



AUTHOR

Benjamin Tomkins

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BENJAMIN TOMKINS

'A Thousand Violins in the Palm of My Hand': The Suitability of Federico García Lorca's Poetry for Musical Adaptation

This article examines the suitability of the poetry of Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) for musical adaptation, and particularly its value in constructing an operatic libretto. The article first considers the technical and cultural aspects of Lorca's writing, drawing on the treatment of Lorca's poem 'Malagueña' by the American composer George Crumb in his 2010 work *The Ghosts of Alhambra*. I will then explore more general questions of how text can be dramatised through music, using Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, a setting of an excerpt of Goethe's *Faust* for voice and piano, as well as Verdi's *La Traviata*, itself an adaptation of Dumas' *La Dame aux Camélias*. The article concludes with a brief consideration of the implications for my own treatment of Lorca's poetry, in the context of my personal praxis as a composer.

*Hay muy pocos ángeles que canten,
hay muy pocos perros que ladren,
mil violines caben en la palma de mi mano.*

— Federico García Lorca¹

I am currently in the process of writing an opera in which the poetry of Federico García Lorca is a major component of the libretto and underpins the thematic structure of the piece as a whole. In order to achieve a successful and cohesive work, it is first necessary to consider the suitability of Lorca's poetry for a musical setting in particular, and then extend this analysis into the textual needs of an operatic libretto in general. The purpose of the following analysis is neither to emphasize its application in my personal compositional choices, nor to suggest that effective opera libretti could not be constructed (in fact, they assuredly have been) with historical and contemporary aesthetics radically different from my own. Rather, this essay is a reflection upon the treatment of text by major figures within the operatic genre, and a critical analysis of the possibilities presented to the musician by Lorca's work.

¹ 'There are very few angels who sing. / There are very few dogs who bark. / A thousand violins fit in the palm of my hand.' (trans. by Catherine Brown), from Federico García Lorca, 'Casida II: Del llanto', in *Lorca: Collected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Maurer and trans. by Catherine Brown, Cola Franzen, Angela Jaffray and others (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), pp. 788-89.

Overview of Lorca's Style and Technique

Lorca is a writer who does the composer a number of technical and thematic favors. His work is deeply influenced by rhythmic, structural, and cultural elements that find conceptual commonality between artists of the word and the note. As a child, he was heavily exposed to Spanish folk music by his family and relatives.² He was a classically trained pianist and surrounded himself with musicians and dancers – notably Manuel de Falla, whose work inspired Lorca to compose *Canciones españolas antiguas* for piano and voice – and was a major figure in the exploding Spanish artistic renaissance of the 1920s and 30s.³ In 1922, Lorca participated in the Concurso de Cante Jondo, a flamenco festival in Granada that was organized by Falla.⁴ Lorca entitled a 1921 collection of his poetry (unpublished for ten years) *Poema del Cante Jondo*, and it is in these that a great deal of rhythmic and thematic material borrowed from the musical genre may be found. Four of them explicitly use ‘guitar’ in their title or a transparent reference such as ‘The Six Strings’. Others mention the instrument in the body of their text, and various other references to sound and instruments such as bells and castanets occur throughout.⁵

The short poem ‘Crótalo’, Spanish for ‘castanet’ (literally, ‘rattlesnake’), is an example of one of the poems from the collection in which a composer would find a lot of technical and thematic crossover between respective genres. Castanets are common in Sevillanas and some flamenco,⁶ and Lorca’s poem opens with the simple identification that three syllables of the word ‘crótalo’ have a similar rhythm to its idiomatic playing:

Crótalo
 Crótalo
 Crótalo
 Escarabajo sonoro⁷

The final line is satisfying in the original Spanish, as ‘Escarabajo sonoro’ extends the rhythmic structure of the first three repeated lines into a fourth line that is three times the length. Easily compartmentalized rhythmic motifs are common and highly utile for classical composers. An example that is both well-known and happens to be similar to the short-short-short-long structure of Lorca’s is a product of Ludwig van Beethoven’s pen:



Fig. 1: Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, opening bars.
 My transcription.

² Ian Gibson, *The Death of Lorca* (Chicago: J. Phillip O’Hara, 1973), p. 3.

³ Lorca’s companionship with Falla and other musicians is illustrated in Francisco García Lorca, *In the Green Morning: Memories of Federico*, trans. by Christopher Maurer (New York: New Directions, 1986), pp. 121-22.

⁴ Gibson, p. 6.

⁵ On the indivisible relationship between Lorca’s poetry and his interests in music, see D. Gareth Walters, ‘Music’, in *A Companion to Federico García Lorca*, ed. by Federico Bonaddio, Monografías, 226 (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2007), pp. 63-83.

⁶ The use of castanets in Spanish dance music (and specifically flamenco) is extremely varied; for an overview, see Rita Vega de Triana, *Antonio Triana and the Spanish Dance: A Personal Recollection* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1995), pp. 91-93.

⁷ Federico García Lorca, ‘Crótalo’, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 150-51 (p. 150). For a translation, see footnote 8 below. We are grateful to Casanovas & Lynch for their support in reproducing the original Spanish versions of Lorca’s poems.

From small ideas such as these composers can create, and have created, entire symphonies of the highest artistic merit, and in the case of composers such as Wagner, entire operatic cycles.

Falla's 'Jota' for baritone and piano from *Siete canciones populares españolas* demonstrates the effectiveness with which both generic and idiomatically Spanish rhythmic structures like those utilized by Lorca can be applied in a musical setting. The melodic figure in triple meter in the top voice is repeated twice, and then spins itself into a threefold repetition. This is nearly the same idea in similar proportions as in Lorca's poem, although there is no evidence of a direct inspirational connection in either direction. The figure even contains a triplet idea that references the castanet rhythm employed by Lorca:

Fig. 2: Lorca's 'castanet triplet' in Falla's setting (mm. 24-35). Manuel de Falla, '4. Jota', in *Siete Canciones populares Españolas* (1914), pp. 15-21 (p. 16). <[https://imslp.org/wiki/7_Canciones_populares_Españolas_\(Falla%2C_Manuel_de\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/7_Canciones_populares_Españolas_(Falla%2C_Manuel_de))> [accessed 1 April 2019].

