

“Sounds and scents turn in the evening air”

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“Sounds and scents turn in the evening air”: Sense and synaesthesia in popular song settings of Baudelaire’s “Evening Harmony”

Now is the time when, throbbing on its stem,
each flower sheds its perfume like incense.
sounds and scents spiral in the evening air
in a melancholy waltz, a slow sensual turning.

Each flower sheds its perfume like incense:
the violin trembles like a wounded heart,
in a melancholy waltz, a slow, sensual turning.
the sky is sad and beautiful, like a vast altar.

The violin trembles like a wounded heart,
a tender heart that hates the huge black void.
the sky is sad and beautiful like a vast altar.
the sun has drowned in its congealing blood.

A tender heart that hates the huge, black void,
is gathering from the luminous past, what dreams remain.
the sun has drowned in its congealing blood,
and like a glowing marvel, your memory shines in me.

Charles Baudelaire, “Evening Harmony” (Translation by Ruth White)

The night has long been a prevalent theme in popular music, playing into ideas of romance, sexuality, sadness and longing, as demonstrated by a recent corpus analysis of song lyrics of Billboard number one hits from 1969 - 2009. The study, conducted by David Henard and Christian Rossetti of North Carolina State University found that the word “night” appeared amongst the top ten most frequently occurring words in lyrics of Billboard chart-toppers in every decade studied, except for the 2000s. (Henard & Rossetti 2014) Henard and Rossetti’s research confirms the longstanding importance of nighttime and the vespertine within the context of popular music, and points to the status of the evening as a space of creative and sensual possibilities. Within the sphere of classical music, too, the night provides rich inspiration, from Mozart’s “Notturmo in D” (1776/7) and “Serenata Notturna” (1776) to John Field’s set of eighteen nocturnes, composed during the early 1800s, which established the nocturne form as a Romantic “trope”, inspiring others, such as Chopin’s famous set of twenty-one nocturnes (1827-1846). As a musical form, the nocturne is associated with and, one might even say, defined by ethereal evocations of the night; in an essay which prefaced his 1859 edition of six of Field’s nocturnes, Franz Liszt describes the unique nature of these compositions, claiming that no other composer had ever matched Field’s “vague Aeolian harmonies, these half-formed sighs floating through the air, softly lamenting and dissolved in delicious melancholy.” (Liszt 1902) Since the nineteenth century, the nocturne form has been appropriated by numerous musical figures and genres, not only within the sphere of classical music, but also within the world of popular and modern experimental music. Björk’s album *Vespertine* and Kate Bush’s *Before the Dawn* point to the role of evening time and the night as a mysteries space in which music and the senses intertwine, “dissolved in delicious melancholy”, as Liszt puts it. This chapter examines the way

in which the night is performed and transformed in two “popular”¹ settings of Charles Baudelaire’s poem “Harmonie du soir” [hereafter referred to in English translation as “Evening Harmony”], first published in 1857, arguing that the principal qualities of the “nocturne” provide a useful lens through which to read interart approaches to performing the night.

Baudelaire provides a rich case study for examining the way in which key themes are performed and embodied in musical adaptations of poetry; he is, arguably, the most frequently set to music of all French poets with over 1800 known song settings of his poetry, spanning a wide range of time periods, languages and musical genres. (Baudelaire Song Project, online) From early classical art song settings by Claude Debussy and Gabriel Fauré, via the cabaret renditions of Maurice Rollinat and the comprehensive set of *chanson française* settings by Léo Ferré released between 1957 and 1977, to twenty-first century settings in genres as diverse as black metal and electronica, Baudelaire’s poems have been a constant source of inspiration for composers and songwriters.² Even stars of reality TV have been known to tap into the marketability of Baudelaire’s universal themes, with Camélia Jordana, a runner-up on the televised singing competition *The Voice*, releasing a setting of one of Baudelaire’s “Spleen” poems in 2009. In order to understand how different popular musicians have performed the complex intertwining of sensory and sentimental experience, this chapter takes as a starting point the qualities associated with the Nocturne form, as outlined in Liszt’s essay. Exploring the varied aspects of the night presented in Baudelaire’s poem, and examining how these have been transformed through musical settings, the chapter seeks to demonstrate how engagement with the artistic possibilities of the night has evolved from the late eighteenth century to recent popular music, mediated through poetry.

