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ABSENT MELODY AND 'THE WOMAN IN WHITE'

By NICKY LOSSEFF

At dinner, [Laura] joined us again, and was more easy and more herself with Sir Percival than I have seen her yet. In the evening she went to the piano, choosing new music of the dexterous, tuneless, florid kind. The lovely old melodies of Mozart, which poor Hartright was so fond of, she has never played since he left. The book is no longer in the music-stand. She took the volume away herself, so that nobody might find it out and ask her to play from it.¹

ALTHOUGH IT is Laura's story which forms the principal subject of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, we always learn it through the narratives of others, never through her own words.² Spoken about but never speaking, she is only ever an object of focus, as seen through a series of different lenses. Her own feelings, thoughts and changing circumstances are articulated through embedded narratives: dreams, letters, reported speech.³ The last of these—reported speech—is our sole point of contact with the 'real' Laura; dreams and letters are apparitions, which define identity through absence. The musical scenes, which occur at various key points in the novel, also constitute an embedded narrative in which playing the piano functions as a channel through which Laura can communicate her descent into a private hell within the social constraints of her situation.⁴ The music 'itself' cannot be heard by the reader except silently, in the imagination; having no substance, and only existing in so far as it is described by fictional characters, its identity can only be deduced from a series of clues.⁵ Like

Jeanice Brooks, Rachel Cowgill, Cyril Ehrlich, Mark Everist, Sophie Fuller, David Griffiths and the anonymous referees hold me in their debt for having read earlier drafts of this article and offering helpful and perceptive comments. Versions of this article have been read at the Third Triennial British Musicological Societies' Conference, University of Surrey, 1999, and at Huddersfield, Sheffield and Leeds Universities, October 1999. It is dedicated to Hilary Summers.

¹ Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1859–60), ed. John Sutherland, Oxford, 1996, p. 167. All parenthetical references in the text are to this 'Oxford World's Classics' edition.

² This element of the novel has been extensively commented upon. Recent and particularly perspicacious discussions are offered by Alison Milbank, *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian fiction*, Basingstoke, 1992, pp. 63–79; Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*, London, 1988, pp. 99–100; and Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic*, New Haven & London, 1992, pp. 140–41; see also Walter Kendrick, 'The Sensationalism of *The Woman in White*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, xxxii (1977), pp. 18–35, at pp. 30–31.

³ Taylor observes that these embedded narratives occur within 'a hierarchical order of specific narratives', which are in turn embedded within the ur-narrative itself. See Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, p. 111.

⁴ *The Woman in White*'s musical scenes have also been examined by Phyllis Weliver, in her *Singing Angel or Musical Demon? Representations of Female Musicians in Victorian Literature* (unpublished dissertation), University of Sussex, 1999, pp. 99–112, published as *Singing Angel or Musical Demon? Female Musicians in Victorian fiction, 1860–1900*, Aldershot, 2000. Weliver argues for a different interpretation from that offered here. In addition, the musical scenes are included within more general discussions by Allan W. Atlas in 'Wilkie Collins on Music and Musicians', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, cxxiv (1999), 255–70, as part of a comprehensive examination of musical references in Collins's fiction. I am grateful to both Phyllis and Allan for sharing their material with me prior to its public release. Richard Altick has examined music as an aspect of the 'web of topicalities' beloved of many Victorian authors in *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel*, Columbus, Ohio, 1991, pp. 168–9; Leon Plantinga takes the first musical scene from *The Woman in White* as a typical example of a drawing-room courtship scene at the piano in 'The Piano and the Nineteenth Century', in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, ed. R. Larry Todd, New York, 1990, pp. 1–15, at p. 2.

⁵ The 'ontologically mutant' status of 'actual' pieces of music is slippery enough (the phrase 'ontologically mutant'

Laura's elusive and fragile identity, reconstructed through a series of different testimonies, this 'absent melody' is one of a series of 'holes' in the story'.⁶ Such slippage between expectation and deliverance is largely responsible for the atmosphere of mystery and suspense which has been enthralling readers of *The Woman in White* since it was first published in 1859–60.⁷

Through a series of narratives, the novel relates the story of Laura Fairlie's deception by her husband, the evil Sir Percival Glyde, and the investigation of this deception by her true love, Walter Hartright, and her half-sister, Marian. Laura and Marian live at Limmeridge in Cumberland. Walter is their drawing master, an 'upper-servant neuter', whose ambiguous social status as impoverished artist and paid tutor renders him emasculated.⁸ Since their Uncle Frederick, an effete aristocrat, stays in a darkened room where no disturbance is permitted, there appears to be a lack of patriarchal control over the immediate, surface features of their lives.⁹ The woman in white is Anne Catherick, almost Laura's double, who is ultimately revealed to be her half-sister. Anne, though, is a pale copy of Laura in terms of both her physicality and mental capacity. She knows that Glyde harbours a secret the leaking of which would place him in some sort of peril. With his ally Count Fosco, Percival incarcerates her in an asylum under a pretext, thereby removing any threat of discovery—an action that allows him, simultaneously, to perpetrate a hoax which will enable him to gain access to Laura's fortune. He simply substitutes Laura for Anne, his scheme reaching fruition when Anne obligingly dies of a heart attack.

Laura's marriage to Glyde was arranged by her father, and filial devotion obliges her to comply with his wish even though the thought fills her with horror. Walter and Laura can scarcely bear to be near each other, knowing their mutual love is destined to come to nothing, so Walter exiles himself by joining an expedition to central America and remains there throughout most of the action. After narrowly escaping death, he eventually returns to England to find Laura 'dead', but he encounters Marian, who has helped Laura escape from the asylum, and together they plan her reparation. Walter discovers the secret: Sir Percival is illegitimate and has no real claim to his title, place in society, or estate. Percival dies when the church in which he is trying to falsify the record of his parents' marriage catches fire. Walter and Laura

was coined by Alan Tormey in 'Indeterminacy and Identity in Art', *Monist*, lviii (1974), pp. 203–15, at p. 207, and further explored by Lydia Goehr in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: an Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford, 1992, esp. pp. 2–3, 51–68). Where we locate the 'existence' of fictional performances of works which exist only in the imaginations of fictional characters would open up another category among those of music's obscure modes of existence—a topic that perhaps deserves further exploration.

⁶ See Milbank, *Daughters of the House*, p. 68. Milbank perceives several 'empty signs' in the novel whose resonances are never energized in the plot: the stagnant lake which invites death but in which no death ever takes place; Anne Catherick, who appears to be privy to the novel's mysteries, but who knows nothing, and whose white clothes are not only a sign of innocence but also of vacancy; many aspects of Laura, as characterized by Walter Hartright in terms of lack or absence, such as her passivity, obedience and lack of physical presence.

⁷ It has never been out of print since its first appearance in *All the Year Round*, the tuppenny weekly owned by Collins's close friend Charles Dickens. Appearing in 40 instalments between 1859 and 1860, it increased the paper's circulation to even higher levels than had the writings of Dickens himself. For further information about the novel's history, see Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins: a Biography*, London, 1951, pp. 137–145 and John Sutherland, 'Introduction', *The Woman in White*, Oxford, 1996, pp. vii–xxiii.

⁸ 'Upper-servant neuter' is Sutherland's term: see his 'Introduction', p. xxii. Heller suggests that, despite his relatively high social status, Hartright must earn his bread in the service of a supercilious aristocrat whose niece (Laura) he is not allowed to court, all the time struggling with the self-denial that represents a Victorian feminine ideal. See Heller, *Dead Secrets*, pp. 116–18.

⁹ However, as Milbank notes, Uncle Frederick's effeminacy is just another variation of patriarchal power: 'the ability of the all-powerful male order to take female roles and symbols for its own' (Milbank, *Daughters of the House*, p. 65).

marry and have a baby, little Walter, who assumes the title Heir of Limmeridge when Uncle Frederick dies. Marian continues to live with them.

