

Music and the Uncanny in the 19th Century*

FRANK HENTSCHEL

[Translation of “Musik und das Unheimliche im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 73 (2016), pp. 9–50; the page numbers of the German version are to be found in square brackets.]

This article explores the musical means composers in the nineteenth century used to evoke the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*). While most existing attempts to determine these means rely on an author’s subjective opinion with regard to particular evocations of the uncanny, this article draws exclusively on contemporary sources. Drawn from the RIPM database, thirteen examples have been selected—following Ernst Jentsch’s notion of the uncanny and based on a clearly defined set of selection criteria—from works by Webern, Loewe, Berlioz, Schumann, Wagner, Boito, and Ambroise Thomas. Compositional devices that recur in several of the works discussed prove to be of central importance. The article asks, finally, how these techniques generate the effect of the uncanny.

Trying to approach the expressive dimensions of music from a historical perspective is a difficult endeavor since historical distance aggravates psychological methods. However, as music in 19th century Europe was essentially embedded in an expressive aesthetic, a musicological investigation of the music of this era must address this issue. The present article singles out the expressive sphere of the uncanny. The central question investigated is what means composers employed when they successfully expressed the uncanny.

What is considered uncanny depends on the subject who has a particular experience. This is inevitably the case with any emotion; however, in the context of historical research, this leads to the problem that the actual subject where the feeling of uncanny occurred can no longer be found. We are therefore forced to fall back on two methodological workarounds: the less circuitous route is to look to documented experiences of contemporary reviewers. To the extent that we can assume the term “uncanny” of the 19th century is approximately equivalent to the meaning of the term today, it is possible to use these sources to identify the music and its features that elicited the feel of the uncanny. The other more circuitous path takes advantage of the fact that the feeling of the uncanny refers to a class of objects that are relatively easy to define. Thus this approach focuses on music that was used to depict uncanny objects or occurrences in lieder or operas. [Page 10] In the present study both approaches are interwoven, as contemporary

* I would like to thank Andreas Domann for his helpful comments.

sources are only considered if they also refer to an object that exhibits characteristics of the uncanny so that the works and their reception shed light on one another.

I. Critical review of the state of research

Without a doubt, it can be interesting to investigate how listeners today perceive the expressive qualities of older music, but this line of inquiry must be differentiated from the historical investigation of which music was supposed to have an uncanny effect or did in fact have an uncanny effect on historical listeners. Several studies on the uncanny mix up these two perspectives. That Joseph Kerman, for example, finds the beginning of the final movement of Beethoven's String Quartet op. 131 to be uncanny,¹ says little about whether the music was intended to be uncanny or whether a listener at the time would have perceived it as such. It is of course one of the essential axioms of historical research on emotions that the experience of feelings is not only dependent on the subject but also on the time period, context, and culture.² Undoubtedly, Joseph Kerman's essay contains many very insightful observations about Beethoven's string quartet, but as an essay on the uncanny in the music of the 19th century, it has one fatal flaw.

In this respect, it is in good company; Nicholas Marston's essay on Schubert's Piano Sonata D 960 (1st movement) as well as Lóránt Péteri's essay on the scherzo in the 19th century are even more guilty of this methodological flaw.³ Marston proceeds in a similar manner to Kerman by focusing his investigation on an aspect of the piano sonata that he experiences as uncanny, namely the particular way Schubert returns to the tonic. The description of this return as a "defamiliarization of the tonic harmony, which is made to sound other than the tonic" already links the phenomenon with the idea of the uncanny through its rhetoric. The word "defamiliarization" implies the Freudian definition of the uncanny, with which Marston opened

¹ "The adjective that works for me is 'uncanny.' This music has something of the ogre about it." (Joseph Kerman, "Beethoven's Opus 131 and the Uncanny," in: *19th-Century Music* 25, 2001–2002, pp. 155–164, here p. 158; cf. p. 160).

² For a comprehensive treatment of these issues, see Jan Plamper, *Geschichte und Gefühl: Grundlagen der Emotionsgeschichte*, Munich 2012.

³ Nicholas Marston, "Schubert's Homecoming," in: *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 125, 2000, pp. 248–270; Lóránt Péteri, "Scherzo and the unheimlich: the Construct of Genre and Feeling in the Long 19th Century," in: *Studia Musicologica* 48, 2007, pp. 319–333.

his remarks. But Freud's definition of the uncanny cannot be used to simply gloss over the fact that there is no contemporary account that the return to the tonic in D 960 (1st movement) was perceived to be uncanny. The discussion of the piano sonata is followed by examples from two of Schubert's lieder (*Gute Nacht* and *Der Doppelgänger*), in which similar passages can be observed. [Page 11] These pieces seem to be the mostly likely candidates to implicitly provide the missing historical evidence. However, two lieder are too few to count as reliable evidence, and moreover one of the two lieder must be disqualified as a source dealing with the uncanny: no motives typical of the uncanny occur in the lieder *Gute Nacht*; it is rather a dominated by images of loneliness and melancholy.

Lóránt Péteri's thesis relates to an entire genre: he claims the scherzo has a tendency to the uncanny.⁴ The analogy between scherzo and the uncanny is however once again established by falling back on subjective associations. After a short commentary on the movement "Alla Danza Tedesca" from Beethoven's String Quartet op. 130, the author writes about a passage in the movement where the elements of the theme are in fact ripped apart (mm. 129–135):

On hearing this, we feel almost as out of sorts as the poor lad Nathanael did when he spied the pretty, although somewhat empty Olympia in a very unworthy situation: across the shoulders of the devilish Coppélius, with gaping eye sockets and limp lifeless limbs. For Olympia, the hero of Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* then realizes, is an automaton, not a living person. The Beethoven music reveals its fabricated, artificial, insubstantial nature at that self-reflective moment of theme permutation and 'music about music.'⁵

Here sound methodology is abandoned in favor of rhetorical argumentation. And although such interpretations are not necessarily historically inaccurate, they are invariably based on a methodological approach that makes it impossible to decide whether these interpretations are plausible or not. They all ultimately rely solely on the personal opinion of the author that the music selected is uncanny. From a methodological viewpoint, a historical study cannot ignore the need to anchor the experience of the uncanny to the historical reception of the work or at least to the historical objects themselves.

Focusing on a work whose content suggests an unambiguous connection to the uncanny, namely *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Paul Dukas, can theoretically help to answer the question what musical means were employed to depict the uncanny as well as what was perceived as

⁴ Péteri, "Scherzo and the unheimlich," (cf. footnote 3) p. 322.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

uncanny. However, not all supernatural occurrences are necessarily uncanny and therein lies the complication for Carolyn Abbate and Carlo Caballero, who both have investigated the uncanny in Dukas's orchestral work. Abbate finds the point in the middle of the piece where the bass instruments slowly start moving again after a general pause to be uncanny. The "abnormal level of repetition," the sudden silence, the sudden isolation of the bass instruments as solo instruments, as well as the "*creatio ex nihilo*" of the music after the silence all contribute to her impression of the uncanny.⁶ [Page 12] All elements are however immediately recognizable as clear graphic descriptions of the plot: the frequent repetitions depict the vigorous and gradually more threatening activities of the brooms; the orchestral attack followed by the abrupt general pause is the attempt of the sorcerer's apprentice to take down the broom with an ax; and the gradual restarting depicts the individual pieces of the chopped-up broom pulling themselves together, which are now getting to work in increased numbers. In theory, this does not rule out that the music could have an uncanny effect, but there is no evidence whatsoever that points to the uncanny nature of the passage. And the extremely concrete onomatopoeic conception of the music seems rather to contradict this assumption, for it is indeed exactly the very physical events—the fall of the ax, picking oneself up, the determined marching forward—that the music takes up. Music restarting after a general pause, a sudden silence, the presence of excessive repetition are all to be found in innumerable works since the 17th century—why this should be experienced as uncanny is hard to understand.

Abbate reads much into the fact that the last strophe of Goethe's ballade is set in quotation marks. She calls these "mysterious quotation marks."⁷ She reads this as a third person entering the narrative, which interjects the implicit "he said."⁸ She feels the music in the coda is uncanny to the extent that the material from the beginning returns in an altered form but without a preceding musical development, and she associates this with the "narrating voice" that is set off in quotation marks. For her, the end of the piece is a sort of enigma.⁹ But setting the spell in quotations marks couldn't be more logical: the apprentice is narrating the event and so he must therefore place the word of his master in quotes. There is nothing uncanny here and nothing mysterious about it, and it also has nothing to do with a third person.

⁶ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton, NJ 1991, p. 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Carlo Caballero has criticized several of Abbate's interpretations using arguments that are based on sounder historical and philological arguments. In his analysis, he has pointed out that the sounds that depict the conjuring of magical powers which frame the symphonic poem can be derived directly from the Goethe poem that the piece is based on.¹⁰ Caballero's starting point is the last two measures, which according to his reading deviate from Goethe's original and create a sense of confusion, which he compares to the ending of modern horror films in which the monster suddenly strikes back after it has supposedly been slayed. This creates an openness that he believe makes Dukas's composition come across as disconcerting and uncanny.¹¹ However, this is again a case of reading too much into the piece. [Page 13] The last two bars very clearly follow the Goethe text quite exactly, whose final stanza reads as follows:

“In die Ecke,
Besen! Besen!
Seid's gewesen!
Denn als Geister
Ruft euch nur zu seinem Zwecke
Erst hervor der alte Meister.”

"Be obedient
Broom, be hiding
And subsiding!
None should ever
But the master, when expedient,
Call you as a ghostly lever!"

(Transl. Paul Dyrsen 1878)

In the last two measures, which take up the motion of the brooms as a motive, the brooms obey the master and disappear into the corner. Once more there is again peace and quiet. The two bars provide a conclusion that could hardly be more final. Clearly there is no suggestion of a return.

