Counterfeits, Contraltos and Harmony in De Quincey's Sublime

Miranda Stanyon

'The most difficult and subtle trait to decipher in sublime feeling is the extreme dissonance
between the powers of thought, which is simultaneously felt as the sublime feeling's
supreme consonance with itself.'

Jean-François Lyotard

If literary scholars and theorists have met difficulties in integrating music and sound into our histories of the sublime, then we perhaps face a sublime blockage in thinking about harmony. In a close reading of Immanuel Kant's analytic of the sublime, Jean-François Lyotard discerned a 'sublime paradox' in the interdependence of dissonance and consonance in the Kantian psychology of the sublime.¹ The lines quoted above open a section on 'Resistance'; under discussion is the sublime object's resistance to imagination, but the title aptly points to the unease of modern critics with consonance and harmony – understanding 'harmony' either vertically, as a loose synonym for consonance, or horizontally and structurally, as the framework which makes a sequence of sounds, concordant and discordant, into an intelligible whole. Critical unease is not limited to postmoderns. For Samuel Holt Monk, in his seminal 1935 study:

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994), 147.

so long as nature was regarded as the orderly, harmonious, universal regularity of the divine mind, there was no place for the sublime of nature and of original genius. One of the missions of the sublime was to help art to escape from the neo-classicists's nature, and to establish it on a conception of nature that included the very irregularity and vastness from which the orthodox speculation of the Enlightenment instinctively shrank.²

Indeed, the sublime has been traditionally aligned with the more or less violent emergence of modernity: with a tearing away from old metaphysical orders and a silencing of the harmonious music of the spheres; with the emergence of art as a matter of passion, expression and aesthetics, instead of mechanical rhetoric techniques governed by *aptum*, arrangement and 'fit' (a root meaning of 'harmony').³ Its heyday apparently coincides with political revolutions that inspire sublime geniuses to unleash the forces of dissonance in music; and with the rise of instrumental music, which unchains music from the shackles of language and representation, and so offers a convergence between music and the post-Kantian sublime as sites of the unrepresentable and unconditioned.⁴ In other words,

² Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* [1935] (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 67.

³ On meanings of harmony and arrangement (Gr. *synthesis*), see Longinus, *On the Sublime*, ed. James Arieti and John Crossett (New York: Mellen, 1985), 194. Unless otherwise noted, translations are from this edition. On the silencing of the music of the spheres, see, for example, John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry, 1500–1700*, revd edn (New York: Norton, 1970). On the demise of rhetoric and the sublime, see recently Dietmar Till, *Das doppelte Erhabene: eine Argumentationsfigur von der Antike bis zum Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006).

⁴ I am thinking of the narrative tying sublimity and increased dissonance to Ludwig van Beethoven, Richard Wagner and Arnold Schoenberg, and studies such as John Neubauer, *The Emancipation of Music from Language: Departure from Mimesis in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and to some extent Stephen Rumph, *Beethoven after Napoleon: Political Romanticism in the Late Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, *Musically Sublime: Indeterminacy, Infinity, Irresolvability* (Ashland: Fordham University Press, 2009).

interlocking narratives about knowledge, politics, music and the arts more generally, encourage us to think sublimity through dissonance. Consonance and resolution sound like beauty (or boredom). Writers who did link harmony and sublimity, then, might seem simply mistaken – part of the benighted tribe who, in Boileau’s view, confuse the *true sublime* with some element of style. Or they might seem reactionary – like Johann Gottfried Herder, whose praise for sublime harmony against a Kantian sublime of dissonance, obscurity and unrepresentability can seem like the dying gasp of a pre-modern worldview.⁵

Musical harmony already had an intimate but troubled relationship with sublimity in Longinus’s treatise. Longinus used the flute and lyre to evoke the overpowering effects of his fifth source of sublimity – ‘harmony’ or ‘arrangement’ – with their notes ‘mixing in concord’, before he emphatically excluded music from the sublime by labelling instrumental sounds as ‘images and counterfeit [or bastard] imitations of persuasion, not, as I said, legitimately bred words of human nature’.⁶ But why does musical harmony only *counterfeit* the Longinian sublime, especially since Longinus’s sublime is explicitly not about reasonable persuasion, but its overthrow in astonishment, ravishment and transport? As he put it in this passage, sublime verbal harmony ‘enchants us’ and ‘completely and really prevail[s] over our perceptiveness in every way’.⁷

This chapter explores the vexed relationship between harmony and sublimity by circling around a brief scene in the opium *Confessions* of the late romantic Thomas De

⁵ See especially Jochen Schulte-Sasse, ‘Herder’s Concept of the Sublime’, in *Herder Today*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, *Contributions from the International Herder Conference* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 268–91.

⁶ Longinus 39.1–3.

⁷ Longinus 39.3.

Quincey. De Quincey's fascination with sublimity is well known, and has been connected with opium, memory, war, empire and (sometimes) music.⁸ De Quincey's sublime has strong Burkean and Kantian overtones. It emphasises obscurity, overmastering grandeur and infinitude, and dramatises the coming-into-being of a precarious subject constituted by experiences at the limits of his powers. Yet it is debatable, with De Quincey, whether sublimity lies primarily in serial (indefinitely repeatable) experiences of limit and excess, or in moments of elevation, coherence and closure.⁹ Moreover, if De Quincey presents genuine resolutions in his writings, then these moments of totality, unlike Kant's, often seem horrifying in their own rights – making harmony a stimulus for the sublime as much as its end.

Music helps to play out these alternatives – overtly, in such texts as *The English Mail-Coach* (1849), which ends in a 'Dream-Fugue' on the 'theme' of sudden death, and culminates in a spectacular scene of eschatological trumpeters, choirs and organs – and

⁸ See particularly Daniel O'Quinn, 'Ravishment Twice Weekly: De Quincey's Opera Pleasures', *Romanticism on the Net*, 34–5 (2004), www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2004/v/n34-35/009436ar.html; Phyllis Weliver, 'Tom-Toms, Dream-Fugues and Poppy Juice: East Meets West in Nineteenth-Century Fiction', in Martin Clayton and Bennett Zon, eds., *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780–1940s: Portrayal of the East* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 258–64; Grevel Lindop, 'De Quincey's "Immortal Druggist" and Wordsworth's "Power of Music"', *Notes and Queries*, 41/3 (1994), 341–2; Charles Rzepka, "'A Deafening Menace in Tempestuous Uproars': De Quincey's 1856 *Confessions*, the Indian Mutiny, and the Response of Collins and Dickens', in Robert Morrison and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, eds., *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical and Critical Directions* (London: Routledge, 2008), 211–35.

