



SHELLEY AND THE  
MUSICO-POETICS  
OF ROMANTICISM



JESSICA K. QUILLIN

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ROMANTICISM

*To B.R.Q. and R.A.Q*

*“Poetry is the music of the soul,  
and, above all, of great and feeling souls.”*

*—Voltaire*

# Shelley and the Musico-Poetics of Romanticism

JESSICA K. QUILLIN

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- A.1 The two dimensions of music and poetry. Adapted from John Minahan, *Word Like a Bell: John Keats, Music and the Romantic Poet*, Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1992, 8; and Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry, The Nineteenth Century and After*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984, 5. 153

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# Abbreviations of Works Cited

## Books and Articles

- (CCD) Clairmont, Claire (Mary Jane). *The Journals of Claire Clairmont*. Ed. Marion Kingston Stocking. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968.
- (CMC) Cowden Clarke, Charles and Mary. *Recollections of Writers*. London: Gilbert & Rivington, Printers, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1878.
- (CPS) Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. 1 vol. Ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- (HCW) Hazlitt, William. "A View of the English Stage." Vol. 3 of *Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*. Ed. Duncan Wu. London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998.
- (MSJ) Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Mary Shelley's Journal*. Ed. Frederick Jones. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947.
- (MWS) Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*. 3 vols. Ed. Betty T. Bennett. London: John Hopkins University Press, 1980.
- (PLB) Wordsworth, William. "Preface" (1800) to *Lyrical Ballads*. Second edition. Ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, London: Routledge, 1998.
- (PSL) Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. 2 vols. Ed. Frederick Jones. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- (SPP) Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers. London: W.W. Norton & Co, 1977.
- (STC) Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. Ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- (TJH) Hogg, Thomas Jefferson. *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd, 1906.
- (TLP) Peacock, Thomas Love. *Memoirs of Shelley and other Essays and Reviews*. Ed. Howard Mills. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1970.
- (TPS) Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Poems of Shelley*. 2 vols. Ed. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews. Harlow: Pearson Educated Ltd, 2000.

## Electronic and Paper Resources

- (EPD) *English Prose Drama Database*. 2003.
- (EVD) *English Verse Drama Database*. 2003.
- (GRV) *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 2003.
- (OCM) *Oxford Companion to Music*. Ed. Percy Scholes. London: Oxford University Press, 1956.

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# Introduction

Under the self same bough, and heard as there  
The birds, the fountains and the Ocean hold  
Sweet talk in music through the enamoured air.  
And then a Vision on my brain was rolled.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, “The Triumph of Life,” 37–40<sup>1</sup>

No English poet, for a comparable body of work, has paid more attention than has Shelley to the loveliness of music, often associated with the human voice.

—Burton Pollin, *Music for Shelley's Poetry*<sup>2</sup>

Critics from Matthew Arnold to F.R. Leavis have praised or censured Shelley's poetry for its musicality; and many have remarked upon the poet's passionate interest in music, especially after 1817. Yet, there is no single comprehensive study exploring music in relation to Shelley's poetry, his thought, or indeed, his life. This study endeavors to fill this lacuna through an in-depth examination of the impact of music and musical aesthetics on Shelley's works. Specifically, this study examines his perception of an interdependence between music and poetry that is expressed in the form and content of his highly sonorous works.

This inquiry is divided into three parts. Part 1 (Chapters 1 and 2) seeks to establish the biographical, cultural, and theoretical context for Shelley's ideas on music. Chapter 1 details Shelley's musical background, discussing the poet's training and interest in music as a way of understanding the complex ways in which music and ideas of music come to play in his poetry and prose, particularly those written after 1817. Chapter 2 considers the role of music in Shelley's own prose writings through an in-depth analysis of *A Defence of Poetry* in order to examine the theoretical sources of his ideas on music in both classical and contemporary philosophy and aesthetics, especially the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Burney, and Sir William Drummond.

Building on this theoretical and biographical setting, the two chapters of Part 2 consider Shelley's use of figurative language and his prosody in two of his longer poems, specifically *Alastor* (Chapter 3) and *Prometheus Unbound* (Chapter 4). Chapter 3 explores the presence of music in Shelley's earlier works through a close reading of *Alastor*. Specifically, I analyze how the dynamic between two types of musical imagery reveals his deep conflict before 1817 between an urge towards Godwinian perfectibilism and his general skepticism towards art and

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<sup>1</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “The Triumph of Life,” *SPP*, 456, ll. 37–40.