In his book *Listening Subject: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture*, David Schwarz discusses

¹⁰ Carlo Caballero, “Silence, Echo: A Response to ‘What the Sorcerer Said’,” in: *19th-Century Music* 28, 2004, pp. 160–182, here p. 174. The symbolic meaning of the a-flat that Caballero works out is also eye-opening (pp. 166–169) and his identification of bitonal elements in the passages depicting the chopped up broom coming back to life (p. 170).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 160 and 163.

two of Schubert's lieder in an essay entitled "Music and the Gaze: Schubert's *Der Doppelgänger* and *Ihr Bild*."¹² Although Schwarz is initially focused on the "gaze," the category of the uncanny is central. As Schwarz does not claim that the lieder evoked the sense of the uncanny (even though he seems to suggest it), the criticism that he is merely projecting his personal viewpoint onto historical material cannot be levied against his analyses. Nevertheless, the essay is problematic in several respects. This is especially evident in the section on *Der Doppelgänger*. At first, we are held in suspense about what Schwarz actually is trying to show: whether the lied is perceived as uncanny or whether Schubert was trying to symbolize psychological processes in the harmonies used. The way the text is written makes the latter more likely, as the following excerpt illustrates and which also clearly illustrates how Schwarz's argument is build on a string of far-reaching assertions that we must accept as given:

The music represents the narrator at his beloved's house by the obsessive four-measure motive [...]. The musical signifier of the gazer is the pitch F# [...]. The musical signifier of recognition is the pitch class G [...]. The music in B minor with G as an upper neighbor to F# represents the fantasy of the gaze in place as a representation of the narrator first gazing at the house of the beloved and then at the narrator's other. [...] The absence of G upper neighbors to the gazing F# signifies the slip in the gaze of the other as other to a gaze of the other as *self*.¹³

These claims are put forward without any justification. And as if this leap of faith wasn't already enough to ask of the reader, Schwarz brings in further premises, among others Freud's interpretation of the doppelgänger motive from his essay on the uncanny and then Lacan's concept of *jouissance*.¹⁴ And thus the conclusions are by and large based on claims and the assertions of authorities that must be accepted on faith, for neither Freud nor Lacan's theories can be considered "corroborated" (*bewährt*) in Karl Popper's sense.¹⁵ [Page 14] They are thus not suitable premises for scientific historiography.

The most thorough and most methodologically rigorous contribution to the research on the uncanny in the music of the 19th century has been penned by Richard Cohn. After an introduction that establishes the definition and use of the term uncanny, he first of all bases his investigation on works that refer to objects that can be described as uncanny and secondly by

¹² David Schwarz, *Listening Subject. Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture*, Durham, NC 1997, pp. 64–86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 65–67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 67 and 69 respectively.

¹⁵ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London 2004, p. 10.

consulting reception evidence (which unfortunately date from modern times) that more or less explicitly characterize the music as uncanny. He selects works that feature a specific harmonic turn, a particular sequence of a major and minor triad. He illustrates this with the example of the pair E-major / C-minor, which he terms “hexatonic poles.” In one of the last sections, Cohn tries to explain why these chord sequences are experienced as uncanny by falling back on Ernst Jentsch as well as Sigmund Freud.¹⁶

As consequently as the contribution is structured, it however suffers just as much from a weakness that affects the core of the argumentation: the examples cited do not meet the criteria for the uncanny. Cohn formulates the following requirement: “I present evidence that composers frequently use hexatonic poles when they seek to depict the range of phenomena that Jentsch and Freud identify as inducing the uncanny. This range is wide, including dead bodies, necroanimism, reincarnation, magic, and spirits.”¹⁷ This list is certainly not exhaustive but rather exemplary, and conversely the example of a dead body is not appropriate because for Jentsch a dead body is only uncanny if it is accompanied by an intellectual uncertainty that blurs the boundary between life and death:

Among all intellectual uncertainties that are able to induce the feeling of the uncanny, there is one very particular one that is capable of evoking a somewhat regular, strong, and very general effect, namely doubting that a seemingly living being is endowed with a soul and conversely uncertainty whether a lifeless object is not somehow endowed with a soul, and indeed also if this doubt is only vaguely perceived on a conscious level.¹⁸

In this respect dead bodies can be uncanny, but they need not be. However, Cohn’s examples do not begin to cover the wide space of the uncanny, and what is more they are without exception referring to phenomena that are incompatible with the intellectual uncertainty, the “lack of orientation,” described by Jentsch.¹⁹ All his examples are examples that depict either—mainly—the process of dying or—less often—an end or a coming of darkness.²⁰ [Page 15] Accordingly, the semantic field that these examples refer to can be understood as a momentous, decisive end to

¹⁶ Richard Cohn, “Uncanny Resemblances: Tonal Signification in the Freudian Age,” in: *JAMS* 57, 2004, pp. 285–323.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹⁸ Ernst Jentsch, “Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen,” in: *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 22, 1906, pp. 195–198, and 23, 1906, pp. 203–205, here p. 197.

¹⁹ For more on this, see below.

²⁰ Cohn, “Uncanny Resemblances,” (cf. footnote 16) pp. 290–299.

a weighty subject (most often the end of life). This is not so much uncanny as it is tragic and existentially distressing. Both madrigals by Gesualdo, *Moro lasso* and *Languisce al fin*, thematize the actual or metaphoric death of the poetic I; in Moteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, the harmonic shifts underpin the moment when Eurdice closes her eyes for good and which Orfeo sings about as he turns around and realizes that he has now irretrievably lost his beloved to the underworld; in *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner uses this device to set the verse "Todgeweihtes Haupt! / Todgeweihtes Herz!" [Head destined for death! / Heart destined for death!], which foreshadows the tragic ending of *Die Walküre* where Wotan longs for the downfall: "Das Ende ... das Ende!" [The end ... the end!]; In his depiction of Åse's death in *Peer Gynt*, Grieg turns to this sequence of triads, just like Puccini does for Scarpia's death in *Tosca*. Two additional examples from Wagner come from *Parsifal*: one is found in the setting of Titurel's words, "Soll ich den Gral heut noch erschaun und leben? Muss ich sterben, vom Retter ungeleitet?" [Shall I again look on the Grail and live? Must I die without my Savior's guidance?], and the other depicts Kundry's death. The final example is drawn from Strauss's setting of Salome's words, "Und das Geheimnis der Liebe ist größer als das Geheimnis des Todes." [And the secret of love is greater than the secret of death.]

Only two examples seem to fall outside this pattern. In Haydn's *Schöpfung*, "hexatonic poles" can be found in the moment after light was created accompanying the text: "Ordnung keimt empor. Erstarrt entflieht der Höllengeister Schar." [Disorder yields to order the fair place. Affrighted fled hell's spirits black in throngs.] Here the spirits call up the sphere of the uncanny much more clearly than all the other examples. However, the context casts them in a different light: "Der erste Tag entstand. / Verwirrung weicht, und Ordnung keimt empor. / Erstarrt entflieht der Höllengeister Schar / In des Abgrunds Tiefen hinab / Zur ewigen Nacht." [The first of days appears. Disorder yields to order the fair place. Affrighted fled hell's spirits black in throngs; down they sink in the deep of abyss to endless night.] Thus, this passage also most likely sets to music a decisive end and a coming of darkness, the endless night. (The spirits and along with them the uncanny dissipate.) And as such, we are now only left with Cohn's last example from the scene in *Götterdämmerung* in which the hand of the slain Siegfried rises threateningly at Hagen. This passage corresponds very clearly with the concept of the uncanny, and the libretto describes an appropriate reaction: "Gutrune und die Frauen schreien entsetzt laut auf. Alles bleibt in Schauer regungslos gefesselt." [Gutrune and the women shriek with horror. All remain motionless with terror.] However overall, the examples Cohn provides do not portray the

uncanny at all; instead, they map out another semantic field whose boundaries are precisely delineated to an impressive degree: that of death or the final, existential end. Although Cohn tries to explain why “hexatonic poles” have an uncanny effect in the last section of his essay, he clearly would have done better to explain why they are suited to portraying death, the end, and the coming of darkness. [Page 16]

II. Analysis of historical evidence

In an attempt to redress the deficits in the existing research outlined above, the following will seek to reframe the question of the means employed to depict the uncanny in the music of the 19th century based on a sound methodological foundation. To accomplish this, a search for instances of the word field for the uncanny in four languages (German, English, French, and Italian), including all forms of the words, was conducted with the help of the RIPM data bank.²¹ That the term “unheimlich” [uncanny] itself is difficult to translate exactly in other languages should be obvious. But even in German it would be a mistake to become too fixated on the word “unheimlich,” for just as two people could mean the very same thing when one says “gespenstisch” [ghostly] and the other labels it “unheimlich,” it is equally possible that two other people could both describe something as “unheimlich,” but mean something different. Thus, it is crucial to understand the sense as precisely as possible based on the specific context of the textual evidence as well as the musical source. In the case of some terms, it became apparent quite quickly that they were as a rule used for other phenomena than the uncanny (or at least so frequently that a search for these terms in the sources seemed to be unwarranted).²²

An intermediate result, which again confirms the previous discussion of the studies by Abbate and Caballero, was that searches for all these terms failed to uncover a single source that was in anyway related to Dukas’s *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. In contrast, if we investigate how this tone poem was actually received and described by contemporary listeners—and to be sure a

²¹ Erschauern, geisterhaft, gespenstig, gespenstisch, Grauen, grauenerregend, grauenhaft, grauenvoll, Graus, Grausen, grausig, gruselig, horribel, mysteriös, schauerhaft, Schauer, schauerlich, schauervoll, schaurig, unheimlich; abominable, demoniacal, demonic, dismay, dread, dreadful, eerie, eery, ghostly, ghostly, gruesome, horrible, horrid, horrific, mysterious, scary, shiver, shudder, spookish, spooky, uneasy, uncanny; angoissant, épouvante, frémir, frisson, horreur, horrible, inquiétant, lugubre, sinistre, ténébreux; misterioso, orrendo, orribile, orridezza, orrore, sinistro, spaventoso, mistico, inquietante.

