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The Limits of Language: Emotion and Its Expression in the Work of Alfred de Musset

Abstract: Music occupies a central role in the work of Alfred de Musset (1810–1857). The popular *chansons à mettre en musique* of his first collection were followed by many more, and references to musicians and the art of music abound in what he wrote. This can be explained in part by his love of music, and his belief in the essential unity of all the arts; but it also reflects the place music came to hold in Musset’s limited but very coherent literary aesthetic, which is to be found in the comments he made in his correspondence, critical essays, and imaginative writing. Central to this poetics was the expression of the deepest feelings of the author himself; over time, however, and particularly after the failure of his liaison with George Sand, Musset became aware of all that words could not express. It was as a result of this perceived linguistic inadequacy that he turned increasingly to the evocative power of verbal melody – and music – to impart the feeling which words, he believed in the end, could at best only suggest: “Quelle parole humaine exprimerait jamais la plus faible caresse?” (*La Confession d’un enfant du siècle*, 1836).

Keywords: affective power of music, expression of emotion through music, inadequacy of words, verbal melody

“Allons, bel oiseau bleu, chantez la romance à Madame”: this is the exhortation to sing his sentimental ballad that the soubrette Suzanne gives to the amorous page Chérubin at the beginning of act 2, scene 4, of *Le Mariage de Figaro*, the play by Beaumarchais dating from 1784 (Beaumarchais 1957 [1949], 282); but it is also the epigraph that Alfred de Musset chose to introduce the shorter poems in his first collection of verse, the *Contes d’Espagne et d’Italie*, in 1829. In his choice of this single line, many of his major predilections as an author are already evident: the slightly impertinent youthful pose he (and many of his narrative personae) would long favour, and his interest in eighteenth-century French literature, including the minor poetic genres that held the attention of few of his peers;¹ but, more notably for us here, also his appreciation of music, and its association, for him, with verse: this epigraph clearly anticipates the inclusion, in his own plays, of

¹ For an explanation of the particular poetic forms from this time that Musset preferred, see the interesting observations by Jacques Bony (1996, 486).

music and song. In what follows here, I would like to describe the importance of verbal melody, or harmony, as a tenet of Musset's theory of poetry – whose existence itself has been long disputed – before going on to explain the light it sheds on the idea of the theatre held by this great dramatist who never clearly expressed what he believed drama should be.

From his earliest days as an author, the associations Musset made between music and his verse were intimate and constant. In one of his personal additions to the text of *L'Anglais mangeur d'opium*, his hasty 1828 translation of De Quincey's classic, and first work in print, Musset refers to "le céleste don de la poésie, le génie de l'harmonie immense" (1966 [1963], 543).² In a *conte en vers* from the *Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie*, published the following year, the protagonist of *Les Marrons du feu*, Rafaël, explains that

[...]. La poésie,
Voyez – vous, c'est bien. – Mais la musique, c'est mieux,
Pardieu! voilà deux airs qui sont délicieux;
La langue sans gosier n'est rien. – Voyez le Dante;
Son Séraphin doré ne parle pas, – il chante! (Musset 1966 [1963], 58)

The short poems that follow these tales in verse, those introduced by the epigraph from Beaumarchais, are entitled "Chansons à mettre en musique et fragments" (Musset 1966 [1963], 70). This may mean, as one critic has suggested (Maurice-Amour 1958, 34), that it was for music that Musset began to write verse; but in this regard one fact is certain: the first poem Musset is known to have composed, "À ma mère," dating from 1824 when he was nearly fourteen, includes, almost as part of the title, the instruction "Sur l'air de 'Femmes voulez-vous éprouver ...'" (Musset 1966 [1963], 218). In the elegy "Lucie," composed in 1835, Musset equates music, "cette douce langue du cœur," with "harmonie," the same word he regularly used to refer to the verbal melody which quickly became one of his central considerations as a poet:

Son sourire semblait d'un ange: elle chanta.
[...]
Fille de la douleur, harmonie! harmonie!
Langue que pour l'amour inventa le génie!
Qui nous vint d'Italie, et qui lui vint des cieux!
Douce langue du cœur [...]. (Musset 1966 [1963], 150)

² All references to the work of Alfred de Musset in this study are to the comprehensive edition prepared by Philippe van Tieghem (Musset 1966 [1963]). Furthermore, all parenthetical citations of Musset refer to Alfred de Musset unless otherwise indicated.