The Night

In placing the emphasis on the notion of the nocturne as a musical form, embedded in classical music, we should not forget the primary and etymological meaning of the term as relating to the night. Indeed, it is the onset of the night which provides the inspiration for Baudelaire’s evocative poem, and the synaesthetic potential of the night which is teased out through these diverse popular settings of “Evening Harmony”. The night proves to be something of a poetic commonplace in Baudelaire’s oeuvre. Undertaking preliminary word frequency analyses on his single verse collection, *Les Fleurs du Mal* [hereafter referred to in English translation as *Flowers of Evil*] reveals that the themes addressed in Baudelaire’s poetry parallel those found in popular music, according to Henard and Rossetti’s study of Billboard number one hits with references to the evening and to dusk appearing repeatedly. (cf. Ardrey 2016) Within Baudelaire’s aesthetic nightfall and nighttime are frequently presented as a backdrop before which spiritual contemplation and synaesthetic experiences can take place, as we see in poems such as “Crépuscule du soir” [“Evening Twilight”] and “Recueillement” [“Meditation”], as well as in

¹ For the purposes of this chapter, we understand “popular” music in the broadest sense of the term, spanning that which appeals to popular tastes, commercial and mainstream music, as well as recent folk and acoustic music, and experimental music which uses modern approaches, such as electronic instruments and synthesizers.

² For a detailed breakdown of different types of song settings of poetry, see Helen Abbott’s *Shifting Typologies of Song* (Table 1.1) in *Baudelaire in Song*. Oxford: OUP, 2017, p. 11. According to the Baudelaire Song Project database (due for release late 2018).

“Evening Harmony”. In the poem “Correspondences”, meanwhile, the speaker describes his aesthetic of synaesthesia as being “vast as the night”. In the poem ‘L’Idéal’ [“The Ideal”] night is personified as the daughter of Michelangelo, while in “Obsession”, darkness is described as a canvas which brings departed souls to life, pointing to its aesthetic, synaesthetic and supernatural powers. The night is also often evoked more subtly, connected to ideas of melancholia or “spleen”, to sex and sensuality, prostitution, intoxication or even malice.

With the synaesthetic and transmedial possibilities of the nocturne firmly in mind, the remainder of this chapter will examine the ways in which two popular musical artists have re-presented the night and transformed its sensory evocations into music, through their settings of Baudelaire’s “Evening Harmony”. Working chronologically, the chapter begins by examining an avant garde English-language electronica setting by Ruth White (1969), before going on to consider how Franco-Tunisien folk pop singer Nawel Ben Kraïem (2014) has appropriated the poem for performance in a twenty-first century acoustic context. In doing so, the chapter seeks to contribute to understanding of the importance of popular settings of Baudelaire’s poetry in shaping the reception history of his works, as well as pointing to the fundamental importance of understanding how texts and themes are performed in popular music culture, with important implications for our understanding of interart dialogue in which popular music is engaged.