²² Entsetzen, entsetzt, geheimnisvoll, dämonisch; thrill; abominable, macabre, diabolique, mysterieux, sombre, terrible; mistero, terribile.

search for the keyword *L'apprenti sorcier* yields a good deal of results—it becomes yet again clear that the interpretations briefly outlined above are strangely ahistorical. The contemporary sources seem to be reasonably unified in their assessment of the tone poem's character: it is described using terms like “amusante,” “haut comique,” “verve,” “entraîné,” “burlesque,” “drôle,” “plein d'humour,” and “humoristique.”²³ None of the sources that I have been able to examine associate the work with the uncanny.

As a first step, irrelevant results were excluded from the (several thousand) references in the search results. [Page 17] For example, German sources could describe a performer as “unheimlich virtuos” [incredibly virtuosic], or English sources often complain about the low level of the performance labeling it “horrible” etc. Moreover, sources that dealt with religious music were excluded. For while the divine presence is indeed crucial for the understanding of the phenomena of horror and the uncanny, it seemed prudent—especially for a study conceived of as a piece of basic research—for the time being to disregard sensitive experiences like religious awe as a boundary case. The selection of the most relevant sources from the remaining 370 sources was made according to the following criteria:

- a. The search term should appear in connection with events or objects that fit Jentsch's definition of the uncanny.²⁴
- b. The source should be as much as possible from the same time period when the work examined was created. (Although the time period was interpreted relatively generously, no sources dated from the period after atonal compositional practice had been established were included because these developments could have brought about a dramatically different perception of tonal music).
- c. The description of the musical passage should be as precise as possible, i.e. the specific concrete passage should be identified (ideally, musical and technical details should also be included).

All these features have a certain degree of fuzziness. Nevertheless, they help to ensure that the

²³ M. Kufferath, in *Le Guide musical* 44, 1898, no. 44, p. 808; Amédée Boutarel, in: *Le Ménestrel* 65, 1899, no. 9, p. 69 and 65, no. 47, p. 373; L. S., in: *Le Ménestrel* 64, 1898, no. 44, p. 349; *Hugues Imbert*, in: *Le Guide musical* 43, 1897, no. 23, p. 413; *H. Barbedette*, in: *Le Ménestrel* 65, 1899, no. 10, p. 78 and 65, 1899, no. 48, p. 381; E. S., in: *Le Guide musical* 45, 1899, no. 46, p. 878; Gustave Samazeuilh, in: *Le Guide musical* 45, 1899, no. 52, p. 1016.

²⁴ In my opinion, Jentsch's contribution to the definition of the uncanny is still the most important. If we follow Freud, we are forced to not only accept the extremely problematic ideas about the history of civilization as well as ontogenetic axioms that are far from plausible (for more on Freud's methods, see especially Donald Spence, *The Rhetorical Voice of Psychoanalysis. Displacement of Evidence by Theory*, Cambridge, MA, 1994; an empirical foundation for Freud's hypotheses is still lacking).

reduction of the material is carried out in a manner that refines the set not simply out of pragmatic concerns. In this way, sources that refer to instrumental music or vocal works whose content does not correspond to Jentsch's definition of the uncanny (such as Beethoven's *Fidelio*) are excluded because in these cases we cannot be sufficiently certain of the intended mood of the music.²⁵ According to Jentsch, phenomena appear uncanny if they do not fit into a subject's mental picture of the world and therefore trigger a sense of a "lack of orientation,"²⁶ which causes them to take on a hostile²⁷ and threatening²⁸ character. For this reason, the specific phenomena that are experienced as uncanny depend on the subject. [Page 18] Therefore, Jentsch works with examples; in particular, he mentions, "doubting whether a living being is endowed with a soul or not and vice versa whether a lifeless object is not somehow endowed with a soul."²⁹ In my opinion, this description makes two things clear: On the one hand, the uncanny is not simply about something that is foreign and unfamiliar, but rather something that shakes our basic assumptions about what we consider possible and therefore belongs to our experience in the world and our mental picture of the world. On the other hand, the feelings triggered by the uncanny or the feeling of the uncanny—we label an object as uncanny but ultimately it designates a feeling that we experience when faced with a phenomenon—is comprised of two ingredients: the experience of something mysterious, ineffable, wonderful, fantastic, and surreal combined with the fear triggered by this experience.

After applying the above criteria as strictly as possible, 17 sources could be identified that fit especially well. However, several works where the scores are difficult to obtain cannot be considered (Carl Kossmaly's opera *Der Doppelgänger*, Adolf L'Arronges operetta *Das Gespenst*, Ludwig Hartmann's ballade *Der Geisterkönig*, and Heinrich Vogl's ballade *Der Fremdling*). This left the 13 sources that are examined below. Of course, this is only a first step; nevertheless, the sample can for the time being be considered to be sufficient, especially given that the goal of this study is not to produce an exhaustive survey of the compositional techniques used to portray the uncanny in the 19th century, but rather to first provide an alternative to other far too subjective

²⁵ This is why Carl Czerny's remarks on the so-called "Geistertrio" [Ghost Trio] are not considered here (*Über den richtigen Vortrag der sämtlichen Beethovenschen Klavierwerke*, Wien 1842, reprint 1963, p. 99). Such sources could be considered at a later time when more knowledge about the musical features of the uncanny have been identified. In a similar manner, Clive McClelland has identified ombra passages in Mozart's instrumental music (*Ombra: Supernatural Music in the Eighteenth Century*, Plymouth 2012).

²⁶ Jentsch, *Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen* (cf. footnote 18), p. 195.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

and methodologically inconsistent approaches and second to at least identify and interpret some of the compositional methods used from an examination of a small but carefully selected corpus. Given this, we must be careful to not make incorrect broad generalizations from this sample.

The following presents an analytic description of the 13 examples selected. Despite all the efforts to be methodologically consistent, it is not possible to avoid the problem that we can most of the time only guess which elements of the music were perceived as uncanny because the authors only rarely cite concrete musical devices. It is however likely that the devices in question are for the most part elements or constellations of elements that occur rarely or not at all in other musical contexts. To identify these devices, I have relied on my knowledge of the music of the time period in question. At the same time, this is an important point of departure for possible falsifications in the future; I will come back to this issue in the discussion of the results.

*

Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* can be seen as the prototypical horror opera. No other work yielded a comparable number of hits based on the search criteria summarized above. German, French, and English periodicals all expressed the sentiment that Weber's work was a model how to achieve the uncanny, horror, and dread in music. [Page 19] A French source from 1863 discusses the work in general stressing "le fantastique sombre et sauvage" and the "apparitions horribles et monstrueuses," (187)³⁰ while three further sources are very specific. The fact that two of these sources (Damcke and Werner) are fictional texts does not make their observations any less valuable.

H. Werner focuses on the overture, whose beginning he calls "mystérieux" citing in particular the pizzicati in the contrabasses. For him, these signal the approach of a dark power:

Écoutez ces sons voilés des cors, cet exorde mystérieux si profondément empreint de cette vie mâle et forestière dont le tableau va se dérouler devant vous. Peu-à peu le ciel se couvre, un pizzicato de contrebasses par trois fois répété annonce l'approche d'une puissance occulte. Samiel paraît, l'esprit de solitudes, le fabricant de sombre incantations. A sa venue, la foudre grande, l'orchestre déchaîne toutes ces tempêtes; un maléfice va s'accomplir, lorsque soudain une voix mélodieuse s'ouvre un sillon de lumière à travers le chaos.³¹ [Listen to these veiled horns,

³⁰ J. D'Ortigue, "Première représentation de la reprise d'Obéron," in: *Le Ménestrel* 30, 1863, no. 24, S. 186f., here p. 187.

³¹ H. Werner, "La première nuit de Freyschutz," in: *Guide musical* 9, 1863, no. 5, pp. 33–36, no. 6, p. 41f., no. 7, pp.

this mysterious beginning that is imbued with the masculine and sylvan life, whose tableau unfolds before you. Little by little the sky becomes cloudy, a pizzicato repeated three times in the contra basses announces the entry of the occult power. Samiel appears, the spirit of solitude, the conjurer of dark incantations. When he comes like a great bolt of lightning, the orchestra unleashes all these storms; a curse begins to be fulfilled as suddenly a melodic voice opens a beam of light through the chaos.]

The impression of the mysterious at the beginning could result from the unisono figures that are underpinned by powerful crescendos and sudden dynamic changes, and they open the work tonally without an overly pronounced fundamental: only a few of the four phrases begin or end on a scale degree that is characteristic for C-major. It is only in m. 9 in preparation for the entry of the horns that the music first arrives at a rich C-major sonority—but played very softly, which is perhaps why the author characterizes it as “veiled” (voilés).

For our purposes here, the reference to the pizzicati in the contrabasses is even more important because, according to H. Werner, they hint at the presence of a hidden “occult” power, thus evoking the supernatural and ghostly. The soft pizzicati in the contrabasses are combined with muffled figures in the timpani (starting in m. 26); the three-note figure occurs twice on the off beats and takes over from the horn episode. The C-major chord that closes this horn passage transforms into a diminished seventh chord, which lingers for four bars held by the violins, violas, and clarinets. The violins and violas play the chord *pp* in tremolo. Only after the knocking do the harmonies become unfrozen and begin to move again.

That this sound was perceived as uncanny is confirmed by other sources. In his fictional conversation about *Der Freischütz* from 1851, B. Damcke, presumably Berthold Damcke, describes the diminished seventh chord reserved for Samiel citing the specific instrumentation and timbre with the following suggestive words:

The fully diminished seventh chord only appears when Samiel’s smirking face is visible, but then, as Beethoven said, one also feels that the Devil has extended his clawed hand. [Page 20] Even if the lights in the theater weren’t dimmed at this moment, it would still be night as soon as the low clarinets, oboes, and horns accompanied by the muffled rhythmically displaced timpani figures emanating from the extreme depth make this uncanny protean chord audible, whose dissonances latch onto sixteen different keys like the legs of a spider. The masterful grouping and nuanced treatment of the characters is once again truly striking here. Samiel doesn’t sing—there is no song for the Devil!³²—a single chord, the most dissonant and most ambiguous that there is, is thrown to him like a bone to a dog,

49–51, here p. 35.

