Relationships Through Music in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

The status of music in the 19th century could be summed up in the simple statement from Theodore Hoppen, a scholar of the period: “The Victorians, it seemed, could do anything with music—except compose it” (qtd. Solie, 261). He and other Musicology scholars such as Phyllis Weliver, Amy E. Siddons, and Ruth A. Solie comment on the strange historical fact that although entertained and enriched by composers, pieces, and performances from other European nations, Victorian England seemed incapable of producing original musical content. From this curious musical dry spell stems the popular thought perpetuated through the 19th and early 20th centuries that England was a “land without music” (Solie, 262).

This strange paradox, that a country could “do anything with music” but be incapable of creating it, can be explained as we delve deeper into the development of music’s sister art—the art of poetry. With commonalties such as meter, rhyme, and repetition, these “sister arts” have experienced a mutually beneficial relationship since ancient days. As the scholar Amy Siddons said of poetry’s early role in music, “the pathos used to praise instrumental music was inspired by literature: were it not for the poetic conceit of unspeakability, there would have been no words available for reinterpreting the musically confusing or empty into the sublime or wonderful” (qtd. Siddons, 6). While music of the past achieved meaning and elevation through literary descriptions and praise, scholars agree that the opposite had become true for many writers and poets in more recent centuries as Amy Siddons continues, “the idea of the desirable indeterminate, originally a poetic troupe, inhabits Victorian literature as a musical theme… for nearly all of the major Victorian poets” (Siddons, 6-7). True to the mutually beneficial relationship of music and poetry, the previous century’s tradition of expounding, interpreting, and elevating music through poetics and turn of phrase gave way to the elevation of poetry
through the intimation of musical elements. This music of words became one of the great artistic treasures of Victorian England, far eclipsing and displacing the veneration traditionally reserved for musical performance. Siddons summarized the historical circumstances as follows: “In one way, Victorian musical literature substitutes for this perceived gap in culture by becoming another English version of musical high art.” The public was eager “for an English expression of art music, even a literary one” (Siddons, 12).

Many nineteenth century authors, including Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB), answered the public’s call for “art music” by incorporating musical themes into their literary works. While Robert Browning toyed with the expression and meaning of music in several of his dramatic monologues, Elizabeth Barrett Browning focused instead on musical symbols to connect ideas and relate to deeper themes and often to the topic of poetry itself.

Musicology scholars of Victorian literature have written about the “art music” of many of these poet-musicians but have not explored the poetry of EBB. On the other hand, the class of EBB scholarship has discussed some musical symbols in her works. However, neither class of scholarship has commented on the musical quality of her sonnets, nor connected them to a musical-poetic theme within the Victorian background. In this presentation, I would like to unite the EBB and Victorian Musicology scholarships in discussion of a work that comfortably belongs to both of them, which is EBB’s Sonnets from the Portuguese. Given a misnomer to disguise the incredibly personal nature of these love poems, Sonnets from the Portuguese is a sonnet sequence compiled of 44 pieces written during the 19-month courtship that preceded EBB’s elopement with Robert Browning. Though it undeniably details a love story from bud to bloom, Sonnets accomplishes many other things within the wider Victorian context. Through my
explication of the musical aspect of EBB’s *Sonnets* and her unification of the musical-poetic theme, I hope to demonstrate how EBB joined in the rich Victorian tradition of music in literature and how that tradition expanded the significance and applicability of her poems.

Although some may argue that musical symbols in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are not used more than the other poetic themes, these musical symbols make a crucial contribution to the musicality of the *Sonnets* as a whole. According to Lorraine Byrne Bodley who wrote extensively on the subject of music in poetry, “A ‘musical poem’ is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of secondary meanings in the words which compose it, … these two patterns are indissoluble and one. The music of verse is not about metrical patterns and scansion; it is a question of the whole poem” (Bodley, 107). From this we understand that the presence of musical symbolism forms one part of a poem’s musicality, the rhythm of the line and music of the words together makes the other, and these two come together to create a subtly and seamlessly musical whole. Therefore, to thoroughly examine the musical aspect of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, we must first explore the musical symbols, or, music in the poetry; and secondly, demonstrate how the poetry is music. To do this, we will first proceed through the poems, following the story of the sonnets, and discuss each major musical allusion that crafts significant musical comparisons and also creates references to the art of poetry. When speaking of the poetic personas, it is implied that the “lover” refers to EBB and the beloved refers to Robert Browning.

The symbolism that most clearly transcends the boundary of straightforward “musical” allusion is found in poem 17. This poem begins with the lover’s call to her beloved, saying “My poet, thou canst touch on all the notes” (1). By choosing to address him as “My poet,” in lieu of “My musician,” which one would expect to see in a sentence referring to touching “notes,” EBB effectively erases the distinguishing line between these two classes of artists. This in turn
connects her with the Victorian movement of musical-poetics. Therefore, in her word
manipulation and the blending of meaning, EBB not only creates poetry with musical references,
but also effectively alludes to both music and poetry. Having now proved the interchangeability
of music and poetry in this instance, we will apply this principle to other examples of musical
symbolism in the sonnet sequence.