Many other examples associating Musset's verse with music could easily be cited: the brief poems inspired, for instance, by the airs of Schubert in 1839 ("Jamais": "Jamais, avez-vous dit, tandis qu'autour de nous / Résonnait de Schubert la plaintive musique" [Musset 1966 (1963), 181]), or Mozart in 1842:

Rappelle-toi
(Vergiß mein nicht)
 Paroles faites sur la musique de Mozart
 [...]

 Je ne te verrai plus; mais mon âme immortelle
 Reviendra près de toi comme une sœur fidèle.
 Écoute, dans la nuit,
 Une voix qui gémit:
 Rappelle-toi.³ (Musset 1966 [1963], 193; italics in original)

There is also the much longer tribute composed in 1836, *À la Malibran*, in memory of the famous mezzo-contralto whose art he had so admired: "Ainsi nous consolait ta voix fraîche et sonore, / Et tes chants dans les cieux emportaient la douleur" (Musset 1966 [1963], 163). Of all the Romantic writers, it has been observed that it was perhaps Musset "qui [...] aime le plus et le mieux la musique" (Maurice-Amour 1958, 34). Throughout his life, he found in it a source of pleasure and consolation, as we have seen, but also of inspiration, and not just for narrative asides or even whole poems,⁴ but, very early on, also for what he believed the true character of all poetry should be: it was in this way that music – as verbal melody – was first incorporated into his poetics.

Although poetry was Musset's preferred genre, he wrote no comprehensive theory to explain his views. Later poets like Baudelaire and Rimbaud would have us believe that he had none,⁵ but he did write, between 1830 and 1832 especially, a number of longer poems in formal alexandrines from which his views on poetry

3 It may be impossible to identify with any certainty the composer of the song Musset heard, but, as L. Maurice-Amour (1958, 34) has written: "Qu'importe que le *lied* soit de Mozart ou d'un imitateur; ce qui compte c'est l'influence de la musique sur la sensibilité du poète."

4 Paul de Musset's recollections confirm that, as early as October, 1831, his brother was well aware of the role music could play in the composition of his verse: "Il forma des projets de retraite et de travail. [...] Afin de s'assurer des récréations paisibles, il acheta ses entrées au théâtre de l'Opéra pour six mois. [...] Parfois, il se trouvait seul dans un coin de la salle et laissait, avec plaisir, la musique éveiller son imagination. Sous l'influence de cet excitant, il composa *le Saule*, le poème le plus long et le plus sérieux qu'il eût encore écrit" (P. de Musset 1877, 105).

5 Frank Lestringant (2006, 8–11) may have prepared the most recent summary of their opinions in his introduction to Alfred de Musset's *Poésies complètes*. To these might be added the reservations mentioned in the notes taken by Heredia of the conversations at Leconte de Lisle's: "Poète médiocre, artiste nul, prosateur fort spirituel" (quoted in Jeune 1970, 46).

may easily be inferred: *Les Secrètes Pensées de Raphaël, gentilhomme français* (published July 1830), *Les Vœux stériles* (published October 1830), and the “Dédicace” of *La Coupe et les Lèvres* (1832). Further qualifying remarks abound in his correspondence, critical essays, dramas, short stories, and indeed his other poems, just over 33 % of which are in some way concerned with literature or literary creation.