Laura plays the piano in four of the novel's musical passages. In doing so, she is reflecting the actions of women of her class all over Britain in the mid nineteenth century. Pianos, after all, occupied a position at the centre of domestic entertainment, their very physical presence announcing respectability, feminine accomplishment, and the prosperity to buy into a certain type of leisure occupation.¹⁰ But since music spoke in situations where words could not be permitted, and of subjects that could not be uttered, the domestic piano functioned not only as a symbol of affluence but also as a private outlet for emotion: Walter Benjamin suggested that it was the 'true dynamic centre of all the dominant miseries and catastrophes of the household'.¹¹ The first of the musical passages in *The Woman in White* takes place at the very beginning of Walter's period of employment at Limmeridge, when he encounters Laura for the first time. They have been out for a sketching lesson, and after dinner repair to the drawing room. A sweet, feminized scene is described, replete with the scent of flowers, in which there steals upon the quiet 'the heavenly tenderness of the music of Mozart' (p. 56). This sentimentalized idea of 'Mozart' is linked early on to softness, happiness and perfection, and the beauties of the night, and it is this association that Laura tries to summon up when she plays Mozart again for Walter in the second passage (p. 122, quoted below). However, as Walter says on this later occasion, 'all was changed—inside and out, all was changed'. It is his last night at Limmeridge, and the same music speaks differently through the changed context of their mutual despair. The excerpt given at the beginning of this article forms the third musical scene. Through the repetition of such a conventional action—playing the piano after dinner—Laura preserves social expectation. Visually, nothing is altered between one musical scene and the next. But appearances are at odds with reality, and through the music she chooses to play, Laura articulates her mental state to anyone equipped with the aural knowledge to decipher its message. In the last of the four passages, the traumatized Laura plays again (not Mozart, we presume), this time for Fosco. The worth of her playing is noted by the Count, which suggests that although her everyday life has become a source of pain, she has never abandoned her piano. Her journey into uncertainty and dread resonates with this unheard accompaniment.

The third passage will form my primary focus here. In this fascinating episode, Collins evokes powerfully a type of musical language and texture which functions not only as apparitional sound but also as a symbol through which we gain access to Laura's precarious state of mind and an insight into a life veering dangerously out of control. When she sits down to play 'new music of the dexterous, tuneless, florid kind', many questions are raised about the ways in which social behaviour and expectation impinged upon musical performance, musical meaning, the nature of musical works and their reception. What values are embodied in the idea of 'Mozart', as seen by Collins, which allows it to stand as a foil for music which was 'tuneless and florid'? What is the relationship between appearances and reality when Laura sits down in the same physical location, at the same after-dinner period, but playing radically different music? In what ways could such music function as a symbol of her mental anguish, through genre and form as well as musical language and discourse? Were these issues raised unknowingly by Collins, or did the scenes of Laura at the piano constitute some

¹⁰ Cyril Ehrlich, *The Piano: a History*, London, 1976, p. 97.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, ed. Gary Smith, trans. Richard Sieburth, Cambridge, Mass., 1986 (written 1926–7 and published as *Moskauer Tagebuch*, Frankfurt, 1980).

of the 'hundreds of little connecting passages' that he says he deliberately built into the narrative¹² and whose cumulative effect is clearly so important to the story's development?

From the broadest perspective, the musical episodes in *The Woman in White* constitute just a few of the many hundreds of references to domestic music-making in nineteenth-century literature. It is probably no exaggeration to suggest that women, by means of their pianos, provided most middle-class people with their principal musical experience during this era, and for this reason, images of domestic music as depicted in the arts merit special attention as sources of social history. The piano's status as a 'prestigious consumer durable' is represented in literature, as Cyril Ehrlich has pointed out, by such examples as Hardy's Gabriel Oak, who, wooing Bathsheba, promises her a piano, which 'farmers' wives are getting to have now'.¹³ Arthur Loesser's seminal *Men, Women and Pianos* depended entirely upon works of fiction to characterize the domestic piano during this period, drawing on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, to illustrate piano playing as it related to the notion of female accomplishment.¹⁴ Loesser interpreted Austen as poking fun at social pretentiousness; it was not until over 30 years later that Mary Burgan re-examined those same musical passages, suggesting that *Emma* also explores the theme of consolation through keyboard music.¹⁵ Burgan also demonstrates that female musicians, almost always pianists, could also symbolize genuine energy and aspiration to education and culture.¹⁶ Despite this possibility, however, the instrument was always constrained within an essentially entrapping domestic situation. Richard Leppert points out that pianos were displayed in the semi-public space of the drawing room, where they operated as objects to be looked at as well as listened to.¹⁷ The piano's purpose as an instrument for the making of music was in effect subsumed under an overriding function to display patriarchal wealth and social privilege; in playing it, a woman declared not only that she had the leisure to pursue music as a pastime, but more overtly, through the class of instrument and its degree of decoration, that the household could afford the extravagance of an object tangential to real necessities. Laura's piano, though owned by family rather than husband, belongs not to her but to Limmeridge, and in generating music solely through it, she speaks from within a gilded cage. Thus, her piano can be read as a signifier of social oppression. On the question of the 'gaze', note that the first thing Walter observes about Laura at the grand piano is not the music, but her 'fair profile' (p. 55). He reads her from left to right, as he would a written text; her body comes first, and only later the instrument through which the music is produced.¹⁸

¹² From Collins's introduction to the first integral edition (1860) of *The Woman in White*; repr. ed. Sutherland, p. 645.

¹³ Ehrlich, *The Piano*, p. 94.

¹⁴ Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: a Social History*, New York, 1954 (repr. 1990), pp. 267–79.

¹⁵ Mary Burgan, 'Heroines at the Piano: Women and Music in Nineteenth-Century Fiction', in *The Lost Chord: Essays on Victorian Music*, ed. Nicholas Temperley, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1989, pp. 42–67, at p. 42. This essay first appeared in *Victorian Studies*, xxx (1986), 51–76.

¹⁶ Two up-to-date studies provide broader and more detailed discussions of female musicianship as represented in nineteenth-century literature: Weliver's *Singing Angel or Musical Demon?* and, more particularly, Regula Hohl's Ph.D. thesis, currently in progress at the University of Basle, on the cultural history of the piano and narratives of domestic music-making in English literature.

¹⁷ Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1993, p. 155.

¹⁸ Although Collins never states that the piano is a grand as opposed to an upright, the aristocratic Fairlie household would undoubtedly have possessed an expensive instrument. In any case, the type of instrument can be deduced from the detailed description of the drawing room layout. The piano stands about 'half way down along the inner wall', but Walter can see Laura's profile 'against the wall', and Laura must be able to see, since she is tempted by, the view on to

The musical passages in *The Woman in White* are replete with the kind of imagery on which social historians of the piano such as Loesser have drawn so eagerly. To Leon Plantinga, the musical scene which takes place on Walter's last night in England functions not only as trifling entertainment but as 'speaker of that which cannot be spoken'. Plantinga points out that music was 'part of the system of signs by which people communicated with each other'.¹⁹ But since Collins hinted at having built connecting passages into the novel—and as Philip O'Neill has noted, his testimony should not be ignored²⁰—we should consider whether these musical scenes stand not in isolation from each other, but function collectively as a sub-narrative. They are spread over a period of ten months: Walter's first day in Cumberland is 7 August 1849 and his last some time during the first week of November. The day Laura plays 'dexterous, new music of the tuneless, florid kind' is 8 November, and the evening on which she plays to Fosco is 18 June 1850. (The gap of less than a week between Walter's last night and the first mention of the new music begs many questions about when, exactly, Laura first had access to the 'tuneless, florid' repertory.) More or less the same personnel are present during the two 'Mozartian' scenes: Walter, Marian and Mrs Vesey, the housekeeper; in addition, the lawyer Gilmore is present at the second. At the third, Glyde has replaced Hartright; and only Marian and Fosco are present at the fourth. Marian is the common link between all four scenes: in effect, she is the only person who can interpret the changing messages conveyed by the music. It is as if the women have composed a private channel of communication within the more public location of the drawing room, creating their own secrecy within their larger physical space by 'turning towards one another' to the exclusion of others.²¹

To what extent is Marian capable of interpreting Laura's musical message? Although Marian herself disclaims any special knowledge of music, pleading ignorance and 'total want of taste in that direction' (p. 320), she is sensitive to its effects. Count Fosco, thundering his way through Rossini's *Moses in Egypt*, causes Marian to shrink nearer and nearer the door. She finds something 'horrible' in the 'outburst of delight at his own singing and playing, and in the triumph with which he watched its effect' on her (loc. cit.). Marian never expressly asks Laura to play. Walter asks Laura to play on the first occasion, but it is apparently she who chooses the Mozart. Marian seems impervious to the repertory Laura offers on this first occasion, engrossed as she is in her letters, but she has obviously registered that Walter loves Mozart since she volunteers this information in the third 'piano-playing' passage. It would seem, indeed, that Laura has habitually offered Mozart to Walter; he speaks of music 'which she knew by memory, which she had played over and over again' (p. 122). Thus, Laura offers her own choice of repertory in the first three passages: in the first through personal choice; in the second because she knows it is Walter's favourite music; and in the third because, I suggest, she can convey her misery to the terrace. Walter would not be able to see Laura's profile if she were sitting at an upright unless the piano were in a corner; if sitting at an upright, Laura would be looking at a wall and not at the view through the glass doors on to the terrace.