³² Already in Hildegard von Bingen’s *Ordo virtutum*, the Devil is forbidden to sing.

which he can gnaw on—that’s all he gets.³³

And in the description of the Berlin premier (1821) by Weber’s son written in 1864, we can read: “At the moment of Samiel’s unexpected entry a chill spread through the deeply moved house like a shudder, and only the ray of light of ‘Her window is now open’ somewhat blurs the uncanny impression of Samiel’s appearance, who returns again with increasing frequency in the last allegro.”³⁴ We do not need to be concerned whether this report is an absolutely faithful account of the events because it is regardless evidence that the described effect seems plausible for the author. This supports the previous source because the same musical device is employed in the passage cited by Weber’s son, only now the staging adds an extra layer: according to the stage directions Samiel enters, “almost motionless, takes a step out of the bushes in the background” (act 1, scene 3) before he disappears again.

The aforementioned B. Damcke singles out the very scene which is the first one we think of when looking for the uncanny in Weber’s opera, and indeed probably the first thing that comes to mind when looking for the uncanny in the music of the 19th century in general: the Wolf’s Glen Scene. But Damcke initially brings up another scene (act 1, scene 6) and in this discussion even explicitly uses the word “uncanny”:

When Kaspar cries out at the end of his big aria, “Triumph! die Rache gelingt!” [Triumph! Revenge is achieved!] with the word “gelingt” landing on the pitch A, which wants to close off the D-major cadence, then suddenly we are confronted with an uncanny F-sharp-minor chord and it is held in as a long fermata—when the same is repeated two times and only after the third attempt is the D-major chord finally reached, it is however immediately robbed of its tonic character by the subsequent G-minor chord—does a chill rush over you then? Don’t you feel a higher power entering the scene that will thwart Kaspar’s plan in the moment of success as if crashing against the rocks? [...] It is true, said Hausmann, that this passage leaves us feeling shaken; the music enters the scene here like fate.³⁵

[Page 21] Here, the uncanny results from a disappointment of harmonic expectations, more precisely: the substitution of the expected major tonic with an unexpected, suddenly persistent minor sixth chord with A in the bass—regardless of whether one interprets it as the parallel minor

³³ B. Damcke, “Weber und der Freischütz,” in: *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* 5, 1851, no. 23, p. 179f., no. 25, p. 195f., no. 26, p. 203f., no. 27, pp. 212–214, no. 28, p. 218–220, here p. 219.

³⁴ Max Maria von Weber, *Carl Maria von Weber: Ein Lebensbild*, Leipzig 1864, p. 314. The excerpt about the premier was quoted in *The Musical Review and Musical World* 15, 1864 under the title “The First Representation of *Der Freischütz* in Berlin” (no. 23, p. 356f., no. 24, p. 372f., no. 25, pp. 387–389, no. 26, p. 404f.). The English expression for “Schauer” is “shudder”.

³⁵ B. Damcke, “Weber und der Freischütz” (see footnote 33), p. 213

of the dominant or as a tonic parallel chord—in addition to the rapid, if only short lived, detour to G-minor away from the D-major tonic that is ultimately reached. The description of the passage makes abundantly clear that the harmonic progressions—as was also seen in the previous sources—are immediately perceived semantically already through the lens of the plot.

When discussing the Wolf's Glen Scene, Damcke writes:

The rocks split—Samiel is standing there. Caspar, consumed by terror and fear, falls to the ground. Then, coiling in the dust, he tries to find new resolve. This is a music—or better to say it is almost no longer music as all harmonic and rhythmic relationships seem to have been thrown out the window! It is rather a sort of painting, terrible, fixed in every detail, truly a type of painting, whose possibility no composer before had even slightly hinted at. [...] Simply look how each instrument imparts its brushstroke to the ghastly painting! —The second violins shudder collectively, the first violins jerk convulsively, the pizzicato figure in the cellos is soaked with the cold sweat of fear, and the hammering octave triplets in the violas, the only living element in the entire harmonic body, are they not the racing pulse of the heart? —It continues like this for a while. Only with each of Samiel's laconic answers does a terrible silence fall over the scene, the heart misses a beat, all life stands still—the music is compressed into a diminished seventh chord, at which point Kaspar then pulls himself together again to continue on in a new key.³⁶

The Wolf's Glen Scene is extended and nuanced; however, Damcke seems to suggest the different elements in this scene that could not be more richly steeped in topoi of the Gothic novel and Gothic horror. In particular, the following elements that mostly likely would evoke the uncanny should be mentioned:

- At the beginning of the scene, the violins and violas play soft tremoli while the bass gradually moves downwards chromatically. The clarinets also fill out the chromatic progression of the harmony, which does not establish any clear tonality. Due to the extremely slow tempo and the seemingly goalless nature of the harmony, the music gives the impression of standing still.
- Directly following the opening, the Chorus of Invisible Spirits comes in. In a monotonous rhythm and stuck on one pitch, the basses recite the text, from time to time interrupted by the shrill “Uhui” cries in the remaining voices, which are supported by a diminished seventh chord in brass instruments. [Page 22]
- When Samiel appears, the elements described above repeat.
- While the means for depicting the uncanny identified thus far were to be expected,

³⁶ Ibid., p. 213.

the music that accompanies Max's appearance is astounding. He "is seen on the rocky peak above the waterfall, peering down into the glen." At the moment of his appearance the harmony becomes rapidly clear and shines forth in an E-flat-major chord, underpinned by a powerful horn fanfare. Max lets his exclamation "Ha!" ring out over two measures on the major third. The exclamation closes with the words, "Furchtbar gähnt der [düstre Abgrund]" [Fearful yawns the {gloomy chasm}], which is set as a falling arpeggiated triad, and the goal of the passage, "Rothgraue, narb'ge Zweige strecken nach mir die Riesenfaust!" [Branches, ruddy-grey and scarred, stretch out gigantic arms at me!] also ends in a powerfully intoned E-flat-major triad.

- After looking down into the chasm Max himself describes the scenery: "Wie dort sich Wetterwolken ballen; der Mond verliert von seinem Schein; gespenst'ge Nebelbilder wallen, belebt ist das Gestein." [Look how the stormclouds cluster there, the moon gives up its beams! Ghostly mist-shapes waver, the rock is alive!] The swilling shapes in the mist and the living rocks, like the previously quoted gigantic arms of the tree, are prototypical examples of the uncanny according to Jentsch's definition. They blur the line between dead and living, the boundary between material that lacks or possesses a soul. Weber accompanies these words with held notes and fleeting repetitive sixteenth-note figures in the flutes, violins, and cellos. (Comparable passages can also be found again later in the piece: when Agathe appears and when the bullets are being cast.) The phrases of the vocal melody are mostly confined to a single pitch, which then ends in a downward minor second.
- Accompanied by soft string tremoli, the ghost of Max's mother appears before his eyes. When he sings the words "So lag sie im Sarg; so ruht sie im Grab" [So she lay in her coffin, so she rests in her grave.], the tremoli cut off, except for the cellos. The strings underpin this by playing the sequence C-major to F-minor two times in a row. On top of this, Max sings the lines quoted above on a falling F-minor triad; in the cellos, a C is held as a pedal point. As this passage was introduced with a seventh chord on G, C-major seems to be the tonic; however, this is juxtaposed with the F-minor triad so that no sonority exhibits a strong tonic function, and instead a state of tonal limbo prevails. This effect is amplified by the repetition of the same chord sequence and a ritardando indicated in the score. Both these combine to create the impression of a stand still.

- To accompany the casting of the second bullet, the flutes, oboes, and clarinets play repeated triplet figures based on the diminished seventh chord, sometimes including leaps spanning a tritone, on top of the string texture like a sort of echo coming out of the woods.

In the remaining bars of the Wolf's Glen Scene, tone painting and dramatic elements seem to dominate and supplant the uncanny atmosphere. [Page 23]

*

In the 19th century, Carl Loewe's *Erlkönig* (1824) was at times compared with Schubert's *Erlkönig* (1815) especially with regard to the depiction of the uncanny. These comparisons tended to run in the same direction: Schubert's lied was indeed a masterpiece, but in terms of creating a sense of the uncanny and horror, Loewe's version was superior. One of the main criticisms was that the figure of the Erlkönig as Schubert had depicted him seemed to be too human. August Wellmer summarized this viewpoint in 1882:

Justifiably, Ambros, Brendel, and others have pointed out that while Schubert's *Erlkönig* is a genius composition of great genius, it is not a ballade, indeed that Schubert's music stands in stark contrast with the poem, "which has something ghostly, terrible-uncanny, in which only the words of the father and the child resonate with us as friendly human voices." With the human-sweet melody of the Erlkönig, Schubert casts off the uncanny from this apparition that the child must succumb to, while in Loewe the uncanny-seductive whispering of the phantom in the shadows [is] splendidly portrayed.³⁷

One of the critics who expressed this view of Schubert and Loewe was Carl Hauer, who for example wrote the following about Schubert's Erlkönig:

The liveliness of his attempts to entice is too related to the human lust for material things, and through this obsession with material things, so lacking in mystical elements, the figure loses for us his alien and ghostly nature, his spellbinding, controlling power, which has nothing in common with human feelings, but rather with the invisible and

