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Poe and New Media

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*“Edgar Allan Poe had the most original imagination in the world; he struck an entirely new note. I shall have to find its equivalent in music.” Debussy.*

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was contemporary of musicians who wrote the history of the world. Their legacies have prevailing influence in contemporary culture. Composers such as Berlioz (1803), Chopin (1810), Liszt (1811), Verdi (1813), Wagner (1813), and Debussy (1862) must have read at some point Poe's mysterious stories. Poe was not a musician but researchers indicate that he played the flute and probably the piano. (Evans 1839.)

It would take about one hundred years after Poe's birthday for musical compositions to begin emerging to the light of the public. A notable one was the production of *The Raven* by Arthur Bergh -piano- recited by Metropolitan Opera baritone David Bispham. Many compositions would follow an urge to turn Poe's writings into music. Quite a few broke the barriers of linguistic frontiers and became foreign interpretations. *“Dit le corbeau: ‘jamais plus’”* or *“Spricht der Rabe: ‘Nimmermeht!’* “May sound rather odd but reflect evidence of the need of cultural acquisition that increased during the Industrial Revolution and the early stages of what we understand today as “Globalization.”

The French master, Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) was deeply inspired by Poe. According to Paris Associated Press Ravel's writings publicly declared interest in Poe's ‘Philosophy of Composition.’ His brother who claimed that Ravel was nothing but an admirer of Poe's work would later challenge this public declaration.

Poe's work had been frequently paralleled to his almost exact contemporary Chopin. Both were tortured by the desire of beauty, and by the vision of perfection.

Sir August Manns, a German conductor who for forty two years was the conductor in Charge of the Crystal Palace -a major exhibition center in the heart of London- brought *The Raven* to the stage in the form of a symphonic poem for grand orchestra. Josef Holbrooke, a British composer who wrote more than 25 compositions comprising more than 35 texts of Poe, wrote the symphony. The work was first performed at the Crystal Palace in a Saturday afternoon, March 3rd 1900. (Lowe 129) We all know the story that was told by now. The interpretation employed a large number of flutes, oboes, cor-anglais, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trombones, trumpets, a bass tuba, tympani, gongs, cymbals, harps and strings. The repetitive "Nevermore" that is essential to the poem was interpreted with the assistance of horns and oboes. Holbrook's work, according to Lowe arouses bitter criticism but it also was exalted to the work of genius.

"There is one poet, however, in particular, with which the name of Holbrook must always be associated, and that is the American Poet, Edgar Allan Poe. We feel that, in some sub-conscious manner, these two creative minds of different ages meet on the same spiritual plane in a manner that is both inevitable and wonderful. The work of the one artist seems to complete that of the other so as to form a subtle link between literature and music." (128)

From the two hundred and fifty two musical setting that comprise the account of the musical bibliography study written by May Garretson Evans, 219 are interpretations of poetry texts. The uncontested poem chosen to become a sound piece by 1939 was *Annabel Lee* with *The Raven* in a very distant fourth place.

*The Raven* that was interpreted as a musical piece by Samuel Beman surfaced to the public arena in a New York monthly magazine called: "*The Nightingale or Jenny Lind Songster*," as

early as June 1850, a mere eight months after Poe's early death. To attest this story a rare small book exists and it introduces *The Raven* in a very peculiar manner:

'Tis with little hesitation, this Poetic strange creation  
 Of a mad imagination, that complete we print once more.  
 'Tis with us a rule prevailing, never to indulge curtailing  
 Author's rhymes, whate'er their failing; all abridgments we deplore.  
 So though you mayn't sing the "Raven," sure we are you'll read it o'er  
 Once, at least, if "nevermore." (Evans 14)

An issue of this publication now sits in the Poe Music Collection of the Johns Hopkins University after being donated by Miss Elizabeth Harris, of Richmond, VA.

Among the known pieces that used *The Raven* as its theme are:

1850 Beman, Samuel. (Editor) Vol. I, No. 103 of *The Nightingale or the Jenny Lind Songster*.

1865 Scattergood, D. 4-part chant.

1866 Barker, George. Arranged as a recitative chant. Peters & Bro. 4 leaves.

1894 Unknown author. Recitation with pianoforte accompaniment. Bosworth & Co., London.

1902 Zech, Frederick. Symphonic poem. Composed 1902.

1905 Heinrich, Max. Recitation with piano accompaniment.

1906 Unknown author. Cantata for chorus and orchestra Op. 50

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1908 Kranich, Alvin. Melodrama. Incidental music for pianoforte, to be used in connection with the narration of the poem. Dresden Germany. English and German texts.