<sup>2</sup> Burton Pollin, *Music for Shelley's Poetry: An Annotated Bibliography of Musical Settings of Shelley's Poetry* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) iii.

imaginative experience. While his skeptical views never abate, Shelley's views on music and its connections to poetry noticeably change both in scope and depth after his significant exposure to music in 1817. As Chapter 4 argues with respect to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley's increased understanding and interest in music not only improves his opinions about what and how art represents; but it also centers his poetry towards an ultimate vision wherein art—specifically, a fusion between music and poetry—becomes the vehicle through which humanity can achieve perfection. Through this analysis, these two chapters examine how music provided Shelley with a model and vocabulary with which to envision and embody the activity of poetic creation and what he perceived as its humanistic purpose.

Part 3 considers the bond between music and poetry with regard to matters of form in Shelley's poetry, specifically with relation to dramatic and lyrical form. Chapter 5 examines correspondences between Shelley's lyrical drama, *Prometheus Unbound*, and selected types of musical drama with particular focus on the Italian *opera buffa*, *ballet d'action*, and extended forms of dramatic sacred music. Chapter 6 looks at the question of form in the context of Shelley's shorter lyrics in order to examine the lyric as a type of musico-poetic composition, which in Shelley's poetry found form not only as domestic love poems, but also as radically political songs.

Ultimately, this study argues that through exploring the musical qualities of poetry and expressing ideas of music in his works, Shelley reveals not only a "keen interest in music," as many critics have observed; but also, he exhibits a fundamental recognition of an interrelation between the arts of music and poetry that can be seen throughout his work. Equating music with love and with all visionary experience, the appeal of music for Shelley primarily lies in what it has to offer poetry. That is, he is interested in the expressive potentialities of a poetry that is charged with music. By allying language with music in the form of poetry, Shelley perceives a way to overcome the (representational) limitations of language. Although in the *Defence* he celebrates language over sound as the form that "is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relations to thoughts alone," and thus elevates poetry over the other arts, music, as the basis of meter and rhythm, forms the central component of the "certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound" that is poetic language.

PART 1  
Overture:  
Setting the Context for Shelley's  
Ideas on Music

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# Chapter 1

## Shelley's Musical Background

Music is, itself, a very expressive and intelligible language to all those ears and hearts [which] are obedient to its vibrations.

—Charles Burney, *A General History of Music*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

On 22 April 1810, Percy Bysshe Shelley enclosed “some lines”<sup>2</sup> in a letter to his friend Edward Fergus Graham, informing him that he “may set them to music” if he thought them “worth it.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, subsequent letters from the spring of 1810 until the early part 1811 affirm that Shelley sent Graham several other poems to be set to music, either by Graham himself or his music master Joseph Wöfl.<sup>4</sup> Although no trace remains of Graham’s musical settings, they bring focus to Shelley’s interest in the art of music concurrent with his earliest published literary efforts—an influence and correspondence that would expand and deepen throughout his life.

Shelley’s early experimentation with having his poetry set to music exemplifies his curiosity as to music’s capability to extend the capacity and qualities of poetry. Growing up at Field Place in Horsham, West Sussex, Shelley was exposed to music from an early age, both from his reading and from his own experiences. Yet, Jean De Palacio observes: “[a]lthough Shelley had a keen and lifelong interest in music, his musical tastes were not fully developed at the outset. They went through a process of trying and enrichment, which are to be seen in his life and his poetic achievement.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, while Shelley had little formal training in music,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Burney, *A general history of music, from the earliest ages to the present period* (1789), 2 vols, ed. Frank Mercer (New York: Dover Publications, 1957 [1789]) II, 534.

<sup>2</sup> Originally written for Harriet Westbrook Shelley, these lines (“How swiftly through Heaven’s wide expanse”) were soon after revised and included in PBS’s novel *St. Irvyne; or The Rosicrucian: A Romance* (1810). See Chapter 6 for further discussion of this poem in the context of Shelley’s lyricism.

<sup>3</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley [cited hereafter as “PBS”], *PSL*, I, 7–8.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Wöfl (1773–1812), who trained with Leopold Mozart and Haydn, was a prominent pianist and composer in Vienna and Paris. In Vienna in the 1790s, he was considered to be Beethoven’s only significant competitor. Moving to London in 1805, he quickly established his reputation as a performer, composer, and teacher of music. (R. Duval, “Un rival de Beethoven: Joseph Wöfl,” *Rivista musicale italiana*, v [1898], 490–503).