⁹ Representative studies include, on seriality and irresolution, Ian Balfour, 'On the Language of the Sublime and the Sublime Nation in De Quincey: Toward a Reading of *The English Mail-Coach*', in Robert Morrison and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, eds., *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical and Critical Directions* (London: Routledge, 2008), 165–87; Joel Black, 'Confession, Digression, Gravitation: Thomas De Quincey's German Connection', in Robert Snyder, ed., *Thomas De Quincey: Bicentenary Studies* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 308–38; and, on De Quincey's search for coherence, stasis, mastery, V. A. De Luca, *Thomas De Quincey: The Prose of Vision* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); O'Quinn, 'Ravishment Twice Weekly'; Charles Rzepka, *Sacramental Commodities: Gift, Text, and the Sublime in De Quincey* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 38–45. See further Stanyon, 'Serpentine Sighs: De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* and the Serpentine Line', *Studies in Romanticism*, 53/1 (2014), 31–58.

more subtly in texts like *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. First published serially in 1821, *Confessions* sets out to justify the ways of opium to man, and to detail its pleasures and pains for the troubled, intellectual youth De Quincey gives us to understand he was when he first took opium around 1804. At this time he habituated the opera, always on opium, to hear the contralto Josephine Grassini:

The choruses were divine to hear: and when Grassini appeared in some interlude, as she often did, and poured forth her passionate soul as Andromache, at the tomb of Hector, &c. I question whether any Turk, of all that ever entered the Paradise of opium-eaters, can have had half the pleasure I had. [...] a chorus, &c. of elaborate harmony, displayed before me, as in a piece of arras work, the whole of my past life – not, as if recalled by an act of memory, but as if present and incarnated in the music: no longer painful to dwell upon: but the detail of its incidents removed, or blended in some hazy abstraction; and its passions exalted, spiritualized, and sublimed.¹⁰

Daniel O’Quinn has suggestively linked this scene with sublime mastery and ravishment.¹¹ Context is vital here: in 1805, the Italian contralto Grassini had relatively recently arrived from Paris, where she had been Napoleon’s lover. Grassini, parted from Napoleon, seemingly mirrors Andromache, parted from Hector. Following this logic, De Quincey

¹⁰ Thomas De Quincey, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop et al., 21 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000–2003), vol. 2, 48. Henceforth cited in the form ‘2.48’ in text or in footnotes with the addition DQ.

¹¹ O’Quinn, ‘Ravishment Twice Weekly’.

supposedly fantasises a sublime 'rape' on Grassini-as-Andromache, a passive and supremely sexually available woman, and does so as part of a national war-effort that consolidates the opera-going public against Napoleon. The sublime unity felt by De Quincey would then take on extremely mordant tones, achieved at the cost of violation. Moreover, the repeated nature of Grassini's performances and De Quincey's visits makes this unity something precarious for O'Quinn – a false cadence, one might say. On this reading, whether De Quincey's sublime is ultimately about mastery or loss, totality or fragmentation, music never spells harmony, but only temporal progression, violence and addiction-like repetition.

A closer examination of Grassini's Andromache in her historical matrix, however, tells a different story. The analysis that follows suggests both Grassini's disturbing agency for some listeners – her power to act as an overwhelming sublime object – and her availability for exalting *identifications* on the part of audience members – that is, for experiences of sublime inflation. Understanding Grassini's gendered, embodied and 'en-voiced' appearances as Andromache confound simple readings of a sublime male rape on a passive female figure. Grassini's status and sound as a contralto are important here, as are the associations with musical harmony and illegitimacy attaching to her voice in general and her particular role as Andromache. Moving through a discussion of pathos, the chapter concludes by placing Grassini's scene within the longer narrative arc of the opium *Confessions*, suggesting the deep-seated anxieties and attractions of harmony within a high romantic discourse of the sublime.

Counterfeiting and gender

It is worth noting at the outset the subtle association between illegitimacy and the classical figure at the centre of De Quincey's opera pleasures. The connection emerges in the

Andromache of Euripides, one of De Quincey's early literary loves. *Andromache* was one principal source for Racine's famous neoclassical tragedy of the same name, and thence for the popular *Andromaca* operas of the eighteenth century.¹² The widow of the Trojan hero Hector, Euripides's *Andromache* lives as the captive and sex-slave of the Greek prince Neoptolemus, son of Hector's killer. At the play's opening, Neoptolemus has travelled to the oracle of Phoebus in an attempt to atone for an outrage against the god, leaving *Andromache* and her son by Neoptolemus vulnerable to the jealousy of Hermione, his childless wife. Towards the play's end, Hermione realises her error in plotting the murder of *Andromache* and her son. Hermione begs her former betrothed, Orestes, to run away with her before Neoptolemus returns. Otherwise, she predicts, 'he will put me to a shameful death, or I shall be a slave to his counterfeit wife whose mistress I was before'.¹³ Imagining this dramatic reversal, she refers to *Andromache* as 'νόθοισι' (bastard, counterfeit). The root term is shared with Longinus's term in condemning music's 'counterfeit imitations of persuasion'. The term is also applicable to *Andromache*'s child by Neoptolemus, of course, for whose life *Andromache* fights throughout Euripides' play. *Andromache* in fact has form with bastards: early on, she rejects Hermione's accusation of scheming to usurp her, and claims that lack of virtue has embittered Neoptolemus towards his wife. 'O my dearest Hector', she exclaims to her dead husband, 'if Aphrodite caused you to trip at all, I even joined you in loving those whom you loved for your sake, and often in times gone by I have

¹² According to Suzana Ograjenšek, there were more new *opere serie* composed on *Andromache* in the eighteenth century than on any other single tragic subject. Ograjenšek, 'The Rise and Fall of *Andromache* on the Operatic Stage, 1660s–1820s', in Peter August Brown and Suzana Ograjenšek, eds., *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 112–38, at 113.

¹³ Euripides, *Andromache*, in *Hecuba; The Trojan Women; Andromache*, trans. James Morwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), lines 928–9.

held my breast to your bastards [νόθοις] to avoid showing you any bitterness. And by doing this, I would win my husband over through my virtue' (lines 222–7). Andromache eloquently turns her self-defence into an indictment of Hermione's virtue and wifely conduct, hinging on the testcase of sympathetic and symbolically legitimising treatment of bastards.

Euripides's Andromache, then, appears as a 'bastard' and a succourer of bastards. She suggests the pragmatism of loving bastards (at least the bastards of the powerful), and even hints at an ethics of illegitimacy. Illegitimates like Andromache's son are vulnerable in multiple ways: legally, as creatures without claims; physically, as infants or minors; politically, as actors with conflicting potential loyalties (to the Greeks or Trojans). Protecting these endangered but potentially dangerous figures is a mark of nobility and virtue – as Euripides suggests through the figures of Andromache and her ally Peleus – and a source of dramatic pathos.¹⁴

The 'semiotics of bastardy' has intriguing links with the sublime, given the prominence of Freud's Oedipal family romance within twentieth-century interpretations of the sublime, and given the prominence and changing status of illegitimacy in the literary tradition (think, for instance, of Shakespeare's duplicitous Edmund, John Dryden's naturally gifted but easily corrupted Absalom, or the eponymous heroes of Denis Diderot's *Natural Son*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* – not to mention the many lofty bastard demi-gods of classical myth).¹⁵ Illegitimacy is also something that makes

¹⁴ On the ageing but courageous Peleus, see especially lines 710–801: Peleus offers to raise Andromache's son in safety 'to be a great enemy' to the Spartans; the chorus praises his nobility.

