male Decadent writers who pose potential threats to Bridget's sexual and creative autonomy: one of the "hard", "cynical", "brilliant" writers eventually becomes her abusive husband, Raoul Travers.<sup>xxxv</sup> The musical scenes in Syrett's work thus inform her feminist critique of the sexual politics of Decadence. Mona Caird uses

a similar trope in *Daughters of Danaus* (1894): the woman composer Hadria Fullerton accepts a marriage proposal from the suave and ‘fastidious’ Hubert Temperley at a moment when she is elated by a performance of Celtic music – he proves unsupportive of what he later calls her ‘bizarre compositions’.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In these New Woman novels, music is a site through which Decadent sexual politics are exposed and contested.

As Self, Hollinghurst and others recognise, music also provided vocabulary and images for exploring and representing queer identity and desire. By the *fin de siècle*, there was a considerable body of opinion among the (pseudo-) sciences that musicality and homosexuality were entwined. In the first edition of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* Ellis writes, for instance, that a ‘taste for music is widespread’ among homosexuals.<sup>xxxvii</sup> In later editions this claim was elaborated:

The musician has not been rendered nervous by the music, but owes his nervousness (as also, it may be added, his disposition to homosexuality) to the same disposition to which he owes his musical gifts.

Homosexuality is related, he argues, to “‘genito-musical synesthesia’”<sup>xxxviii</sup>. Edward Carpenter, Marc-André Raffalovich, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Heinrich Ulrichs and others also asserted connections between homosexuality and musicality.<sup>xxxix</sup> In such a context, Decadent references to musical sensibility often function as coded allusions to queer desire. Thus Algernon’s declaration at the beginning of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) that he plays the piano ‘with wonderful expression [...] sentiment is my forte’ may have signalled to informed audience members an alternative sexuality to that presented by the play’s plot as would Beardsley’s numerous images of musicians, some of them (such as in the 1893-4 *Morte d’Arthur*) notably androgynous.<sup>xl</sup> In J. Meade Falkner’s *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895), the protagonist John Maltravers becomes obsessed with the portrait of his debauched ancestor, an accomplished violinist, who appears in ghostly form whenever a particular ‘gagliarda’ is played by John or his male friends. John’s initial ‘revulsion’ from the ghost who brings him ‘face to face with some abysmal and repellent wickedness’ shifts into an obsession with the gagliarda and the violin, prompting his relocation to Naples where he participates in unspecified rites in the subterranean cells under his villa, accompanied by his devoted ‘Italian boy’, Raffaello Carotenuto.

(Falkner's love of symbolic character names, and the pervasive echoes of Wilde and his work, leave little doubt about the queer subtext).<sup>xli</sup> The friend who contributes the framing narrative conclusion judges that music has contributed to John's 'mental degradation': 'if some music is good for man and elevates him, other melodies are equally bad and enervating'.<sup>xlii</sup> The novel thus proposes the Decadence of certain music and makes music central to its exploration of Decadent subjects.

Music was vital to female Decadents' writing of queer desire too. Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn) published translations and looser adaptations of Sappho's work, alluding frequently to Sappho and music: in 'A Dorian Tale' (in *From Green to Violet*, 1903) Sappho appears to Hero of Guara to "teach you songs and amour"; in 'The Mute Siren' (*Fjord Mists*) the sirens 'sang the ecstasy of Death, the charm of a voluptuous agony'; and her reflection on female friendship, 'Feminine Amity', compares the love of the Biblical Ruth and Naomi to 'the most beautiful music.'<sup>xliii</sup>

References to Sappho pepper Rachilde's (Marguerite Vallette-Eymery's) 1884

*Monsieur Vénus*. The lover of the cross-dressing female protagonist imagines hearing 'the songs of a strange sexless love that produced every kind of pleasure' during a hashish hallucination; his protean sexual adventures are termed a 'fugue'.<sup>xliv</sup> In this work, music signals not only queer identity but also feminism: the protagonist's rejection of normative femininity is suggested by the fact that Raoule's piano is placed in her 'profane' bedroom – rather than in the drawing room where it could provide pleasant entertainment for family and guests – and she dismisses the fear that her desire for Jacques will leave her a powerless "girl" with the exclamation, "Let him be what others have been, an instrument that I can smash before becoming the echo of its vibrations!"<sup>xlv</sup> Rachilde's novel is exceptional in the textual attention that is given to transgressive or taboo desire but its association of music with queer identity and sexual experience is apparent in many contemporary works.