³⁷ August Wellmer, "Lied, Ballade und Legende in Dichtung und Musik vom Anfang unseres Jahrhunderts bis auf die neuere Zeit (Fortsetzung und Schluss)," in: *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* 36, 1882, no. 16, pp. 121–124, here p. 122. —I am not convinced by Christopher Gibbs's view that it is precisely the humanness of the Erlkönig in Schubert that evokes a sense of the uncanny. "'Komm geh' mit mir': Schubert's Uncanny Erlkönig," in: *19th-Century Music* 19, 1995, pp. 115–135). Gibbs does not provide any evidence for his claim; the observation that the Erlkönig is "unsettling" is simply present as a claim by the author. While it is true that the first sources comparing the uncanny in Loewe with Schubert's version were written in the middle of the 19th century (p.116), this does not mean that we can conclude that earlier sources would have been different.

uncanny, and thus calling for constant vigilance, by means of our imagination a rush of images, wishes, fear, and hope flows over us, a power whose danger we certainly can sense, but we know we are not in a position to escape its influence.³⁸

In terms of the portrayal of the uncanny in Loewe, there are two concrete features that Hauer identifies: On the one hand, he cites the soft tremolo with chromatic and augmented intervals at the beginning, which he compares to the “mysterious whispering murmuring and rustling of trees” that “send a chill through the lonely traveler walking through the night.”³⁹ [Page 24] On the other hand, Hauer points out the Erlkönig’s melody, which has the effect that this remains a “hazy vision,” the product of the “the child’s delusion brought about by his illness”:

The melody, even though this designation doesn’t really apply here, only consists of the simple natural notes of the triad, is more like the sound of lightly rustling leaves. The whole rich poetic apparatus with which the poet equipped the Erlkönig, which—as we saw in Schubert—provide such gratifying material for musical expression, consists tenaciously of only these three tones until the act of violence, where instead of the former tones of the major triad the tones of the minor triad are heard and the minor third B-flat only occurs once on the word “ich” [I], while the second syllable of the word “Gewalt” [force/violence] is chilling, landing on a tone far outside the key (E-flat) and fittingly designates the moment of catastrophe.⁴⁰

The fact that the Erlkönig is accompanied in pianissimo and “una corda” underlines the effect of the Erlkönig’s sonic manifestation. The vocal part, which consists of an unadorned arpeggiated triad, is indeed noteworthy; it is well worth examining it more closely to perhaps reach a deeper understanding of what Hauer and other critics found to be uncanny about this melody.

In all three passages, the Erlkönig sings in G-major. This presence of one and the same key is thus striking because it avoids any sort of dramatic gesture: the Erlkönig does not interact with the other protagonists, rather appearing as if he is from another world. Although the sung dialogue between the father and son ends on D-minor before the first appearance of the Erlkönig, the music continues in G-major when the Erlkönig begins singing. This is accomplished by using a particular harmonic transition—D-minor is transformed into D-major, and by adding the seventh, this chord takes on a dominant function. Nevertheless, this transition is quite abrupt.

³⁸ “‘Der Erlkönig’ von Franz Schubert und von Carl Löwe: Eine Parallele,” in: *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* 19, 1865, no. 42, p.329f., here, p. 330.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “‘Der Erlkönig’ von Franz Schubert und von Carl Löwe: Eine Parallele (Fortsetzung statt Schluss),” in: *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* 19, 1865, no. 43, pp. 337–339, here p. 337f.

When the dialogue between the father and child returns, the harmony again becomes unstable; this time it coalesces on E-minor. Even more abruptly than the previous passage, the dominant seventh chord on D is introduced for the transition to G-major. The same transition is repeated the third time: unperturbed by all that is happening, the Erlkönig sings in G-major and does not react in any way whatsoever to the events playing out—with the one exception of the enactment of the catastrophe on the word “Gewalt” [force/violence] that Hauer described.

There are three elements that are worth noting about the use of G-major: first, the relative sudden transition with which it is introduced; second, the rigidity with which it avoids any interaction with the human dramatic actions; and third, its unadulterated, dissonance-free character, which at first glance doesn't seem to fit the threatening nature of the phantom.

*

In an essay on editorial additions and completions that all too often turn out to be changes for the worse or tend to reign in the wild impulses and therefore reveal particularly interesting passages, [Page 25] August Wilhelm Ambros examines the modification of Beethoven's *Eroica* that Dionys Weber as well as Richard Wagner had undertaken. In order to give Wagner a vivid sense of how Beethoven would have felt if he had heard Wagner's version, Ambros took an example from Wagner's own Opera *Der Fliegende Holländer* (1843):

By changing A-flat into G at the turning point of the movement, one of the most ingenious of Beethoven's ideas is spoiled! What indeed would Wagner have to say if a later-day papa Dionys set his sights on the gloomy, terrifying C-sharp-minor chord that rings out from the ghost ship confronting the overconfident chorus of sailors calling out in C-major so clearing answering “wir sind todt” [we are dead]—and wanted to “improve” it by changing it to C-minor?!⁴¹

However, the words “wir sind todt” are not to be found in Wagner's opera. In all likelihood, Ambros was quoting from memory, for we can with a good degree of certainty reconstruct which moment Ambros had in mind based on his description: the Norwegian sailors, whose ship is anchored in the harbor next to the Dutch ship, call out to the ship's strangely silent crew: “Lieb' Nachbarn, habt ihr Stimm' und Sprach', so wachet auf und macht's uns nach!” [Good neighbors,

⁴¹ “Musikalische Uebermalungen und Retouchen,” in: *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* 28, 1874, np. 5, pp. 33–35, here p. 34.

if you've voice and speech, wake up and follow our example!]) (act III, scene 1). The boisterous song of the sailors "Steermann laß die Wacht! Steermann! Her zu uns!" [Steersman, leave your watch! Steersman, join us!], which is actually in C-major, is after a while suddenly interrupted by the crew of the Dutch ship. The stage directions are as follows: "The sea, which everywhere else remains calm, has begun to rise in the neighborhood of the Dutch ship; a dull blue flame flares up like a watchfire. A storm wind whistles through the rigging. The crew, hitherto invisible, bestir themselves."

The C-major cadence of the Norwegian sailors is followed by a short ascending chromatic tremolo passage in the basses before the tam-tam sounds and the noise of the wind machine announces the arrival of the uncanny. The chord that sounds is not, as Ambros thought, C-sharp minor but rather the fifth B to F-sharp, which due to the context can be interpreted as an incomplete B-minor triad, and when the chorus shouts "huissa" it has already coalesced as a diminished seventh chord. The chromatic shift in the harmony makes the parallel world of the ghost ship audible, just as it is visible in the local disturbance of the sea. This is accompanied by sting tremoli, timpani rolls, and the Dutch sailors sign through megaphones—an element of defamiliarization: they are the voices of humans who are no longer human. Wagner's means are reminiscent of Damcke's idea, proposed in 1851, that Samiel's voice in Weber's *Der Freischütz* should be distorted: "Samiel's words must sound like distant thunder or the muffled echoes of a brewing storm; some sort of acoustic contraption would be indispensable here."⁴² Ascending and descending chromatic motion that imitates the wind, constantly shifting between loud and soft dynamics, and diminished seventh chord, often in the shrill high register of the woodwinds, maintain the ghostly character. [Page 26] After the Norwegian sailors have started to sing again, doubtlessly to try to steady their nerves, there are almost bitonal moments when the ghost choir shouts "huissa" on a diminished seventh chord on top of the sounding C-major of the sailors.

*

In his review of the piano reduction of Ferdinand Hillers opera *Ein Traum in der Christnacht*, Ernst Kossak discusses the ballade of the grave digger in act II, scene 4, about which he writes: "in the following ballade of the grave digger, *Moderato*, G-minor, 4/4, the composer excels in the truly German genre of the uncanny and horror. There is a certain black humor in it that when

⁴² Damcke, "Weber und der Freischütz" (see footnote 33), p. 219.

supported by a good performance from the singer can indeed be poignant despite individual want-to-be effects.”⁴³

Whether Kossak was only familiar with the opera from the piano reduction that he reviewed is not clear from the text. The basis for the following short discussion is a score that was published in 1845 in Dresden. His comments about comical elements (black humor) and “want-to-be effects” are reminders that we should be careful how we interpret this source. While a tightrope act skirting the line between the uncanny and the comic seems to imply that an unambiguous differentiation between both these facets doesn’t always seem to make sense, the “want-to-be effects” have to be assumed to refer to devices that simply don’t work, which instead of having an uncanny effect seem deliberate and awkward. It is not possible to completely avoid the danger of basing the analysis on exactly these unsuccessful effects. However, keeping this pitfall in mind, we can begin by trying to identify what these elements mostly likely are in order to keep our focus on the other elements of the composition.

The descending scalar passages played at the beginning in the flute and piccolo accompanied by pizzicati in the violins (eight, eighth rest, eight, eighth rest, etc.) that form a stark contrast to the block chords in the horns can certainly be included among the humorous elements. Starting with the words, “Die übers Jahr der Tod berührt / Die kommen hergegangen” [Those who throughout the year death touches / come this way] the singer (bass) takes over this rhythm, now accompanied by the low strings.⁴⁴ Although the comic character is already created by the timbre of the plucked notes in combination with the piccolo, the choppy treatment of the voice in a later section brings in a further element of comic tone painting, as the rhythm clearly illustrates the walking of the dead or skeletons. An even clearer example of tone painting can be found in another passage. The motive of walking is taken up with a march-like rhythm (starting from the lines “Vom Leichenbitter angeführt / Mit fahlen Geisterwangen” [Led by the undertaker* / With pale ghostly cheeks], later repeatedly). [Page 27] One could hardly characterize these devices as “want-to-be” because they are too obvious; they have much more of a comic effect.

⁴³ Ernst Kossak, “Ein Traum in der Christnacht: Oper in drei Acten, Gedicht von Carl Gollmick, Musik von Ferdinand Hiller, Klavierauszug, Leipzig, bei Breitkopf & Härtel,” in: *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* 1, 1847, no. 21, pp. 180–182, here p. 181.

⁴⁴ Similar material is repeated later on, and the pizzicato figure continues in the low strings for some time.