The Text

Baudelaire’s “Evening Harmony” was composed around 1846, and appeared in the first edition of *Flowers of Evil*, published in 1857. Structurally, the poem is unique amongst Baudelaire’s verse poetry in using the pantoum form. A Malaysian verse form, the pantoum is a poem composed of quatrains (in this case four quatrains) with an ABAB or “rime croisée” rhyme scheme. The second and fourth lines of “odd” stanzas form the first and third lines of the following “even” stanza, so lines two and four in stanza one, become lines one and three in stanza two. (Poets.org online) The pantoum form was relatively popular in nineteenth-century French poetry, popularised by Victor Hugo in his collection *Orientales* (1829) and taken up by French poets including Théodore de Banville, Leconte de Lisle and Paul Verlaine. In his *Petit Traité de poésie française [Little Treatise on French Poetry]*, (1872) Théodore de Banville offers a brief description of the Pantoum:

Created in the Orient, and preserved there, so as to retain a boundless grace, and delicate charm, fleeting as a dream, this deeply musical poem is trying somehow to acclimatise over here.³ (Banville 1881, 254-255)

Banville’s description of the pantoum form as being “deeply musical” perhaps offers some hint as to its aptitude for a poem which describes the synaesthetic “music” of nightfall in “Evening Harmony”. It is not entirely clear what Banville means here, as his use of the adjective “musical” seems to be used metaphorically to suggest the delicate Eastern charm of the form, rather than as a claim that the poetic form is literally comparable to music, though arguably the regular repetition of lines makes the “pantoum” particularly apt for setting to music. Through the use of

³ Translation by the author. Original text:

« Créé et conservé par l’Orient, qui lui a gardé une grâce infinie et un charme délicat et fuyant comme celui d’un rêve, ce poème si musical essaie seulement de s’acclimater chez nous. »

the pantoum form and the rich sensory allusions to sounds, smells, sights and sensations, night is presented as sensuous, luxurious, exotic and melancholy, echoing the “gentle intoxication of this music, comparable to the odorous smoke-wreaths of rose-tobacco substituted in a narghileh, for the acrid whiffs of tombeki – hallucinations free from fever and violent emotion, but filled, on the contrary, with floating iridescent images” which Liszt associates with the nocturne form. (Liszt 1902)

Ruth White: “Evening Harmony” (1969)

The ethereal and hallucinatory qualities associated with both the Pantoum as a poetic form and the musical nocturne are vividly evoked through the soundscape of Ruth White’s “Evening Harmony”. The second track on her album, *Flowers of Evil*, released in 1969, “Evening Harmony” follows on from the opening track “The Clock”, which personifies time as a sinister deity. The sequence of tracks on the LP creates the sense of an impending movement towards darkness, foregrounding the melancholy, nostalgic and troubling aspects of the night evoked in “Evening Harmony”. White’s Baudelaire settings elude and, I suggest, deliberately reject classification according to musical genre, playing out a sense of uncertainty over the stability and sustainability of artistic practice. Indeed, we might even question whether White’s performances of poems by Baudelaire can really be considered songs, as they, in fact, consist of readings of her own, unrhymed translations of the poem, with vocals distorted through the use of a MOOG synthesizer. Instead, we might think of White’s settings as a form of sung declamation, in which words and music are superimposed rather than fused together, enhancing the sense of distortion and fragmentation which characterises the setting and highlights the uncertainty of the impending darkness.

The evasion of physicality, through the mechanical distortion of the voice moves the site of physical experience from the performer to the listener, who becomes acutely aware of their own corporeality as they experience and react to the music. Helen Abbott notes that Ruth White’s settings of Baudelaire “have largely remained on the peripheries of comparative Baudelaire scholarship” (Abbott 2015, 360) and yet as she goes on to assert that these interactions with Baudelaire play a particularly important role in demonstrating the broad scope of the reception of the poet’s oeuvre through music. Examining White’s treatment of Baudelaire’s poems—in this case “Evening Harmony”—alongside other popular settings of this poem can be particularly illuminating, demonstrating how those on the margins of Baudelaire’s reception (through musical genre as well as through gender, nationality, language etc.) enable us to challenge received ideas about the relationship between poetry and music. In particular, I suggest that White’s settings draw attention to the spiritual dimension to Baudelaire’s poem, showcasing how the very physical evocation of sounds and smells is a catalyst for performing the mysterious nature of the night, playing on the psychical and existential, rather than on the corporeal sensations which the night evokes.