¹⁹ Plantinga, 'The Piano and the Nineteenth Century', pp. 2–3.

²⁰ Philip O'Neill, *Wilkie Collins: Women, Property and Propriety*, Basingstoke, 1988, p. 98.

²¹ Jennifer Post challenges the notion that public and private spheres are as musically exclusive as they can sometimes seem. Drawing on the work of the social historians Linda Imray, Audrey Middleton and Margaret Yocom, she argues that women can 'carry their private realm into social contexts that can, in a sense, be viewed as public'. Post's model is an example from Yocom's study of women's storytelling in Pennsylvania, which suggests that women 'create privacy in a crowded room by turning towards each other, to the exclusion of others, to share a story' (Jennifer Post, 'Erasing the Boundaries between Public and Private in Women's Performance Traditions', in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, ed. Susan C. Cook & Judy Tsou, Urbana & Chicago, 1994, pp. 35–51, at p. 37).

Marian only through non-verbal means. Certainly, Glyde is very unlikely to have understood such a message, since Fosco characterizes his friend's relationship to music by announcing 'If Percival is coming, harmony and melody are both at an end' (p. 320). The Count himself requests the music in the last of the passages, and Laura complies through sheer astonishment. Her choice of repertory is discussed below.

Like other Victorian novelists, Collins often drew on precise sources.²² In *The Woman in White*, he explored many highly topical issues, exploiting a contemporaneity that can easily be lost on current readers. The idea of false imprisonment to gain pecuniary advantage was suggested by Maurice Mejan's account of the Madame de Douhault case in *Recueil des causes célèbres*, which the author had picked up on a Paris bookstall in 1856;²³ however, as Sutherland points out, more recent cases of false incarceration in asylums had hit the headlines around the time of the novel's conception,²⁴ and discussions about the boundaries between sanity and insanity were filtering down from psychologists and social reformers through to the press.²⁵ The 1850s also abounded with incidents of domestic poisonings. Collins probably even attended the trial of William Palmer, the Rugeley poisoner, and said himself that the 'witness statement' construction of the novel was suggested by the manner in which the trial was conducted.²⁶ Marian's typhus infection would have recalled the terrible epidemic of 1849–50, and it is no accident that she contracts the illness at the aptly-named Blackwater Park, Sir Percival's residence.

There is every reason to believe that the musical sources, too, were drawn precisely from real life, though apart from the operas which Count Fosco attends, sings or discusses, their identities are tantalizingly slippery.²⁷ Music was undoubtedly one of the most important elements in Collins's life, and appears to a greater or lesser extent in almost all his novels. He was a constant visitor at the artistic gatherings of his friends Nina and Frederick Lehmann: the biography of the Lehmanns published by their grandson John, which drew on Frederick's own unfinished memoirs, makes useful references to musical evenings at which Collins was present.²⁸ Nina was apparently a highly talented pianist who sometimes appeared in public, and from whose touch 'the notes seemed to flow in streams of liquid jewels'.²⁹ Collins said of her that 'after Nina Lehmann Hallé was the best pianist in England'.³⁰ Frederick, for his part, was a good amateur violinist and friend of such figures as Joseph Joachim, Pauline Viardot-Garcia, Meyerbeer and Clara Schumann. Collins considered the Lehmanns his closest friends; John Lehmann goes so far as to suggest that of his grandparents' circle of friends, it was Collins 'who appeared the most frequently at the dinner parties and musical evenings'.³¹ Dickens reported that, on music, Collins was 'very learned, and

²² The use of real-life sources for realistic fiction forms the subject of Altick, *The Presence of the Present*. In his survey, Altick includes such topics as historical events, names in the media, financial issues, consumer goods, London, and popular entertainment. The fictional appearance of 'real' songs, operas and instrumental works is discussed with reference to Collins, Dickens, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Emily Eden, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charlotte M. Yonge, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy (*ibid.*, pp. 466–75).

²³ John Sutherland, 'Explanatory Notes', in *The Woman in White*, Oxford, 1996, pp. 659–60.

²⁴ Sutherland, 'Introduction', pp. xvi–xxi.

²⁵ Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, pp. 27–70.

²⁶ Sutherland, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

²⁷ Fosco sings an aria from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* (p. 230), and talks about and accompanies himself singing passages from *William Tell* and *Moses in Egypt* (p. 320); he also attends Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* (pp. 582–6).

²⁸ John Lehmann, *Ancestors and Friends*, London, 1962, pp. 98, 161, 166, 173 and 219.

²⁹ Rudolph C. Lehmann, *Memoirs of Half a Century*, London, 1908, p. 3. The author was Nina's son, and admits he might be biased—but says that any number of people who heard her would agree with his assessment of his mother's playing.

³⁰ Lehmann, *Ancestors and Friends*, p. 161.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

sometimes drives me into a frenzy by humming and whistling whole overtures';³² Mary Cunliffe recorded her astonishment 'at [his] capacity for enjoyment', adding that afterwards Collins told her it made him feel 'ten years younger'.³³

Collins's love of music is evident not only from such references but also from his letters³⁴ and from the frequent references in his fiction, where he freely publicized his tastes through the voices of characters or anonymous narrators. He made no secret that his favourite composer was Mozart, who crops up in several musical scenes. The context is often twilight and the idea of the composer a sentimentalized one, perhaps gained largely from a knowledge of some of the two- and four-handed piano music and the more popular arias. The eponymous blind heroine, Lucilla, in *Poor Miss Finch*, plays Mozart sonatas on the piano, taught by rote by her companion Madame Pratolungo. On one occasion, Madame Pratolungo is so upset that she plays badly, and she cannot abide doing Mozart this disservice:

The divine serenity and completeness by which Mozart's music is, to my mind, raised above all music that ever was written, can only be worthily interpreted by a player whose whole mind is given undividedly to the work. Devoured as I then was by my own anxieties, I might profane those heavenly melodies—I could not play them. Lucilla accepted my excuses, and took my place.³⁵

This 'divine Mozart' trope reflects accurately the common mid-nineteenth-century construction of Mozart as Classical ideal. For English readers, such an image had achieved wide currency through Edward Holmes's *Life of Mozart* (1845)—the only extensive and accurate biography available—and a listener of Collins's enthusiasm would undoubtedly have possessed a copy.³⁶ With its panegyric references to 'the high density of [Mozart's] genius', the composer's 'exquisite melodies', and the 'touches of a great master', some of the more laudatory passages could have come from the pen of Collins himself.³⁷ However, this construction was in some ways radically different from the prevailing perception in the decades immediately following the composer's death when, as William Stafford has suggested, his music was judged expressive and passionate, and mainstream criticism assimilated him to Romanticism. Indeed, only after the phenomenon of Beethoven, who was thought to epitomize Romantic rebelliousness, did a different picture of Mozart's music as representing perfection and formal beauty emerge.³⁸ Perhaps one of the most telling comments on mid-nineteenth-century Mozart reception occurs in Collins's *The Frozen Deep*, when Clara

³² *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House & Graham Storey, Oxford, 1993, vii. 203–5, given in Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins', p. 255; for further references to Collins's relationship with Dickens, see *ibid.*, n. 1.

³³ Given in Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins', p. 255.

³⁴ See *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, ed. William Baker & William M. Clarke, Basingstoke, 1999. In those written home during his travels on the Continent as a young man, it is his love of Italian opera which is apparent above all, even though he is critical of individual performances. Collins mentions attending *Othello* in Paris in 1844, which he described as 'dismal, and Duprez most grievously hoarse' (i. 23). He also attended Verdi's 'last and noisiest production' at La Scala in October 1853, which was 'miserably lighted, wretchedly dirty, mournfully empty, and desecrated by some of the very worst singers I ever heard, and some of the mouldiest scenery I ever saw. . . . The tenor was laughed at, and the Prima Donna was hissed—in short, the whole performance was utterly miserable and incapable, even for Italy—and that is saying a great deal in this present state of Opera here' (i. 107). In Naples in November the same year he heard the same opera—also 'Very poor' (i. 115); but then two weeks later in Venice, *Nabucco* was praised as 'very fairly and pleasantly done' (i. 118).

³⁵ Collins, *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), ed. Catherine Peters, Oxford, 1995, p. 153.

³⁶ Edward Holmes, *The Life of Mozart, Including his Correspondence*, London, 1845, with an introduction by Ernest Newman, London, 1912.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 153, 173 and 266.