At the centre of the very coherent poetics that emerges were the most intimate feelings of the poet himself: his own heart was to furnish, through its moods and discoveries, the thematic material of his verse, but was also to generate the inspiration necessary for its composition. The object of such poetry, charged by emotion, analysing emotion, was to move the reader as deeply as Musset himself had been moved when composing it. Even when writing his earliest verse, Musset believed rhythm to be an indispensable means of putting his reader into a deeper state of mind, of making him more receptive to the emotion his poetry contained; and this would not change. “La poésie est si essentiellement musicale,” he claimed in 1839 in the incomplete *Poète déchu*, “qu’il n’y a pas de si belle pensée devant laquelle le poète ne recule si la mélodie ne s’y trouve pas et, à force de s’exercer ainsi, il en vient à n’avoir non seulement que des paroles, mais que des pensées mélodieuses” (Musset 1966 [1963], 650). The emotion such poetry was intended to evoke can be gauged from Musset’s own response in the same fragment to the episode of Paolo and Francesca in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: “Vingt-cinq vers, me disais-je, rendent un homme immortel! Pourquoi? Parce que celui qui lit ces vingt-cinq vers après cinq siècles, s’il a du cœur, tombe à terre et pleure, et qu’une larme est ce qu’il y a de plus vrai, de plus impérissable au monde” (Musset 1966 [1963], 650). Musset’s emphasis on harmony determined the character of his verse, resulting in the fluid alexandrines of the *Nuits* cycle, for example, and its images associating poetry with music,⁶ or the varied and evocative metres of his later *contes en vers*.

Many modern readers, however, find the verbal melodies of Musset’s *chansons* and shorter poems to be the most appealing. Focused as they often are on sentiment and devoid of neoclassical rhetoric, these brief songs were the strand of his verse which changed the least. With the passing of the years, the technical ability evident in the early “Chansons à mettre en musique” would be maintained,

⁶ Most are found in the first two, *La Nuit de mai* (1835) and *La Nuit de décembre* (1835). Musset’s constant refrain “Poète, prends ton luth [...]” (Musset, 1966 [1963], 151–152), as well as other lines such as “Viens, chantons devant Dieu; chantons dans tes pensées [...]” (151), “Les plus désespérés sont les chants les plus beaux” (152), and “Et le moins que j’en pourrais dire, / Si je l’essayais sur ma lyre [...]” (152) are all from *La Nuit de mai*; the image of the lute is continued in *La Nuit de décembre* (153).

but often allied to themes more subdued and profound. The result would be poems like the “Chanson: À Saint-Blaise, à la Zuecca,”⁷ the “Chanson de Barberine,” the “Chanson de Fortunio” (all in Musset 1966 [1963], 177), and the “Chanson: Quand on perd, par triste occurrence [...]” (208): flawless little melodies that, however slight, can be evocative and indelibly haunting.

Two of these poems, the *chansons* of Barberine and Fortunio, are to be found in Musset’s plays, where they are set to music.⁸ This inclusion in his theatre of song, which few critics have addressed, might be ascribed to the example of Victor Hugo and other popular Romantic dramatists like Alexandre Dumas, or to the influence of the plays of William Shakespeare, their common literary idol. It could also be seen as the result of Musset’s love of music and his enjoyment of vaudeville and the *opéra comique*;⁹ but the dates of composition of those plays in which the most important *chansons* are to be found, as well as the specific uses to which these songs are put, lead me to believe that the principal reason for their presence lies elsewhere.

In the plays Musset wrote beginning in 1833, there are less than ten songs,¹⁰ all quite brief, and they fall clearly into two main divisions: the drinking and

7 Through its combination of a simple message with a sophisticated rhythm, this poem, written in remembrance of the blissful idyll Musset had known – all too briefly – with George Sand in Venice, could stand on its own as an outstanding example of melody in his verse. As one recent critic has observed: “si le poète peut en même temps être en règle avec la versification, c’est tant mieux pour lui, mais ce n’est sans doute pas sa préoccupation première quand il compose cette fantaisie à Venise. Ce qui compte, c’est bien plus la musique des mots que le sens des paroles” (Bouffard-Moret 2012, 254–255). Years before, however, Benedetto Croce (1946, 222) had noticed the same tendency: “Assai spesso, il verso soverchia il pensiero, e suona per suonare, come, per esempio, in questa [...] epistola à Lamartine: ‘Puisque tu sais chanter, ami, tu sais pleurer.’”