The excerpt includes another common feature in the Spanish idiom, the hemiola. A hemiola is the division of groups of threes into duple figures:

Fig. 3: A sample hemiola rhythm. My transcription.

The top voice of the left hand utilizes a repeated hemiola ostinato C#-B-C#-B, etc. The effect on the listener is that the melody sounds as if it is in the simple (duple), broader tempo of a 3/4 time signature, until the third repetition occurs with accents on the downbeats in the second line to define the more sprightly rhythmic impulse of 3/8.

This figure... ...sounds like this figure.

Piano

Fig. 4: The effects of the hemiola in Falla's 'Jota'. My transcription.

This idea is rooted in the rhythmic idiosyncrasies of Spanish folk and traditional music, and will recur throughout the examples that follow.

A major point of concern for any consumer of literature is the necessity of translating a foreign language into a tongue familiar to the reader, and this problem is greatly magnified for a musician seeking to adapt a foreign-language text. Naturally, some works suffer more than others from translation, and Lorca falls definitively into the former category. Since Lorca's style often relies heavily on culturally idiomatic rhythm and pulse, a composer is likely to encounter serious problems if they choose to work in another language. An English translation of 'Crótalo' as 'Castanet [...] sonorous scarab',⁸ for example, does not preserve Lorca's rhythmic structure very well. There are several different attempts by translators to match the appeal of the original, but all are as interchangeably inferior. The translation not only robs the English reader of Lorca's natural rhythmic prowess and character, but also deprives the text of an elemental quality of its cultural flair. 'Castanet,' with a hard consonant at the end, loses the rolling quality of 'cró-ta-lo, cró-ta-lo, cró-ta-lo.' Worse, the last line loses an entire beat in English. These shortcomings might not seem very tragic given the benefit of non-Spanish speakers having casual access to Lorca's body of work, but in musical terms, the shifting emphasis, length of line and diminished autological experience would have a major impact on a composer's fundamental conception of the musical content.

The depth of Lorca's exploration of the Spanish idiom does not create solely conceptual and technical challenges to overcome when working with a translation. Information imprinted deep within the language itself evaporates when that foundation is broken up. For Lorca, the exploration of these rhythms is not merely a matter of comfortable idioms employed for popular effect and appeal with the Spanish public. His work reflects an attempt to identify and animate a Spanish experiential commonality that exists at the very boundaries of history, speech, and sound. The *cante jondo* idiom, for instance, is the most serious reflection of flamenco. It originated amongst the Andalusian *gitanos*, and is 'the essence of the art of flamenco and forms the foundation from which a multitude of other styles developed.'⁹ Even the word *jondo*, meaning 'deep,' is spelled with a 'j' rather than with an 'h' as in *hondo*, the common Spanish word of the same meaning, to reflect the uniquely aspirated Andalusian allophone [x], thus imbuing the very definition of the genre with a profound sense of regional cultural ownership. The artform cannot be uttered or written – or the depths of it expressed – without propitiations being made to the underlying Andalusian spirit.

⁸ Federico García Lorca, 'Crótalo', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 150-51 (p.151) (trans. by Cola Franzen).

⁹ Christof Jung, 'Cante Flamenco', in *Flamenco: Gypsy Dance and Music from Andalusia*, ed. by Claus Schreiner and trans. by Mollie Comerford Peters (Portland: Amadeus Press, 2000), pp. 57-88 (p. 68).

One finds this idiomatic essentiality everywhere in Lorca's work. Even the most seemingly simple poetic jotting about a tiny instrument for the fingertips is infused with deep and historical cultural vitality that evaporates the moment translation is attempted. Certainly, this exists to some degree in any translation, but in translating Lorca, it feels less like a trimming of the hedges and more a cutting of the root. In any setting of his poetry to music – particularly in opera, which is of primary concern to this author – the question of language will be of much greater import than, say, aesthetic concerns (such as the preferential contemporary aesthetic of Italian in opera during Mozart's life, as opposed to his native German).

Lorca's 'Malagueña' and its Musical Treatment by George Crumb

There have been many settings of Lorca's poetry in song, and his spring will likely continue to yield fresh water for as long as words are set to sound. American composer George Crumb spent a significant portion of his career in the 60s and 70s setting Lorca's poetry to music. Among his several treatments is *The Ghosts of Alhambra*, a seven-movement work for baritone, guitar, and percussion featuring seven of Lorca's poems from his *Poema del Cante Jondo*.¹⁰

Crumb's orchestration and composition around Lorca's text reflect a fundamental conception of flamenco. Recognizable to any audience are the basic figures of guitarist, percussionist (admittedly, in a piece by George Crumb the percussionist will have a somewhat more impressive scaffolding of hardware surrounding them than the average collection of Spaniards hammering out the rhythm on a tabletop), and soloist. The baritone is also responsible for playing the claves occasionally, thus completing the imagery of a soloist with a small, hand-held set of wooden percussion instruments ('Crótalo, crótalo, crótalo ...').

The sixth movement uses the text of Lorca's 'Malagueña', and shares the title. A *malagueña* is a traditional flamenco composition, and a brief history and some examples will be useful for understanding Lorca's construction. It is derived from the *fandango*, an ancient Andalusian dance under the umbrella of flamenco, but it evolved over time into the freely structured rhapsodic style of *cante libre*.¹¹ The following rendering of the fandango rhythm which also appears in the *malagueña* is familiar to most people:¹²



Fig. 5: A simple fandango rhythm. My transcription.

Traditionally, this rhythm would have been clapped and accentuated by the accompanying dancing, and, as with many ancient Spanish dance rhythms, it includes the hemiola.

¹⁰ George Crumb, *The Ghosts of Alhambra* (New York: Peters, 2010).

¹¹ On the origin of the *malagueña* from within the fandango tradition and its subsequent evolution, see Jung, 'Cante flamenco', p. 72.

¹² Ravel's *Boléro* presents a modified fandango rhythm as its key percussive motif. Maurice Ravel, *Boléro* (autograph manuscript, [1928]), p. 1 (m. 1) <[https://imslp.org/wiki/Boléro_\(Ravel,_Maurice\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Boléro_(Ravel,_Maurice))> [accessed 8 April 2018].