### **Mystics, Music, Afterlives**

As the works of Rachilde, Makower, Falkner and others indicate, Decadent texts repeatedly associate music with the mystical, spiritual and occult. Mysticism was a key term in critical writing on Decadence too. Nietzsche attacks the mysticism of Wagner's music dramas, a trait he characterises as pandering to female taste.<sup>xlii</sup> In *Degeneration*, Nordau argues that music is central to the 'mysticism' and irrationalism of contemporary society: composers, musical works and audiences are

alike categorised as ‘mystical’, a trait identified as symptomatic of degraded *fin-de-siècle* culture.<sup>xlvii</sup> For these two influential theorists of Decadence, contemporary music and musical taste are associated with emotionalism and a crisis of male reason; as such they exemplify Decadent society and art.<sup>xlviii</sup> In Decadent fiction music was aligned with a wide spectrum of attitudes towards the spiritual and mystical, including orthodox religious faith. In *The Lost Stradivarius* it was associated, for example, with occult rites via Temple’s dabbling with ‘pagan mysteries’ and ‘Neoplatonism’.<sup>xlix</sup> Huneker’s 1902 *Melomaniacs* offers one of the most extreme narratives about Pythagorean music: the opera written by malevolent misogynist composer Pavel Illowski has cosmic effects, creating an apocalyptic destruction of the Parisian music hall at its premiere.<sup>l</sup> Helena Blavatsky proposes in her Theosophical ‘master-key’ *Isis Unveiled* (1910) that:

the Pythagorean “music of the spheres” is something more than a mere fancy [...] certain planetary aspects may imply disturbances in the ether of our planet, and certain others rest and harmony. Certain kinds of music throw us into frenzy; some exalt the soul to religious aspirations.<sup>li</sup>

Blavatsky’s Theosophical theory hints at a dichotomised model of sensual and spiritual (i.e. Decadent and ideal) music but the former is the focus of her short story ‘The Ensouled Violin’ (1892): it deals with a Faustian competition between Paganini and a fictional violinist in which music’s “‘demoniacal’” effects are variously explained in terms of alchemy, the occult, magic, mesmerism and hypnotism. Despite the narrator’s proposal that music’s power may be explained by the modern mental sciences, the fantastic story draws fulsomely on Hoffmann-esque elements: the ‘voice’ and ‘soul’ of a sacrificed individual are believed to be trapped within the violin and the Stradivarius is itself strung with the victim’s intestines.<sup>lii</sup>

For some Decadents, such self-destructive musical obsession offered a route to posthumous transcendence rather than a gruesome afterlife as a gut string. D’Annunzio’s *Il Trionfo della Morte*, for instance, celebrates music and erotic love, lauding Schopenhaurian pessimism and a proto-Freudian death drive in the lovers’ wish for a Wagnerian *Liebestod*; in this work, music and desire alike erase subjectivity and offer transcendence through death. Conversely, some Decadent texts assert and celebrate music’s capacity to create spiritual enlightenment by emphasising

its ethereality and immateriality, as in the visions of the embattled woman composer in *The Mirror of Music*. Victor Plarr's 'The Violin-player' depicts music as a site of 'enchant[ment]' that is opposed to the type of knowledge available to the 'critical friend'; a young girl playing the violin represents this more intuitive enlightenment available to player and aesthete – 'The vague sweet sorrow, the mystery, / Which are the beginning and end of Art.'<sup>lvi</sup> Similarly, 'A Nocturne at Greenwich' depicts a poet sitting surrounded by the works of Dante, Brutus and Tully as the writers 'commune': 'This silent music of what once hath been / Suits well with that night scene'.<sup>lvii</sup> In this poem, the implied allusion to musical harmony enables a vision of enlightenment and communion. Whether stressing music's sensuality or its ethereality, numerous Decadent works share a perception that music offers an alternative type of knowledge (to Falkner, a 'sixth sense'; to Renée Vivien, 'the savant complexity of chords') and experiences superior to those of contemporary social mores.<sup>lviii</sup>