<sup>5</sup> Jean De Palacio, “Music and Musical Themes in Shelley’s Poetry,” *Modern Language Review* 59 (1964): 345–59.

his knowledge and interest in music increased greatly after 1817, from his reading and intellectual encounters with his contemporaries, especially the Hunt Circle, and from his introduction to the public sphere of concert and theater music, particularly the opera and ballet, as well as his renewed experiences with the domestic world of drawing room music; and this combined exposure to both theoretical ideas of music and the actual art of music itself had a significant impact upon the poetry and prose he wrote for the rest of his life.

This chapter will examine the development of Shelley's musical background first through a critical examination of the poet's own experiences with music, beginning with his childhood at Field Place through his last days in Italy. Through this discussion, I will analyze the development of Shelley's knowledge and ideas on music in order to elucidate how, while "his musical tastes were not fully developed at the outset," music, on its many levels—domestic and public, theoretical and practical—was an important influence throughout his life, especially after 1817. Thus, I will argue, Shelley's theoretical and practical exposure to music in the private and domestic arenas made the art of sound a complex, but determining factor in his writings as an image, a mode of expression, and a general conception that he perceived closely linked to love, poetry, and, ultimately, the creative powers of the imagination.

### A "keen interest" in Music: Shelley's Musical Development 1792 to 1822

When approaching the subject of Shelley's musical background, many critics have drawn attention to his general disinterest in music before 1817. The example most frequently mentioned comes from the memoirs of Mme Gataye, the daughter of the Newtons, vegetarian friends of William Godwin who became acquainted with Shelley and Harriet in London in late 1812.<sup>6</sup> According to N.I. White's description of a scene adapted from Mme Gataye's memoirs, one particular evening at the Newtons in early 1813:

While Mrs. Newton was making music with some fellow artist, Shelley, whose musical tastes were simpler than those of the performers, often retired to a corner of the room and told ghost-stories to the children ....<sup>7</sup>

Jean De Palacio cites this story as evidence that "[t]hrough musical themes were underlying much of Shelley's poetry before he attained an extensive knowledge of music, he was not a good connoisseur of music in his early life."<sup>8</sup> While rightly assessing the significance of music throughout Shelley's poetry as a whole, De Palacio fails to mention that though on the evening described Shelley took little interest in Mrs. Newton's soirée, Mrs. Newton nevertheless was responsible for

<sup>6</sup> Richard Holmes, *Shelley the Pursuit* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1974) 174.

<sup>7</sup> Newman Ivey White, *Shelley* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1947) I, 304.

<sup>8</sup> De Palacio, 345.

introducing Shelley “to the gaities of Vauxhall Gardens, with its multitude of twinkling lights, its fireworks, and its lively music.”<sup>9</sup> Also, as Wilfrid Woollen writes: “[p]robably too much weight has been attached to Mme Gataye’s record of Shelley’s interest in music,” pointing out that the story is told from the standpoint of a rather elderly lady recollecting her childhood.<sup>10</sup> As a result, there is no reason to believe that Shelley did not take part in other musical evenings at the Newtons; and thus one should not assume that he remained completely “uninitiated in music” until 1817.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Shelley’s curiosity towards music and ideas of music evinced itself from his earliest poetic attempts, a fascination that developed into a fundamental part of his poetic conception and practice later in his life. Ultimately, Shelley’s exposure to a diversity of musical experiences and ideas of music affected not only the way in which he perceived music, but came to shape both his skills as a poet and his general view of poetry and the poet’s role.

*“[T]he tunes which had been favourites in boyhood charmed him”*

Although there is no evidence that Shelley’s father, Timothy, received musical training or indeed possessed any interest in music, his mother, Elizabeth Pilfold Shelley,<sup>12</sup> having grown up in the household of her wealthy aunt Charlotte Poole, was fond of the fine arts, sang and played the harpsichord or piano, accomplishments which were a standard element of a young lady’s education at the time.<sup>13</sup> In this way, one can presume Elizabeth Shelley sang to her children on a regular basis, and encouraged them in the arts, as well. Since Shelley’s sisters, Elizabeth, Hellen, and Margaret, received voice and music lessons at Field Place from Edward Fergus Graham and other music masters, Field Place indubitably contained a room for

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<sup>9</sup> White, I, 304.

<sup>10</sup> Wilfrid Woollen, “Shelley’s Knowledge of Music,” Letter to the Editor, *Times Literary Supplement*, Thursday, 7 June 1923 <<http://www.tls.psmedia.com>> 10 Oct 2001, 13.02.