In sonnet 3, EBB compares the “chief musician” to a “poor, tired, wandering singer,”
highlighting the incongruity of the two lovers (9, 11). At surface level, this comparison paints the
beloved, or “chief musician” to be someone from a higher station and of enhanced ability, while
the lover is seen only as “weak” and consigned to “wander” alone in the seemingly impenetrable
gap that separates them. Yet this comparison still unites the lovers since, despite their disparities,
the clear fact remains: that they both are musicians. Thus the very offices used to emphasize the
differences between the lovers also prove their underlying commonalities. This hidden unity
through music also hints at the deeper truth—that both are also poets. The succeeding sonnets are
more forward in proving this theme, as the musical symbolism evolves from this pre-destined
course of aggrandizement of the beloved and belittling of the lover to bringing the underlying
idea of unity into a literary reality.

Sonnet 32 at first refers to the previous theme of incongruity between the two lovers with
the new comparison of the beloved to a “good singer” and the lover to a “worn viol” (8).
However, as the poem unfolds, this comparison takes a positive turn with the thought that
“perfect strains may float, /’Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced” (12-13). This
simple conclusion suggests for the first time that, despite their differences and the defects on the
part of the lover, the two can be better musicians together than either of them could be apart; and
if better musicians, then better poets. Additionally, the “instruments defaced” from line 13 could
be a reference EBB makes to herself on two levels: first as the lover, the “worn viol” who sings the sweetest “strains”; and secondly, as a woman who, although frequently in poor health, wrote lines of exquisite poetry which she attributed in this instance to Robert’s love for her.

However, it is sonnet 41 in which the marriage of poetry and music and the union of the poetic lovers are both solidified. This sonnet begins with the lover giving gratitude to all those who heard her “music in its louder parts” (4). Keeping in mind the pre-established poetic references presented in many of the sonnets, it is not such a stretch to assume that the music to which EBB alludes in this opening reference is that of her own poetry. She was, after all, a well-known poet at the time. The sonnet’s mention of those who heard her music in passing must then refer to the people who followed her poetry. EBB then describes her “voice’s sink and fall” (7) and we are introduced to the beloved and his “divinest Art’s/ Own instrument” (8-9), which is dropped to the floor as he listens to her.

In a previous poetic example employing an instrumental theme, the instrument of “[The Worn viol] is laid down at the first ill-sounding note” (32, 8-9, emphasis added) which is in direct contrast with this instrument which the beloved “did drop down at [his] foot” (41, 9, emphasis added). If the intended meaning of the word ‘instrument’ here was ascribed to a musical instrument (such as the viol of a previous example), then the act of “dropping it” would cause irreparable damage. Yet because such damage is not suggested in the rest of the poem, a different meaning must be implied. An alternate interpretation of the words “art” and “instrument” defines the “art” as that of poetry. The instrument then, would be the “instrument” of the pen in poetry and writing. We know that EBB and Robert Browning courted through correspondence, and since they frequently referenced each other’s poetry in their letters and each other’s letters in their poetry (Stone fn 4, 216), it can be construed that the “beloved” stopping to
“harken what I said between my tears” (10) is a reference to Robert Browning’s loving correspondence when he set aside his “divinest Art’s/ Own instrument” of the pen and just listened, letting EBB express her feelings in what proved to be a pivotal moment in their relationship and eventual love.

Having now confirmed the poetic features of the musical imagery and second meanings, we return to explore the musical aspect of the poetry itself. Referring again to the remaining qualifications given by Bodley, “A ‘musical poem’ is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of secondary meanings in the words which compose it, and these two patterns are indissoluble and one.” However, the ‘musical pattern of sound’ found in the Sonnets—though present—is often hard to distinguish through close reading alone. The difficulty of making musical distinctions clear arises from the different perspectives and expectations of the readership (Bodley, 106). While I cannot claim that every reader will sense the ‘pattern of musical sound’ present in Sonnets from the Portuguese, there is a strong argument for its presence and effectiveness. Well-crafted words and phrases have their own rhythm and movement comparable to anything that could be sung, and in the case of Sonnets from the Portuguese, this musical quality has been translated quite literally.

Libby Larsen, a celebrated composer, saw the existing musical aspect of Sonnets from the Portuguese and took the next step, translating the textual sonnet sequence into a singing cycle in 1991. Of her work, Larsen explained, “I generally let the rhythm of the words, the varying length of phrases, and the word emphasis dictate specific rhythm, phrase structure and melodic material.” (Rowe, 19). Drawing specifically from sonnets 1, 28, 34, 35, 40, and 43, Larsen essentially allows the text to sing the music already within the sonnets as she composes each phrase. Any text so beautifully adapted to music such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Sonnets of
*the Portuguese* has been must have intrinsic musical qualities not only in its content, but also in its style and rhythm of phrase. We can therefore clearly see that *Sonnets from the Portuguese* fulfills the criteria of a musical poem, having both a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of secondary meanings in the words.

Although the Victorian era may have lacked music in the traditional sense, EBB’s contributions to the culture through her musical poetics in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* enriched and imbued Victorian life with, what her husband tenderly termed, her own “fresh, strange music” (qtd. Mermin, 351). We “lend it utterance” (XLI, 13) today as we read and study her poems, saluting her brilliance and finally appreciating her masterful interweaving of the sister arts of music and poetry.
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