### **Cosmopolites, Cockneys, Consumers: Music, Money and the Mass**

Music also provided Decadent writers with a means of exploring collective identity, whether in terms of national identity, ethnicity or 'the mass'. Debates about music and Decadence frequently intersect with Orientalism, cosmopolitanism and nationalism. To some, music embodied humanist identity that transcended linguistic, cultural and ethnic difference: Blavatsky's writing on ancient Egyptian music thus contributes to a larger syncretic narrative of cultural and religious history.<sup>lvix</sup> To others, music's attraction lay in its apparent exoticism in which it was aligned with the instinctual and 'primitive'. In Custance's 'The Music of Dvorák', the closing poem of *Opals*, 'dancing girls' are depicted in an Orientalist vision '[b]eneath a golden dome, [on] an emerald floor'.<sup>lvx</sup> Egerton's 'A Cross Line' flaunts its stylistic and thematic Decadence through a combination of non sequiturs, elliptical prose, allusions to popular music and exoticism: the protagonist imagines herself as a Salomé- or Medusa-like dancer on stage and as a horse-rider in 'Arabia'.<sup>lvxi</sup> It is clear from Huneker's study that a cosmopolitan aesthetic was part of the Polish Chopin's appeal: 'He inducted Europe into the mysteries and seductions of the Orient. His music lies wavering between the East and the West'.<sup>lvxii</sup> The chromaticism of Wagner and Strauss similarly was frequently characterised in similarly exotic terms: Lee bluntly accuses *Tristan* of 'playing with the savage within us'.<sup>lvxiii</sup> The importance of music to evolutionary theory and the theory's prominence within late nineteenth-century

musicology augmented the cultural currency of these ideas.<sup>lxii</sup> The widespread fetishizing of Southern Europe, particularly (Southern) Italy, and its music in Decadent and anti-Decadent discourse relies on a perception of its ‘primitivism’, implicitly or explicitly opposed to the ‘intellectualism’ of Northern European culture and music. Primitivism suffuses Nietzsche’s account of Bizet and ‘the South’ in *The Case of Wagner*, Falkner’s account of Naples, and Des Esseintes’s unorthodox love of plainsong, ‘at present considered [...] effete and barbarous’.<sup>lxiii</sup> Contrarily, Caird celebrates Scottish and ‘Celtic’ music more widely in *The Daughters of Danaus*: her emphasis on its democratic roots in the local community informs her critique of the novel’s Decadent aesthete Temperley but she also relies heavily on its apparent primitivism. The novel opens with the protagonists dancing by moonlight to the ‘intoxicating primitive music’ of a ‘reel tune’, fusing allusions to the Celtic ‘northern race’ with the Three Graces and a *danse macabre*.<sup>lxiv</sup> Such accounts were acutely informed by contemporary geo-political tensions: Huneker’s approving exclamation about Chopin – ‘how he chromaticized the prudish, rigid garden of German harmony’ – registers anxieties about German military as well as aesthetic prowess via the medium of music criticism.<sup>lxv</sup> A similar sentiment, albeit in a comic register, informs Algernon’s remark in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that ‘[o]nly relatives, or creditors, ever ring [the doorbell] in that Wagnerian manner’ and Henry James’s more fraught representation in ‘Collaboration’ (1892) of the relationship between a German composer and a French librettist in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war.<sup>lxvi</sup>

