

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. RECOGNITION BY THE MUSICALLY INCLINED	
1. Poe in Music	1
2. Poe's Own Reaction to Music	2
3. Settings Slow at First in Appearing	3
4. From Foreign Parts	5
5. Amazing Variety of Musical Forms	9
II. POE'S VERSE IN MUSIC	
1. Poems Most Frequently Selected	12
2. The Early Bird: <i>The Raven</i>	13
3. <i>The Bells</i>	15
4. Rachmaninoff and the U. S. S. R.	16
5. <i>Annabel Lee</i>	18
6. <i>Eldorado</i>	19
7. A MacDowell Fragment	20
8. <i>To Helen</i>	21
III. POE'S TALES IN MUSIC	
1. Musical Forms Comprised	22
2. Debussy's Ill-Fated Operas	24
3. Ballets	26
IV. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL LISTS	
1. A Bibliography of Musical Settings of Poe Texts	29
2. List of Poe Texts in Order of Number of Musical Settings	82
3. Changes in Original Versions	83
4. Summary of Settings and Composers	85
APPENDIX	91
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	95
BIOGRAPHICAL WORKS CONSULTED	97

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CHAPTER I

RECOGNITION BY THE MUSICALLY INCLINED

1. Poe in Music

"I am profoundly excited by music," said Poe.

Conversely, musicians seem to have been profoundly excited by Poe, judging both by their expressions of admiration as readers of the poet and by the number of musical settings of Poe texts.

The explanation of the influence of Poe on the musically inclined, whether or not composers, is not far to seek. When one considers "the witchery of his rhymes and the sorcery of his rhythms" (as Brander Matthews puts it), the union of thought with tonal quality, the lyrical beauty, the telling use of repetition and refrain, the mystical and dramatic power in Edgar Allan Poe, it becomes easy to understand why this musical poet casts a spell over the poetic musician. Subtly increasing the enchantment, there is always too the appeal of his melancholy and of "the mystery which binds [him] still."

A concrete evidence of this attraction is to be found in the bibliography of compositions based on Poe material, presented herewith, which lists no fewer than 252 efforts "to find its equivalent in music."

Doubtless this initial attempt at the publication of a bibliography of Poe settings is incomplete. Happily so! Indeed, it may be that setting Poe to music will never be completed. And this despite certain trends away from just those qualities for which Poe stands; trends in which (as W. Somerset Maugham says in *The Summing Up*) "we see poets impatient with their own harmony trying to fit with their verse the other harmony of prose."

It is likely that there are many more existing settings of Poe than are mentioned in this bibliography. Some are perhaps now in the making, or have not yet been brought to general notice, or are out of print and unobtainable, or—*forgotten*. Then, too, the foreign field has not thus far been thoroughly explored.

Also, present conditions in parts of Europe render difficult the effort to secure information through correspondence or other means. But it is safe to assume that in view of the recognition in European countries of the genius of Poe, the settings by foreign musicians included in the present list, numerous though they are, could be considerably augmented.

2. Poe's Own Reaction to Music

Poe himself, as has been cited, was keenly susceptible to music. "We are often," he cries, "made to feel, with a shivering delight, that from an earthly harp are stricken notes which *cannot* have been unfamiliar to the angels." There is an interesting tradition about Poe's having been so deeply moved by the singing of an anthem in church one Sunday, that, hardly conscious of his surroundings, he left the pew and advanced slowly up the aisle toward the choir—rapt, entranced. Only when the music ceased did he become aware of his strange and conspicuous actions. It is a pretty story—let us hope it is true.

It is told also of Poe that he played on the flute (some say on the piano too) and that he had a good voice—gifts which probably found their chief expression in the slight parlor pieces and sentimental ditties of the time in the American home. He was certainly not, however, a musician in any special sense of the word.

Of Poe's interest in music, Professor Killis Campbell (*The Mind of Poe*, Harvard University Press) says:

He was fond of the piano and of instrumental music generally. In an early letter (written in 1835) he remarks that he has been making 'some odd chromatic experiments' by way of testing the music of some of his own lines; and elsewhere he reveals an acquaintance with technical terms in music. In certain of his essays, especially those written about 1845, he comments on the opera and on theatrical performances in New York City, which he attended from time to time.