¹⁵ For the phrase 'semiotics of bastardy', see Helen Vella Bonavita, *Illegitimacy and the National Family in Early Modern England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017). On Absalom, see Head in this volume; further Stanyon, 'Musical

music more integral to the sublime than one might suppose. It is not coincidental that Longinus applies the term bastard/counterfeit to music: he is marking out the limits of the legitimate sublime – as verbal – and attempting to separate it from an uncanny half-sibling, instrumental music. Longinus represents this music as naturally powerful, indeed overpowering, but for that reason *dangerous* to the listener's sovereignty, whereas the true (verbal) sublime ultimately empowers listeners. Playing out Andromache's connection with illegitimacy opens up an alternative to taking Longinus's condemnation of music at face value. It is possible to sympathise with 'bastards' and 'counterfeits', and to denaturalise the separation between the lawful and real on one hand, and the unlawful and spurious on the other.

Andromache's structural connection with illegitimacy notwithstanding, her European reception has still stronger associations with normativity. Indeed, Andromache's exemplarity as faithful wife, mother and widow is arguably what turns the affective screws, making her enslavement and suffering exemplarily piteous and a potential site of idealising identification. In romantic-era Britain, Andromache was a model of mourning, appearing as a grieving figure at an urn or tomb in sentimental paintings, prints and sculpture, as well as in theatre and opera. As one might expect with an iconic classical figure, her representations easily moved from the particular to the general, and from the general to new particulars. In Ambrose Philips's early eighteenth-century play, *The Distress'd Mother*, Andromache has already become a generalised epitome of motherhood. Later in the century, Angelica

Kauffmann's popular painting of a grieving Andromache alongside her son and mother-in-law was adapted by porcelain manufacturers to abstract the figure of the decorously drooping beauty, and present her as an embodiment of grief, easily repurposed, in turn, for customers' particular bereavements.

The iconography of a grieving Andromache had particular resonances around Nelson's death at Trafalgar in October 1805, the year of Grassini's performances as 'Andromache, at the tomb of Hector'. Nelson's death in victory galvanised national feeling. At its most spectacular in Nelson's elaborate state funeral and tomb in St Paul's, and given a personal focus in the demonstrative body of Nelson's lover Emma Hamilton, the event was also commemorated, disseminated and preserved in texts, music, merchandise and memorabilia that members of the public could consume and make their own. In a context where narratives surrounding Trafalgar sometimes explicitly likened besieged Britain to Troy, the visual iconography of Britannia mourning Nelson could also echo that of Andromache mourning Hector.¹⁶ Grassini's recorded performances as Andromache in the King's Theatre fell some months before Nelson's death, in a period of intensified anxiety about war with France and the potential invasion of fortress Britain. The appeal of her appearances as Andromache plausibly tapped into the figure's heightened availability as a national as well as a personal symbol of grief.

Andromache's uses as a model for the nation in tears were unsettled, however, by narratives focusing on her actions as an independent widow willing to kill herself, or her child, rather than betray her husband's memory. Racine's *Andromaque*, Philips's *Distress'd*

¹⁶ See Stanyon, 'Musical Sublimes', 247–50.

Mother and various operas dramatised Andromache's agonised choice between accepting the love and protection of her captor (here named Phyrus, but, as in Euripides, the son of her husband's killer), or allowing the Greeks to execute her son. A further classical source drawn on in the operatic tradition, Virgil's *Aeneid*, made Andromache available as an almost pathological figure of memory and mourning, of failing to move on. Aeneas meets Andromache after her trials in Greece, in a latter-day Troy built by one of the exiled Trojan princes.¹⁷ Although she has remarried, Andromache is glued to her obsequies at Hector's reconstructed tomb, and faints after mistaking Aeneas for her husband's ghost. Andromache, then, represented floridly sentimental, and potentially disturbing, practices of memory and mourning. These are keynotes of mourning in Victorian culture, and a focus of De Quincey's autobiographical oeuvre: baffled childhood grief for his sister Elizabeth; anxiety over the disappearance of his companion Anne during a period of homelessness in London; unseemly mourning over the death of Wordsworth's young daughter, and more.¹⁸

The singer representing Andromache also had unsettling powers. Apparently the first operatic contralto heard in London in living memory, Grassini combined nubile feminine roles and the persona of a graceful, pretty, fashionable mistress of powerful men, with a voice heard as itself powerful and masculine. It was described as lacking 'sweet effeminacy'; sounding 'remarkably deep and masculine' against her tenor counterpart; and as 'husky', 'guttural' and 'chalameau'-like against the 'flute'-like voice of the English soprano

¹⁷ Virgil *Aeneid* 3.294–355.

¹⁸ On Victorian mourning culture, see, for instance, Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jolene Zigarovich, *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel: Engraved Narratives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Elizabeth Billington, the other *prima donna* at the King's Theatre.¹⁹ Grassini's apparently limited vocal range and simple delivery – lacking Billington's 'scientific' virtuosity – could code her as the more pathetic, natural, sincere and deeply emotional singer. These were qualities admired by romantic-era critics, such as Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt, nervous about technical mastery and artifice.²⁰ But the same depth and limited range also led to insinuations of something counterfeit in Grassini's gender. She, alone among women, has 'a falsetto'; she has an illness, 'weakness' or 'defect' in her 'organs'; she was a soprano but suffered an 'accident', an old euphemism for the operation undergone by castrati – and this at a point when castrati were banished from the King's Theatre, and when 'female masculinity' sent panic waves through a nation at war.²¹ By the mid-nineteenth century, after a second stint in London, the older Grassini was compared to the child-actor Master Betty (William Henry Best Betty, 1791–1874), and even labelled 'a complete "counter tenor"'.²²

This is a queer voice and subject, not in the sense that Grassini sought to transgress gender norms (the opposite seems to be the case), nor in the sense that she gives us clues

¹⁹ Anon., 'Chronicles of the Italian Opera in England', *The Harmonicon*, 1 (1830), 10–13, 70–73, 112–15, 96–98, 246–48, at 12; *Morning Post* (London, 21 June 1804).

²⁰ See Gillen D'Arcy Wood, 'The Castrato's Tale: Artaxerxes and the Feminization of Virtuosity', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 39/3 (2008), 74–9.

²¹ See reports in *The Times*, in Theodore Fenner, *Opera in London: Views of the Press, 1785–1830* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), 208; *Morning Post* (London, 18 January 1804, 21 January 1804); Richard Edgcumbe, 2nd Earl of Mount-Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences of an Old Amateur*, 2nd edn (London: W. Clarke, 1827), 94. On female masculinity, see Kathleen Wilson, 'Nelson's Women: Female Masculinity and Body Politics in the French and Napoleonic Wars', *European History Quarterly*, 37/4 (2007), 562–81. On the qualities associated with alto roles in opera of this period, see Naomi André, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

²² 'Memoir of Mr. W. H. W. Betty', *London Pioneer* (London, 14 May 1846), 45; 'Opera Singers Forty Years Since', *The Court Magazine and Monthly Critic* (London, 1 October 1847), 1.

to a subjectivity tugged at or oriented towards non-normative desires, but in the now paradigmatic sense suggested by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. '[O]ne of the things that "queer" can refer to', she wrote, is 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.'²³ Grassini's nineteenth-century positioning as 'queer' in this socio-semiotic sense draws on the discourse surrounding the castrato, whose 'tone' one listener thought had 'something *squally & pipy & spewy & queer* in it'.²⁴ While castrati were not necessarily coded as sublime in Britain, even in their heyday, they nonetheless haunted the boundaries of the literary sublime, just as they are often imagined to haunt the opera world as their prestige waned in the romantic era.²⁵

Early in the eighteenth century, as Matthew Head observes in this volume, John Dennis famously praised the sublime as a 'pleasing rape' committed by virile (male) writer

²³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, DC: Duke University Press, 1993), 8. Compare Jarman-Ivens's understanding of the singing voice as 'a site for the emergence of queer', understood less as an 'identity' and more as the ability of the embodied voice (and specific voices) to offer 'moments of identification with and identification against the voice by the listener' in excess of heteronormative scripts. Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Vocality, the Uncanny, and Popular Music* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 2. For an overview of the development of queer opera studies, see Serena Guarracino, "'I Would Like to Disappear into Those Vowels": Gender-Troubling Opera', *The Newsletter for the LGBTQ Study Group of the American Musicological Society*, 16/2 (2006), 3–10. I am grateful to Matthew Head for sharing his research on the queer sublime.