* Translator’s note: “Undertaker” is not exactly equivalent. The German term *Leichenbitter*—literally, the one who requests (from the verb *bitten*) one’s presence at the corpse (*Leiche*)—refers to a public office that existed up into the 19th century, whose duties included announcing the death of members of the community by going door to door and inviting to the funeral. the *Leichenbitter* was also a part of the funeral procession.

Perhaps the passages that were heard as “want-to-be” were however also of a tone painting nature, for the very similar musical means used to imitate the cawing of ravens and the moaning of ghosts stand out (“Wenn Eul und Rabe krächzen / Wenn nur der Todtengräber wacht, / und sünd’ge Geister ächzen ...” [When owls hoot and ravens caw / When only the grave digger stands watch, / and sinful ghosts moan ...]): in both cases, the woodwinds (oboes, clarinets, and bassoons) interject dissonant figures that perhaps take the tone painting too far and thus seemed for Kossak to be something that wants to be terrifying but isn’t.

The block chord passage in the horns at the beginning that is to be played fortissimo (>p) consists of a chain of diminished seventh chords that suddenly resolve to D-major after the first five bars. Also, in the later course of the ballade, the diminished seventh chord plays a central role. Finally, the surprising and often sudden harmonic modulations that pivot to major keys are striking. These occur mostly towards the end of the ballade: when the words “Wohl zwischen Leichensteinen / und modernden Gebeinen” [Truly between gravestone / and rotting bones] are sung, a G-minor triad, the diminished seventh chord (A-flat – C-flat – D – F), an E-flat major triad, a D-major triad, and finally a d-minor triad follow one another in quick succession, which can be interpreted in a functional harmonic context as parts of a cadence with a Neapolitan sixth chord, but it can hardly be said to truly realize this function. Particularly, the chromatic neighboring major triads on E-flat and D are especially conspicuous here. The ballade ends with the unexpected clarity that comes from the shift from G-minor to G-major.

*

In addition to Carl Maria von Weber, Hector Berlioz could be the one composer that most immediately comes to mind when thinking of the uncanny. Contemporary reviews confirm this intuition. Two reviews make observations on *The Damnation of Faust* (1846) that are relevant for our question under investigation here. One reviewer wrote just after the world premiere: “Sans ressembler aucunement à la *Marche du supplice* ni au *Dies Irae*, le galop de Faust ne leur cède pas en épouvantemens; c’est une magnifique horreur!”⁴⁵ [Without resembling the “*Marche du supplice*” or the “*Dies Irae*” in any way, Faust’s galop is in no way inferior to them in terms of fright; it is a magnificent horror!] The other wrote some 30 years later: “[...] la Course à l’abîme

⁴⁵ E. Viel, “La Damnation de Faust. Légende en quatre parties, musique de M. Hector Berlioz,” in: *Le Ménestrel* 14, 1846, no. 2, p. 6f., here p. 7.

et ce formidable chœur des damnés dont la puissante horreur n'a d'égale dans aucune littérature musicale"⁴⁶. [... the ride into the abyss an this tremendous choir of the damned, whose powerful horror is without parallel in the musical literature.]

Both authors refer to the scenes “La Course à l’Abime” and “Pandaemonium.” The terms “épouvante” and “horreur” refer to—in English translation—the semantic field of dread, mortal fear, disgust, horror, and terror. Some of the elements in the plot include a hideous, roaring monster (“Un monstre hideux en hurlant nous poursuit”) [a hideous and roaring monster pursues us.], a swarm of great night birds (“essaim de grands oiseaux de nuit”) [a flock of great birds of the night], and an endless line of dancing skeletons who blurt out such a dreadful laughter (“Cette ligne infinie de squelettes dansant! [Page 28] Avec quel rire horrible ils saluent en passant”) [This infinite line of dancing skeletons! With what horrible laughter do they greet us as they pass by.]. If we interpret the uncanny as more of an implicit horror, then here we are dealing with a borderline case. It does, however, make clear that the line between the uncanny and horror, or between the implicit (psychological) and explicit horror is fluid. In as much, the figures described signal the eruption of an incomprehensible other world; moreover, the infinite nature of the line of skeletons transcends our powers of perception. There is no explicit aggression that emanates from the apparition; their very presence itself instills terror. Such borderline cases are certainly not rare. The scene in William Friedkin’s film *The Exorcist*, in which Regan turns her head 180°, represents the climax of the horror dramatic arch in the film. In this moment explicit horror—here in its physical, revolting form—and the uncanny—the disturbing, physical impossibility of the head turning this way—amplify one another. In Berlioz’s horror scenario, both these elements seem to be intertwined in a similar manner.

With some probability, we can identify the following element as being crucial for the uncanny effect of the music:

- Until the appearance of the skeletons, the oboe plays with interruptions a melody that is heavily chromatic, and its rhythms again and again completely blur the quadruple meter.
- The emergence of the monster is announced and accompanied by low winds—bass clarinet, bassoon, trombone, and tuba—which become denser at the moment of the explicit mention of the monster and as if independent of the rhythmic events, falling out of their temporal structure so to speak, generating slow but emphatically

⁴⁶ M. Th. Belgique, in: *Guide musical* 25, 1879, no. 16, p. 123f., here p. 124.

stomping sounds.

- The black flock of birds is illustrated with very high and thus also noisy short bursts of chords in the woodwinds (harmonically they are an incomplete minor ninth chord).
- The “Princes des Ténèbres,” who from time to time ask Mephistopheles whether Faust signed the pact free of coercion, sing in unison with the bassoon and trombone and are otherwise only accompanied by tremoli in the basses.
- In the middle of the shrieks of triumph and din of the demons celebrating Mephistopheles, all instruments fall silent, preceded by increasingly chromatic harmonies and finally a chromatic descent on the word “Fir omé vixé méronдор” [the demons sing an invented language] which leads the listener into a harmonically indifferent space. The course of the music is interrupted by a dramatic reduction in the overall volume of the music, only the basses enter again after a short rest to accompany the unison singing of the demons, who rock back and forth between A and F-sharp on the words “mit ayskor méronдор” and are rhythmically as well as harmonically in limbo, devoid of any metrical or tonal relationships. Although the details of how it is composed differ markedly, another comparable standstill happens again shortly after the words, “Belzébuth! Belphégor! Astaroth! Méphisto!” which are more whispered than sung. [Page 29]
- The orchestral postlude to the infernal spectacle stands out due to several factors: the prominent role played by the bass drum, which is almost treated as a soloist here; the unusual permanent crescendos and decrescendos of the winds; as well as the breathtaking harmony of the sudden chordal compositional style (B-major, F-major, D-major, E-major, C-major, F-major). Except for the goal of F-major, which is preceded by a C-major acting as a dominant, the chords follow one another without any clear functional harmonic relation. B-major and F-major are particularly remote from one another, separated by the interval of a tritone; the sequence F-major and D-major or E-major and C-major are chromatic median relationships. The high degree of consonance and the uninterrupted major character are also striking.

In his essay *Geschichtliches und Aesthetisches über das Erinnerungsmotiv* from 1885, J. van Santen Kolff mentions Schumann's *Szenen aus Goethes Faust* (1844–1853) in passing and causally uses the term “uncanny” in his description of the piece: “Between his desperate fearful interjection ‘Die Pforte knarrt, und niemand kommt herein.’ [The door creaks, yet no one is at hand.*] and his question ‘Ist jemand hier?’ [Is anyone there?], which follows immediately, the uncanny creeping octave motions in the flute, piccolo, oboe, and bassoon from the introduction to this scene [are repeated].”⁴⁷

The expression “octave motions” doesn’t really accurately describe the passage in question: in this section, these are mostly static sounds that consist of a single tone doubled in several octaves. There is no “motion” per se. They are rather static, changing the pitch now and then, but they don’t establish an incisive rhythm or outline a thematic or melodic shape. They open up an acoustic space that is filled with the rapid fluttering figures in the violins and violas. They are found at the opening of the scene, but they return later in the context of the text passages quoted above and their effect is increased because they interrupt a context to which they contrast markedly and whose course they stop or disturb. After the question “Ist jemand hier?” the sound is held for the duration of four bars, in which nothing else happens—it is an extremely tense silence.

The music that accompanies the words “Die Pforte knarrt” is also striking: in a high register, which is thus quite distinct from the music that precedes it, the strings play a slow sequence of sounds in ppp that undergo a major harmonic shift. The previous verse “Und so verschüchtert stehen wir allein” [And so, alone, intimidated, we stand.] already stands out: after a fluctuating, dramatic harmonic progression that departing from the tonic F-major seems to quickly modulate to the dominant, steering just as quickly to the minor tonic, which then however deviates towards the chromatic mediant D-flat major a major third away, etc., the music unexpectedly comes to a standstill, where the low strings play in their sonorous tones the sequence of triads G-flat major / C-flat major / G-flat major. [Page 30] Here G-flat major remains in a state of functional harmonic limbo until the passage takes a Phrygian turn resolving back to F-major. However, this happens in such a compact manner that the third F – A that ends the first

* Translator’s note: Translations from Goethe’s *Faust* are from: Kline, A.S., (poetry translation) *Goethe: Faust Acts I and II Complete*, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/klineasfaust.php> accessed 14 September 2018.

⁴⁷ J. van Santen Kolff, “Geschichtliches und Aesthetisches über das Erinnerungsmotiv,” in: *Bayreuther Blätter* 8, 1885, no. 12, pp. 380–386 (Part 2), here p. 385.

half of the verse (“Die Pforte knarrt”) likewise is hardly felt as a tonic. At the end of the entire verse (“und niemand komt herein”), F is again established as a clear tonic, but the music once more transforms itself into the held octave pillars. Faust is “shattered”.

Even though the end of the scene is quite a few bars away from the passage that Santen Kolff characterized as uncanny, it could be valid to take a brief look at the final bars. After all, it is a part of a scene that a historical source associated with the uncanny. It was the figure of “Worry” who had slipped into Faust’s palace and causes him to go blind: “Die Menschen sind im ganzen Leben blind, nun Fauste werde du’s am Ende!” [Lifelong, all you men are blind, now, Faust be so to the end!] “Sie haucht ihn an.” [She breathes in his face.] At this point, Schumann introduces a B-minor triad without any preparation and then transforms the third into a major third, which leads into and F-sharp major triad in a sort of plagal cadence, but F-sharp once again fails to establish any feeling of a tonic.