The period in which Poe lived was, by the way, one of extraordinary musical creativeness abroad, and it must have had its influence on him, if only indirectly. The time of the birth of Poe, or shortly before or after, saw also the births of many men destined to make musical history—Bellini (1801), Berlioz (1803), Mendelssohn (1809), Chopin (1810), Schumann

(1810), Liszt (1811), Verdi (1813), Wagner (1813), and others. Compositions by the majority of these were given their first American productions in Poe's own time; not to speak of works of the musical giants of the eighteenth century.

Though the new country was of necessity preoccupied with the stress of material upbuilding, it was nevertheless surely if slowly awakening to the appeal of good music. The United States had not yet become orchestra-conscious, but choral societies and other musical organizations, professional and amateur, were active in the principal cities. Opera companies and musical virtuosi, chiefly from Europe, made frequent appearances and were enthusiastically, if not always discriminatingly, received, especially in the later 'forties. Poe's connection with New York journals at that time doubtless often gave him admission to concerts and operas which otherwise, in his poverty, he could not have attended.

3. Settings Slow at First in Appearing

It is possible but not probable that musical settings of Poe texts appeared in his own lifetime. At least none have been recorded with certainty by the present writer, though the one of earliest date may have been *written* before the poet's death, since it was published in a compilation less than eight months after.

This lack is, in a measure, understandable. In continental Europe, for instance, the composers of Poe's day would naturally prefer, as texts for songs, poems in the original in their own tongues, rather than have recourse to the few translations of Poe, if any, then available.

Even after the death of Poe, special recognition by musicians, as by the literati, was slow in coming. In the entire second half of the nineteenth century, the fifty years following the death of Poe (1849-1899), there appeared—all told, at home and abroad—hardly more than two score musical settings.

As late as 1895 the American composer and critic, Charles Sanford Skilton, wrote (in *Music*, New York, January 19—Poe's birthday):

The poet whose genius was of the highest quality our country has produced, whose writings have had the deepest influence along certain

lines upon our literature, who is recognized as wholly unique and peculiar to America, has been quite overlooked by American musicians. . . . A composer seeks in a poem certain qualities: euphony, forcible diction, rhythmic flow, intelligibility, and, above all, the lyrical or dramatic spirit. Lacking some of these qualities many poems, like those of Browning, are unsuited to music. The poems of Poe are a fresh, untrodden field of lyrical beauty. . . . In respect of euphony, Poe, like a master musician before an organ, has drawn from the English language tones which equal the softness and richness of the Italian. . . . Seldom does our speech offer to music such richness of sound effect. . . . Poe's diction is always elegant and suited to the prevailing mood; beguiled by its charm one is sometimes in danger of overlooking the poet's meaning. In rhythm, perhaps, even more than in euphony and diction, is Poe's original power displayed. . . . Poe is usually intelligible and always lyrical or dramatic. It would be difficult to find in his poems, with the exception of those which are definitely personal, a line that would be unsuited to music.

It is pertinent to note here that the Hall of Fame, New York University, at its inception in the beginning of the new century, was not able to muster enough votes for the inclusion of our poet's name on its roll—so poor Poe had to remain in outer darkness in so far as the judgment at the time was concerned. Whereat the ire of the blind poet-priest of Maryland, Father Tabb, flared up. In deep disdain he burst forth into his now historic arraignment:

Unto the charnel House of Fame
The dead alone should go;
Then write not there the *living* name
Of Edgar Allan Poe.

Things were not, however, to remain thus. With the turn of the century came an awakening. The literary world, both in this country and abroad, was becoming increasingly Poe-conscious. Translations into foreign tongues were available. The attention of musicians was a natural consequence, and musical treatment a significant by-product. Hardly a year passed in the first decade of the twentieth century that was not marked by a number of new compositions based on Poe texts. Impetus was doubtless given at this time by the approach of the centenary of the birth of Poe, which was widely observed in America and Europe. Special musical settings were composed for some of the commemorative exercises.