²⁴ Thomas Twining to Charles Jenner, 20 February 1769. Twining claims to paraphrase a figurehead of naturalism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *A Selection of Thomas Twining's Letters, 1735–1804: The Record of a Tranquil Life*, ed. Ralph Walker (Lewiston: Edward Mellen Press, 1991), 70. Note the important caveats Martha Feldman places on labelling eighteenth-century castrati as ambiguously sexed or queer, and the participation of enlightenment castrati in patriarchal orders. Feldman, *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), especially 43–4.

²⁵ André, *Voicing Gender*, 16; James Q. Davies, "'Veluti in Speculum": The Twilight of the Castrato', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 17/3 (2005), 271–301; Jennifer Jones, 'Sounds Romantic: The Castrato and English Poetics around 1800', in Gillen D'Arcy Wood, ed., *Opera and Romanticism*, Romantic Circles Praxis Series (May 2005), www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/opera/jones/jones.html (accessed 23 October 2017); further Feldman, *Castrato*, 211–62. Compare Stanyon, 'Musical Sublimes', 255–6.

upon the soul of a (male) reader. Dennis's libertine-like praise of the heights of pleasure in literature and drama is shadowed by his condemnation of an opera world dominated by castrati. On the opera stage, he wrote, one male pleasures and overpowers another, and 'he who gives or he who received [Pleasure] in a supreme Degree, must be alike unmann'd'.²⁶ There is, then, a bleeding over between the cultural work of the castrato and the work of music in the verbal and literary sublime. The sublime is often critiqued as a masculinist and heteronormative discourse,²⁷ yet its emphasis on transgression unsurprisingly also meant exploiting – tacitly or not – the meanings of queer and female voices.

In this context, the music of Grassini's *Andromache* becomes particularly intriguing. For what newspapers describe as a 'Grand Scene', composed for Grassini by Niccolò Zingarelli, proves to be extremely elusive: not an excerpt of a known *Andromache* opera or cantata by Zingarelli, nor a reprise of another appearance as *Andromache* by Grassini. It seems, in all likelihood, to have been an adaptation of a scene and aria which first appeared in Zingarelli's *Giulietta e Romeo*, for which Grassini created the role of Juliet at La Scala in 1796. The music in question, however, was sung, and partly written, by the castrato Girolamo Crescentini in the heroic male role of Romeo. Romeo's tomb-side aria, 'Ombra adorata, aspetta', was certainly one of Grassini's suitcase arias on the Continent. A key manuscript score dated 1802 indicates how she adapted the opera's third act for a solo

²⁶ John Dennis, *An Essay Upon Publick Spirit* (London: Bernard Lintott, 1711), 19.

²⁷ See, for instance, Judy Lochhead, 'The Sublime, the Ineffable and Other Dangerous Aesthetic Concepts', *Women and Music*, 12 (2008), 63–74.

‘scene’ by a devoted widow.²⁸ Grassini used the same scene fifteen years later to portray Cleopatra (at the tomb of Mark Anthony) in a series of dramatic in-character solo performances. Assuming the Andromache scene worked in a similar way, we have here a contrafactum (a kind of textual counterfeit), an Andromache who is a Romeo in petticoats.

Before turning to this music, we need to place the mode of sublimity with which Grassini seems to have been associated in Napoleonic-era Britain. For if queerness was structurally built into her vocal power and its potential to sublimely threaten, to please and to offer identification to listeners, then her deep tessitura, limited technique and passionate delivery coded this sublimity as pathetic.

The pathetic sublime

Central to Grassini’s reception in London was the perception of her pathos. The *Morning Post* advertised the ‘pathetic powers’ of her ‘grand scene’ as Andromache.²⁹ The singer and theatre manager Michael Kelly remembered Grassini’s voice as ‘sublimely pathetic’.³⁰ De Quincey hears her ‘pour[ing] forth her passionate soul’, surrounded by the ‘sweet and melodious grandeur’ of the King’s Theatre orchestra (so different from the ‘predominance of the clangorous instruments’ in English orchestras) (2.47). A ladies’ magazine even complained that Grassini ‘had *pathos* indeed’, ‘but she was always pathetic’ and ‘could

²⁸ ‘Sposo adorato aspetta | Scena, cavatina, e Rondo | cantata | Dalla Sig.^{ra} Giuseppa Grassini | 1802’, Hochschule für Musik und Tanz, Cologne, D-KNh R684 (formerly M 10855). For a performance based on this score, alongside two other interpretations of the aria, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHPrXUxrop4.

²⁹ *Morning Post* (2 July 1805).

³⁰ Michael Kelly, *Reminiscences*, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), vol.2, 214.

neither divest her voice, her looks, nor her action, of that air of affliction or melancholy dignity, which she so finely personified'.³¹

Pathos and the pathetic have long been linked with sublimity, yet the terms are polysemous and need explication. They can name the entire sphere of the passions or emotions, translating the Greek *pathos*; this was the second source of Longinus's sublime.³² Kant's populariser Christian Friedrich Michaelis used cognate German terms in this way, when he claimed that music could either arouse the sublime without reference to 'the expression of feeling' (*Gefühlsausdruck*), or could present a 'pathetic-sublime' by depicting how we are 'stirred, shattered, moved hither and thither, and enthused by the sublime'.³³

Samuel Monk also used the terms in a global sense, presenting the expression and experience of emotion as central to the eighteenth-century British sublime. The pathetic was a marker of the sublime's 'modern' and aesthetic character in the hands of British writers, who, in their focus on psychology and subjectivity, paved the way for the breakthrough of the Kantian sublime. 'The sublime and the pathetic begin their long journey in each others' company' following the reception of Boileau's Longinus in Britain, Monk argued, for 'the English were naturally more metaphysical' than the rule-bound French. 'English literature had always been a literature of feeling and emotion rather than of intellect', and 'rules were never really acclimated among a people who genuinely loved Shakespeare'. As lovers of Lockean psychology as well as Shakespeare, '[w]hat more natural

³¹ *La Belle Assemblée* (1 February 1807), 103.

³² Longinus, 8.1. Compare OED, s.v. 'pathos', sense 4.