The liberality with which various *malagueñas* and derived pieces treat this figure is as diverse as the composers working within the genre. Two examples will suffice to suggest the breadth of treatment. The famous 'Malagueña' from the suite *Andalusia* by Cuban composer Ernesto Lecuona keeps the hemiola as a motif, but reduces the four-note interjections to two notes and imbues them with melodic content. The fandango rhythm is still easily identifiable even without the suggestion of the title, and it highlights the stylistic force traditional Spanish rhythms embody:



Fig 6: 'Malagueña', mm. 1-6. My transcription, from Ernesto Lecuona, *Andalusia* (New York: Edward B. Marks, 1956) p. 26. Reproduced by kind permission of the Publishers.

The work is very freely composed in block sections with highly rhapsodic transitions between them – as would be expected – and variations of this rhythm serve as the bulk of the thematic material. A subtle treatment is present in Emmanuel Chabrier's lyric symphonic composition *España*, which begins with a bare suggestion of the fandango rhythm. This would be unidentifiable as such to a blind listener, but the evidence beyond the title that this was indeed a Spanish idiom would be the visual of the conductor beating 3/8 time against the larger 3/4 pulse. As with all art forms, whether one translates a text or records a work that was intended to be performed live, the communicative powers of the artist are diminished, even when all that is removed is the single musician who performs in silence.

Fig. 7: 3/8 time and the hemiola in the opening bars to *España*. Emmanuel Chabrier, *España* (Paris: Enoch, Frères & Costallat, [1884]). Repr.: Paul Dukas and Emmanuel Chabrier, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice' and 'España' in Full Score* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1997), pp. 79-139 (p. 79) (mm. 1-6) <[https://imslp.org/wiki/España_\(Chabrier%2C_Emanuel\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/España_(Chabrier%2C_Emanuel))> [accessed 5 April 2019].

The question posed by the hemiola is resolved shortly thereafter when the harps join and fill in a triplet variation of the fandango rhythm:



Fig. 8: The harps enter with a triplet fandango. Chabrier, *España*, p. 80 (mm. 11-12).

This concept of short rhythmic bursts is used to great effect in Lorca's poem. He preserves the idea of the fandango triplet meter in the text and accentuates the rhapsodic quality of the malagueña with rapid-fire phrases that do not rhythmically elide with each other. Here is the rhythmic breakdown of the first three lines of Lorca's 'Malagueña' expressed in the most natural terms using simple music notation:

La muerte	<i>Death</i>
entra y sale	<i>enters and leaves</i>
de la taberna	<i>the tavern.</i> ¹³



Fig. 9: A simple rhythmic breakdown of Lorca's 'Malagueña'. My transcription.

Once again, we become aware of the artistic poverty imposed upon Lorca's writing by translation. 'La muerte' establishes with great effect the musical thrust of the poem, in which regard the monosyllabic English 'death' is an extremely poor substitute. Beyond the obvious rhythmic shortcoming, 'La muerte' relies on three successive short vowel sounds ('ah'-'eh'-'eh', /la 'mwerte/) to propel the reader or speaker through the text. Moreover, their motivic use in the first three lines creates artistic cohesion of the first stanza and the only longer vowel sound – the longer 'ee' sound /i/ – is both the geographical and thematic pivot point of the text.

A rendering of the text using only its vowels reveals a deep and symmetrical satisfaction of the idea of alternation. The first line establishes the unit (/a/ - /e/ - /e/) as motivic. The second line functions as a linguistic mirror and is brilliantly illustrative of the text. The vowel sounds of 'entra' ('enters') are an inverted permutational fragment of the first line. The vowels of the fragment are reversed in 'sale' (leaves), with the unique sound /i/ serving as the beat of reflection (/e/ - /a/ - /i/ - /a/ - /e/). The presentation of the theme of alteration on both the semantic and the linguistic levels is particularly effective. The final line is an inversion of the first (/e/ - /a/ - /a/) with the extra two beats /e/ - /a/ operating as a tag to diffuse the rhythmic momentum of the second line.

Setting the tag aside for a moment, the first stanza is a perfection of poetical linguistic conception. The first five syllables naturally group together both conceptually and rhythmically as a unit of three and a unit of two ('la muerte entra'). The /i/ syllable reverses them into a unit of two and a unit of three ('sale de la ta-') with all the phonemes reversed as well.

¹³ Federico García Lorca, 'Malagueña', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 144-47 (p. 144). The translation of this poem used throughout this article is taken from Crumb, *The Ghosts of Alhambra*, where it is included on an unnumbered early page of the score.

/a/ - /e/ - /e/	'ah'- 'eh'- 'eh'
/e/ - /a/ - /i/ - /a/ - /e/	'eh'- 'ah'- 'ee'- 'ah'- 'eh'
/e/ - /a/ - /a/ - (/e/ - /a/)	'eh'- 'ah'- 'ah'- ('eh'- 'ah')

The issue of the tag is only problematic insofar as one imposes the condition of total symmetry as an ideal. It is extremely rare in practice for an artist's fluidly idealistic conception to fit comfortably into the squared dimensions of reality, and an artist must make choices to deal with blunt truths. In Lorca's case, there is no avoiding the fact that the word 'taberna' has three syllables and will insert a slight flaw into the otherwise crystalline structure of the stanza. However, very often these quirks provide a deep and profound insight into an artist's craft. As great artists seem to do, he converts this minor weakness into a greater architectural strength.

The final stanza is a repetition of the first in which the architectural scale has been increased from the level of the syllable to the word, and the word to the line.

La muerte	<i>Death</i>
entra y sale,	<i>enters and leaves,</i>
y sale y entra	<i>and leaves and enters</i>
la muerte	<i>the death</i>
de la taberna.	<i>of the tavern.¹⁴</i>

Once again, the idea of a mirror around the syllable /i/ is present. However, instead of merely serving as a pivot for a few words as in the first stanza, now it reflects and reverses two entire lines 'La muerte entra y sale'. Likewise, the tag from the first stanza that was only the last two syllables of 'taberna' is now the entire line ('de la taberna'), and solidifies the conviction that this minor issue has been considered and accounted for by Lorca. Finally, Lorca confirms the three-beat/five-beat line structure introduced in the first stanza as thematic with the three-line/five-lines structure of the first and last stanzas respectively, thus fusing the conceptual architecture of the outer two stanzas into a thoroughly cohesive whole.