White’s English-language performance of Baudelaire’s “Evening Harmony” offers an alternative mode of performing the night, resisting categorisation according to genre, space or, indeed historical period. In this regard, White’s performance of “Evening Harmony”, like other tracks on her *Flowers of Evil* album, challenges conventions surrounding performance. Sean Cubitt

argues that popular song typically makes the listener feel a sense of intimacy, through the physical presence of the voice, and yet, “in the case of recorded songs, that presence is illusory.” (Cubitt 1984, 213) When a song is recorded, the interposition of a machine (i.e. a recording device) between the singing subject and the listener creates an imperceptible boundary which separates the two parties, problematising the relationship between performer and audience. On the one hand, Ruth White’s “Evening Harmony” breaks down that illusory intimacy, making the boundary between performer and listener manifest through distortion, and, on the other, the electronic manipulations wrought upon both the voice and the accompanying soundscape further complicate the relationship between speaking subject and / or performer, and listener.

The intervention of the MOOG synthesiser challenges our expectations of the auditory identity of the lyric voice, which sounds dream-like and other-worldly. In the sleeve notes which accompany *Flowers of Evil*, White explains her affinity with Baudelaire:

To me, Baudelaire’s poems are of such unique power that they always seem to rise above the level of the personal and sometimes existential nature of their content. In this composition, I have attempted to parallel the transcendental qualities of the poetry through electronic means. (White 1969)

It is notable that White refers to her musical appropriations of Baudelaire’s poetry as “compositions” rather than as songs or even as music, suggesting a tendency to elude categorisation beyond the broad scope of ‘art’. White’s description of her aesthetic aims in setting Baudelaire’s poetry to music has striking parallels with Liszt’s estimation of John Field’s nocturnes.

The title Nocturne [...] bears our thoughts at the outset toward those hours wherein the soul, released from all the cares of the day, is lost in self-contemplation, and soars toward the regions of a starlit heaven. (Liszt 1902)

Here, Liszt highlights the potential for evening to serve as a moment of self-contemplation, highlighting the “transcendental qualities” (to use White’s phrase) of the evening. Moreover, like White, Liszt conceives of the effect of the aesthetic experience of the nocturne as operating on a vertical plane, with evening serving as a particularly apt moment for self-contemplation, in which the physical body is transcended. The physicality of the sensations evoked in the poem text and performed by White, paradoxically, combine in a synaesthetic fusion, to transcend corporeal existence.

Questions of presence and absence are particularly pertinent in the case of White’s performance of “Evening Harmony”. The track is a little over four minutes long, and yet the vocals enter at 2’09”, distorted by the synthesiser and performed over a strange soundscape which sounds, variously, like waves, the wind and the regular pulsating of a heartbeat. In White’s setting, the text almost forms a backdrop, transcended by the ethereal soundscape to which the poem gives rise. The prevalence of soundscapes, and the absence of the voice for most of the track seems to relegate the voice, and thus the physical body to secondary status, highlighting the “transcendental qualities” which White seeks to evoke, in different ways, across the *Flowers of Evil* LP. Indeed, in the sleeve notes which accompany the LP, the artist explains that she

deliberately sought to move away from the presence of the physical body, transforming herself and transcending the body, through the intervention of the MOOG synthesiser. She writes: “for the words, I used my own voice as the generator of the original sound, to be altered or dehumanized [...] To accent special words or phrases, I used controlled tape delays. Choruses were created by combining slight delays with multiple track recordings.” (White 1969)