³³ Christian Friedrich Michaelis, 'Einige Bemerkungen über das Erhabene der Musik', *Berlinische musikalische Zeitung*, 46.1 (1805), 179–81, at 180.

than that the English should [...] seek to analyse the effect of the sublime on the minds and emotions of men?’³⁴ Naturalised as an Anglo-Saxon concern, Monk’s pathetic sublime would cover the passions represented on the tragic stage; the extremes of passion elicited in spectators; and, somewhat ironically, the feelings quite different to normal passion which writers such as John Dennis and Edmund Burke classified as sublime (respectively ‘Enthusiastick Passion’ removed from ‘Vulgar Passion’, and fear mingled with super-passionate tranquillity and repose).³⁵ Opera, too, is often regarded as the art of pathos in a global sense.³⁶ But a nebulous alignment of pathos, sublimity and music can cover a multitude of sins, obscuring as much as it clarifies.

More circumscribed – though nonetheless loaded – understandings of sublime pathos were evidently at play in Grassini’s reception. Located in the singer’s body and voice as well as her emotive roles, and associated with tragedy, affliction and melancholy, ‘pathos’ here involves the dual senses of physical and mental *suffering* (embedded in the Greek *pathos*), and the evocation of sympathy, pity and tenderness.³⁷ This last cluster of feelings, while easily compatible with Grassini’s roles as tragic lovers, daughters and mothers, is at first blush foreign to the sublime: sympathy should spoil the aesthetic

³⁴ Monk, *The Sublime*, 45.

³⁵ John Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (London: Strahan, 1704), 15–16; Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 2nd edn (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1759), 211 and elsewhere.

³⁶ Compare Sigrid Weigel, ‘Pathosformel und Oper: die Bedeutung des Musiktheaters für Aby Warburgs Konzept der Pathosformel’, *KulturPoetik*, 6/2 (2006), 234–53; Jan Assman, ‘Pathosformeln, Figuren und Erinnerungsmotive in Mozarts *Zauberflöte*’, in Herbert Lachmayer, ed., *Mozart. Experiment Aufklärung im Wien des Ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 781–9.

³⁷ Compare OED, s.v. ‘pathos’, senses 1–3.

pleasure we take in viewing another's peril;³⁸ pity is the keynote of tragic catharsis rather than the elation of the sublime; and tenderness belongs among the moderate, domestic and diminutive passions that Burke associated with the beautiful.³⁹ De Quincey assumes as much when he notes the confusion of modern critics over the fact that Longinus includes 'amongst the elements of his sublime [...] even the pathetic, *i.e.* (say they) what by connecting itself with the depressing passion of grief is the very counter-agent to the elevating affection of the sublime' (11.11).

And yet pathos as sympathy, pity and tenderness *was* entangled with the romantic-era sublime. The young Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who shared with De Quincey a fascination with German thought, found in Friedrich Schiller's drama a pathetic sublime arising from our identification with suffering, from the representation of intimate familial bonds, and from a broader sociable sympathy that had little in common with Burke's anti-social sublime.⁴⁰ In his own essays, Schiller sought out precise relationships between the sublime and pathetic, arguing that '[t]he pathetic is only aesthetic, insofar as it is sublime'.⁴¹ He argued that the viewer's feeling of sublime moral freedom could be triggered by the onstage dramatisation of conflict between freedom, and fate or nature, including the natural feelings of familial love. 'In killing her children', he writes, 'Medea aims at Jason's heart, but she simultaneously

³⁸ As discussed by theorists of the sublime using examples of watching a ship in a storm or an execution.

³⁹ Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 67. On a related understanding of pathos in Samuel Johnson's influential criticism, see J.H. Hagstrum, 'Johnson's Conception of the Beautiful, the Pathetic, and the Sublime', *PMLA*, 64/1 (1949), 134–57, at 141–8.

⁴⁰ Christopher R. Stokes, 'Radical Sympathy and Retributive Violence: The Sublime of Terror in "The Destiny of Nations"', *European Romantic Review*, 20/1 (2009), 57–75.

⁴¹ Friedrich Schiller, 'Über the Pathetische' [1793], in Otto Dann, et al., eds., *Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bänden* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1998–2004), vol. 8, 428.

strikes a painful blow against her own, and her revenge becomes aesthetically sublime as soon as we see the tender mother'.⁴² The parallels are strong between Medea and the Andromache of the opera tradition, torn between her son's life, and her own chastity and husband's memory. Schiller's remarks on the pathetic in 'On the Sublime' are still more suggestive for De Quincey's response to Andromache. 'The pathetic', for Schiller, 'is an inoculation against unavoidable fate, which robs it of its malignity'.⁴³ Watching characters' suffering allows us to practice our own indifference to fate and independence of the sensible world; tragic pathos allows us to 'dissolve real pain into a sublime agitation'.⁴⁴ Schiller thinks in terms of an initial theatrical inoculation and subsequent indifference to real pain. The memoirist De Quincey instead works with 'initial' memories. Characteristically, he gives us a re-presentation of past pains ('the whole of my past life [...] as if present and incarnated in the music; no longer painful to dwell upon'), dissolved or 'blended' to remove their details, and finally 'sublimed' by his opera visits.

It is not Grassini alone, but 'a chorus, &c. of elaborate harmony' which summons up De Quincey's vision of his life. It is important here to register both that 'harmony' is the trigger of this aesthetic experience of wholeness, and that De Quincey's evasive '&c.' draws in a gamut of choral, orchestral and solo material and textures touched on in his opera-going scene. In other words, the passage continues to be coloured by the implications of a mourning Andromache – the only particular character or piece named in the *Confessions* –

⁴² Ibid., 450.

⁴³ Friedrich Schiller, 'Über das Erhabene' [1801?], in *ibid.*, 837.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

her pain rendered in pleasing music, and, if she was indeed singing 'Sposo adorata, aspetta', her pain modified or complicated by her contemplation of a joyful reunion with her husband.

In the scene adapted from *Giulietta e Romeo*, a widow approaches her husband's tomb, beginning, 'Ecco il luogo: ecco l'Urna' (Behold the place: behold the urn). She laments his fate and her grief in a brooding and stormy cavatina beginning in C minor, and accompanied by strings, oboes, bassoons and horns. Omitting the chorus material from Zingarelli's cavatina and an intervening aria and recitative, Grassini's character then launches into a rondo aria in D major, where she anticipates her contentment after death, and entreats her husband to wait for her in a paradise resonating with the voices of happy lovers:

Sposo adorato aspetta

Meco sarai indiviso,

Nel fortunato Eliso

Avra contenti il cor.

Là tra fedeli amanti

Ci appresta amor diletto,

Godremo i dolci istanti

De' piu innocenti affetti;

E l'Echo a noi d'intorno

Risuonerà d'amor.⁴⁵

[Beloved husband, wait! You will be indivisible from me; in happy Elysium my heart will be content. There, among faithful lovers, the delights of love await us. We will enjoy sweet moments of the most innocent feelings; and the Echo round about us will resound with love.]