³⁸ William Stafford, *The Mozart Myths: a Critical Reassessment*, Stanford, 1991, p. 164.

asks her friend Lucy to play something 'worthy of the night . . . something spiritual and divine'. Unwillingly, Lucy

puts her book aside and goes to the piano—Mozart's 'Air in A, with Variations' lies open on the instrument. One after another she plays the lovely melodies, so simple, so purely beautiful, of that unpretending and unrivalled work. At the close of the ninth variation (Clara's favourite) she pauses . . .³⁹

The 'Air in A with Variations' cannot have been either the first movement of the Sonata in A, K.331, which has only five variations, or the Variations K.454a, in which there are no more than eight.⁴⁰ A popular piece of this title with ten variations was published in countless British editions throughout the nineteenth century under Mozart's name,⁴¹ and this is most probably the work to which Collins is referring. It is actually not by Mozart at all⁴² but, rather, Emanuel Aloys Förster—a composer respected by Beethoven among others, but largely self-published and little remembered after his death in 1823.⁴³ Here, then, there is a friction between authorial power and evidence, since Collins's personal judgement of the music's value was almost certainly coloured by his perception of its supposed composer.

Collins sets up his sentimentalized and even imaginary idea of 'Mozart' not in opposition to another named composer but to another 'idea', in the form of a particular type of musical texture, as we shall see. And the corollary is also true: 'new music of the dexterous, tuneless kind' is set up in opposition to the idea of 'Mozart'. The two musical types function as polarized dualities and can be read as extreme examples of their types. In terms of genre, 'Mozart' would indicate sonatas or variations; we have seen that both feature elsewhere in Collins's novels. The 'new music', by contrast, could be represented by a plethora of more nebulous titles. If it were 'high art' music, it might be designated as Nocturne, Impromptu, Song without Words, Prelude, Rhapsody, Albumblatt, Fantasia, Novelette—the list is endless: pieces in which themes or tunes have given way to obscure textures, and tonality, interacting with form, is stretched far beyond familiarity and the comfort which that engenders. Before the third scene, it is as if Laura knows nothing of such pieces. She is always something of a blank canvas on to which other people's versions of her can be painted, as several critics have noted.⁴⁴ Although Laura chooses her own repertory, and is in some sense thus responsible for articulating her own musical 'voice', it is not she who interprets her own choices for the reader.⁴⁵ Instead, Walter 'writes upon' Laura, seizing her choice of a Mozartian repertory as indicative of the characteristics by which he most wishes to know her. The origins of this construction lie in the first musical scene, when he joins the ladies in the drawing room after dinner 'on the civilised foreign plan' (p. 55). At this point, all is softness and sweetness—a garden of Eden, complete with 'the divine' in the form of Mozart, just waiting to be destroyed.

³⁹ Collins, *The Frozen Deep*, 1874 (repr. Stroud, 1996), p. 48.

⁴⁰ The doubtful version has eight and the manuscript version two. See Stanley Sadie, 'Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart' (work-list with Anthony Hicks), *The New Grove*, xii. 680–752, at p. 744.

⁴¹ See *The Catalogue of Printed Music in the British Library* (henceforth CPM), London, Munich, New York & Paris, 1985, xli. 197.

⁴² Listed in Ludwig Ritter von Köchel, *Chronologisch–thematisches Verzeichnis sämtliche Tonwerke Wolfgang Amadé Mozarts*, 6th edn., ed. Franz Giegling, Alexander Weinmann & Gerd Sievers, Wiesbaden, 1964, pp. 896–7, as K. Anh. C 26.06 (it was formerly Anh. 289).

⁴³ See R. M. Longyear, 'Förster, Emanuel Aloys', *The New Grove*, vi. 717–18.

⁴⁴ Milbank deals particularly thoroughly with the question of blankness in the novel, not just of Laura but of her 'double', Anne Catherick. She also discusses blanknesses not just of people but of incidents, information and geographical features (Milbank, *Daughters of the House*, pp. 68–73).

⁴⁵ Discussed in Weliver, *Singing Angel or Musical Demon?*, pp. 104–5.

The housekeeper dozes off in an armchair while Marian searches through her mother's letters, and the feminine topos of this scene is completed by Laura, who seats herself at the piano at Hartright's request:

[Her] fair profile . . . was just delicately defined against the faintly deepening background of the inner wall of the room . . . The sense of peace and seclusion soothed all thought and feeling into a rapt, unearthly repose; and the balmy quiet that deepened ever with the deepening light, seemed to hover over us with a gentler influence still, when there stole upon it from the piano the heavenly tenderness of the music of Mozart. It was an evening of sights and sounds never to forget. (p. 56)

The second musical scene occurs on the night before Walter's departure for Honduras. Having learnt that Laura is engaged to Glyde, he has decided to leave. After dinner, the assembled company return to the drawing room—the room in which, as Hartright declares, 'the happiest evenings of my life had been passed' (p. 121). He sees Laura 'lingering near the music stand . . . She cast one quick glance at me, took a piece of music from the stand, and came towards me of her own accord' (loc. cit.). Laura then plays 'those little melodies of Mozart, which you used to like so much' (p. 122). Although she refers to 'little melodies', she then plays for such a protracted period of time as to suggest the performance of more substantial compositions as well.⁴⁶ In any case, Walter, who listens with simple pleasure to Laura's music but is acknowledged not to be an informed listener,⁴⁷ could well have heard a sonata movement as a series of 'melodies' succeeding each other.

Leonard Ratner and Kofi Agawu have suggested that Mozart (and other Classical) movements can be read as series of successive 'topics', and it is a small step to imagine an uninformed listener hearing these, or describing them, as 'melodies'.⁴⁸ On this level, the idea of 'Mozart' can simply be something that is heard, representing nothing except its own sonority; on another, it can stand as a symbol of the order, sanity and simple happiness that characterizes Laura's life before the permeating corruptness of Glyde. Genre might thus be a primary component in defining 'Mozart' as one pole of the musical duality Collins has set up, in which case not only musical lines but forms and tonal structures too should be 'relied upon' to behave in certain foreordained ways. Mozart's fantasias, which can veer dangerously close to the 'tuneless', cannot fulfil the function of the idea of 'Mozart' within the polarizing context of this scene. On the other hand, sonata form, as theorized by A. B. Marx close to the time of the novel's publication, symbolizes a narrative paradigm that reflects ideals of social order. As Susan McClary noted, Marx gives us possibly one of the most illuminating insights of this whole period into societal gender construction.⁴⁹ In sonata-form movements, he says, a second, tender and flexible theme—the 'feminine'—is dependent on, and determined by, a first, energetic, emphatic statement—the 'masculine'. It has not escaped the notice of scholars that sonata form continues to reflect paradigms of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' to the end: following the 'adventures' of the development section comes the recapitulation, in which the feminine theme returns but in the

⁴⁶ Incidentally, Laura and Hartright do not play duets; Hartright says he takes a seat 'near the piano', not at it, and since he often seems to get up to go and do something else, there is no evidence to suggest, as Robinson does, that they share in the musical experience in this way (see Robinson, *Wilkie Collins*, pp. 155–6).

⁴⁷ As noted by Marian, p. 292.

⁴⁸ Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*, New York, 1980, pp. 9–30; V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: a Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music*, Princeton, 1991, especially pp. 88–9.

⁴⁹ Marx published *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition* in 1845. McClary was the modern scholar who pointed out the potential for exploiting the 'masculine/feminine' paradigm in critical readings of sonata-form movements (see Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, Minneapolis & Oxford, 1991, pp. 13–17).

tonic key—safely reined into the patriarchal sphere, as it were.⁵⁰ Whether or not individual pieces conformed to this model, sonata form as an abstract ideal seems to have embodied the fulfilment of societal expectation. There is of course a tension between the idea of domestic happiness and the ‘domestic restraint’ of sonata form here, for if Walter ‘reads’ Laura’s choice of repertory as embodying an ideal social order, then he is again imposing on her the characteristics by which he wishes to know her. Laura, though initiating the choice of Mozart, does not (and cannot) dictate what Walter wants to hear in the music.