It is sufficient (although certainly not exhaustive) to demonstrate the potential shortcomings of translation by examining the effect it has upon the linguistics of the first stanza. All of the aforementioned elements are either lost or weakened in the English. 'Death', rather than ending with a vowel sound that rolls naturally into the following line, concludes with the voiceless dental fricative (*death*, /θ/). This phoneme both literally concludes the forward motion as the tongue touches the back of the teeth, thus requiring an additional movement of the tongue that impedes elision with the following word, and artistically introduces a sense of arrest to a reading. While the English does loosely preserve the idea of vowel alternation, it has several major shortcomings. It utilizes four distinct vowel sounds — 'eh' /e/, 'uh' /ə/, 'ah' /æ/, and 'ee' /i:/ — and arranges them in a comparatively graceless fashion:

/e/	'eh'
/e/ - /ə/ - /æ/ - /i:/	'eh'- 'uh'- 'ah'- 'ee'
/ə/ - /æ/ - /ə/	'uh'- 'ah'- 'uh'

Here, the pivot point of the second line is the 'ah' /æ/ sound which repeats in the middle of the final line, collapsing the delicate architecture of Lorca's original. There is alternation of

¹⁴Federico García Lorca, 'Malagueña', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 144-47 (pp. 144-46). Translation by Crumb.

‘eh’ /e/ and ‘ah’ /æ/ sounds in only the barest terms as there is only a grammatical relationship rather than a sonic one, and there is no inversion or evolution of the motivic features of Lorca’s original. There are three syllables leading of the pivot, and four nearly unrelated syllables in the group following it. Worse, the one line that is unambiguously symmetrical is the final one, which destroys the concept of the tag that was critical to Lorca’s conception of the structure of the final stanza and, by extension, the architecture of the poem as a whole.

Admittedly, these may seem like trivial or pedantic technical concessions to the average reader, but for a poet working with the aesthetics of words it is clear they have the potential to affect a tectonic shift in conception. There is every reason to expect the same would be true for a composer. A brief illustration of one form this might take is the effect of the easy rolling vacillation between short vowels of the original becoming altered by the tendency to linger on the long ‘ee’ /i:/ sounds in the English, which somewhat undermines the coming and going imagery of the text. This might draw a composer – either consciously or unconsciously – towards the interpretive implications of ‘leaving’ being a slightly more dominant theme than ‘coming.’ Given that this is a poem about death, it is easy to conceive of the number and sort of creative variances towards which composers might be led. Architecturally, the concepts of phrase length, beats and tags all have direct musical analogues that would most certainly be points of great consideration for the thoughtful composer.

The first line of the second stanza is a nod to the hemiola figure intrinsic to the fandango rhythm, and serves as a transition between the three lines preceding and following it:

Pasan caballos	<i>Black horses</i>
y gente siniestra	<i>and sinister people pass through</i>
por los hondos caminos	<i>the deep pathways</i>
de la guitarra.	<i>of the guitar.¹⁵</i>



Fig. 10: A rhythmic depiction of ‘Pasan caballos negros’. My transcription.

The next three lines comprise the rest of the sentence beginning with ‘Pasan’, and are both a rhythmical and metaphorical improvisation on the first three lines. The first begins on a pickup beat and is a little longer, the second treats the words ‘por los’ ornamentally, and the final line is identical to its counterpart. Note that both sentences end with ‘de la’, and the rhythmic consistency of Lorca’s writing accentuates this feature:



Fig. 11: A rhythmic description of the following lines. My transcription.

Note that the word *hondos* has been spelled in the common Spanish rather than with the Andalusian ‘j’ when the word is not used as the title of the genre.

¹⁵ Federico García Lorca, ‘Malagueña’, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 144-47 (pp. 144-45). Translation by Crumb.

It is sufficient for the purposes of this essay to analyze Crumb's setting of these lines to get the flavor of his style and approach as a whole. After a brief introductory figure, Crumb presents the main idea of the first three lines in 7/16 time:

Fig. 12: George Crumb, 'Malagueña', in *The Ghosts of Alhambra (Spanish Songbook I)* (New York: Peters, 2010), p. 11 (mm. 4-6). Edition Peters No. 68286; © 2010 by C. F. Peters Corporation, New York. This excerpt, and all those that follow, are reproduced by kind permission of the Publishers.

Although the metamorphosis from a language-driven aesthetic to a musical one has not led Crumb to produce a more obvious rendering of Lorca's arching vowel structure, it has nevertheless manifested as a background image in his structure. 'La muerte' begins on an eighth note beat, and the figure develops from one-, to two-, to a three-note idea on the longer /i/ vowel sound in 'y sale', which we recall was Lorca's pivot point. The final line 'de la taberna' is set off in the eighth note beat but brings back the single sixteenth note of the first bar, suggesting a background reference to Lorca's arching treatment.

Crumb's choice to shift the architecture to the background rather than the foreground as it is in Lorca's poem is probably a matter of his style and aesthetic, but nevertheless serves as an excellent example of how information may be retained or lost in extremely subtle ways through translation. While it is not prominent, it is clear that something of Lorca's ideas has been retained in Crumb's setting. It is impossible to know without asking Crumb how much of this was intended or manifested from more obscure machinations of an artist's mind, but the fact of its presence on some identifiable level is certainly well beyond numerological games.

However, although the architecture of the language is weakened, Crumb provides artistic compensation by strengthening musical ideas that are only barely suggested by Lorca. Lorca's only explicit animation of his rhythms as inspired by the *malagueña* is the title. Crumb seizes on this opportunity by giving the guitar chords that use the half-step motion between the first and second scale degrees typical of the Phrygian mode. This harmonic progression is extremely familiar to the ear as 'Spanish', and is derived from the generalized example below:

Fig. 13: a stock instance of Phrygian motion. My transcription.