<sup>11</sup> De Palacio, 345.

<sup>12</sup> Little else is known about Elizabeth Shelley, except that she was a gifted letter writer, and “[f]rom Shelley’s accounts of her in his letters, she seems to have been an intelligent and liberal-minded woman who had the confidence of her son and was strongly devoted to him” (Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley and His Circle, 1773–1822*, II, 10 vols, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron [New York: The Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation, 1970–2002], 606).

<sup>13</sup> Susan Djabri, *The Shelleys of Field Place, the story of the family and their estates* (Horsham: Horsham Museum Society, 2000) 100. For example, Thomas Charles Medwin, in his will, urges his daughter “to keep up her music having in addition to a fine toned piano forte (which I gave her) purchased her most of the approved and new publications and compositions as an encouragement and incitement for her so to do” (The Will of Thomas Charles Medwin, 20 Sept 1816, Sussex Public Record Office PROB 11/1765 f.61, information courtesy of Susan Djabri, Horsham Museum, Horsham, West Sussex, Sept 2000).

music, either as part of the drawing room or in a separate room altogether.<sup>14</sup> Field Place, as a normal upper middle class<sup>15</sup> country household, hosted one or more semi-annual balls as well as any number of private soirées, in addition to balls, assemblies, and other goings-on held in the town of Horsham itself—events in which music played an integral role. Horsham was full of musical events, ranging from local balls and festivals to music played by the stationed military men to the local tradition of bell-ringing at Horsham Church.<sup>16</sup> In several letters to his Eton friend Tisdall, Shelley invites him up to attend the Horsham ball at Easter and earlier mentions a family ball at Field Place around Christmas.<sup>17</sup> Harriet Grove also writes in her diary of a Christmas ball held at Field Place late in 1808, though she herself did not attend.<sup>18</sup>

Amongst the influential figures in Shelley's life before 1817, the music master Edward Fergus Graham<sup>19</sup> (?1787–1852) was arguably the first to give the poet any significant exposure to the intricacies of the art of music, and the potentialities it offered for poetry. Graham seems to have been held in high affection in the Shelley household, for it is known that he gave music and singing lessons to Shelley's sisters (though not to Shelley) and to Harriet Grove;<sup>20</sup> and he even was considered as a marriage prospect for Shelley's sister Elizabeth, though there is much doubt over Shelley's belief that his mother had an affair with Graham.<sup>21</sup> Out of the

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<sup>14</sup> White states that the drawing room was across from the dining room in PBS's day, which suggests the drawing room may have doubled as a music room. See White, I, 5. See also Holmes, 229.

<sup>15</sup> PBS "was not born, contrary to the widely held belief, into an old aristocratic family, but a nouveau riche 'county' family ..." (Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Young Shelley* [New York: Collier Books, 1950] 16).

<sup>16</sup> Information courtesy of Jeremy Knight and Susan Djabri, Horsham Museum, Horsham, West Sussex, 16 Sept 2000. For more on the tradition of bell-ringing during PBS's day, see "The Recollections of Henry Burstow," *Recollections of Horsham* (Worthing Road, Horsham: The Free Christian Book Society, Sept 1911) 93–4.

<sup>17</sup> PBS, *PSL*, I, 2, 3: 10 Jan 1808, 1 Jan 1809.

<sup>18</sup> Harriet Grove's diary in *Shelley and His Circle*, II, 509.

<sup>19</sup> Although several of PBS's biographers seem to have different opinions as to how close Graham and PBS were growing up, it would seem that under Timothy Shelley's sponsorship, Edward Fergus Graham received his musical training with Joseph Wölfl, and that Graham's father may have also been in Timothy's employ. (F.L. Jones, *PSL*, I, 8. ff.1, 5). Also, during his time at Eton and at least until he fell out with Graham in 1811 over the matter with his mother, PBS considered Graham a confidant, and even an intercessor against tyranny, both parental and social. Graham was to be one of many to act as a go-between between PBS and his father after the poet was expelled from Oxford. For various opinions on PBS and Graham, see White, I, 61; Holmes, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Holmes, 31. Harriet Grove writes in her diary on 7 May 1809 that Graham came to give her music lessons on three occasions, making her "try to sing, he says I have a voice but I do not believe it" (Harriet Grove's diary, *Shelley and His Circle*, II, 480).

<sup>21</sup> See PBS's letter to Graham, 14 May 1811, and his first verse letter, also dated 14 May 1811 in PBS, *PSL*, I, 85–6; 86–7.