However, in opposition to the idea of ‘Mozart’, ‘new music’ in 1850 could mean—and represent—any one of a number of things, not necessarily what we retrospectively perceive as the ‘high art’ music of that era. After all, the drawing-room piano functioned as an instrument for pieces of widely differing ‘tone’: the music stand which one day saw ‘high art’ music might the next day (or even the same evening) hold a ‘popular’ ballad. The boundary between these types can easily be exaggerated:⁵¹ a glance through the British Library’s *Catalogue of Printed Music* suggests that the name of Mozart, for instance, was attached to numerous arrangements of ‘favourite airs’ from operas, marketed in such a way as to attract the greatest number of buyers.⁵² Chopin’s music too, to his horror, found its way to the British drawing-room piano under fancy titles invented by his publisher Wessel, to give just one example.⁵³ Bound albums of such ‘drawing-room music’, comprising collections of ‘popular’ sheet music, were presumably plentiful; among those still extant is a series belonging to the Duchesses of St Albans.⁵⁴ Indeed, the popularity of *The Woman in White* gave rise to at least three drawing-room pieces: ‘The Fosco Galop’, a song called ‘The Woman in White’ and ‘The Woman in White Waltz’.⁵⁵ But even if we had, catalogued and available for study, a varied corpus of bound sheet-music albums that must surely have existed in every household where there was a piano, they would still give no indication either of which pieces within their covers were prioritized—musically or as entertainment—or indeed how their status compared to the volumes of ‘classics’ that were issued by publishers such as Augener and Novello during the mid nineteenth century.⁵⁶

Despite this note of caution, it is clear that other works of fiction maintain a polarizing distinction between ‘popular’ and ‘art’ music, even depending on this

⁵⁰ This idea has recently been critiqued by Lucy Green in *Music, Gender, Education*, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 97–8 and 117–21.

⁵¹ As Roger Chartier has observed, ‘the macroscopic opposition between “popular” and “high” culture has lost its pertinence. An inventory of the multiple divisions that fragment the social body is preferable to this massive partition, which often defines the common . . . by default as [that which is] outside the elite’. Chartier calls into question the certainties and habits by which popular culture is defined, which, though specific in his paper to French cultural history, has much resonance for historians of musical cultures (see Chartier, ‘Texts, Printing, Readings’, in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1989, pp. 154–75, esp. pp. 168–70).

⁵² For instance, *Four Themes Selected from Mozart’s Most Celebrated Operas. Arranged and Varied for the Piano Forte by F. J. Kirmair* (1811); *Beauties of Mozart, Partly Taken from Manuscripts in his Own Handwriting. Arranged for the Piano Forte by W. Grosse* (1815); ‘Love resists’ (1807), an ‘adaptation with an accompaniment for the pianoforte’ of ‘Abendempfindung’, K.523. Large numbers of ‘fantasie transcriptions’ and arrangements of individual numbers from operas can also be found among the lists in *CPM*.

⁵³ As Donald W. Krummel notes (see his ‘Music Publishing’, in *The Athlone History of Music in Britain*, v: *The Romantic Age, 1800–1914*, ed. Nicholas Temperley, London, 1981, pp. 46–59, at p. 56). Some of these are listed in *CPM*. The four Mazurkas Op. 6 appeared in Wessel’s imprint as ‘Souvenir de la Pologne’; the Nocturnes Op. 9 as ‘Les murmures de la Seine’, Op. 15 as ‘Les zephyrs’, Op. 27 as ‘Les plaintives!’, Op. 32 as ‘“Il lamento” e “La consolazione”’, and Op. 37 as ‘Les soupirs’. The Waltzes Op. 70 No. 2 and Op. 69 No. 2 appeared as ‘Une soirée à Cracovie en 1844’.

⁵⁴ Nicholas Temperley, ‘Ballroom and Drawing-Room Music’, *The Romantic Age*, pp. 109–34, at p. 118.

⁵⁵ Andrew Gasson, *Wilkie Collins: an Illustrated Guide*, Oxford & New York, 1998, p. 110.

⁵⁶ John A. Parkinson, *Victorian Music Publishers: an Annotated List*, Warren, Michigan, 1990, pp. 13–14.

distinction to symbolize a person's character, intellect and moral fibre. For both Eliot and Dickens, the performance of serious music could signify lofty character, and drawing room ballads the opposite, as Mary Burgan has demonstrated. Burgan goes so far as to suggest that 'most of the young women who labored to learn the piano in the nineteenth century were not intent upon mastering the intricacies of Mozart, Haydn or Beethoven'.⁵⁷ As Ehrlich has also pointed out, young ladies needed 'effective' pieces to show that money had been well spent on instruments and lessons; a steady stream of pieces was 'mass produced for the ungifted and semi-trained to perform to the unmusical and half-listening'.⁵⁸ By contrast, Laura seems much more dedicated to her art, as is indicated not only through her knowledge of Mozart but also by the testimony of Count Fosco in the fourth musical passage:

He highly approved of the music, and tenderly admired Laura's manner of playing—not as poor Hartright used to praise it, with an innocent enjoyment of sweet sounds, but with a clear, cultivated, practical knowledge of the merits of the composition, in the first place, and of the merits of the player's touch, in the second. (pp. 292–3)

The Count is presented to us as deeply knowledgeable about music. For instance, at the opera, where Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* is being performed, 'not a note of the music was lost upon him' (p. 583). (The choice of an Italian opera to demonstrate Fosco's understanding should be read not only as a positive reflection of Collins's own preferences but also as a more veiled reference to his negative feelings about the German symphonic tradition.)⁵⁹ Although in Marian's narrative we do not witness Laura at the piano for the seven months between 8 November and 18 June, she would hardly have earned Fosco's praise had she not been practising regularly in the meantime. She is alert to her own faults, and will not tolerate blunders even under the most traumatic of circumstances. The second musical scene demonstrates this clearly. Laura goes to the piano on the night before Walter's departure. He places himself near to her, and she tells him, her voice sinking almost to a whisper: 'I am very sorry you are going' (p. 122). At this point, her fingers fly over the keys 'with a strange feverish energy [Walter] had not noticed in her before' (p. 123). When she hits a wrong note, she is momentarily confused in trying to set it right, but declares, as Hartright narrates:

'I will play it . . . I will play it on the last night . . .' The rest of the evening passed without a word or look from her. She kept her place at the piano; and I kept mine at the card-table. She played unremittingly—played as if the music was her only refuge from herself. Sometimes, her fingers touched the notes with a lingering fondness, a soft, plaintive, dying tenderness, unutterably beautiful and mournful to hear—sometimes, they faltered and failed her, or hurried over the instrument mechanically, as if their task was a burden to them. But still, change and waver as they might in the expression they imparted to the music, their resolution to play never faltered. (pp. 123–4)

Despite the horrors that she can see lying ahead of her, Laura is determined to fix that combined image of herself, the soft twilight, and Mozart, for Walter to evoke as a memory during his exile. Whatever else happens that evening, the most important thing for her is that she should manage to speak to him through the Mozart he so loves to associate with her. The presence of the assembled company means she cannot communicate her love in any other way. However, her performance on Walter's last night differs in one important aspect from those she has given before. Although she is

⁵⁷ Burgan, 'Heroines at the Piano', p. 47.

⁵⁹ See Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins', pp. 260–61.

⁵⁸ Ehrlich, *The Piano*, p. 93.

accustomed to play from memory, she keeps her eyes glued to the score on that final evening. Playing 'by heart' in these circumstances might have witnessed her losing control completely, whereas in following the notation she can confine herself to follow the imprisoning 'orders' of the score, as Leppert would have it.⁶⁰

The piano, to Laura, is thus much more than a social accomplishment; it is an invaluable and subtle communicative tool. Although it might be unusual for a non-professional pianist to be represented wholly in terms of art music, Collins did have the relatively unusual advantage of being able to draw on a real-life example of an 'amateur' pianist of real talent in the form of Nina Lehmann. And because Nina was his probable model, we should look beyond the kind of repertoires that young ladies usually drew on for evening entertainment in teasing out the nascent threads of Laura's musical activities. The music that was actually available in the depths of Cumberland to buy, hear or study does not impinge at all on this reconstruction of Laura's music, since Collins is very unlikely to have had much insight into the realities of day-to-day life among the provincial gentry.⁶¹

Let us turn now to the third musical passage, which occurs at the very beginning of Marian Halcombe's narrative, and to a discussion of what the real-life source of 'new music of the dexterous, tuneless, florid kind' might have been. Walter, as the first of the novel's narrators, has 'written upon' Laura by interpreting her repertorial choice, connecting Laura as a player of Mozart with Laura as the object of his incipient love. However, it is not until the third passage that Marian explicitly links the relationship between Laura and Hartright with the idea of 'Mozart'. Thus, values other than those which stand in opposition to 'tuneless and florid' new music are already embodied in the idea of 'Mozart', through having been coupled with a representation of Laura herself. We have seen that the idea of 'Mozart' is linked to perfection, order, sanity and pleasure, and that Collins's own musical tastes were paramount in creating this trope. The conjectural source of the tuneless new music can also be identified from the evidence of Collins's own tastes. In order to make this identification, passages from Collins's letters and fictional works will be drawn upon. Finally, however, my suggestion is based only partly on these factors, since my more immediate concern is to focus on ways in which a speculative attribution can be relevant to reading such aspects of the novel as gender and mental illness.