8 For a list of composers who set the *chansons* from Musset’s theatre to music, see Maurice-Amour (1958, 56–57).

9 The personal library that Alfred de Musset shared with his brother Paul contained a number of books in which questions of music and even musicology were discussed. The publication dates of many, including Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (Paris: Buisson, an Ve de la République), A.-E.-M. Grétry’s *Mémoires, ou Essais sur la musique* (Paris: Imprimerie de la République, an V), and J.-J. Rousseau’s *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Dupont, 1823), indicate that they may have been inherited from their father, an editor of Rousseau; that they were retained, however, is noteworthy, and it was Alfred de Musset himself who likely bought the *Mémoires, correspondance et ouvrages inédits de Diderot* (Paris: Fournier et Garnier, 1841). The list of all the books sold at auction after Paul’s death in 1880 is to be found in the *Catalogue des livres composant la bibliothèque de MM. Alfred et Paul de Musset* (1881).

10 Not considered in this essay are the songs in Musset’s first play, *La Quittance du diable*, inspired by an episode of Sir Walter Scott’s *Redgauntlet* (1824) and written in 1830, but never produced, and published only in 1914. While clear evidence of the young Musset’s interest in music,

hunting songs that today exist only through their plays, and the love songs which, over the years, have found a place apart in anthologies of French verse. The short hunting and drinking songs all come from the secondary characters: Césario or Grémio in *André del Sarto* (1833), for example, Giomo in *Lorenzaccio* (1834), and Uncle van Buck in *Il ne faut jurer de rien* (1836). These songs are not closely linked to the development of the plot; they fulfil, instead, limited structural objectives by facilitating a change of atmosphere – or scene – and the entry of new characters or by illustrating, very succinctly, the personality of the characters who sing them. As the *chansons* of Uncle Van Buck in *Il ne faut jurer de rien* in particular demonstrate, they do this very well:

Van Buck: C'est dit. Bonne chance, garçon; tu me conteras ton affaire, et nous en ferons quelque chanson; c'était notre ancienne manière; pas de fredaine dont on ne fit un couplet. (*Il chante.*)

Eh! vraiment, oui, mademoiselle,

Eh! vraiment, oui, nous serons trois. (Musset 1966 [1963], 400)

It should be noted, too, that, brief though they may be, all these songs also add their touch of social and historical colour – *couleur locale* – to the plays.

The role of the love songs, however, is much more considerable. All composed after the end of Musset's tumultuous liaison with George Sand in 1835, they are sung, without exception, by the main characters, whether it is Barberine, Fortunio, or Bettine (the heroine of his penultimate play), and form, now, an integral part of the plots of *La Quenouille de Barberine* (published August 1835), *Le Chandelier* (published November 1835), and *Bettine* (published November 1851). Paul de Musset's testimony in his biography of his brother suggests these songs may well have been inspired by the dramatic situations they describe: "Souvent il [...] arrivait [à Alfred] de rêver à un sujet de poésie tout en écrivant de la prose. [...] Sachant bien à l'avance ce qu'il voulait dire en prose, il regagnait le temps employé à tracer des mots sur le papier, en roulant dans sa tête une autre idée. [...] C'était, disait-il, comme de regarder une étoile dans le ciel pour mieux voir scintiller l'étoile voisine" (P. de Musset 1877, 191).

it was dismissed by his brother Paul in the *Biographie* as "une blquette fantastique" (P. de Musset 1877, 95) and described by Maurice Allem in his edition of Musset's theatre as "un sombre mélodrame romantique pourvu de tous les terribles agréments de ce genre et qu'Alfred de Musset, qui l'a écrit pour en tirer quelque profit, a fait naturellement au goût du moment" (Musset 1958, 1604). Also excluded here is the lament (*complainte*) of the troubadour Minuccio in *Carmosine* (1850) because onstage it is not sung, but read; Musset closely translated it, moreover, from the Italian of Boccaccio.