This rondo, its music composed by Crescentini and inserted into *Giulietta e Romeo* from very early in the opera's life, was widely performed and celebrated in Napoleonic-era Europe, entering the concert repertoire for numerous singers and sustaining Crescentini's career for decades. On paper the aria is nonetheless unremarkable and unassuming, even formulaic. Marked 'Maestoso' in the 1802 score associated with Grassini, the aria is built from a few brief and simple motifs, with a B section that continues to exploit earlier motivic material rather than presenting a fully developed contrast. The melodic line moves gently, with repeated notes and conjunct motion especially in the opening phrases of each section. Not unexpectedly, more declamatory and emphatic leaps emerge as the aria unfolds, and written-out elaborations of the opening motifs expand the compass and flexibility of each phrase, while also leading the voice up into a brighter register. This reaches a climax in an extended A₃ which tumbles down to a C₄ sharp (on *risuonerà*, 'will resound'), followed by final phrases circling around F₃ sharp, an octave above the opening: the singer leaves on a high. Not unusually for contemporary Italian arias, the harmonic language of Crescentini's aria is slow-paced and unadventurous; the tonality is warm, rarely departing from tonic and

⁴⁵ Text taken from 'Sposo adorato aspetta', D-KNh R684. This has been triangulated with text in the word-book *Gran concerto di Madama Grassini, ristretto dell'opera La Cleopatra, musica del Signor Maestro Naolini* (Venice: Casali, 1817), 18–19, where Grassini sewed the scene onto music from Nasolini's *Cleopatra*.

dominant chords, and use of dissonance is sparing (although ornamentation in performance would typically introduce copious passing dissonances as well as exuberant melisma in the vocal line).⁴⁶ The accompaniment unfolds in regular quavers, enlivened by light, tripping, staccato semiquaver runs in an obbligato motif for violin and oboes (flute in some sources). If we wanted an emblematically harmonious composition in this era – or an example of the noble simplicity some critics associated with the sublime – Crescentini's aria might fit the bill, in its use of consonance, the cohesion and simplicity of its material, and the even-tempered sentiment its words seem to convey. Yet this is, as it were, harmony out of place. The oddities of the piece as the culmination of a tragedy and an outpouring of grief (Romeo introduces it as his 'ultimo pianto' (last lament)) did not escape listeners. The *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* regretted that the piece was so sunny.⁴⁷ The novelist and critic Stendhal – who wrote at some length about the 'sublime aria' and the 'sublime voice' of his favourite interpreter, Giuditta Pasta – reflected that it was 'in effect nothing but a sublime praise of suicide'.⁴⁸

Sublime grief also had a special fascination for De Quincey. Deeply affected by the childhood death of his older sister, he worried about falling prey to what, quoting William Wordsworth, he calls 'the sublime attractions of the grave' (15.156). One of the remedies for these morbid attractions, for his childhood and adult self, was found in the experience of music and in the paradoxical structure of the religious sublime, which, he explains, draws

⁴⁶ On performance and ornamentation practices surrounding 'Ombra adorata', see the extraordinary discussion in Feldman, *The Castrato*, 223–49.

⁴⁷ *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, 32 (9 May 1804), 543.

⁴⁸ Stendhal, *Vie de Rossini suivie des Notes d'un dilettante*, ed. Henry Prunières, in *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 23.2, (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1986), 255, 152, 405, 115.

the believer to the lowest depth (death and crucifixion), not in order to allow him to fester in the grave, but in order to catapult him to the acme of loftiness and blessedness (resurrection and ascension). Thus, he remembers feeling as a child in mourning that ‘under the transfigurations of music’ in church, ‘grief itself’ became ‘a fiery chariot for mounting victoriously above the causes of grief’ (15.149). We might be reminded here of Elijah’s ascent in the fiery chariot, the chariots of transgressive classical heroes (including Medea and the proto-musician Orpheus), and indeed the God of the Psalms, who ‘makes the clouds his chariots, and rides on the wings of the wind’ (Ps. 104:3). Beyond the imagery associated with De Quincey’s recollections, the structure of feeling outlined is significant. It chimes with the aesthetics of pathos, as summarised pithily by Ulrich Port. ‘As an aesthetic phenomenon,’ he writes, ‘pathos always occurs when – within a tense coupling of articulated suffering [or “passion”] and associated attempts at distanciation – the freeing of suffering *in transit* is sought through suffering, and both “moments” are joined in *one* highly artificial configuration.’⁴⁹

De Quincey not infrequently associated the term pathos with music, and often, too, with the paradoxical structure of descent and resurrection so central to his sublime. In *Suspiria de profundis*, for example, he remembers connecting ‘a profound sense of pathos with the re-appearance [...] of some crocuses’ in spring, a resurrection which for adults, he maintains, functions as a reminder of death (15.137). *The English Mail-Coach* closes with an

⁴⁹ Ulrich Port, ‘“Katharsis Des Leidens”. Aby Warburgs “Pathosformeln” und ihre Konzeptionellen Hintergründe in Rhetorik, Poetik und Tragödien-theorie’, *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 73/1 Supplement: *Wege deutsch-jüdischen Denkens im 20. Jahrhundert* (1999), 5–42, at 21.

apocalyptic vision of the spreading of divine news, ‘too full of pathos’ and ‘joy that acknowledged no fountain but God, to utter themselves by other language than by tears, by restless anthems, by reverberations rising from every choir, of the *Gloria in excelsis*’ (16.445). The same text describes the ‘music and governing principles’ of a ‘dream’ sitting at ‘the confluence of two different keys’: one key is grotesque horror and madness; the other, a ‘pathos’ awakened by ‘one fair female hand [...] pointing, in sweet, sorrowful admonition, upwards to heaven’ (16.421). In light of examples like this, it is tempting to suggest that the structural conditions were ripe for the pathetic sublime across the late classical and early romantic musical repertoires popular in De Quincey’s lifetime: whether in a funeral liturgy or in operatic tragedy, music makes grief speak a tonal harmonic language that by its nature works with consonances, and with dissonances which are intelligible through their relationship to concord. The (however slight) distancing offered by form, and by the aural pleasures of harmony, joins with vividly portrayed – ‘articulated’ – suffering to create a highly artificial configuration, be that in the rites of liturgy; in the theatre’s stylisations of acting, staging and costume; or in the spectator’s rituals of opera-going and opium-taking. Harmony, according to this reading – this aesthetic ideology – is both the means by which suffering or passion is ‘freed’ and communicated to listeners, and the means by which it is made bearable, by which listeners are freed from it.

The mixed feelings implied by a praise of suicide, or a grief that gives pleasure, are another keynote of the pathetic sublime.⁵⁰ British romantic audiences knew the appeal of

⁵⁰ Compare Thomas Dixon’s discussion of the ‘age of pathos’ in *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 123–84, especially 158.

mixed emotions. They were seen when the sublime singer Ossian was inspired by the ‘joy of grief’.⁵¹ They were found in Alexander Pope’s canonical translation of the *Iliad*, where Andromache ‘mingled with [her] Smile a tender Tear’ as Hector leaves Troy.⁵² A suggestion of mixed emotions is also one of the ways we might understand ‘Sposo adorato, aspetta’, hearing its pleasant and serene D major tonality as the smile accompanying the mourner’s tears. Grassini’s chalumeau-like voice itself might sharpen the pathos imaginable in this scene, pathos relying on contented harmonies for its conceptual dissonances: between light-weight material and the timbres of oboes, low, dark bassoons and sombre horns; between the aria’s sunny sentiments, sepulchral setting and its suicidal implications.⁵³

Pathos has a bad reputation.⁵⁴ Yet the pathetic sublime is a structure of feeling worth teasing out when approaching eighteenth- and nineteenth-century musical and literary culture. It articulates a relationship between tragedy and the sublime that is related to yet distinct from pity and catharsis.⁵⁵ As a structure, it mediates between pleasure and pain: not the Burkean pain of fear and terror, but the pain of grief, pity and tenderness.