It is, however, above all the tremolo in the violins that creates a double ambivalence: First, the tremolo introduces a dissonant clash made up of two minor seconds (A-sharp – B; C-sharp – D). This causes the sound to oscillate between a radiant D-major and a sharp dissonance, but due to the rapid tremolo, both sounds are, on the one hand, only audible for brief moments and, on the other hand, an extremely ambivalent mixed sonority emerges. Second, the pitch D falls completely outside of the key of F-sharp major (which can only in retrospect be interpreted as a dominant chord), but what is more important in this passage is the functional harmonic state of limbo that the tremolo sound creates.

*

In 1892, Julien Tiersot wrote about a performance of Hector Berlioz’s *Les Troyens* (1858).⁴⁸ In his review, he pointed out a somber accent in the Chorus of the Priest of Pluto (act 5, scene 3, no. 49) that caused a chill to run over the audience: “dont l’accent sombre fait frissonner” [its dark accent leaves you trembling].⁴⁹ He could be referring to the invocation of chaos: “Entendez-nous, Hécate, Erèbe, et toi Chaos!” [Answer us, Hecate, Erebe, and you Chaos!] where the word “Chaos” is underscored by an accented tremolo diminished seventh chord in the low strings. (The passage is repeated once more in a very similar manner.)

⁴⁸ “Les Troyens a Carthage, de Berlioz, a l’opéra comique,” in: *Le Ménestrel* 58, 1892, no. 24, pp. 187–189.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

Two additional scenes from *Les Troyens* can unambiguously be associated with the uncanny, and they were also identified as such in historical sources. The apparition of the slain Hector opens the second act: “D’un coin obscur s’avance vers Enée le spectre sanglant d’Hector d’un pas lent et solennel.” [Emerging from a dark corner, the bloody ghost of Hector moves towards Aeneas with deliberate and solemn steps.] Hector addresses Aeneas; he advises Aeneas to flee and found a new empire in Italy. In 1879, H. Moreno wrote about this passage: “Toute cette scène de l’apparition est admirablement conçue et réalisée. La pathétique apostrophe d’Enée, le sombre monologue d’Hector descendant par [Page 31] degrés chromatiques et souligné par le timbre sinistre des cors bouchés, accompagnés de la sourde pulsation des timbales et des lourdes pizzicati des basses, forme un tableau digne de Gluck.”⁵⁰ [This entire scene with the apparition is conceived and realized in an admirable way. Aeneas’s gripping address, Hector’s somber monologue, which descends in chromatic steps and is underlined by the sinister timbre of stopped horns, accompanied by the muffled pulsation of the timpani and the oppressive pizzicati of the basses, sets a scene that is worthy of Gluck.] The scene consists of two parts: the appearance of the ghost while Aeneas is half asleep is accompanied by the dull thuds of the timpani played with sponge mallets, stopped horns, monotonous rhythms, a tremolo in the violas, as well as a chromatic horn melody that plods forward in ridged half notes devoid of any vocal character. Hector’s movements should be synchronized with the rhythm of the orchestra: “mesuré sur le rythme de l’orchestre,” which transfers the ridged monotony to the ghostlike figure. Hector’s part presents a sort of composed fade-out: “la voix d’Hector doit s’affaiblir graduellement jusque’ á la fin;” this gradual decrescendo as specified in the score is underlined by Hector’s vocal line which traverses an octave descending chromatically over the course of 28 bars. In the process, the line is divided into phrases that all become stuck on a single pitch; the rhythm of the speech is the only thing that provides a subtle respite from the monotony. According to the stage directions, Hector moves away solemnly until his form disintegrates; Aeneas watches him disappear, stunned.

Alfred Ernst referred to a third passage in a text from 1884: “Dans le drame grandiose de *Troyens*, au 4^e acte, il faut analyser la terrible harmonie de la scène où les spectres de Priam et d’Hector apparaissent à Enée.”⁵¹ [In the grandiose drama *Les Troyens*, namely in the fourth act, it is worthwhile to analyze the terrifying harmony found in the scene where the ghosts of Priam and

⁵⁰ “La Prise de Troie d’Hector Berlioz,” in: *Le Ménestrel* 46, 1879, no. 2, p. 11f., here p. 11.

⁵¹ “Wagner corrigé par Berlioz,” in: *Le Ménestrel* 50, 1884, no. 44, p. 348f., here p. 349.

Hector appear to Aeneas.] Even though Hector was already introduced earlier, the ghosts in this scene (actually, act 5, scene 1, no. 42) are much more eerie in the way they are portrayed. The music enters on a single pitch D in the low register played by basses and horns. The pitch hangs in the air for a bar without anything else happening. In the following, it returns again and again; it stands out of the acoustic space like a totally independent object. The harmonic chords that follow shortly afterwards have a similar effect. Harmonically these are simple seventh chords, but when played in harmonics, they are unrecognizable and they also do not have any clear function in the sense of functional harmony. The strings play arpeggiated diminished seventh chords several times; in general, this chord pervades the harmony. In the winds, held chords are played, which do not align with the meter, and like the other elements, they obscure any clear sense of meter. The instrumentation juxtaposes extremely low and extremely high registers in close proximity and thus opens up a wide range, which is however left almost empty. In principle, the vocal part of the ghosts is always monotone stuck on a single pitch. The unexpected simultaneous entry of two voices creates a particular effect that makes the ghosts seem like they have been deindividualized: as it were, the mouthpiece of a higher power.

*

An author who was only referred to by his initials G. C. wrote a review of Richard Wüerst's opera *Vineta* in the *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* in 1863. The reviewer had not heard the work in concert but had a score of the work. In two places, the author uses the adjective "uncanny". [Page 32] The first mention of the term also occurs with several other relevant expressions and significantly the addition that the feeling is inexplicable:

The finale [of the first act] per se may not be developed as extensively as it should be, but it seems to be totally justified as preparation for the further course of the piece, and after the curtain falls, the listener is gripped by an uncanny feeling, a foreboding that one senses but cannot explain. Bruno sings a fiery aria [...]; he cheers with delight upon catching sight of his beloved and being reunited with her—then ringing out of the depths a choir accompanied by harp, the choir keeps singing, the harp in the orchestra joins the other harp, long held chords in the winds and a tremolo in the strings fill out the harmonies, the sun sets disappearing into the sea while Bruno attentively savors the sounds, the curtain falls slowly, and the ghostly music continues to sound for a while. With a good arrangement, the impression must be more overwhelming than what we can report from reading the score, but we could imagine the

timbres and these alone suggest a magical effect.⁵²

For Bruno, who has fallen in love with a mermaid, the voices connote less of a threat and more a sense of hope, especially as he himself called out to her and implored her to give a sign. Above all, it is the reviewer's use of the word "uncanny" that suggests a threat, the other words—"foreboding," "magical," and "ghostly"—are much less indicative of this level of meaning. Thus in comparison to the passages in which we are confronted with explicit horror, we find ourselves here on the exact other end of the spectrum of the uncanny: the moment of the fantastic is clearly in the foreground and the threatening recedes into the background.

The instrumentation cannot be recognized from the piano reduction that is available (Berlin und Posen [Bote & Bock] n. d.); however, the author of the review gives a few hints: in particular, the held wind chords, the central role of the two harps, and the string tremoli, as well as the song out of the depth, which in all likelihood would be correspondingly distorted, or at the very least sung from off stage. The harmony is kept very "thin"; the music is dominated by simple major and minor triads that are as rule easily classified in a functional context. A few more conspicuous elements are woven into this lucid harmonic structure: the choir from the deep enters in the mediant key of E-flat major, following immediately after Bruno's aria has faded away on a G-major triad (in an A-minor context). Of course, the E-flat triad is quickly disturbed by a dissonant D in the bass. And Bruno's impatient words "so sagt, so sagt" [then say, then say] are underlined by the chromatic neighboring triads A-flat major / G major. Diminished seventh chords, which are now and then interspersed, are placed in the same context ("Ist denn der Ruf zu euch gedrungen, ihr dort in Meeresgründen...?") [Has the call then reached you, you there on the bottom of the sea...?]), but they also appear in the final harp solo (8 bars before the end). [Page 33] In addition, the abrupt shift to the minor on the subdominant is also worth noting (A-flat major / A-flat minor, 10 bars before the end).

The second passage that this reviewer labels as uncanny, the beginning of the second act, doesn't require any detailed commentary. G. C. writes:

The second act begins with a moderato in A-flat major; the string quartet can be heard as bleak and uncanny only

⁵² C. G. "Vineta, Romantische Oper in drei Acten von Richard Wüerst," in: *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* 17, 1863, no. 45, p. 353f. and p. 361f., here p. 354.

supported by the bassoon and tuba in unison, interrupted by isolated powerful chords from the full orchestra.⁵³

Here it is apparently the low register, the dark timbre, and the unison (pp and moderato) that evoke the sense of the uncanny. The author himself points out that the timbres become brighter with the rising sun. Perhaps, Wüerst was simply trying to illustrate the dark of night.