1909 Unknown author. Poem for grand orchestra. Op 25. J & W. Chester, Ltd.

1913 Haasz, Richard. Symphonic poem for grand orchestra. Also piano transcription.

1925 Author Unknown. (Der Rabe) Symphonic poem. Score completed at Weimar, Germany,

1925.

1933 Dubensky, Arcady. Recitation (“melodeclamation”) with orchestra accompaniment.

1939 Johnson, Hunter. For piano. MS Written when the composer was 14 years old

In more “contemporary” years more interpretations of *The Raven* have been released to the public. Among them the most representatives are the experimental version released in 1975 by Oswald Gerstel which included horn, vibrophone, xylophone, percussion, and magnetic tape; and that of Richard Wrightson and Charlotte Roebbelen in 1977.

However, it was many years earlier, in 1969, a version managed to make it into the popular culture, Poe’s perennial goal. *The Glass Prism*, a group of rock and roll from Boston anointed by RCA produced a version of *The Raven*. *The Glass Prism* disappeared from the world after their second album. Ronald Smith in *Poe and The Media* (1990) says: “They tried to be “faithful” to Poe by appropriating entire stanzas unchanged and condensing the story line.” But it never really happens. To this day *The Glass Prism* interpretation doesn’t go beyond that, an interpretation of it. It is more interesting perhaps the cover design for the album, which included a large black raven, perched onto what reads as the main member of the group.

Finally, in 1975 Alan Parsons, British musician and music engineer partnered with Eric Woolfson -songwriter and manager- to create “The Alan Parsons Project.” This venture was aimed from the very beginning to develop conceptually based businesses. Their first project was “***Tales of Mystery and Imagination***,” a work derived directly from Poe’s writings. It was the result of a marketing school project developed by Woolfson during his college years when he came up with the original concept as a marketing exercise. During an interview included in the re-released of the album in 2007 (Mercury Records) Woolfson reveals the nature of their project authorial intent:

*“ I looked at -amongst other things- to the fact that people were drawn to terror.*

*They went to see films such as King Kong, Psycho, Earth Quake, Towering Inferno, and The Jaws as a way of getting release, and I felt perhaps there was something you could capture in record.”* (CD MLA?)

The whole album was recorded in the famous Abbey Road Studios, known for incorporating engineering into the production of its records, particularly those of the famous British group *The Beatles* that undoubtedly changed the world by adding its name to the reigning popular culture. Abbey Road Studios Engineers came up with idea of using a *vocoder*, an electronic device that alters the signals of a sound -mostly speech- when passed through a multi-band filter. It wasn't a new invention since its original design took place in the 1930s as a tool for coding communication for military purposes.

“I literally just speak the words meanwhile while Eric plays the notes on the keyboard.” Says Alan Parson during the interview included in the 2007 re-release of the record. The Alan Parsons Project was the not the first to use the device in unexpected ways and to apply it to the music production environment. Its sound interpretative qualities were very well suited for a time when hallucinogenic environments were an integral part of young popular culture, an approach that ties to the argument of Poe's addictions to opium as many authors claim.

The production team changed the titles so they wouldn't recognize them. For obvious reasons this approach quickly failed given the preceding fame of Poe's texts. However, the names and production details were kept as guarded secrets perhaps signaling the first attempts to incorporate said practices in today's corporate and advertising world. After its official release in 1976, Rolling Stone magazine's writer Billy Altman wrote a brief critical review about the album where he mainly claimed that it was a complex and difficult task that did not rise to the expectations of such a monumental project. *“Unfortunately, the tension and sense of impending, surreal terror that underscore most of Poe's work simply didn't get transferred into the musical interpretations.”* (Rolling Stone, September 23 1976, 118)

*The Raven* as interpreted by The Alan Parsons Project begins with an electronic tapping followed by vocals: Terry Celesti, John Mails, Arthur Brown (fa), Morrison, and Alan Parsons himself. What I find a success is the interpretative approach for a piece of text so embedded in popular culture. Avoiding the strong lure of using the texts as is has a strong merit. The long poem had been reinterpreted opening with a stanza that reads as follows:

The clock struck midnight  
And through my sleeping  
I heard a tapping at my door  
I looked but nothing lay in the darkness  
And so I turned inside once more

Here the text changes the state of mind of Poe's original description from a previous state of sleep and nodding -almost napping- to an experience that is almost a dream rather than the vanishing vigil state of consciousness that the original poem describes. The electronic tone, on the other hand, does a great job in setting up a mood and a frame for the entire piece, that of an electronic, computerized new age. An approach that Poe would have enjoyed as a form of beauty as we can read in his *Anastatic Printing* article from 1845: "*...that is to say, to everything which arouses profound interest in the heart or intellect of man. In very such thing, strangeness - in other words novelty - will be found a principal element; and so universal is this law that it has no exception even in the case of this principal element itself.*"