Crumb uses the Phrygian figure in his setting of ‘Malagueña’ to preserve the idiom for the listener but alters the harmonies to avoid a familiar treatment. The rough harmonic outline of the alternating sixth and seventh guitar chords in the example is c^6 – $G^{6/4}$, or iv^6 – $I^{6/4}$ (analyzing for simplicity only the upper three notes in the chord), with the $C/E\flat$ to B/D Phrygian motion sounding prominent in the texture.

The asymmetrical measuring is an interesting choice, as 7/16 is naturally grouped into sets of simple (duple) and compound (triple) figures and lightly reflects the hemiola idea. It proceeds through the first three lines of Lorca’s poem, and after the word *taberna*, the percussionist – punctuated by the baritone’s claves – plays a version of the first three beats of the fandango rhythm.

Fig. 14: George Crumb, ‘Malagueña’, in *The Ghosts of Alhambra*, p. 11 (m. 8)

The same three lines are repeated, this time concluding with a full statement of the fandango rhythm, accompanied by a flourish on the last note on the tamtam.

Fig. 15: George Crumb, 'Malagueña', in *The Ghosts of Alhambra*, p. 11 (mm. 14-15).

What follows is a moment wherein the differences between the aims and machinations of poetry and music collide. Crumb omits the word 'negros' from the line 'Pasan caballos negros'. Recall that this is exactly the word that forces the natural triplet rhythm of 'Pasan caballos' into the hemiola in Lorca's text.

Structurally, Lorca's poetic form transitions from one idea to the next, but Crumb's preference is for this section to focus on the conceptual forward motion of the 'sinister people passing through the deep pathways of the guitar'. Hemiolas are naturally slowing, as a quick three pattern becomes a broader rhythmic group, so Crumb cuts the word:

Fig. 16: George Crumb, 'Malagueña', in *The Ghosts of Alhambra*, p. 11 (mm. 15-16).

Crumb finds a charming answer for this regrettable necessity. 'Pasan caballos negros' falls into a syllabic group of 3+2+2. In musical terms, that forms a 7/16 bar, precisely the figure on which Crumb builds the material of the first three lines. In a curious way, he has replaced the vocalization of the word 'black' by painting it on the background of the piece. Will anyone hear that in the music? There is not a single chance, and I cannot say with certainty that Crumb intended it. However, I do know that this type of highly conspicuous coincidence is something that talented composers – and indeed, talented artists in general – are able to achieve. This could be Crumb's way of making amends for altering the work of a poet he admired a great deal.

The final three lines with which we will concern ourselves take on a grotesque and comical quality in Crumb's setting. Starting with 'Pasan caballos', the lines are delivered in the improvisatory and staccato bursts as they were treated by Lorca. Crumb utilizes a series of five descending chords as an accompanying figure, echoing the four-chord harmonic descent common in flamenco music (iv–III–II–I). Crumb then takes the risk of employing the woodblocks as an echo of the horses as they traverse the sinister, deep pathways of the guitar.

In comedy, timing is – as they say – everything. The use of woodblocks for horse sounds by comedians such as Spike Jones is so ubiquitous that it is the musical equivalent of taking 'two empty halves of coconut and banging them together.' One needs to look no further than the final three bars of comedic classical composer Peter Schickele's dramatic oratorio *Oedipus Tex* to discover that if having sex with a horse is a premise in classical music, the woodblocks are the punchline.¹⁶ It is unsurprising then, that Crumb does not place this cartoonish element of theater directly over the word 'caballos'. This sort of amateurish sound painting would undoubtedly verge on patronizing the audience; it would risk saying, 'For those of you who have not yet become learned in Spanish ... it's a horse.' By setting it over the text two lines later, Crumb brilliantly evokes a morbidly humorous conception of this bleak journey, reminiscent of the grim and absurd collision of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza with the Knight of the Looking Glass and his squire's grotesquely oversized papier-mâché nostrils. The guitar embellishes this asymmetrical clopping with glissandos to heighten the spectacle:

Fig. 17: George Crumb, 'Malagueña', in *The Ghosts of Alhambra*, p. 12 (mm. 20-22).

Finally, in acknowledgement of Lorca's identical construction of the lines 'de la taberna' and 'de la guitarra', the section closes with a repetition of the partial fandango rhythm that occurred at the end of the first three.

All of this is very effective and interesting, and above all, listenable and accessible to an audience member without much musical training. The thrust of Lorca's imagery and rhythmic motifs find a very natural home under Crumb's pen, and one would expect that

¹⁶P. D. Q. Bach, *Oedipus Tex* (S. 150), ed. by Peter Schickele (King of Prussia: Theodore Presser Company, [n. d.]).

a great and diverse portion of Lorca's writing would be similarly well-suited for musical adaptation.

The Suitability of Text for Traditional Opera Libretti

Having established the issues of suitability and the basic principles through which musicians might approach Lorca's work, it is time to address the setting and function of text in opera, and the possible problems that utilizing poetry for those purposes may present. It would seem that poetry being a precise, concise, and symbolically rich rendering of language would be a good starting point for the construction of a libretto. Poetry is the historical substrate of song, and even to this day, pop writers feel a suspiciously guilty compulsion to rhyme.

In practice, however, a great deal of poetry is particularly unsuitable for operatic composition, and not just because poems tend to deal with narrative on the small scale. The problem is one of distillation. Good poetry seeks to infuse language with as much meaning between the words as in them. In opera, it is the goal of most composers to fill those voids with music. This is the distinguishing difference between 'opera' and what I would term 'operatic'. Opera is a genre of staged drama that is nearly or entirely sung. 'Operatic' refers, by my narrow definition, to the treatment of musical language itself as a dramatic presence. Ostensibly, an opera could be thoroughly non-operatic by this definition.

Hence, Crumb's setting of 'Malagueña' is neither operatic in scope nor conception, despite the writing being highly illustrative of the text. The only moment where the music begins to take on the guise of an independent voice in the poetic drama is the super-textual commentary or interpretation the woodblock moment provides, but it never rises to the level of a purely musical dramatic presence. It informs the listener of what Crumb might be reading into Lorca's work for a laugh, but it is not something the larger dramatic thrust must engage with to create resolution of the song as a whole. In pursuit of this concept, we will begin first with an analysis of the relative artistic merits and challenges of setting the text of a play to music.