The dialectic of presence and absence established through the distortion of the voice in White’s “Evening Harmony” echoes the self-same tension in the text of Baudelaire’s poem. In the poem, the evening itself is presented as an uncertain, intermediary space, in which the relationship between the physical and the imaginary is called into question. The transformation of voice and the replications used to create “choruses” in White’s setting serve to challenge the notion of performative presence. The final stanza of the poem text, both in the original French and in White’s English translation takes comfort in making what is absent present, through the act of imagining — so it is that the speaker seeks to gather up the remains of the “luminous past” from the “huge, black void”, and both the poem and the track end with an image of optimism: “and like a glowing marvel, your memory shines in me.” It is the creative acts of poetry — both writing and reading — and of remembrance which brings light, countering and transcending the anxieties brought about by the night. The comparison in the final line of White’s translation of Baudelaire’s poem, “like a glowing marvel, your memory shines in me”, echoes Claude Debussy’s description of his own appropriation of the nocturne form, from Whistler, seeking to capture in music “the special effects of the light that the word suggests”. White’s song setting ends with the subject pronoun “me”, followed by a few seconds of the ethereal soundscape; this has the effect that the speaking subject both has and is the last word (in the original French text, the last word is “ostensoir”, meaning “censer”) as if the lyric voice itself becomes a space in which, in the face of darkness, light might shine, through the creative act of memory.

Nawel et Lilabox Project: “Harmonie du soir” (2011)

The emphasis on the aesthetic experience and ethereality seen in White’s “Evening Harmony” is evoked through very different means in the Nawel and Lilabox’s setting of the poem. The song is a direct setting of Baudelaire’s original French text, with no alterations or modifications. Unlike Ruth White’s English-language electronica version, which operates at the level of sung declamation, Nawel and Lilabox’s setting is an acoustic sung version, foregrounding the physicality of the (female) voice. The song was originally performed in concert in 2011, as part of the Nawel and Lilabox Project band, led by the franco-arabic singer Nawel Ben Kraïem, who had previously sung with the French-Tunisian group Cirrus. “Harmonie du soir” is one of just a handful of songs in French amongst Ben Kraïem’s discography—the others being in English and Arabic—and is, to date, the only French poem to be set to music by the singer. Ben Kraïem describes her sound as “melting pop” (Miadi, online) and, to date, her songs have included a reworking of an Islamic prayer, and a number of socio-political ballads in Arabic, which tell stories of cultural difference and persecution, echoing the turbulence of recent events in her native Tunisia.

Nawel and Lilabox’s setting of “Evening Harmony” foregrounds its own hybridity, both in form, content and medium. A promotional article for the Neumünster Abbey Cultural Exchange Center

describes Nawel and Lilabox as an “eminently hybrid project, as much on the level of language as on the level of sound, which mixes acoustic and electronic, drawing on the singer’s gravelly voice and the oneiric quality of Arab poets.” (Neumünster 2012). Here, we see the “oneiric quality” not of Arab poets, but of a French poet, who represents the other side of Ben Kraïem’s cultural heritage. Nawel and Lilabox’s setting of Baudelaire’s “Evening Harmony”, draws on the other side of the singer’s cultural heritage, tapping instead into the synaesthetic and sensory elements of a canonical work of French poetry, from one of France’s best-known poets. It is particularly striking that Nawel and Lilabox should pick “Evening Harmony” —a poem in which, formally speaking, East meets West, as Baudelaire’s Oriental-inspired pantoum is made up of twelve-syllable lines, known as alexandrines, which are a staple of classical French verse. While White’s English-language setting of “Evening Harmony” takes place within an ethereal “non-space”, Nawel and Lilabox’s setting foregrounds the complexities of space, seeking roots in-between cultural and temporal contexts.

Nawel and Lilabox’s setting of “Evening Harmony” plays on the theme of the “melancholy waltz” through the use of a triple-time accompaniment, in 6/8, played out on the guitar. The notion of dance is particularly connected with the music of the evening, and listening to music can be seen in itself as having synaesthetic qualities, encouraging a desire for physical movement, within a social context and furthering a sense of physical and sensual intimacy. In Nawel and Lilabox’s setting of Baudelaire’s poem, the effect of the waltz rhythm is almost hypnotic, with the vocal line floating above this metronomic accompaniment.