Decadent writing is, however, just as indebted to popular genres and performance spaces as it is to opera and Art Music. Egerton’s ‘A Cross Line’ opens with the New Woman protagonist overhearing ‘the refrain of a popular music-hall ditty’ sung by the male hiker; its ‘slangy, vulgar tune’ evokes the ‘footlight flare and fantastic dance’ of a metropolitan music hall despite the pastoral setting.<sup>lxvii</sup> The popular musical genre signals the story’s avant-garde qualities, as it does in Symons’s 1895 *London Nights*, a collection punctuated by ‘intermezzos’. John Davidson uses popular music to explore the gap between the lived conditions of working-class lives and their representations on stage. ‘To the Street Piano’ (from *Ballads and Songs*, 1894), jarringly sets the suicidal voice of an abused ‘labourer’s wife’ to the boisterous bawdy dance tune ‘Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay’,<sup>lxviii</sup> whilst in ‘Lily Dale’ (from *In a Music-hall and Other Poems*, 1891) the sex worker turned singer acknowledges, with

confidence but also vulnerability, her calculated response to the audience's (sexual) tastes:

I can't sing a bit, I can't shout;  
But I go through my songs with a birr;  
And I always contrive to bring out  
The meaning that tickles you, sir.

They were written for me; they're the rage;  
They're the plainest, the wildest, the slyest;  
For I find on the music-hall stage,  
That kind of song goes the highest.<sup>lxviii</sup>

Others use allusions to the economic and social exclusivity of certain Art Music to critique the relationship between Decadence, gender and material consumption: whilst Syrett's heroine has to skip a meal to save 'half-a-crown' for the Wagner concert, her male companion is 'lay[ing] in a stock of Wagner sensations' before leaving London for Algiers.<sup>lxix</sup> Ambivalence about the commodification of music is also registered in Decadent writing on musical crowds. Des Esseintes refuses to 'plunge into this mob-bath' of the large metropolitan concert audience; his scathing depiction of the 'ignorant crowd' enraptured by Wagner echoes Baudelaire's, contributing to their delineation of an aristocratic Decadent sensibility.<sup>lxx</sup> At stake in all these texts is music's uncertain relationship to commerce and mass taste. As Bourdieu, Jonathan Freedman and others have documented, music is a 'site of particularly intense struggle on the battlefield of taste'.<sup>lxxi</sup> Music may seem anti-commercial and 'spiritual' because immaterial but musical performances are occasions for the acquisition and display of wealth. Similarly, Decadent writing encompasses a variety of attitudes towards commerce, from celebrations of material consumption to more democratic aesthetics.

### Mishearing Decadence

Music provided formative myths for retrospectively characterising Decadence and Decadents. The legend of Tannhäuser, reworked by Wagner, Wilde, Beardsley and many others, was powerful: the pilgrim-knight torn between sacred and profane love

seemed an apposite figurehead for the period to Beerbohm, Henry Harland and others.<sup>lxxii</sup> Moreover, numerous accounts of Decadent art characterised it as ‘musical’: in his obituary article on Beardsley, Symons described the artist’s line as ‘the minims and crotchetts by which he wrote down his music.’<sup>lxxiii</sup> Decadence’s pivotal role in constructions of modernity is well-known but music’s part in this has not been widely recognised: yet as Ellis put it, following Nietzsche, ‘in its highest development, music is the special exponent of the modern soul in its complexity, its passive resignation, its restless mystical ardours’.<sup>lxxiv</sup> The association of Decadence and music in the immediate aftermath of the period responds to both to the purported qualities of ‘typical’ *fin-de-siècle* music (like the ‘modern soul’, it is ardent, mystical, resigned) and to the formal characteristics of Decadent art (Beardsley’s drawings are lauded as ‘musical’ because they are perceived to privilege formal concerns over representational subjects). Implicitly, these accounts use music to characterise Decadence as self-indulgent and emotionally over-blown, even apolitical and naïve. Music’s central role in *fin-de-siècle* discourse about gender, national identity, class and ethnicity was quickly elided – a fundamental move in modernism’s construction of its own difference from its Decadent forebears.