And the Hall of Fame? Things were doing there too. On the hundredth birthday anniversary of Poe, January 19, 1909, its stately walls resounded to the music of the first production of Arthur Bergh's composition, *The Raven*. The eminent Metropolitan Opera baritone, David Bispham, was the reciter, and the composer accompanied on the piano. In the same season the work was repeated in New York, this time in Carnegie Hall with the full orchestral accompaniment, the composer conducting. The very next year saw the poet safely included among the elect at the Hall of Fame. Later on, a bronze portrait bust by Daniel Chester French further memorialized there Poe's share in the glory of American letters. (Maybe the birthday music helped to put things over.)

Though the gloom and desperation of the War years fell within the decade following the centenary, many new Poe settings were made in this period. Since then an astonishingly large number of compositions have borne witness to the urge to set Edgar Allan Poe to music.

4. From Foreign Parts

Though the greatest number of Poe-inspired compositions naturally hail from English-speaking countries, in which the composer can absorb and project the text in its original idiom, the continent of Europe also is represented by a considerable group. From France, Russia, Lithuania, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Italy, Rumania, have come evidences of deep interest in the musical possibilities of Poe's writings.

In reviewing the many settings in many tongues it becomes a strange but alluring experience to listen to the voice of our cosmopolitan author making its way through to us in musical numbers from far-off lands—transmuted but vastly appealing withal. To hear again, for instance, the croaking voice of the ominous bird of yore—"Dit le corbeau: 'jamais plus'," or "Spricht der Rabe: 'Nimmermehr!'" And to hearken to the pealing of Russian *kolokola*; or to the tintinnabulation of Italian *bubbolini*.

For the most part the foreign composers have had the advantage of recourse to fine translations into their own native tongues. Some of them have presented the compositions in the

original English or with transliterated texts in two or three languages. Some of the non-French Europeans have preferred to employ the notable French translations by Mallarmé, Baudelaire, and others—masterly renderings which have made the people of France come to regard the works of the American writer as an integral part of their own native literature.

In this connection it is of interest to note a recent occurrence relating to Poe and the French master, Maurice Ravel (of whom David Ewen in his *Composers of Today* says: "His two chief admirations in art are Poe and Mozart"). At the time of the death of Ravel (December 28, 1937), Associated Press dispatches from Paris included the following paragraph, which was widely commented on:

Ravel aroused interest by declaring that his model as a composer was Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's 'Philosophy of Composition' led Ravel to abandon 'the formlessness of the early French impressionists in favor of a return to classic standards,' he insisted.

For the purpose of obtaining further details relating to this interesting but rather sweeping assertion, information concerning the source of the press dispatches was sought from the composer's brother, M. Edouard Ravel, through the courtesy of Durand et Cie. Monsieur Ravel stated in reply that the article which appeared in a French journal as being by his brother was only an interview of several years back which had not been reviewed by the composer. He remarked further that although Ravel "had always greatly admired Edgar A. Poe, it is impossible to affirm that he considered him 'his model' and that the 'Philosophy of Composition' had had the consequences which you mention." (Which leaves it up in the air!)

One recalls also the frequent coupling by musicians of the name of Poe with that of his almost exact contemporary, Chopin. Aside from the mere matter of dates, striking resemblances to each other have been discerned:

'Poe and Chopin,' says James G. Huneker (*Mezzotints in Modern Music*, Charles Scribner's Sons), 'never knew of each other's existence, yet—a curious coincidence—two supremely melancholy artists of the beautiful lived and died almost synchronously. . . . The chronological events . . . are not the only comparisons that might be made. . . . There are parallels in the soul-lives as well as in the earth-lives of these two men. . . . Poe and Chopin all their lives were tortured by the

desire of beauty, by the vision of perfection. . . . both believed in the rhythmical creation of lyrical beauty and in the charm of evanescence. . . . The note of melancholy was to [Poe] the one note worthy the singing. And have we not a parallel in Chopin's music? [Chopin,] like Poe, is at his best in smaller art forms. . . . Poe's haunting melodies, his music for music's sake, often remind us of Chopin. . . . Both men resembled one another strangely, in their intensity of expression. Both had the power of expressing the weird, the terrific, . . .