Carmina, the heroine of *Heart and Science*, considers, 'in common with Mozart and Rossini', that 'music without melody is not music at all'.⁶² We may presume this latter opinion to be that of Collins too, since he echoes it in *The Fallen Leaves*, when Amelius Goldenheart and Mrs Farnaby attend a concert in which members of the audience are described as 'the docile victims of the worst of all quackeries (musical quackery)'.⁶³ In this concert, as the 'impersonal' narrating voice reports, 'modern German music was largely represented on the programme. The patient English people sat in closely packed rows, listening to the pretentious instrumental noises which were impudently offered to them as a substitute for melody'.⁶⁴ This description is strongly reminiscent of

⁶⁰ Leppert, *The Sight of Sound*, p. 133.

⁶¹ He chose Cumberland as a setting after a rather disastrous visit with Dickens, but did not know the north of England well. Nor, as a lifelong Londoner, did he have much experience of provincial life. See Gasson, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 33.

⁶² Collins, *Heart and Science: a Story of the Present Time*, 1883 (repr. Stroud, 1990), p. 16.

⁶³ Collins, *The Fallen Leaves*, 1879 (repr. Stroud, 1994), p. 59.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

the 'new music' from *The Woman in White*, and since no composer is named in either, they might be considered together. Harvey Sucksmith suggests that the 'florid, tuneless' music is by Wagner, for whom, as Robinson states, Collins conceived a violent dislike. This received wisdom is repeated by Sutherland.⁶⁵ However, of the piano music, only Wagner's Sonata in B flat had actually been published, and with its solidly classical structure, harmonic progressions and clear themes, it does not fit the bill. The Fantasia, which might well be the kind of piece Laura was playing, was not published until 1905;⁶⁶ and although she might have been reading through an arrangement of one of Wagner's operas this is unlikely given the novel's date.⁶⁷ In any case, the evidence that Wagner was the chief casualty of Collins's musical taste is slight. Wagner is never cited in the letters, and William Clarke, drawing on the recollections of Nathaniel Beard, suggests only that Collins found the composer 'difficult to appreciate'.⁶⁸ In focusing on Wagner, Sucksmith *et alia* bypassed Robert Schumann, the object of real derision whom Collins actually mentions by name. Collins wrote to Frederick's sister Elizabeth Benzon after a concert they had attended together: 'I hope you were not the worse for this concert. As for *me*, Herr Schumann's music, madame Schumann's playing, *and* the atmosphere of St James's Hall, are three such afflictions as I never desire to feel again.'⁶⁹ Collins gave Schumann only the thinnest of disguises in another revealing musical passage, this time from *Miss or Mrs.?*. This short 'novel in outline' bears many resemblances to *The Woman in White*. The heroine, Natalie, has been promised by her father to a man she does not love, the corrupt and depraved Richard Turlington, although her secret lover is her cousin, Launcelot Linzie. Launce, since he is a relative, has greater access to Natalie than would be usual—like Walter, he occupies the space of a safe, unthreatening 'neuter'. Turlington is counting on the £40,000 he will receive as part of the marriage settlement to save himself from bankruptcy. Natalie, in her desperation to escape Turlington's clutches, marries Launce in secret at a seedy little church in the East End, but the deception is discovered by the (wicked) stepdaughters of her best friend. The tension mounts to its greatest height during a section where, during a party at which everyone is present, the document which will ultimately lead to the discovery falls by accident from between the pages of a music book which Launce himself has picked up. The party commences, with strains of jealousy and the fear of discovery running like a counterpoint to the social niceties that the characters play out. But the musical accompaniment that underpins this scene reflects its true nature of anxiety and foreboding. A bitter scene takes place between Turlington, Linzie and Natalie, but in the meantime 'a renowned "virtuoso" has arrived and is thundering on the piano'. Natalie's friend defuses the situation by diverting the three back to the performance, saying to Natalie:

Why do you allow these two barbarous men to keep you in here while the great Bootmann is playing the Nightmare Sonata in the next room? Launce! Mr Turlington! follow me, and learn to be musical directly! You only have to shut your eyes, and you will fancy you hear

⁶⁵ Harvey Peter Sucksmith, 'Introduction' and 'Explanatory Notes' to his edition of Collins, *The Woman in White*, London, 1975, p. 608; Robinson, *Wilkie Collins*, pp. 155–6; Sutherland, 'Explanatory Notes', p. 676.

⁶⁶ Carl Dahlhaus, 'Kritischer Bericht', in *Richard Wagner: Klavierwerke*, ed. idem ('Sämtliche Werke', xix), Mainz, 1970, p. 110.

⁶⁷ Atlas, drawing on Theresa Muir's *Wagner in England: Four Writers before Shaw* (unpublished dissertation), City University of New York, 1997, suggests that only for Collins's later novels does Wagner represent the archetype for 'modern German music' (Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins', p. 261).

⁶⁸ William M. Clarke, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*, London, 1988, p. 201.

⁶⁹ Letter of 26 February 1869; see *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, ii. 319.

four modern German composers playing, instead of one, and not a ghost of a melody among the four.⁷⁰

Thus, Collins is concerned with exploring the tension between appearances and reality, and as in *The Woman in White*, he does so partly through music. He would probably have come across Schumann's music long before his letter to Benzon of 1869 or the novel of 1873. Clara first came to England in 1856, where after 'initial difficulties she became immensely popular'.⁷¹ These 'initial difficulties' were largely owing to the unfavourable reactions of the *Athenaeum's* critic Henry Fothergill Chorley, who persisted in referring to Clara as 'the old shoe-woman', a name bearing more than passing resemblance to 'the great Bootmann'.⁷² John Lehmann considered Chorley to have been almost single-handedly responsible for discouraging the performance of Schumann's music in England,⁷³ and indeed, Chorley's reactions to Schumann, which became more and more antagonistic as time went on, were for some time very influential.⁷⁴ However, other critics, too, were hostile, notably J. W. Davison of *The Times*; and for nearly 40 years, despite the efforts of John Ella and the popularity of Clara, the anti-Schumann faction did its best to prevent Schumann performances in England.⁷⁵ Reference to a composer only recently introduced to London audiences, described in terms which had been echoed by its best-known critics, would lend further topicality to *The Woman in White*. Like the other current or recent events of which the novel makes use but does not explicitly name, such references would presumably have been recognizable to at least a proportion of the author's readership and would have shown Collins to be a man with his finger on the artistic pulse of London. What would he have heard (or rather, have failed to hear) in Schumann which suggests his music as a suitable source through which to express Laura's emotional turmoil?

When she sits down at the piano on that third occasion, in front of the appalling Sir Percival instead of the beloved Walter, the physical conditions under which she does so are unaltered despite the radically different repertory she presents to her listeners: an observer, as opposed to a listener, would perceive nothing different from one occasion to the other. Since her perception of the horrors of her forthcoming marriage are almost too frightful to discuss, even with Marian, piano-playing is one of the few ways open to her of expressing her distress. It is also a path which, as we have seen, no one except Marian is in a position to comprehend. Laura's 'tuneless' music, to fulfil its

⁷⁰ Collins, *Miss or Mrs? and Other Stories in Outline*, 1873 (repr. Stroud, 1993), p. 49. Atlas suggests—'in the spirit of a game'—that the 'Nightmare Sonata' could be identified as Beethoven's D minor Piano Sonata Op. 31 No. 2 ('The Tempest'), which Collins could have heard Clara perform during 1867. Collins facetiously describes a musical sound, 'produced principally with the left hand, [that] is made to describe, beyond all possibility of mistake, the rising of the moon in a country churchyard, and a dance of Vampires round a maiden's grave' (Collins, *Miss or Mrs?*, p. 50); Atlas points to a possible link with the development section of Beethoven's first movement, which features 'ascending motivic and chromatic turns in the left hand against thumping triplets in the right' (bars 97 ff.) (Atlas, 'Wilkie Collins', pp. 259–60).

⁷¹ Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: the Artist and the Woman*, Oxford, 1989, p. 278.

⁷² Robert Terrell Bledsoe, *Henry Fothergill Chorley: Victorian Journalist*, Aldershot, 1998, p. 269. Atlas explicates the relationship between Schumann, the 'great Bootmann' and the 'shoe-woman' (see his 'Wilkie Collins', p. 259 n. 15).

⁷³ Lehmann, *Ancestors and Friends*, p. 205.

⁷⁴ Chorley's initial reaction to Schumann in 1840 was ambivalent, but became increasingly hostile during the 1850s and '60s, as documented in Bledsoe, *Henry Fothergill Chorley*, esp. pp. 107–8 and 209–12. It should be noted, however, that Chorley did commend John Ella for having presented a new composer to the musicians of England, despite his opinion of the quality of the music (*ibid.*, p. 164), and that the concert of Schumann's which was especially badly received, the infamous New Philharmonic Society concert in June 1856, was condemned not only by Chorley but almost universally (*ibid.*, p. 211).