For the second stanza as the electronic tapping continues more instruments are added to create a crescendo toward the end of it when the piece turns into a purely Rock & Roll rhythm

To my amazement  
There stood a raven

Whose shadow hung above my door

Then through the silence

It spoke that one word

That I shall hear forever more

The climax of the piece stop suddenly to let the audience hear the main expressions of The Raven, the ones that through reiteration provide a sense of anguish to the poem, void in the musical piece:

Nevermore

Thus quoth the raven, nevermore

The piece finish with a strong stanza that attempts to provide the audience with a sense of unrest and lack of hope, “no words can soothe him” there is nothing that could be done to alter the destiny delivered by the visit of the black bird.

And still the raven remains in my room

No matter how much I implore

No words can soothe him

No prayer remove him

And I must hear for evermore

Quoth the raven, nevermore

Thus quoth the raven

Nevermore

The actual album was not a financial success but it led to others created by this co-ventured project that became hits in Billboard charts. They included the engineering of Pink Floyd’s *“The Dark Side of the Moon”* and other such as *Ammonia Avenue* (1984), *Vulture Culture* (1985), *Stereotomy* (1986) and *Gaudi* (1987).

Critics claim that what kept this album from being a hit was its experimental nature for the time it was released. I found this observation interesting, as Poe had to face similar situations repetitively during his life time. Might he have been too futuristic for his time? Perhaps Poe was indeed too progressive and even though he always struggles to increase his readership he never found the masses he continued to look for.

It is interesting to comment that the design of the album attempted to create an experience of discovery and mystery by adding several layers inside it that were accompanied by a booklet, an inlet so to speak that presented the lyrics of the songs and included a photographic composition of a man wrapped around what reads as magnetic tape with the image of a doctor, standing in the background gazing, almost lurking at the image of the wrapped man while holding his arms in a state of suspended action that adds to the tension of the image. The composition attempts to provide the same aura of 1920 Man Ray's *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*. The photo does not succeed in communicating this emotion due to the additional elements that create visual clutter. Namely, the illustrations on the upper right hand corner and the following pages and the caption beneath the photographs.

However, they also be read as a possible sexual bizarre practices which would not be inadequate to the overall composition and the poem concept anyway but in this particular case are not leaning towards that reading either.

Inside this publication there another set of images of two profiles to illustrate the lyrics of *The Raven* showing an actual raven looking straight into the eye of a man, both in profiles, frozen. The photographs are by Storm Thorgerson, Aubrey Powell, Peter Christopherson, and Sam Emerson (Alan Parsons' portrait.) The Front sleeve was designed by Hipgnosis, a now dissolved British art design group that created many of the now cultural icons of Rock & Roll including Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, Genesis, Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Peter Gabriel, and The Alan Parsons Project.

Even though the project's scale was massive -it employed more than 300 people- the actual project fell far from being close to Poe's intent of inflicting terror in the reader. It is said that Poe's reading of the poem was an accelerating and intense experience on itself (Evans 2.) It could also be claimed that the project did not even fulfill its original intent, that of becoming a marketing success. Unless, of course, the intent was far reaching that than and aimed to begin a long term creative consortium that capitalized in the fame of a copyright-less very popular author exploited to unimaginable limits.

A few days ago, I sent an email to Alan Parsons communication address -available through his website- asking him about two aspects that caught my attention during the research process for this analysis: One, a possible Andean influence in the composition of the piece. *The Fall of the House of Usher: Pavane (Remix) (4:37)* includes what seems to be a "charango," which is an instrument made out of the exoskeleton of an Armadillo. The instrument is common to Andean music. And two, I asked him a more conceptual question about the effectiveness of his composition in terms of a possible critic input from Poe himself. I asked him how he thinks Poe would have composed *The Raven* had there been a chance to work directly with him as a sound engineer. Will he ever answer? I don't think so but I certainly hope he does. Keeping that possibility open is the true nature of the beauty of new media: The seemingly true possibility of direct and "personal" communication.

My conclusion after delivering this brief analysis is that achieving an enticing, powerful, and convincing interpretation of any poem by Edgar Alan Poe is a challenging task. A task attempted innumerable times over the years. Even Silvio Rodriguez -the famous Cuban musician- had used Poe's *The Raven* for one of his songs. A song that will become part of my short term future for this semester.

More importantly however, the preliminary conclusion that I have is that I want to know more and for that reason my research paper-final project- will attempt to present yet one more version

of Poe's *The Raven* as a hybrid media appropriation embedded in its own scholarly analysis.

Poe is dead, long live Poe.

"I am profoundly excited by music," said Poe. (Evans 1)

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