- <sup>i</sup> *Dorian: An Imitation* (London: Penguin, 2003), 55.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 2003), 16.
- <sup>iii</sup> *The Swimming-Pool Library* (London: Vintage, 2006), 119-22, 266.
- <sup>iv</sup> See further Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- <sup>v</sup> Egerton's later collections include *Discords* and *Symphonies*.
- <sup>vi</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 125.
- <sup>vii</sup> Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, vol. XXVI (Europe)/LXXXVII (America) (June-November 1893), 858-67 (860).
- <sup>viii</sup> *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: G. Richards, 1913), 197.
- <sup>ix</sup> *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 86. Italics in original.
- <sup>x</sup> Nietzsche's definitions (particularly in *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*) have been axiomatic; in *Die Entartung* Nordau devotes more analysis to Wagner than to any other artist; see chapter 13 of *What is Art?*, which opposes Wagner's to 'genuine' art (Tolstoy, trans. Richard Pavear and Larissa Volokhonsky [London: Penguin, 1995], 101).
- <sup>xi</sup> See, notably: Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, 'Staging the Female Body: Richard Strauss's *Salome*', in Mary Ann Smart, ed., *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 204–221; Lawrence Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Stephen Downes, *Music and Decadence in European Modernism: The Case of Central and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For a brief introduction see my 'Music' in Jane Desmarais and David Weir, eds, *Cambridge Critical Concepts: Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
- <sup>xii</sup> *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener* (London: Continuum, 2010), XV.
- <sup>xiii</sup> See Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, selections from *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, in Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 382–445 and Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, E. F. J. Payne, trans., 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1969), II: 257-62. Hegel places poetry alone above music, since it need only be thought not heard.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Pater, 85.
- <sup>xv</sup> Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 18-19.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Chopin: *The Man and his Music* (London: William Reeves, 1901), 135.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Huneker, *Chopin*, 3 and 130. Whilst Huneker explicitly counters perceptions of Chopin's effeminacy and other 'decadent' tropes his own vocabulary reiterates them.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Wilde, 135.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Silhouettes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Smithers, 1896).
- <sup>xx</sup> 'Signior Curiazzo: A Musical Medley' in *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1887), 101-

---

76 (172), and ‘Beauty and Sanity’, *Fortnightly Review*, 58 NS (August 1895), 252-68 (261).

<sup>xxi</sup> Olive Custance, ‘*Opals*’ 1897 with ‘*Rainbows*’ 1903 (Poole and New York: Woodstock Books, 1996), [Opals], 47.

<sup>xxii</sup> Custance, 59.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See Phyllis Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860-1900: Representations of Music, Science and Gender in the Leisured Home*, repr. Routledge Library Editions: The Nineteenth-century Novel, vol. 41 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 59-115.

<sup>xxiv</sup> See Stoddard Martin, *Wagner to ‘The Waste Land’: A Study of the Relationship of Wagner to English Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 74-6.

<sup>xxv</sup> Stanley V. Makower, *The Mirror of Music* (London: John Lane and Boston: Roberts Bros., 1895); repr. British Library Historical Collection, [n.d.], 178.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner* in ‘*The Birth of Tragedy*’ and ‘*The Case of Wagner*’, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 166.

<sup>xxvii</sup> From LiederNet: [http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get\\_text.html?TextId=19407](http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=19407) [accessed 1 November 2018]

<sup>xxviii</sup> Susan McClary, ‘The Impromptu that Trod on a Loaf: or How Music Tells Stories’, *Narrative*, V (January 1997), 20-35 (24). McClary refers here to the period 1700-1900 and to instrumental music in particular.

<sup>xxix</sup> Egerton, ‘A Cross Line’, in Elaine Showalter, ed., *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1993), 60.

<sup>xxx</sup> Pater, ‘Preface’, xxx.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Wilde, 144.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *The New Spirit* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), 235-36.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘Richard Wagner and *Tannhäuser* in Paris’, in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 325-57 (332) and Lee, ‘A Wicked Voice’, in ‘*Hauntings*’ and Other Fantastic Tales, ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Ontario: Broadview, 2006), 154-81 (179).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> The long, evocative account of *Tristan* in Book 6 of D’Annunzio’s novel compounds its Decadent subject matter with connotations of rape, incest and murderous intent (*The Triumph of Death*, trans. Georgina Harding [London: William Heinemann, 1898], 276-92); and see especially chapter 12 of *Evelyn Innes* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898).