In his 1972 essay “The Grain of the Voice” Roland Barthes describes the complex relationship between the voice and the body from which it emanates, highlighting how vocal expression diverges from the meaning of the text being performed. In the act of performing a song the listener experiences:

something which is directly the singer's body, brought by one and the same movement to your ear from the depths of the body's cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilage, [...] as if a single skin lined the performer's inner flesh and the music he sings. This voice is not personal: it expresses nothing about the singer, about his soul; it is not original [...], and at the same time it is individual: it enables us to hear a body which, of course, has no public identity, no "personality," but which is nonetheless a separate body; and above all this voice directly conveys the symbolic, over and above the intelligible, the expressive. (Barthes 1977, 181-182)

The notion of transcending the physical body, alluded to by Ruth White in the sleeve notes to *Flowers of Evil* might, if we are to agree with Barthes, be achieved not through distorting the voice electronically, but by experiencing and celebrating the expressive, extratextual “language” of the voice. The materiality of the voice is foregrounded in Nawel and Lilabox’s “Harmonie du soir”; indeed, this poem could almost stand as a metaphor for the voice, with verbs of movement “vibrates” and “trembles”, both in the present tense in French, suggesting the movement of the vocal chords and the immediacy of the voice, which is so palpable in this particular setting. In the song the movement and the sound of Ben Kraïem’s singing body combine with the performances of the instrumentalists; we feel the strumming of the guitar and the plucking of the cello strings. In the recording we actually hear Ben Kraïem gasp for breath, emphasising a

curiously natural and untrained style, which becomes part of the music of the song. Thus, to put it in Lawrence Kramer's terms, the song "attacks the text", (Kramer 1984, 129) distorting the linguistic content, but instead creating a new work of art, not the sum of its parts but a complete entity in which words and music are enmeshed.

Both of the songs analysed in this chapter are performed by women, and yet the two female voices have very different effects, calling into question the implications of gender for understanding the role of the embodied voice in song settings of poetry. Ruth White's English-language setting of "Evening Harmony" challenges the materiality and corporeality of the voice through the interposition of the MOOG synthesiser, while Ben Kraïem's performance of Baudelaire's poem foregrounds the materiality of the voice as part of the physical performance. Indeed, it is telling that Nawel and Lilabox's setting of Baudelaire's "Evening Harmony" was performed live, but was never released as a physical recording on disc or digitally as an mp3. Now, some seven years after its initial performance, the track is only available to listen to via Ben Kraïem's MySpace page (a now dated format, the page is sparse, and has not been updated for a number of years). The difficulty in accessing a (legitimate) recording of Nawel and Lilabox's setting of Baudelaire's "Evening Harmony" highlights the transience of physical performance, in contrast to the permanence and repeatability of the illusion of presence created by recording. In the case of Nawel and Lilabox, then, the act of performing an acoustic setting of Baudelaire's poem serves to create a sense of presence and immediacy, which stands in stark contrast to the problematic interplay of presence and absence created by the experimental electronic distortions of Ruth White's "Evening Harmony".

The MOOG synthesiser which "cloaks" the voice of the performer in Ruth White's setting of "Evening Harmony" might be seen to be rather sterile in comparison with the rawness of the voice in Nawel and Lilabox's ethereal setting. By assuming the persona of the lyric voice entirely in her performance, Ben Kraïem underscores the synaesthetic possibilities of Baudelaire's text and breathes life into the sensuous scene evoked in the poem's first stanza. The ease with which she, as a vocalist, brings together the tightly-woven structure of the pantoum and the relaxed acoustic song, evoking the intertwining of sadness and ecstasy brought about by the night reveals the intercultural dialogue which is inherent both within herself and her work. Writing on the singer in an article for the website of the international francophone television channel *TV5 Monde*, the journalist Yahia Assam describes the singer's past struggles to situate herself within a fixed cultural space, concluding that: "today, this double exile is no longer a problem: she lives out her double identity like a flag in multiple colours."⁴ (Assam 2013, online) In this regard, Ben Kraïem assumes a physical presence on the stage, embodying her dual identity through the act of sung performance, while White transcends her physical, performing body by transforming her voice. In Nawel and Lilabox's setting of Baudelaire's "Evening Harmony", the assertion of the body into the act of performance effectively mediates between the physical and the spiritual dimensions, enacting a process of "correspondances", to use Baudelaire's own terminology—that is the intermingling of the senses through art, which is a key part of Baudelaire's aesthetic.