Franz Schubert's second composition is the song *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, op. 2. It is taken from scene 15 of Goethe's epic poetic stage drama *Faust Part I*, in which Gretchen is sitting at a spinning wheel mulling the potential ramifications of a romantic relationship with the title character. The scene is short, and Schubert uses the entire text:¹⁷

My peace is gone
My heart is heavy;
I shall never
Ever find peace again.

When he's not with me,
Life's like the grave;

¹⁷The text is taken from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Gretchen at the spinning-wheel', trans. by Richard Stokes <<https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/199>> [accessed 6 April 2019]. The translation is © Richard Stokes, author of *The Book of Lieder*, published by Faber, and is provided courtesy of Oxford Lieder (www.oxfordlieder.co.uk).

The whole world
Is turned to gall.

My poor head
Is crazed,
My poor mind
Shattered.

My peace is gone
My heart is heavy;
I shall never
Ever find peace again.

It's only for him
I gaze from the window,
It's only for him
I leave the house.

His proud bearing
His noble form,
The smile on his lips,
The power of his eyes,

And the magic flow
Of his words,
The touch of his hand,
And ah, his kiss!

My peace is gone
My heart is heavy;
I shall never
Ever find peace again.

My bosom
Yearns for him.
Ah! if I could clasp
And hold him,

And kiss him
To my heart's content,
And in his kisses
Perish!

In the staged version of the scene the metaphor of the spinning wheel works very well with Gretchen 'spinning her wheels' over Faust. Schubert's adaptation depicts the spinning wheel with a cyclical stream of 16th notes in the piano:

The image shows a musical score for Franz Schubert's 'Gretchen am Spinnrade', Op. 2. The score is in 6/8 time and features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Nicht zu geschwind. (♩ = 72)'. The piano part consists of a continuous eighth-note rhythmic ostinato in the left hand, marked 'sempre staccato', and a sixteenth-note figure in the right hand, marked 'sempre legato'. The lyrics 'Mei - ne Ruh - ist' are written above the vocal line.

Fig. 18: The cyclical sixteenth notes. Franz Schubert, 'Gretchen am Spinnrade', in *Schubert-Album., Band 1*, ed. by Max Friedlaender (Leipzig: Peters [n.d.]), pp. 176-81 (p. 176) (mm. 1-3) <[https://imslp.org/wiki/Gretchen_am_Spinnrade%2C_D.118_\(Schubert%2C_Franz\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Gretchen_am_Spinnrade%2C_D.118_(Schubert%2C_Franz))> [accessed 6 April 2019].

Additionally, the eighth note rhythmic ostinato on the upper voice of the left hand evokes the imagery of Gretchen nervously treading the foot pedal of the spinning wheel. Both rhythmic figures sustain their tension nearly from beginning to end, alluding to the tension that must be maintained by the spinner when drawing out the thread.

However, while all this is certainly evocative, music is not a deterministic art from which the image of a spinning wheel can be reliably conjured for the listener. There are easily fifty examples of similar music in the repertoire that have nothing to do with spinning yarn. The major difference between Goethe and Schubert is that Schubert's song is intended to be performed without the visual benefit of the spinning wheel. Moreover, there is no trace of a reference to spinning, sheep, weaving, or anything of the kind in Gretchen's monologue. It is fair to say that, without Schubert's title, there would be nearly no chance at all that someone would dream up a spinning wheel solely from hearing the music. The magic of Schubert's piece comes from the suggestion to the audience in the title that she is spinning, which in turn enables well-crafted music to produce the image of the spinning wheel in their mind.

In the poem 'Malagueña', Lorca achieves something very similar. The body of the text does not mention fandango, flamenco, musicians, or even depict the guitar as being played by a human being. It is merely the suggestion in the title that awakens the image of the musicians and animates the rhythmic reference to the *malagueña* in the text. Crumb's setting, being musical, does not suffer from the staging deficiency Schubert needed to overcome. Rather, Crumb has to replace the *malagueña* rhythms that are lost when his musical setting breaks up the words.

Nevertheless, the mere production of a mental image or idea through artistic association is not implicitly 'operatic' despite the fact that the interpolation of Schubert's setting in the staged production of *Faust* would be the beginning of creating an opera. Similarly, the staging of the scene with or without the presence of a spinning wheel, or the announcement of the song's title from the stage, would not imbue Schubert's virtual spinning wheel with an operatic quality. The musical completion of the spinning metaphor establishes the wheel as an object, but it is not a part of the drama which creates tension or demands resolution on its own. What it does do, however, is demonstrate how a limited amount of text can be used to create great opportunity for music to fill in narrative gaps. This is the craft of the librettist, and it is one of the reasons seemingly trivial plots and writing are the subject of running jokes amongst musicians: these things are no more meant to be read by themselves than the scene from *Faust* is meant to be performed without staging.

One way of moving the material in the direction of ‘operatic’ might be if, in one scene, Gretchen is spinning as a D major version of the music accompanies her without the text, and in a later scene she sings the text with the music as Schubert has written it in D minor without the spinning wheel. In the first scene, the music is not necessary for producing the visual of the spinning wheel any more than the virtual spinning wheel image is necessary for Gretchen to communicate her personal problems. Moreover, without the music, there would be no reason to connect the two events throughout the course of the drama.

