

A Beginner's Guide to the Supernatural in Music: "Macbeth" and "Symphonie fantastique"

The following elements of music are often used by composers to signify the presence of the Supernatural.

THE NORMATIVE: In general, supernatural elements in music are expressed as deviations from well-known norms. In essence the supernatural is suggested by the extent to which it fails to conform to basic musical types or topoi. This can be established uniquely within the context of an individual work, or can be seen in the comparison of other, sometimes only vaguely similar works. Important musical ideas, like 'dissonance' are often best defined as deviations from the normative 'consonance'.

MELODY

>melodies that use unusual and/or dissonant intervals. Intervals are the distances between individual notes. This may be a feature of the use of a minor key (see HARMONY below.) as well. In Verdi's "Macbeth" the half-step, (the smallest interval) plays a dominant role, and seems to symbolize evil. The tritone, the 'devil in music' also features very prominently in the witches "e il nostro oracolo" in their second chorus, and in many other places as well.

>melodies that feature chromaticism. "Extra" pitches not part of the basic sonic set of the piece. Rather like "blue notes" in Jazz. The chromatic scale often signifies something amiss.

>grotesque use of grace notes and other ornamental musical figures.

>monotone, or melodies that use only a single pitch. There are many examples of this in "Macbeth", very early instance being the prophecy to Banco at the beginning of Act I.

>melodies that are related to folksong or to exotic cultures.

HARMONY

>the use of a minor key or tonality. In the witches chorus "S'allontanrono" the first part is in minor. This emphasizes the witches' evil intent. When Verdi shifts to major for the final section we sense the witches delight in the havoc they create.

>the use of the highly dissonant, and tension-filled diminished chord. It is made up of two interlocking tritones!

>chromaticism. The addition, for expressive purposes, of harmonies not generally present in the given key.

> the use of movement from chord to chord that defies the standard and accepted rules of harmonic motion. The witches three-fold "Salve, o Macbetto" is an instance of this.

RHYTHM

>ostinato. The incessant use of a constant repeated rhythmic pattern. This can be very quick or the slow and relentless pulse of a funeral march. In Verdi's "Macbeth" the music of the witches continually employs these repetitive rhythms. They are often dance-like and suggest a grotesque orgiastic frenzy. They are also closely related to the music Verdi uses for gypsy characters. At their heart related to Italian peasant dances, they nonetheless clearly represent the "other" in musical terms.

> use of unusual or rarely encountered rhythmic patterns, or groupings of rhythmic patterns (meter)

>syncopation. In this effect, beats---within a given measure or musical unit---which would not normally be emphasized are accented/emphasized. This is an indispensable tool for any composer.

TEXTURE

>in the music of the 19th century a melody and accompaniment texture is the norm. In spite of the normative quality of this texture, remember that accompanimental ideas can be extremely subtle and sophisticated. They can also be exploited as a means of vividly depicting emotions or concepts with the musical work. (see TONE & TEXT-PAINTING below). A typical example of this texture is found in Lady's cavatina "Vieni! t'affretta!" in Act I.

>drastic reductions of texture, often to just a single sustained tone, can have dramatic implications. Monophonic texture is rare and usually important. Note that the Prelude to "Macbeth" begins with haunted, bare octaves.

>the use of hymn-like homophony can be used ironically. We see this in the Finale to Act I of "Macbeth" where Lady and Macbeth piously lament the king they have just slain. The use of the a cappella texture (without instruments) in variably suggests the performing traditions of sacred music.

>Imitative polyphony/fugue. This most elaborate of textures is used in "Macbeth" to suggest the confusion of the battle in Act III. However, this texture is traditionally associated with the music of the church. Hence Berlioz's choice of this "blasphemous" texture for the Witches orgy that concludes "Symphonie fantastique".

TIMBRE

>This element of music focuses on the very nature of the sounds themselves. Are they shrill and piercing, or low and growling? Are they more 'noise' than music? The more unusual the sonic "color", or more tied to literal depiction of the unsettling (the hooting of owls in both Verdi and Berlioz), the more likely they are to prove identifiers of the supernatural. Think about the use of a bell in both the Verdi and Berlioz works. This unique and immediately recognizable sound is little more than a realistic stage effect in "Macbeth" but it is very much more in "Symphony fantastique".

>sudden very loud or very quiet sounds.

>...silence... Note that this can also be a component of RHYTHM.

>sound effects like thunder and lightning. The military drum roll that announces the entrance of Macbeth and Banco is an obvious example, and Verdi begins act one with the musical depiction of thunder and lightning. Part of the magic of the Introduction to the last movement of "Symphony fantastique" is that mere effects are transformed into musical material.

TEXT AND/OR TONE-PAINTING

>in text-painting the way in which the sung text is set actually reflects some important aspect of the text. For example, the word "hell" could be expected to be sung on a low pitch, while heaven would be a high one. We see this continually, from Purcell's dissonant harmony for the word 'hate' through innumerable examples in "Alcina". Text-painting is central to the art of the Baroque composer, and remains key for Romantics like Verdi as well.

>in tone-painting the non-texted instrumental music depicts an idea or concept.
Remember the pounding hoof –beats of the horse in Schubert’s setting of Goethe’s
“Erlkonig”?

FORM

>this is one of the most complex elements to relate to the supernatural, largely because we hear form through a subtle web of cultural contexts and references. Think of the ABA “da capo” form that is central to “opera seria” as exemplified by Handel. In the early part of Verdi’s career the typical Italian operatic form was made up of an instrumental introduction followed by recitative, a slow, flowing and lyrical vocal solo, then a transition section with dramatic and narrative aspects that lead directly into a lively and ornate final section. When Lady Macbeth employs this form in her opening scene we certainly understand her as a “Queenly” character---far removed from the peasant vulgarity of much of the witches choruses. A very interesting subversion of this formal pattern occurs in Banco’s scene before the Finale of Act II. Here Verdi begins the formula---introduction and recitative followed by the slow “Cavatina”. In the ensuing dramatic interlude Banco is murdered and Fleance flees. Now Verdi poignantly omits the fast and showy final “Cabaletta”, as Banco is now dead. The fact that the final movement of Berlioz’s “Symphony fantastique” is not in any ‘standard” form is significant; clearly the composer is rejecting the “natural” for the supernatural.

MENU DU JOUR

“Now good digestion wait on appetite, And health on both”

Macbeth 3.4.37

—Appetizer

Musical signifiers of the Supernatural

Numerous piquant and exotic offerings will be sampled. (Eye of newt—market price). Served with a flute of Witches Brew ‘666 or a glass of Hell Gate Porter.

—Main Dish

Verdi’s “Macbeth”

Maggot-pie (3.4.128) thickened with “grease that’s sweaten From the murderer’s gibbet.”(4.1.29). Not recommend for those prone to insomnia. Served with a Lacryma Christi ‘09

—Dessert (serves two)

“Symphonie fantastique” by Berlioz

Warning: this Romantic treat is liable to go bad rather quickly. The initial sweetness is followed by a bitter aftertaste. Best paired with Laudanum, Absinthe or Bile.

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