⁵¹ Hugh Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (London: T. Beket and P.A. De Hondt, 1763), 49–50. For Burke, too, grief contains pleasure and has no ‘resemblance to positive pain’. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 55.

⁵² Alexander Pope, *The Iliad of Homer* (London: B. Lintott, 1715–20), book 2 line 145 (compare *Iliad* 6.484).

⁵³ Something similar might be said of the pathos of a probable model for the aria, Gluck’s major-key ‘Che farò senza Euridice’ from *Orfeo* (Vienna 1762, Paris version 1774). Notwithstanding the popularity of Gluck’s aria, some of its first listeners complained it was ‘too cheerful a reaction’ to Orfeo’s final loss of Euridice. Gluck defended his composition by citing highly sensitive and (for him) un-notable aspects of performance: ‘with the slightest change in the singer’s expression’, he wrote, ‘the air “would become a dance for marionettes”’. See Bruce Alan Brown, ‘Gluck, Christoph Willibald, Ritter von’, §11, *Grove Music Online*, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>

⁵⁴ Compare Port, 42.

⁵⁵ Schiller is explicit that pity is a purely natural ‘affection’ which must be exceeded in the pathetic sublime (*Sämtliche Werke* V, 509–12; Port, 32).

While joining a large discourse surrounding mixed feelings, pathos did distinctive work for British romantics and Victorians, for whom taking pleasure *in* grief has to be guarded against, as maudlin, sentimental, self-pitying and introverted, at worst growing pathological and destructive.⁵⁶ Grief is to motivate pleasure, to be redeemed, in more indirect ways. Central among these is aesthetic experience, which arises, as De Quincey sketches it in his opera reminiscences, in the interaction between three different spheres: the passions represented on stage; the personal, incidental, natural passions of the spectator's life; and the quasi-impersonal, unreal, estranged and sublimed passions belonging to second-order reflection upon life. That is, aesthetic reflection, in this scenario, arises from seeing oneself as another – hearing one's own life (or life in general) *as if* coherent, as if represented in a chorus of elaborate harmony, &c.

From pathos to harmonia mundi

The foregoing analysis has attempted to articulate what De Quincey leaves unspecified in his opera-going scene, with its repeated ' &cs.' Lack of specificity is indeed celebrated in the text, as De Quincey rehearses a romantic commonplace about music as an 'other' to understanding:

I had all around me, in the intervals [...] the music of the Italian language
talked by Italian women [...] I listened with a pleasure such as that with
which Weld the traveller lay and listened, in Canada, to the sweet laughter

⁵⁶ Compare Dixon, *Weeping Britannia*, 156–7.

of Indian women; for the less you understand of a language, the more sensible you are to the melody or harshness of its sounds.⁵⁷

De Quincey's *etceteras* in this context are suggestive as well as vague, inviting sensuous ('sensible'), imaginative and (for opera-goers among his first readers) memorial engagements, allowing indefinite series of connections between a historical performance, 'elaborate harmony' and aesthetic experiences of pain and subjection sublimely transformed into pleasure and purposiveness.

Responding to De Quincey's inviting *etceteras*, then, how might we think further about sublime harmony and De Quincey's opera pleasures? First, there is the opera-going scene's connection with a longer narrative of elevation in *Confessions*. This is a narrative about opium's pleasures which attempts to cast the drug as an agent of aesthetic-moral renovation. Music plays a submerged but sustained role here. Paralleling the legitimising moves of earlier writers on the sublime, De Quincey wants to present *opium* as a force of restoration, not intoxication or enthusiasm. While 'wine disorders the mental faculties', he insists, 'opium [...] introduces amongst them the most exquisite order, legislation, and harmony'. Indeed, opium offers a 'healthy restoration' to 'antediluvian' spiritual and bodily 'equipoise' (2.44). Just before this invocation of conceptual harmony come four references to Wordsworth's poem 'The Power of Music' (1806), all referring to London's Oxford Street, where De Quincey first bought opium. In Wordsworth's poem, this is the place where a fiddler irresistably attracts a crowd of working-class listeners. Wordsworth's poem could be

⁵⁷ Isaac Weld, *Travels Through the States of North America* (1799), had compared the 'harmonious voices' of Italian and Canadian women. See DQ 2.334. An 'operatic' mode was also linked with an Indian woman's voice by Wordsworth. D'Arcy Wood, *Romanticism and Music Culture*, 112–13.

seen to celebrate music's aesthetic power to suspend acquisitive, harried, utilitarian life. It concludes:

Now, coaches and chariots! roar on like a stream;
Here are twenty souls happy as souls in a dream;
They are deaf to your murmurs – they care not for you,
Nor what ye are flying, nor what ye pursue! (lines 41–44)⁵⁸

The poem nonetheless troubles a celebratory interpretation by persistently emphasising that listeners become vulnerable, passive, 'caught' by music's 'sway' (lines 6, 18), distracted from gainful employment and familial duties. The suspicion that, like music, *opium* might also make us passive, negligent and vulnerable is precisely what De Quincey seeks to disprove by recounting his musical pleasures. 'It will be seen', he announces, that 'opium did not move me to seek solitude, and much less to seek inactivity, or' 'torpid' 'self-involution' (2.47).

Opera-going is thus presented as sociable, tied to the real sensuous world, and 'active' – in that music is 'constructed', he claims, 'by the re-action of the mind upon the notices of the ear' (2.48). In this sense musical pleasure remains aesthetic in a post-Kantian sense: it relies on the mind to give 'form' to sensuous '*matter*'; it is tied to particular sense impressions; and it 'incarnat[es]' life rather than transcending life, even as it gestures towards sublime abstraction. Audible and harmonious music here triggers a 'present[ation]' of one's life as an integrated whole. Like Kant's sublime totality, this is something impossible

⁵⁸ William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 236–8.

for imagination to literally collate and present. And it is a presentation which itself grants a *feeling* of personal harmony, a sort of inaudible *harmonia humana*.

The climax of De Quincey's opium pleasures plays further on inaudible harmonies. The opium-eater now sits alone near the sea and a distant town, and perceives the whole 'earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind', 'yet not out of sight' (2.51). He has become like the recipient of a Lucretian sublime: tranquil without torpor, feeling delight without disruptive passion.⁵⁹ Attuned to the harmony of the cosmos, the opium-eater is also like Boethius's Scipio in the *Consolations of Philosophy's* paradigmatic reflection on music. As in Boethius, this perception of cosmic harmony reflects reconciliation of harmony in man: for, De Quincey writes, 'the ocean, in everlasting but gentle agitation', 'might not unfitly typify the mind and the mood which then swayed it'. The 'intellect' moves 'as unwearied as the heavens' yet with 'a tranquillity that seemed no product of inertia, but as if resulting from mighty and equal antagonisms: infinite activity, infinite repose' (2.51). This longer narrative folds Grassini's 'interludes' at the opera into an ascending and elevating series of sublime pleasures governed by different harmonies – intertextual, audible, personal, cosmic.