What we now have – and more to the point, what the pitiable Gretchen has – is a uniquely musical problem that demands resolution in musical terms. Music has imposed itself on the narrative. Now, even if Gretchen could rid herself of every textual and circumstantial demon with which she has been presented, unless she addresses her musical circumstances, the curtain will fall with an extant fact of dramatic and artistic incompleteness. The natural direction this takes in the highest forms of opera is the establishment of musical drama as the foundational paradigm of the entire work. *La Traviata*, for example, existed first as the novel *La Dame aux Camélias* and then a play, both by Alexandre Dumas’ son with whom he shared a first and surname. The primary obstacle to be overcome in any novel is the complete lack of setting, which is nothing more than a blank piece of paper as far as the reader is concerned. All of this must be established by the author, and it follows very naturally that a first-person description of the setting serves as the originating vehicle for symbolism at the beginning of *Camélias*:

In my opinion, it is impossible to create characters until one has spent a long time in studying men, as it is impossible to speak a language until it has been seriously acquired. Not being old enough to invent, I content myself with narrating, and I beg the reader to assure himself of the truth of a story in which all the characters, with the exception of the heroine, are still alive [...] This is how these details came to my knowledge. On the 12th of March, 1847, I saw in the Rue Lafitte a great yellow placard announcing a sale of furniture and curiosities. The sale was to take place on account of the death of the owner [...] I was not long in discovering the reason of this astonishment and admiration, for, having begun to examine things a little carefully, I discovered without difficulty that I was in the house of a kept woman.¹⁸

The novel was so popular in its time that Dumas *filis* converted it into a play. Of course, the main dramatic element of a play is that of characters and their interactions. It would be artistically valueless for an actor to walk on stage and describe what was around them just as it would be redundant to watch Gretchen spinning to Schubert’s music. Therefore, Dumas *filis* introduces the same symbolic content – a dead (or in this case, absent and probably dying) rich woman in France, some kind of relationship drama, and a preoccupation with time – in the form most natural to a play: the interaction of characters:

[De] Var[ville]. Someone rang the bell.

Nan[ine]. Valentine will open the door.

Var. It is Marguerite, no doubt.

Nan. Not yet; she is not to return until half-past ten and it is now barely ten. [...]

¹⁸Alexandre Dumas, *The Lady of the Camellias*, ed. and trans. by Edmund Gosse (New York: Werner, 1902), pp. 1-2 <<https://archive.org/details/ladyofcamellias00duma>> [accessed 7 April 2019]. In this and the examples below, I draw on translations in the first instance.

Var. Quite pretty, that little Nichette.

Nan. And clever!

Var. And M. Gustave?

Nan. Which M. Gustave?

Var. Of whom he spoke, and awaited her below.

Nan. He is her husband.

Var. M. Nichette?

Nan. He is not her husband yet; but he will be.

Var. In a word, he is her lover. Very well, I see. She is clever, but she has a lover. [...]

Nan. Listen, M. de Varville. There are many true things to be said in regard to madame; all the more reason not to mention those which are not true. Now, this is what I can assure you, for I have seen it with my own eyes, and Heaven knows that madame has given me no orders in the matters as she has no reason to deceive you, and cares not whether she stands ill or well with you. I can assure you that, two year ago, madame, after a long illness, went to drink the waters to recover her health.¹⁹

The novel was published in 1848, the play premiered in 1852 in Paris, and in 1853 Verdi's *La Traviata* debuted in Venice. It is a decidedly condensed adaptation, focusing largely on the primary character (renamed Violetta) who is dying of consumption, her romantic dalliance with a handsome tenor, and then the spending of the entire third act succumbing to her degenerative lung disease in truly respectable opera fashion by singing loudly and brilliantly for about forty-five minutes without the least hint of diminished technical capacity.

The final point is not a bit of humor for its own sake. The soprano was put to stage to die a musical death, not a gruesome or realistic one. The libretto, then, is essentially the long-form dramatic version of Schubert's title: it should give enough body to the music that the audience can follow the plot, but little more. Thus, the first few lines of the libretto of *La Traviata*:

Chorus 1.

Past already's the hour of appointment —
You are tardy.

Chorus 2.

We played deep at Flora's,
And while playing the hours flew away.

Violetta.

Flora, and kind friends, the night is before us.
Other pleasures we here will display. [...]
'Mid the wine-cups the hours pass more gaily.

Flora [&] Marquis.

Can you there find enjoyment.

Violetta.

¹⁹ Alexandre Dumas, *Camille: Complete French and English Text*, [n. trans.] (New York: Chickering & Sons, 1881), pp. 5-7 <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiuc.6261859_001> [accessed 7 April 2019].

I strive to;
 Yes, to pleasure I yield, and endeavor
 With such remedies illness to stay.

All.

Yes! enjoyment will lengthen our days.²⁰

All the themes are there, but present in a nearly comical and childish form compared to the novel and the play. However, this is merely a skeleton upon which Verdi can set the musical flesh. Key areas and melodic motifs permeate the work and bind it together to form a cohesive musical narrative. In fact, the real beginning of the opera happened before the chorus ever walked onstage. The entire paradigm is encapsulated, and the thematic material presented, in the deep composition of the overture that is the true artistic equivalent of the first few paragraphs of the novel and the play. It begins in the key of B minor as a dramatic interaction of two characters: the first and second violins, divided. The primary melodic voice in the top divisi of the first violins is dominated by a descending half step, and the top line of the second violins is an ascending whole step, suggesting the inevitable descent of Violetta's health and the hopeless optimism of her love interest Alfredo. In the second bar, the first violin line reaches up a half step from C# to D, ultimately faltering back to C# in the third measure after an attempt to rise up to an E. The rhythmic speed is doubled, emphasizing time as a theme.

In the next phrase in bars 5-7, the half step idea becomes a sliding chromatic descent that – for all the hope of modulation in the harmony – ends up right where it started: on the same B–A# half step as the beginning, but this time with the cadential determinism of a $i^{6/4}$ –V perfect authentic cadence in the making.

Fig. 19: Giuseppe Verdi, 'Praeludio', in *La Traviata in Full Score* (Milan: Ricordi, 1914), pp. 1-6 (p. 1) mm.
 1-9) <[https://imslp.org/wiki/La_traviata_\(Verdi,_Giuseppe\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/La_traviata_(Verdi,_Giuseppe))> [accessed 7 April 2019]

However, this does not occur. The three-note chromatic descent that offered the only ray of modulatory hope in the fifth bar becomes a temporary savior. The A# slides down to an A \natural as the second phrase elides it with the *tutti* in bar 8, augmenting the experience of time once again, and offering the promise that melodic indulgence might free the listener from the looming harmonic inevitability. The music moves quite emotionally through several key areas until the descending half step idea becomes a yearning ascending motive in bar 13. Unfortunately, it cannot sustain itself and collapses down the first violin line into silence.