⁴ Translation by the author. Original text:

"aujourd'hui, ce double exil n'est plus un problème ; elle vit sa double identité comme un drapeau aux multiples couleurs"

There are inherent similarities to be found in the poetics of “correspondances” or synaesthesia which are central to Baudelaire’s artistic practice and the self-declared hybridity of the aesthetic of the Nawel and Lilabox Project. The breathy, gravelly timbre of Ben Kraïem’s voice and the way in which she performs the sounds and perfumes “turning” in the evening air, puts the listener in mind of Baudelaire’s poem “Tout entière” [“All of Her”], in which the poet describes a lover who “dazzles like the dawn and consoles like the night”, concluding with an ecstatic evocation of synaesthesia:

O mystic metamorphosis
 Of all my senses joined in one!
 Her breath makes music,
 And her voice makes perfume! (Baudelaire b 1954)

This final stanza of “All of Her” highlights the essential combination of physicality and sensuality which enables the performance of a poem—whether physically, through spoken declamation or song, or mentally, through the act of reading—to transcend the limitations of the page. The performance of “Evening Harmony” enacts the process of correspondances in a variety of ways: transposing this exotic yet canonical poem into the familiar French context of the cabaret, as in Léo Ferré’s setting; transcending the realm of physical sensation by making the voice artificial and “strange” as Ruth White does; or, as in the Nawel and Lilabox Project’s setting, by embodying the interplay of sensations through the physicality of performance.

Conclusion

The theme of the night and the physical, psychological and spiritual transformations which take place under the cover of darkness are central to Baudelaire’s poetry. By examining the way in which popular musicians have performed darkness, melancholy, twilight and the nighttime in his work, we begin to see the importance of re-examining the status of the night within the context of the reception history of Baudelaire’s oeuvre. Such a comparative study, which draws on the increasingly apparent links between nineteenth-century French poetry and the performance of popular song, has much to tell us about the rich tapestry of symbolism which lies beneath the surface of Baudelaire’s presentation of the night, as well as about affinities between his aesthetic and that of popular and electronic music, pointing to the potential benefits of similar thematic studies of other word and music pairings.

Reading popular song settings of Baudelaire’s “Evening Harmony” in light of the theme of the nocturne allows us to explore the fluid boundaries between art forms, and highlights the universality of sensory and sensual experience evoked in poetry and song. As Liszt wrote of John Field’s nocturnes,

[the] form will not grow old, because it is perfectly adapted to his conceptions, which do not belong to a class of temporary, transient sentiments, called into being by the influence of his environment at the time, but are pure emotions which will for ever cast a spell over the heart of man; for he finds them always the same, whether contrasted with the beauties

of Nature or with the fondest happiness revealed to him at the morn of life, before the radiant prisms of emotion are overclouded by the shadow of reflection. (Liszt 1902)

Considering popular musical adaptations of Baudelaire’s “Evening Harmony” in light of the concept of the Nocturne helps us to understand the lasting influence of poetry and, in particular, Baudelaire’s poetry in evoking universal themes. In his introduction to his edition of Field’s “Nocturnes”, Franz Liszt claimed that “after more than thirty-six years they still seem to exhale copious perfumes” (Liszt 1902) ; as this chapter seeks to have demonstrated over 150 years after the poem was first published, Baudelaire’s “Evening Harmony”, too, breathes its heady cocktail of sense and synaesthesia into diverse fields of popular musical culture.

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