The longer narrative outlined here ends with a kind of *concordia discors*, a harmony of discords or 'mighty and equal antagonisms'. Incidentally, the term *concordia discors* first

⁵⁹ On the Lucretian sublime, see Philip Hardie, *Lucretian Receptions: History, the Sublime, Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); James Porter, 'Lucretius and the Sublime', in Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 167–84; Paddy Bullard, 'Edmund Burke among the Poets: Milton, Lucretius and the *Philosophical Enquiry*', in Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard, eds., *The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke's Philosophical Enquiry* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 247–63.

appeared in a Lucretian-Virgilian moment in Horace's *Epistles*, where it describes the *sublimia cures* (lofty concerns) of a man contemplating the workings of the cosmos: the movements of tides, seasons, heavenly bodies, the 'discordant harmony of things'.⁶⁰ *Concordia discors* in fact chimes with intertextual connections between the opera scene and the sublime, connections spun across De Quincey's autobiographical writings. Take, for instance, *Suspiria de profundis*, where De Quincey recounts his earliest opium dreams in terms resonant with the opera's 'blended', 'hazy abstraction':

Once again, arose the swell of the anthem – the burst of the Hallelujah chorus – the storm – the trampling movement of the choral passion – the agitation of my own trembling sympathy – the tumult of the choir – the wrath of the organ. Once more I, that wallowed, became he that rose up to the clouds. And now in Oxford, all was bound up into unity; the first state and the last were melted into each other as in some sunny glorifying haze.

This charts a recognisable transformation from sublime subjection beneath an overwhelming power to sublime elevation. Although the audible dream-music is abrupt, 'tumult[uous]', and 'passion[ate]', the conceptual emphasis is not on agitated dissonance but again on harmonising opposites: 'wallow[ing]' is not merely succeeded by 'r[is]ing up'; the two 'state[s]' are 'unit[ed]'. We could align the states of wallowing and rising with grief and composure, but also death and life; for (adding another intertext) what De Quincey dreams about is childhood visions at his sister Elisabeth's funeral. During this funeral,

⁶⁰ Horace, *Epistle* 12.15–19, in *Epistles Book 1*, ed. Roland Mayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72.

fantasies of reunion between the living and dead, earth and heaven, were triggered by readings from the Book of Common Prayer's funeral service alongside the 'sublime effect' of a musical setting from Revelation, from the Funeral Sentences. The Sentence interrupts the spoken text of the liturgy, and itself functions like an apocalyptic 'burst of heavenly trumpets' to announce the raising and reunion of the quick and dead: "'I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, from henceforth blessed are the dead'". Although the points of reference just outlined are commonplaces of an English Protestant sublime – Handel, scripture, the Book of Common Prayer – in structural terms we have not moved so very far from Andromache and her imagined reunions at Hector's tomb.

This brings me to one final, extended sense of harmony, suggested not only by the potential, distant parallel between Andromache and the bereft eighteenth-century child mourner of *Suspiria de profundis*, but also by the repeated, sustained '*risuonerà*' (will resound) at the climax of '*Ombra adorata, aspetta*'. De Quincey's texts often use figures of resonance, reverberation and vibration to connect disparate textual and autobiographical moments of sublimity, and to imagine sublime transmissions of energy from source to receptor. Take for instance the 'agitation of' 'trembling sympathy' that De Quincey feels in his sublime opium dreams: this is not merely fearful trembling in response to a sublime object; like the trembling of a sympathetic string, this trembling *participates* in power, in the 'trampling' and 'swell' to which it is apparently only subjected. Such odd participation is, of course, crucial to the Longinian sublime, which 'fill[s]' us 'with joy and pride, as if we had

ourselves produced the very thing we heard'.⁶¹ An ability to resonate depends on similarities between emitter and receptor (a receptor that in turn also becomes a transmitter), on shared frequencies, aptness or fit. This 'fit' gives a logic to De Quincey's dream: a listener is transformed into a kind of vibrating string, mirroring the heavenly music of the Hallelujah chorus, and so rising to the music's position in 'the clouds'. But if sublime harmonisation or *concordia discors* relies on our 'vibrating sympathy' with powers of grief, powers of death (as well as life), and on *others'* death and pain, we can well understand why even sublime harmony might, in De Quincey's texts, be a guilty pleasure or a pleasing horror. In this sense, the sublime as a resolution of difficulty into untroubled, singular concord will always look like a deceptive cadence, a counterfeit resolution.

This chapter has perhaps played fast and loose with harmony. But, after all, the question of how far diverse materials can be made to cohere is proper to harmony. If all this seems to stretch harmony too far, we might think again of Longinus, who saw in musical arrangement an irresistible fit between music's movements and the movements of bodies and passions, and who saw in verbal harmony an involuted fit between 'myriad ideas' raised by language and the structuring and 'tones' of that same language. Harmonious verbal arrangement, for Longinus, also triggered a sublime described as an irresistible fit (συναρμόζουσιν) and participation or communion (μετουσίαν) between the emotions of listener and speaker.⁶² Clearly, harmony has a confounding semantic range, stretching from

⁶¹ Longinus, 'On the Sublime', trans. W.H. Fyfe and Donald Russell, in Jeffrey Henderson, ed., *Aristotle: Poetics; Longinus: On the Sublime; Demetrius: On Style*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 143–308, at 179 (7.2).

⁶² Longinus, 39.3.

affective composure, to resemblance (even resonance), to the fact of things forming a whole, however attenuated. Harmony can imply temporal extension, requiring a resolution that ends a series of tensions; or a synchrony, the apt coexistence of sounds, even if these sounds are discordantly concordant – like the sublime harmony Dennis saw in the Alps, which made ‘such a Consort up for the Eye, as that sort of Musick does for the Ear, in which Horreur can be joyn’d with Harmony’.⁶³ To examine harmony in this context is not to gainsay the vital roles of dissonance in the sublime. But, precisely by focusing on a writer so interested in difficulty and lack of resolution, as De Quincey was, we can appreciate the ineluctable importance of harmony to thinking the sublime. Finally, through the expansive resonances of the figure of Grassini-as-Andromache, it becomes clear that the uncomfortable proximity between ‘fit’ and ‘counterfeit’ in Longinus’s treatise has far-reaching implications in the long history of the harmonious sublime.

⁶³ John Dennis, ‘Turin, October 25. [16]88’, in *Miscellanies in Verse and Prose* (London: James Knapton, 1693), 139.

Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Stanyon, M

Title:

Counterfeits, Contraltos and Harmony in De Quincey's Sublime

Date:

2020-05-31

Citation:

Stanyon, M. (2020). Counterfeits, Contraltos and Harmony in De Quincey's Sublime.
Stanyon, M (Ed.). Hibberd, S (Ed.). Music and the Sonorous Sublime in European Culture, 1680–1880, (1), pp.177-199. Cambridge University Press.

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/285052>