<sup>xxxv</sup> *Nobody’s Fault* (Boston: Roberts Bros. and London: John Lane, 1896), repr. Kessinger Legacy Reprints [n.d.], 115-16, 119, 167. Italics in original.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> *The Daughters of Danaus* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1989), 122, 166.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex. Volume 1: Sexual Inversion* (London: Wilson and MacMillan, 1897), 123.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (London: F. A. Davis, 1921), 295, cited in James Kennaway, ‘Historical Perspectives on Music as a Source of Disease’, in Eckart Altenmüller, Stanley Finger, Francois Boller, eds, *Music, Neurology, and Neuroscience: Historical Connections and Perspectives, Progress in Brain Research*, vol. 216 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 127-45 (135).

<sup>xxxix</sup> See Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 27-8, 46-51 and Kennaway, 135.

- 
- <sup>xl</sup> *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), 357.
- <sup>xli</sup> ‘Carotenuto’ evokes both personal and musical domains, suggesting Raffealle is ‘held dear’ but also ‘held’ like a sustained note.
- <sup>xlii</sup> *The Lost Stradivarius* (London: Hesperus, 2006), 46, 84, 112.
- <sup>xliii</sup> *Lilith’s Legacy: Prose Poems and Short Stories*, trans. Brian Stableford (n.p.: Snuggly Books, 2018), pp.53, 29 and 171.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus: A Materialist Novel*, trans. Melanie Hawthorne after the 1929 translation by Madeleine Boyd (New York: MLA, 2004), 62 and 194.
- <sup>xlv</sup> Rachilde, 23, 41.
- <sup>xlivi</sup> See, for example, section 6 ('Let us harangue the infinite, let us surround ourselves with symbols') and the 'Postscript', *The Case of Wagner*, 168, 183.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Book II, entitled 'Mysticism', includes 'The Richard Wagner Cult': Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 45-240.
- <sup>xlviii</sup> The charge was hardly new: Balzac's 1837 short story 'Gambara', in which a composer can write only when drunk, takes to an extreme the idea that music is produced and perceived through the suspension of reason.
- <sup>xlix</sup> Falkner, 110.
- <sup>l</sup> 'The Piper of Dreams' in *Melomaniacs* (London: T. Werner Laurie, [n.d.]), 31-62.
- <sup>li</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (London and Benares: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1910), 2 vols., I: 275.
- <sup>lii</sup> H.P.B. [Helena Blavatsky], 'The Ensouled Violin', *Lucifer: A Theosophical Magazine*, X, March and April 1892, 9-20 and 97-107 (15). Cf, Count Stenbock's 'Viol d'Amor', in which a viol of 'peculiar sweetness' is strung with children's skin (Eric, Count Stenbock, *Studies of Death: Romantic Tales* [London: David Nutt, 1894], 67-90).
- <sup>liii</sup> *In the Dorian Mood* (Oxford and New York: Woodstock, 1995), 84-5.
- <sup>liv</sup> Plarr, 98.
- <sup>lv</sup> Falkner, 22, and Vivien, 'The Song of the One Who Passes By' [in *From Green to Violet*, 1903], in *Lilith’s Legacy*, 74.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, I: 544.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Custance, 73.
- <sup>lviii</sup> Egerton, 58.
- <sup>lix</sup> Huneker, *Chopin*, 130.
- <sup>lx</sup> Lee, 'Orpheus in Rome', in *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine, 1894), 51-104 (84-5).
- <sup>lxii</sup> See Weliver, chapters 5-7, and Bennett Zon, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- <sup>lxii</sup> J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), 202.
- <sup>lxiii</sup> Caird, 5-6.
- <sup>lxiv</sup> Huneker, *Chopin*, 129.
- <sup>lxv</sup> Wilde, *Earnest*, 363.
- <sup>lxvi</sup> Egerton, 47.
- <sup>lxvii</sup> John Davidson, 'In a Music-hall' 1891 with 'Ballads and songs' 1894 (Oxford and New York: Woodstock, 1993), 98.
- <sup>lxviii</sup> Davidson, 6-7.
- <sup>lxix</sup> Syrett, 107, 121.

---

<sup>lxx</sup> Huysmans, 204.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1989), 18-19.

<sup>lxxii</sup> See further, ‘Epilogue: Framing the Decade’, Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 193-99.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: At the Sign of the Unicorn, 1898), 30.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> *The New Spirit*, 119.