Without neglecting the structural ends already mentioned, these love songs serve primarily to describe the state of mind of the protagonists at an important moment in the action. “La Chanson de Barberine,” for instance, makes it clear how much Barberine misses her husband and how lonely she feels, intimating in this way that she may well need to be consoled by the young baron who has sworn to seduce her and who, as if to remind us of his plan, reappears onstage as she sings:

Beau chevalier qui partez pour la guerre,
 Qu’allez-vous faire
 Si loin de nous?
 J’en vais pleurer, moi qui me laissais dire
 Que mon sourire
 Était si doux. (Musset 1966 [1963], 366)

In *Le Chandelier*, it is by means of his song that the young Fortunio is finally able to broach the subject of love to Jacqueline, the beautiful wife of his employer:

Si vous croyez que je vais dire
 Qui j’ose aimer,
 Je ne saurais pour un empire
 Vous la nommer. (Musset 1966 [1963], 380)

This leads to his open declaration in the intimate conversation which ensues between them; but Musset also underlines the message of these songs, and highlights their music, by placing them – Bettine’s as well – almost at the centre of the plays they animate.

That Musset came to exploit his *chansons* in this way, however, should be seen as a consequence not only of the poetics emphasizing harmony – verbal music – that he had developed, but of his serious reconsideration of it after his passionate liaison with George Sand (which lasted from 29 July 1833 until the first break on 13 February 1834 and their definitive parting on 6 March 1835), and the emotional and artistic crises it precipitated. For it was following these episodes that Musset often came to prefer songs and music, rather than monologues or soliloquies, for revealing the innermost thoughts of specific characters, and that songs, or allusions to them and to music, frequently found a place in his narrative prose as well.¹¹

¹¹ For specific examples of the frequent allusions Musset made to music and song in his narrative prose and criticism, see Maurice-Amour (1958, 35–37).

Following his intense affair in 1833–1835 with George Sand, and the effort it took to compose the verse of the *Nuits* cycle – essentially an inner dialogue, in neoclassical rhetoric, about his difficulties with poetic creation – Musset became finally, forcibly, aware of the limits of words. Although Fantasio's remarks in the eponymous play of 1833 (published January 1834) confirm that Musset was very aware of their power – “et jouer avec les mots est un moyen comme un autre de jouer avec les pensées, les actions et les êtres” (Musset 1966 [1963], 293) – by this point, he had come to realize the inability of language to convey in all its dimension and force the feeling which lay at the core of his creative expression.¹² That is why observations to this effect became increasingly frequent in what he wrote. “Ah! ce que j'ai senti dans cet instant terrible, / Oserai-je m'en plaindre et te le raconter? / Comment exprimerai-je une peine indicible?” Musset (1966 [1963], 160) had asked in the *Lettre à M. de Lamartine* (1836), and in *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* (begun in 1834, published 1835–1836): “Quelle parole humaine exprimera jamais la plus faible caresse?” (Musset 1966 [1963], 601). With reference to his composition of the same novel he wrote to Franz Liszt on June 30, 1836, “Aborder [...] le monde tel qu'il est, *dire les choses*, est impossible” (Musset 1985, 184; emphasis in original). A passage from the short story *Emmeline* (1837) seems to confirm Musset's acceptance of these shortcomings:

Elle avait enfin succombé, et son bonheur dura quinze jours.

[...] Comment tenterai-je de vous le peindre? Vous raconterai-je ce qui est inexprimable, et ce que les plus grands génies de la terre ont laissé deviner dans leurs ouvrages, faute d'une parole qui pût le rendre? [...] Ce qui vient du cœur peut s'écrire, mais non ce qui est le cœur lui-même. (Musset 1966 [1963], 683)

However close they might come, Musset believed it was not within the power of words to express the essence of his emotion. A similar resignation is echoed in *Frédéric et Bernerette*, the short story published in January 1838 – “Ils [les amants] cherchent ce qui est introuvable, c'est-à-dire des mots pour exprimer ce qu'ils sentent” (Musset 1966 [1963], 712) – and in the words of Bettine, the heroine of his