²⁰ Giuseppe Verdi, *La Traviata*, ed. and trans. by T. T. Barker (Philadelphia: Oliver Ditson, [n.d.]), p. 5 <<https://archive.org/details/verdisoperalatra00verdi>> [accessed 8 April 2019].

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Violin (Viol.), Viola (v.le), and Violoncello (Vc.). The score is for Verdi's 'Praeludio', page 2, measures 10-13. The music is in a key with three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a common time signature. The Violin part has a melodic line with many accidentals and a dynamic marking of 'pp' in the third measure. The Viola and Violoncello parts provide harmonic support with similar rhythmic patterns. The score is written in a standard musical notation style with a grand staff for each instrument.

Fig. 20: Verdi, 'Praeludio', p. 2 (mm. 10-13).

In essence, this is the dramatic outline of the entire opera on the first page of the score. The themes of a pair in a tragic relationship, decadence as expressed in chromaticism, and a preoccupation with extensions of time and the inevitability of death are all contained in a thread of music that takes about the same amount of time required to read the introduction of the novel or deliver the first few paragraphs of the play. The text, therefore, of the first scene need only clarify any ambiguities that are the natural shortcoming of unspoken musical communication. This idea of using text as a series of road markers for the true artistic medium permeates the entirety of *La Traviata*, and the construction of libretti in general.

Conclusion

Having analyzed the construction of Lorca's poetry, established its suitability for musical setting, and the nature of texts that suit the constructional needs of opera, we have the necessary understanding to address the project of incorporating his poetry as a significant portion into the libretto of an opera.

There is no doubt that Lorca's body of work contains longer, narrative-driven works such as the *Romancero Gitano* ('Gypsy Ballads') which are cohesive enough to adapt a libretto from text alone. Their common thematic material – presentation as a series of vignettes of human experience, dramatic content, and universal themes of human experience – would render them an obvious choice for someone tasked with constructing a traditional libretto for a traditional opera. In truth, they would very likely be suitable for non-traditional and avant-garde settings as well, although they are not the focus of this analysis.

Pertinent to that end, however, is that a librettist would most certainly have the luxury of preserving a great deal of Lorca's text because of the suitability of his poetry for music, unlike *La Dame aux Camélias* and its play adaptation which are nakedly unsuited for the purpose. It would not seem very satisfactory to attempt to stitch Lorca's poetry – even in its most narrative iterations – into a nearly or wholly un-adapted libretto. His vignettes in the 'Gypsy Ballads' are still only snapshots that bear varying relevance to the material around them, and even a spirited and highly creative reorganizing effort would likely encounter problems that would demand editing and the introduction of new material to produce a functional classical libretto.

Another great advantage of using Lorca's body of work for a project of this nature is that his symbolic language and style are, on the whole, very consistent. Themes such as cattle, bulls, the moon, blood, flowers, night, insects, and music appear in his very first and his

very last poems, as well as throughout the intervening work. Similarly, while his approach varies greatly from subject to subject, Lorca's approach to language, beat, and pacing are remarkably coherent over time. A librettist using Lorca as the basis for his construction would not be confronted with a dramatic mid-life shift between radically different poetic styles and voices.

Finally, Lorca also wrote a great deal of poetry that focuses on individual reflection and the exposure of inner thought, which is a hallmark of traditional opera. Cherubino's aria in the first act of *Figaro*, in which he ('she', actually, as it is a breeches role) sings of love is one of the finest examples of this type of treatment:

I do not know anymore what I am, what I do,
 One moment I'm on fire, the next moment I am cold as ice,
 Every woman changes my color,
 Every woman makes me tremble.
 At the very mention of love, of delight,
 I am greatly troubled, my heart stirs within my chest,
 It compels me to speak of love
 A desire I cannot explain...²¹

Along these lines a poem such as 'The Song of the Barren Orange Tree' is easily conceivable as a centerpiece for a scene in an unaltered form, if not the focal point of an entire act, as the personified orange-tree gives voice to his own internal monologue:

Leñador.	<i>Woodcutter.</i>
Córtame la sombra.	<i>Cut my shadow from me.</i>
Líbrame del suplicio	<i>Free me from the torment</i>
de verme sin toronjas. [...]	<i>of seeing myself without fruit. [...]</i>
¿Por qué nací entre espejos?	<i>Why was I born among mirrors?</i>
El día me da vueltas,	<i>The day walks in circles around me,</i>
y la noche me copia	<i>and the night copies me</i>
en todas sus estrellas. [...]	<i>in all its stars. [...]</i> ²²

One can see, even in translation, that all of the elements that make Lorca's poetry suitable for musical treatment are present, and this could fit nicely into a properly constructed libretto just as it is. Lorca's work is not only highly suitable for musical composition on the small scale, but it contains a great number of advantages for the composer and librettist on the

²¹ Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, trans. by Hannah Kilpatrick <<http://www.aria-database.com/translations/figaro.txt>> [accessed 5 April 2019].

²² In this instance, I am using an alternative translation to that provided in the *Collected Poems* edition (pp. 540-41, trans. by Alan S. Trueblood), namely, that of W. S. Merwin, in *The Selected Poems of Federico García Lorca*, ed. by Donald M. Allen (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1955), pp. 62-3. While both provide readable renderings of the text, Trueblood's translation falls short in its treatment of the word 'verme'. In three occurrences in the four-stanza poem — 'de verme sin toronjas' in the first and last stanzas and 'Quiero vivir sin verme' in the third — the word is implied but never directly translated ('of bearing no fruit' and 'Let me live unmirrored' respectively). Lorca's repetition of 'verme' is a critical poetic device for establishing an introspective and *pathétique* perspective that is severely inhibited by the Trueblood treatment. Merwin's translation, by contrast, animates the ideas of dream and sadness far more effectively by preserving the active voice of the tree per Lorca's original intent.

grand operatic scale, as well. Although composers such as Crumb have made long and serious work of his text, it is with great hope and enthusiasm that future generations of composers may look at the unexplored possibilities Federico García Lorca still offers.

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