Charles Sanford Skilton, in lecture-recitals on "Chopin and Poe," used to read certain Poe poems and play certain Chopin compositions in illustration of the bonds of similarity uniting the two. "History," he remarked, "records no other such striking parallel in temperament, genius and achievement between men of alien races. . . . Chopin the consummate flower of the oldest and most aristocratic civilization of Europe, put forth in the death throes of her independent existence; Poe among the first timid artistic products of a crude commercial republic—they are as far apart as sunrise and sunset, and as strangely and beautifully alike."

Howard R. Thatcher, professor of composition at the Peabody Conservatory of Music, learned while in Paris some years ago that a tradition was current among musicians that one of Chopin's most melodious *Etudes* (E major, Op. 10, No. 3) was inspired by a part of *The Bells*. Indeed, the character of the *Etude* in the middle section lends some plausibility to this notion. Too bad to prick the fair bubble; but the fact is that not only was the E major *Etude* composed years before *The Bells*, but the poem was not published until the month following the death of Chopin and that of Poe.

From the beginning Poe appealed strongly to the Slavic mind. One of the results of this interest is a significant group of compositions by Russian and other twentieth-century East-European composers inspired by Poe. A strong influence has been that of the noted Russian poet and translator of Poe—Konstantin Balmont, an outstanding symbolist and modernist in the Russian school of poetry. Among the earliest translations of Poe were some in the Russian language. Avrahm Yarmolinsky, in an article in *The Bookman* of September, 1916, says:

Translations of certain of Poe's writings appeared in Russian periodicals as early as the late 'thirties [of the nineteenth century, when Poe

was only in *his* late 'twenties or early 'thirties]. . . . The first name a Russian is most likely to mention, when the conversation turns to American literature, is 'that of 'mad Edgar,' . . . more than any other land, France included, Russia may claim to be Poe's country by, so to speak, posthumous adoption. The Slav has taken him to heart with all his unearthliness and morbidity, his fantastic rationalism and super-excited aestheticism, with all his dreams and nightmares. . . . Russian literature possesses a truly remarkable translation of Poe's complete poetical works, which closely follows the metre of the original. This is perhaps the most adequate transposition of Poe's poetry yet produced in any language. . . . Balmont's admirable translation of Poe's complete works . . . puts a finishing stroke to the process of Poe's Russification.

Mr. Yarmolinsky thus quotes Balmont:

'How could I breathe, and thousands of people with me, if there were not Poe's *Raven*, with its unforgettable burden of "Nevermore"? And if by night Annabel-Lee and Morella and Ligeia did not lean over me and kiss me a fantastic kiss? And how could the evening and morning bells chime if there were no "Bells" of the mad Edgar? And was not I among the Masks of the Red Death? And have I not fled in frenzied terror from the falling house of Usher? . . . Edgar Poe is the sweetest sound of the lute and the most passionate sob of the violin. . . . He lives among us in our most delicate sensations, in the mad outcries of our sorrow, in the sonorous rhythms of our songs.'

A further expression of this interest is contained in a personal letter, in English, from the Lithuanian composer, J. Karnavičius (G. Karnovitch), from which the following excerpts are made:

From the very beginning of the Great War I was in the front in Galicia. In 1915, after a three-days-and-nights desperate *arrière-garde* fight, we—that is two Russian battalions and myself—were taken prisoners by the Germans. We were sent to Bohemia and there, in the little town Josefstadt, I passed the next three years of my life. Separated from the world, we had plenty of time to read, meditate and dream. I studied the work of Edgar Poe earnestly. Reading again and again 'The Fall of the House of Usher' I was at last possessed by a queer fancy, as if I had lived myself in the strange House of Usher, meeting and conversing with Usher and Poe, reading Shelley together. . . . The result was the music of the 'Remembrances of the House of Usher.' . . . ' . . . the night waned and he sat upon the rock.' The night is waning in reality and I am sitting at my table. Do forgive me this endless letter! You see, Edgar Poe, as a personality, and his work have such an irresistible influence on me, that whenever I meet them I cannot stop thinking, 'linking fancy unto fancy' and 'dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.'