¹² In Musset's writing, the utility of language had already been questioned: even before the author came, through his poetry, to a personal realization of the sorely limited power of language to express emotion, the inability of words to communicate meaningfully had been illustrated through the conversations of his own theatrical characters in such plays as *Fantasio* (published 1 January 1834) and *Les Caprices de Marianne* (1835), where, in the assessment of a recent critic, “chez les adultes au pouvoir, comme chez les jeunes gens, règne [...] une inaptitude des mots à remplir leur fonction première: [...] ils mettent en place l'image d'un monde où toute véritable communication est impossible, où la règle est le quiproquo, le malentendu, la méprise” (Bony 2012, 266).

eponymous play of 1851: “Si je l’aime! ah! mon cher ami, que les mots sont froids, insignifiants, que la parole est misérable quand on veut essayer de dire combien l’on aime!” (Musset 1966 [1963], 472). It was chiefly to add depth to his words, and heighten their emotional impact, that Musset finally had recourse to the evocative power of music to convey the different messages of love these central songs in his theatre contain.

Musset’s reappraisal of his poetics after his liaison with Sand coincided with a major change in the tone of his theatre – likely another result of his deep disenchantment – which made the inclusion of such music all the easier. Even in the plays written in 1834 and 1835, one critic has observed, Musset was becoming more interested in the personalities of his characters, in their impulses and changes of feeling (Fryčer 1967, 138); but it was only with the composition of *La Quenouille de Barberine* in 1835 that a lasting change was made in the essential nature of his dramatic expression: “Musset a changé la tonalité de son théâtre, du plan lyrique il a déplacé le sujet sur le plan comique” (Fryčer 1967, 147). It is through the love songs in these later plays that Musset reveals the deepest emotions of his principal characters, furthering as he does so the development of his plots: but in comedies, of course, the protagonists have every right to sing, and such songs can be more easily accommodated in the more natural and less figurative language of these later plays than in the at times ardent lyricism of those written earlier.

The observations Musset made in his speech of admission at the Académie française in 1852 about the comic operas of his predecessor, the librettist Emmanuel Dupaty, confirm the view that, for Musset, the melody of music could, at well-chosen moments, bring the same emotional intensity to his plays as verbal melody did to his poems: “En effet, tant que l’acteur parle, l’action marche, ou du moins peut marcher; mais dès qu’il chante, il est clair qu’elle s’arrête. [...] C’est la colère, c’est la prière, c’est la jalousie, c’est l’amour que nous voyons et que nous entendons. [...] La mélodie s’empare du sentiment, elle l’isole; soit qu’elle le concentre, soit qu’elle l’épanche largement, elle en tire l’accent suprême” (Musset 1966 [1963], 923). In Musset’s own work, harmony, whether metrical or musical, was intended to play a key role by triggering the emotion that alone could authenticate the fictive experience and so facilitate his ideal of communication at the deepest level, “en sorte que dans cette multitude de spectateurs, dans ces acteurs qui vont et viennent,” to quote from a fragment (“Sur le théâtre”) that Musset likely wrote toward the end of his brief life, “dans tout cet appareil, dans toutes ces pensées, il semble qu’il n’y ait qu’une pensée unique et un seul homme qui parle à un autre homme” (Musset 1966 [1963], 931).

Beyond the poetic ability they can demonstrate, therefore, and their dramatic value, proof in itself of an imaginative but conscious art, the love songs in Mus-

set's theatre reveal the importance he assigned, finally, to emotion in his plays as well as his poems; and they indicate, no less clearly, the degree to which the structure of this justly celebrated theatre is dependent, like many of its themes,¹³ on an aesthetic elaborated primarily for the creation of the verse that Musset – a dramatist in our time, but a poet in his own – wished above all to create.

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¹³ The degree to which the themes of some of Musset's most memorable plays reflect his search for poetic inspiration is discussed in Gamble (1989–1990).

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