⁷⁵ See Percy A. Scholes, 'The Antagonism to Schumann', in *The Mirror of Music 1844–1944: a Century of Musical Life in Britain as Reflected in the Pages of the 'Musical Times'*, London, 1947, pp. 420–22.

function in the novel, must articulate realities which do not tally with appearances; it must represent a mask, semblance rather than substance, through whose 'façade' only those with a high degree of perspicacity can see. Collins creates sensation and horror from the 'secret theatre of home',⁷⁶ the domestic situation turned from the familiar into the unstable; and Laura's music, too, must reflect a breaking down of the predictable in the form of narrative processes, and the stretching of Victorian sensibilities to their limits. Of all the 'modern German music' available to Collins, Schumann's piano music resonates with these qualities most particularly, and here we come to the second of the 'absent melodies' of my title. Clara herself identified early on what was proving so problematic for audiences of Robert's music, begging him 'for once' to compose 'something brilliant, easily understandable, without titles, something that is a complete, coherent piece'⁷⁷—something with melodies, to which audiences would willingly give their attention. Charles Rosen has succinctly expressed one aspect of musical style that changed radically between Mozart and Schumann, almost echoing Collins's description as 'tuneless' (though without its negative overtones): that 'the absolutely inaudible is rejected during the period of Viennese Classicism in which every musical line is potentially or imaginatively audible, but it makes a dramatic reappearance in the music of Schumann'.⁷⁸ It is these features of Schumann—the fragmentary, the aphoristic, the unspoken, the melody that cannot actually be heard and never comes to completion, the love of masks, the play of genders—that form a complete antithesis to the idea of 'Mozart'. We can observe through early reactions to Schumann that Collins, Chorley and Davison were not alone in their response, and that other contemporary listeners were extremely puzzled by some of these features. In 1845, Franz Brendel linked Schumann's artistic beginnings to late Beethoven:

A particular, individual emotional state becomes the sole content of a piece of music; shorter compositions with different characters are strung together; a poetic idea provides the connecting thread; and coherence through technical means takes second place . . . The unchaining of fantasy completely emancipated earlier forms.⁷⁹

Brendel singled out *Papillons* as 'so characteristic' of these qualities: he 'valued them so much' that he could 'not avoid stressing their significance . . . The work [is] called 'Butterflies' in order to convey at once its unusual character, its loose, poetic nature, and its desire to be absolved of all strictly musical requirements.'⁸⁰ *Papillons* is, of course, a portrayal of a masked ball, which Schumann simply made up from a collection of earlier waltzes and polonaises which he had written in imitation of Schubert. The title, Gerald Abraham suggests, was fully significant only to the composer himself, since 'larvae' and 'butterflies' played important parts in his private world of thought.⁸¹ In *Carnaval* too, characters appear in disguises which mask not

⁷⁶ Taylor takes the title of her book from this phrase from *Basil: a Story of Modern Life* (1852), ed. Dorothy Goldman, Oxford, 1990, p. 76.

⁷⁷ The original reads: 'Höre Robert, willst du nicht auch einmal etwas Brillantes, leichtverständliches componiren, und Etwas das keine Ueberschriften hat, sondern ein ganzes zusammenhängendes Stück ist'. Clara & Robert Schumann, *Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Eva Weissweiler, Frankfurt, 1984, ii. 469–70, given in the translation used here in Anthony Newcomb, 'Schumann and the Marketplace: from Butterflies to *Hausmusik*', in Todd, *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, pp. 258–315, at p. 266.

⁷⁸ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, London, 1996, p. 7.

⁷⁹ Franz Brendel, 'Robert Schumann with Reference to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and the Development of Modern Music in General' (first published as 'Robert Schumann mit Rücksicht auf Mendelssohn-Bartholdy und die Entwicklung der modernen Tonkunst überhaupt' in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 1845), trans. Jürgen Thym in *Schumann and his World*, ed. R. Larry Todd, Princeton, 1994, pp. 317–37, at p. 320.

⁸⁰ Loc. cit.

⁸¹ See Gerald Abraham, 'Schumann, Robert', *The New Grove*, xvi. 850.

only their appearances but also their genders.⁸² Brendel significantly remarks that some works ‘open up their inner core at first glance’ but others ‘grant access slowly’, going on to suggest that Mozart’s music combines both sides, but that Schumann’s belongs in the second category. Many pianists, he says, were ‘intimidated because they could not get a taste for these works after reading through the scores’.⁸³ As Newcomb observes, Schumann had strayed into a problematic area which made little sense to the amateur, for whom the music was simply too difficult, or the professional, whose audiences were too challenged by its puzzles, textures and extremely quick rate of emotional change.⁸⁴ On the other hand, Schumann might have found his ideal interpreter in such a pianist as Laura represents, if she was indeed modelled on Nina Lehmann. The problem of audience response would not have impinged on her repertorial decisions; nor would she have lacked the required technical skill. A haunting image of Laura suggests itself: of hours spent at her instrument, playing the same passages over and over again in search of technical perfection, brooding as the music works itself into her psyche. The obsessive repetition inherent in some of Schumann’s works often invokes a terrible melancholy, heightened by the endless reiteration of phrases that practising involves.⁸⁵

Rosen’s exploration of ‘absent melody’ in Schumann embraces several piano pieces, including the *Humoreske*. As he notes, the melody on the middle stave is not to be played, but is

embodied in the upper and lower parts as a kind of after-resonance—out of phase, delicate, and shadowy. What one hears is the echo of an unperformed melody . . . It has its being within the mind and its existence only through its echo.⁸⁶

Not only can melodies be present by implication, however; sometimes they simply float away to nothingness. In the Allegro, Op. 8, section after section of gesture succeeds the last, and the promises of melody are never realized. Even when the music reaches D major, in bar 22, the tunes simply fragment into texture: ‘dexterous’ and ‘florid’ texture, in fact. Laura could well be imagined playing this very piece.

Schumann had died by the time *The Woman in White* was written: like Laura, shut in an asylum, although his own grim decline into madness was all too real. Clara did not visit him for two-and-a-half years, until shortly before his death in July 1856. Earlier that year, she had made her first British concert tour.⁸⁷ Collins would almost certainly have known of Schumann’s insanity at the time Clara first played her husband’s music at a public concert, since it had been widely reported in the press;⁸⁸ for him, perhaps, the very fabric of Schumann’s music was saturated by the idea of madness.

No wonder, too, that Count Fosco appreciates not only Laura’s playing but also the music she performs, since this ‘absent’ Schumann also reflects his own personality with uncanny accuracy. Like a character from *Carnaval*, he too is the master of

⁸² See Lawrence Kramer’s fascinating exploration of this topic: ‘*Carnaval*, Cross-Dressing and the Woman in the Mirror’, in *Musicology and Difference*, ed. Ruth Solie, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1993, pp. 305–25.

⁸³ Brendel, ‘Robert Schumann’, p. 326.

⁸⁴ Newcomb, ‘Schumann and the Marketplace’, p. 269.

⁸⁵ Rosen is particularly insightful with regard to this issue (see *The Romantic Generation*, pp. 646–710), but all who have experienced intense periods of piano practice, with its intrinsic loneliness, will recognize the peculiar force with which a composition can work its way relentlessly into one’s thoughts and dreams.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–9.

⁸⁷ Reich, *Clara Schumann*, pp. 277–8.