Many other evidences of acquaintanceship with the American Poe have come from foreign musicians. For instance, to mention only a few, the following composers (they have not as yet made settings of the texts, but they know their Poe):

Jean Sibelius: "I am a strong admirer of Allan Poe."

Arnold Schoenberg: "I read many of E. A. Poe's works."

Sergei Prokofieff: "I have the greatest admiration to this remarkable poet."

Taijiro Goh (of Imperial Conservatory of Music of Japan): "Poe is a well-known name to students of English literature and poetry in Japan."

5. Amazing Variety of Musical Forms

One expects to find vocal forms, admitting of the use of words, predominating in musical settings of literary texts. Thus it is in the case of Poe. But what one would not expect to find is the astonishing variety and number of other forms selected by composers for the treatment of Poe themes.

Even a brief listing of the modes of expression will suffice to convey some idea of their great extent—song, chant, chorus, cantata, recitation to music, opera, piano solo, chamber music, symphony, symphonic poem, incidental music, ballet.

The first purely instrumental piece noted in the present list appeared as early as 1866. It is a piano solo, *Sleigh Bells*, based on the first stanza of *The Bells*, and forms one of three *Winter Pictures* by the American church composer, Dudley Buck.

A third of a century later (in 1900) a symphonic poem for grand orchestra, *The Raven*, was brought out at the Crystal Palace Symphony Concerts, London, under the direction of Sir August Manns. It is the work of the British composer, Josef Holbrooke, who, by the way, has written more Poe pieces than has any other single composer, no fewer than 25 compositions, comprising 35 Poe texts, evidencing his interest in the American poet. ("Poe sings always," says Holbrooke; "and so few poets do.")

Other instrumental works followed in rapid succession both in this country and abroad. This development, which Poe himself could certainly never have foreseen, was doubtless due in part to the increasing vogue of descriptive instrumental music—

"program music"—based on or inspired by a literary text or an incident or other "program." Poe's imaginative creations lend themselves readily to such depiction. In turn they themselves find a fitting vehicle in the large instrumental forms, especially in the latest and highest development of the tone picture—the symphonic poem.

The multiform mediums chosen by composers for the musical embodiment of Poe represent no less variety in the character of the music. The compositions range from the simplest and most conventional styles of past periods in which they were popular, and the highly developed forms adhered to by followers of the "classical" school, to the restless tonality (and "atonality"), the radical departure from long-established principles, and the startling—even sometimes audacious—innovations in instrumentation characterizing the modern trends.

The compositions recorded in the bibliography represent, of course, various degrees of merit. Many of the settings are the work of unquestioned genius; and of distinguished talent and originality. Most of them are products of the present century, and include many effective interpretations by rising young composers of today. Some four or five are the bubbling effusions of composers when in their long-ago boyhood days, and have a special significance for that very reason. Some of the settings are noteworthy chiefly for their antiquarian interest. But the great majority are the expressions of matured art. No attempt at evaluation of the works listed has been made. Suffice it to say that the settings as a whole constitute a sincere and impressive contribution to music as well as a tribute to the poet. And they represent withal a highly significant phase of the belated appreciation (belated at least in his native land) accorded the bard "whose hardest idea will to melody run."

Pondering on the whole remarkable development, one can but fall to musing in the old accustomed way on the irony of fate, and to speculating as to what the thoughts of struggling genius would be if only it were given to it to peer into the future and take heart of courage therefrom. Perchance the prophetic soul of a creative artist *does* perceive somehow the things which are in store, and so goes on stubbornly with a fight that seems often a losing one. And Edgar Allan Poe, trudging

the streets in bitterness of spirit, despairingly but doggedly hawking his wares from publisher to publisher, may indeed have sensed, if dimly, what was to come—both the literary recognition of his art and the realization of the musical potentialities in which it abounds. Said he:

In speaking of song-writing, I mean, of course, the composition of brief poems with an eye to their adaptation for music. . . . In this ultimate destination of the song proper, lies its essence, its genius.

And again:

There can be little doubt that in the union of Poetry with Music . . . we shall find the widest field for the Poetic development. The old Bards and Minnesingers had advantages which we do not possess—and Thomas Moore, singing his own songs, was, in the most legitimate manner, perfecting them as poems.