⁸⁸ Nancy B. Reich, ‘The Correspondence between Clara Wieck Schumann and Felix and Paul Mendelssohn’, in *Schumann and his World*, ed. Todd, pp. 205–32, at p. 225.

disguise: the fat man who yet moves 'with a horribly silent tread' (p. 292), the spy who feigns friendship, the charming arch-villain, the sphinx. Above all, he is characterized by 'feminine' features. On 19 June, as described in Marian's narrative, he devours

the greater part of a fruit tart, submerged under a whole jugful of cream . . . 'A taste for sweets', he said, in his softest tones and his tenderest manner, 'is the innocent taste of women and children. I love to share it with them—it is another bond, dear ladies, between you and me'. (p. 294)

The piano, so central to the establishment of Laura's identity, also plays its role in Fosco's constructed femininity. Before his gargantuan lunch, he had 'passed the morning quietly, indoors . . . some part of it in the drawing-room, playing odds and ends of music on the piano, and humming quietly to himself' (loc. cit.). In contrast to the quintessentially feminine Laura, whose purely instrumental music, separated from the word, constructs her as non-verbal and emotional, Fosco's relationship to music constructs him as an 'effeminate' man. As well as his 'ecstatic' and flamboyant performance on the concertina, when Marian describes him as a 'fat St Cecilia in male attire' (p. 230), he also plays the piano, 'located almost exclusively among amateurs as a female instrument'.⁸⁹ However, he never loses his relationship with the prescriptive power of the word and the patriarchal order, since his is always *texted* music. And his primary relationship with language is never more apparent than during the third musical episode, functioning as it does to complement the earlier twilight musical scene in which Walter first hears Laura's Mozart. In both, the daylight is fading, and protestations are made against the illumination of indoor lamps. But whereas Walter enjoyed Laura's music with an 'innocent enjoyment of the sweet sounds', Fosco praises it with a 'clear, cultivated, practical knowledge of the merits of the composition, in the first place, and of the merits of the player's touch, in the second' (p. 292). And whereas to Walter the evening was one of *sights* and sounds never to forget, Fosco responds to the inherent poetry of the 'modest, trembling English twilight' with purple prose of his own, followed by quotations from Dante (loc. cit.). As Carolyn Abbate has pointed out, 'the alignment of male with discursive language, female with music . . . is dogma in certain schools of psychoanalytical and feminist writing'.⁹⁰ Equating Luce Irigaray's *écriture féminine*, so close to presymbolic speech, with (nominally at least) 'nonrepresentational', untexted music, she aligns the binary opposition 'female—music/male—language' alongside Roland Barthes's elimination, in the process of utterance, of the masculine-gendered 'Author' through its supplanting by a female-gendered and 'musical force': the Voice. Fosco writes, speaks and sings language; Laura can only cry out through tortured piano music whose signifier—signified system is at best ambiguous, at worst unidentifiable.⁹¹ Indeed, Laura's other represented musical practice—singing softly to herself—is also non-verbal, since she is reproducing 'one of the melodies which she had been playing earlier' (p. 57). Here, in generating the music herself, Laura confirms her loss of speech; her 'voice', so seldom heard through her own language, is inseparable from her inner music.

But the piano as a feminine marker can also define through its lack. And significantly, Marian cannot play music at all. Just as music combines with other signifiers to depict Fosco as a 'feminine man', it also defines Marian as a 'virile

⁸⁹ Leppert, *The Sight of Sound*, p. 134.

⁹⁰ Carolyn Abbate, 'Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women', in *Musicology and Difference*, ed. Solie, pp. 225–58, at p. 232.

⁹¹ Loc. cit.

woman'. She is characterized in opposition to Laura's passivity by her dynamism, and physically to Laura's blonde sweetness by height, freedom of movement and a swarthy complexion, dark down on her upper lip that was 'almost a moustache', and a 'masculine form' and 'masculine look of her features' (p. 32). Walter is almost repelled by her face, but Fosco recognizes someone in whom he has met his match, articulating his love for her—the 'first and last weakness of Fosco's life!'—in his final confession (pp. 614–29). Marian not only fails to respond; she loathes him with a vengeance after she realizes he must have taken advantage of her unconscious state to penetrate not only the covers of her dairy but also of her clothing. Sutherland and Heller have pointed out that Marian is a classic lesbian figure whose love for her half-sister verges on the erotic. Collins even felt he had to delete some of the more passionate passages before the story was published.⁹² Her apparitional lesbianism⁹³ is defined not only by these factors, plus her lack of desire for men and her indifference to male desire, but also by the third of my 'absent melodies': her inability to play the piano and her 'total ignorance of music' (p. 320). Presumably, her sole musical interest is that of listener to the only character for whom she ever expresses love: Laura. Alison Milbank has seen Marian's ultimate fate, that of maiden aunt in the Hartright household, as a 'descent into dependence', 'back into masculine control and into further enclosure'.⁹⁴ However, given that Marian sees marriage as 'like death' (p. 187), and that unlike her sister she has no independent means, it would have been difficult for Collins to have found anything else to do with her. Besides, her ultimate triumph is to continue to be with Laura despite the marriage. Before Laura's first marriage, Marian could not bear to think that 'she will be *his* Laura instead of mine! *His* Laura!' (loc. cit.); Laura, for her part, even asked her lawyer to 'pray make it law that Marian is to live with me!' (p. 144). To read this solely as a passive fate would be to misunderstand the power of love the two sisters bear for one another. In any case, Marian's role as Laura's 'ideal listener' elevates her in some ways to a higher position in her relationship with Laura than that occupied by Walter. Although Walter takes simple pleasure in the sounds Laura makes, he has little real understanding of music. It is not given to him, but rather to Marian, to read its changing messages.

I suggest, in conclusion, that Laura's voice does emerge from within a 'text'—one that is constituted by that trajectory between 'the idea of Mozart' and 'the possibility of Schumann'. Laura's voice sounds through the 'pure' music Abbate aligns with enveloping but non-linguistic sound, the 'female cry'.⁹⁵ For Barthes, Laura would thus have revealed herself in 'the grain of the voice', that friction between the voice and the message, the latter being the 'female voice itself', emerging from within the art work.⁹⁶ However, Laura's music is absent, and since the unseen reader cannot hear it, Collins supplies an intermediary to interpret the act of listening on that reader's behalf. In *The Woman in White*, as we have seen, language which retains its semantic content continues to be aligned with the masculine, and this is where Marian's voice would locate itself: *she* stands on that threshold between words and music, finding a vocabulary, for our benefit, for what Laura has said to her through pure sound.

⁹² Sutherland, 'Introduction', p. x; Heller, *Dead Secrets*, p. 129.

⁹³ Terry Castle's 'apparitional lesbians' are those that have been made to seem invisible by culture itself. As Castle says, confronting the negative imagery of these 'ghosts'—most famously invoked at the end of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*—is to try and pin down something as elusive as a ghost effect (see Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, New York, 1993, esp. pp. 28–65).

⁹⁴ Milbank, *Daughters of the House*, p. 76.

⁹⁵ Abbate, 'Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women', p. 232.

⁹⁶ Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', *Image—Music—Text*, ed. & trans. Stephen Heath, pp. 179–89.

Schumann would form an ideal candidate as the composer of Collins's 'new music of the dexterous, tuneless, florid kind', since he embodies so many of the qualities, including that of melodic absence, that stand in opposition to the idea of 'Mozart'. Playing her new choice of repertory, Laura's piano functions as an escape from social entrapment. One late Victorian commentator, the Revd H. R. Haweis, came close to expressing this in considering that a 'good play on the piano' had 'not infrequently taken the place of a good cry upstairs' and was important because 'society itself, whilst it limits [woman's] sphere of action, frequently calls upon her to repress her feelings'.⁹⁷ But the instrument itself indicated female respectability and accomplishment only when sited within the socially controlled sphere of the home: professional women pianists, unless of the status of Clara Schumann, were more likely to earn opprobrium,⁹⁸ and thus the piano also functioned as an archetypal symbol of power loss. In *The Woman in White*, Laura progresses from Mozart, played under social circumstances characterized by contentment and a certain lack of patriarchal control, to the 'new music', played under conditions of increasing tyranny and subjugation. Briefly, while they are in London, their financial situation is completely changed. There is no mention of even a 'wretched little hired piano'.⁹⁹ This period when melody is literally absent from Laura's life serves as an inert vacuum, a resting place for her to take stock, where she is no longer either entrapped or in need of outlets for emotion that cannot be articulated through words. *The Woman in White* ends with Laura's imminent reinstatement at Limmeridge; but will the melodies of Mozart ever again embody the qualities of order, peace and contentment? Or has her journey into menace and fear taken her far too far?

⁹⁷ H[ugh] R[eginald] Haweis, *Music and Morals*, London, 1871, pp. 525–6, given in Ehrlich, *The Piano*, p. 92.

⁹⁸ I accept Marcia Citron's argument that dichotomizing the public and the private, and the professional and the amateur, is fraught with difficulties (see her *Gender and the Musical Canon*, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 100–104). It is true, as she points out, that Cécile Chaminade, for instance, moved without difficulty in a grey area between the two. However, this does not alter the fact that, for male critics, biological sex could be invoked as a means to pour scorn on many women who performed in public, as Katharine Ellis has shown (see 'Female Pianists and their Male Critics in Nineteenth-Century Paris', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 1 (1997), 353–85). For Henry Fothergill Chorley, calling Clara the 'shoe-woman' suggests that her sex played a major part in his dislike of her as an artist.

⁹⁹ Collins's greatest pianistic heroine, Lydia Gwilt, has to endure this type of piano while she is living in conditions of poverty. See *Armada* (1866), ed. John Sutherland, Harmondsworth, 1995, p. 412.