*

In an anonymous article on Arrigo Boito that appeared in the *Guide musical* in 1883, Boito's opera *Mefistofele* is discussed. Three statements that match several of the search terms specified above are to be found in this source. The "sombre cadence finale"⁵⁴ at the moment of Marguerite's death may however be read as "somber" in the sense of "miserable, painful, bitter, and mournful." However, the phrase "mystérieux et lugubre," which the author uses to describe the scene change from the Easter walk to the study at night, can absolutely be understood in the sense of "terrifying and uncanny": "Le décor change; la scène représente le laboratoire de Faust. L'écho de la jolie chanson des étudiants se perd dans le lointain, tandis que des profondeurs de l'orchestre sort comme un appel mystérieux et lugubre."⁵⁵ [The scene changes and now depicts Faust's laboratory. The echo of the lovely student song fades into the distance, while the lows in the orchestra emerge as a sort of mysterious and dark appeal.] After the scene change, the mysterious Franciscan slips unnoticed into Faust's study. The choir of citizens of the city (Borghesi, not students) in B-flat major is followed by long held, rhythmically indifferent notes in the bass (dotted half notes with fermatas), which due to the unpredictable length of the notes virtually suspend any sense of rhythmic expectation. They form a circle of fifths and thus move from B-flat major to B major without actually modulating: B-flat – E-flat – A-flat – D-flat – G-flat/F-sharp – B. In B major, the choir part returns again but this time as if from afar, almost inaudible, and the basses once again move through the circle of fifths, now from B to C. The non-harmonized notes in both circles of fifths create a sense of harmonic disorientation; the long held bass notes with fermatas blur the temporal order.

It is more difficult to say with complete certainty which musical elements the other

⁵³ Ibid., p. 361.

⁵⁴ Anonymus, "Arrigo Boito," in: *Le guide musical* 29, 1883, no. 2, pp. 11–13, here p. 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

relevant statement refers to: “Le quatrième tableau c’est la *Nuit de sabbat*, où l’auteur, chargeant sa palette des couleurs les plus sombres, prodiguant à plaisir les combinaisons humoristiques et orchestrales les plus audacieuses, donne libre cours à sa verve emportée et fantasque.” [The fourth scene is the *Nuit de sabbat*, in which the author, who has spread his palette with the darkest colors and, as is his pleasure, piling on the most audaciously humorous orchestral means, giving free rein to his irascible and moody verve.] [Page 34] The scene (act II, scene “La Notte del Sabba”) is full of numerous unusual compositional moments. The author’s reference to “humorous” aspects already makes clear that some of these moments are more evocative of the grotesque and not so much the uncanny. Strictly speaking, the methodology employed here does not allow us to make any presuppositions about what will be perceived as grotesque and what as uncanny from the score. Nevertheless, I have made a selection based on the passages investigated up until this point, but also relying on my experience in dealing with 19th century music. Given the current state of research, this element of subjectivity cannot be avoided. With this in mind, the following elements stand out:

- At the beginning of the Witches’ Sabbath, the stage directions already indicate the mood that the music should reflect or create: “La valle di Schirk, costeggiata dagli spaventosi culmini del Brocken – monte delle streghe. Un’aurora rossiccia di luna illumina stranamente la scena.” [The Schirk Valley, flanked by the awesome peaks of the Brocken (the witches’ mountain). A rising blood-red moon casts a weird light on the scene.] Boito evokes an appropriate atmosphere by starting the music on a low held note, on top of which slow chromatic ascending and descending motion in the strings unfolds, producing dissonant minor seconds that at times clash with the bass note and in other cases result from the polyphonic expansion of the texture. The ascending and descending motion are soon continued in tremolos. Corresponding to the wavelike contours of the melody, the dynamics also create a similar ebb and flow generated by the constant shift between crescendo and decrescendo that eschews any sort of climatic or anti-climatic endings. Dull timpani rolls round out the sound field. After a short section in which Mefistofele and Faust call upon a will-o-the-wisp and which is presumably closer to the bizarre or grotesque, the music takes up the same atmosphere again but expands on the devices detailed above by adding a vocalise on a single pitch (“Ah!”) as well as diminished or half diminished seventh chords. The voices should sound as if coming from a distance (*lontano*). The text explicitly evokes the uncanny in the sense of Ernst Jentsch by—as in

Der Frieschütz—referring to the branches of the trees as gigantic arms: “S’agita il bosco / e gli alti pini antichi / cozzan furenti / colle giganti braccia.” [The forest shakes and the tall, age-old pines clash furiously together with their gigantic arms.]

- The witches and sorcerers who kneel down before Mefistofele sing their supplicating words in a whispered song on a single pitch without any harmonic changes. The rhythm is not as monotone as the pitch material, but due to the frequent repetition of the same building blocks, it is nevertheless quite stiff (“Ci prostriamo a Mefistofele”).
- After the witches and sorcerers give Mefistofele a crystal ball that is said to depict the Earth and before his cynical song about humanity begins (“Ecco il mondo”), at the end of which he smashes the crystal ball, a note on the triangle and the dull rumbling of the timpani are heard in alternation. Also the passage later on when Mefistofele reveals Marguerite’s apparition to be an illusion (“Torci il guardo”), Faust is accompanied mainly by basses and timpani in sharp contrast to his *bel canto* passages. [Page 35]

*

In his critique of a performance of Verdi’s *Aida* in Leipzig written in 1876, Hermann Zopff alludes to the uncanny in two excerpts. One of the two passages can be quickly eliminated: the explicitly mentioned adjective “uncanny” likely has less to do with the music and more to do with the content of the verdict that Radamès receives, namely to be buried alive: “The fourth act delivers the most dramatically tense scenes like the duet so full of poignant southern fervor and lifted by dramatic power in which the general, condemned to be buried alive, and the king’s daughter, spurned by the general but who seeks to save him, sing together while the priests, who have descended into the subterranean courtroom, call forth from the depths proclaiming their uncanny verdict.”⁵⁶ If the accent were placed on the musical setting, it would have been much more natural to use the adverb “uncannily” to modify “proclaim”; thus, the use here as an adjective must be taken seriously.

In another passage, the adjective “uncanny” appears, but once again it does not refer to the music. Instead, it is directed at a scenic element. Nevertheless, Zopff calls the atmosphere “fantastic” and characterizes the figures played by the violins as “ghostly”: “At the beginning of

⁵⁶ Hermann Zopff, “‘Aida’, Oper von G. Verdi: Erste Aufführung im Stadttheater in Leipzig am 9. September 1876,” in: *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* 30, 1876, no. 38, p. 300f., here p. 301.

the third act, we catch a glimpse through the palm trees of the Temple to Isis with its uncannily gigantic idols in the glow of the tropical full moon. Ghostly shimmering of the violins, combined with exotic oriental phrases, and the veiled distant song of the priests, everything dipped in mystical minor colors, transport the audience into a strangely fantastical mood.”⁵⁷

In the first eight bars of the passage in question, G and D are the only pitches sounding. The first violins play the pitch G split over four octaves as a sparkling ascending and descending ostinato; a pizzicato figure in violas that also only consist of the pitch G supplements this ostinato; the second violins add a tremolo on the pitch G and D. All play *con sordino* and triple piano. At the same time, the G is played as a harmonic in the cellos. The flute melody that enters a few moments later is also initially limited to the notes G and D until the last beat of bar nine when a B is finally introduced. As such, it is hardly possible to characterize this passage as having a “minor color.” Only a little bit later does the flute begin to play with the alternation of B-flat and B, which here arguably has less to do with a play on major-minor and can be interpreted as a sort of exoticism (“exotic oriental phrases”). This is the only element that introduces a bit of movement in the harmony, which has been totally static up until this point.

“Minor colors” first come to the fore with the entry of the chorus, where, except for the harmonics that are held over, the instruments fall silent. Here the male priests, who enter first (basses and tenors), begin their passage by first circling around the pitch B and then the pitch E so that the G tends to be heard as the third of an E-minor triad. [Page 36] In contrast, the priestesses, who come in shortly afterwards, start on the tone D and include the tone B-flat several times so that we seem to find ourselves in G-minor. As this all occurs without modulation, the music lacks a clear unambiguous center in this section, and it could be heard as harmonically diffuse. The melodic constructions also lack a sense of direction as a result of the indistinct harmonies; they seem to be so to speak out of focus or blurry—perhaps this is what Zopff meant by his adjective “veiled”.

*

One source related to the opera *Gunlöd* by Peter Cornelius presents a clear case that can be dealt with quite quickly. August Ludwig wrote in the *Neue Berliner Zeitung*: “Afterwards [Suttung]

⁵⁷ Ibid.

sings for [Gunlöd] a eerie (very original) duet with the reverberation (echo).”⁵⁸ Basses playing tremoli that are positioned off-stage—the score expressly request that they are at some distance—could be responsible for the characterization “eerie” on a musical level. It could, however, also be derived from the plot: Suttung wants to sacrifice Gunlöd to the underworld and sings a song full of ridicule and mockery.

*

The opening scene of the second act of Richard Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*, in which Alberich appears to his son Hagen in a dream, was characterized by two authors using terminology associated with the uncanny. The author “H. E.” published his review in *Guide musical* in 1876 immediately following the Bayreuth Festival, the other author looks back with good degree of self-satisfaction recounting his recollections of the same festival: Richard Wagner. H. E. describes the scene as follows: “Elle est fantastique comme une ballade, des frissons courent le long de l’orchestre et les sonorités sont d’une merveilleuse justesse de coloris.”⁵⁹ [It is fantastic like a ballade; a chill runs through the orchestra, and the sonorities are wonderfully exact in their use of color.] That Wagner himself also experienced this and, moreover, that this corresponded with his intentions can be seen in his text, in which he writes: “I for my part confess that I consider the ghostly-dreamy dialogue between Alberich and Hagen at the beginning of the second act of *Götterdämmerung* to be one of the most sublime parts of our total output.”⁶⁰

At the beginning of the scene, the static harmony is striking: over the course of six measures, the only chord that sounds is a B-flat-minor triad, which admittedly has a certain inner unrest brought on by the syncopations in the violins and violas as well as the pitch changes in the low register (bassoon, bass tuba, contrabass tuba, cello, contrabass), crescendos and decrescendos as well as the sudden entry of the high woodwinds in measure four that opens up the passage across a wide range. Then with the pitch E in the low instruments, a dissonant interference emerges in measure six, which gives rise to other moments of harmonic tension; [Page 37] once more, it is the diminished seventh chord that most clearly stands out here (for the first time in m. 9) as well as the abrupt appearance of the diminished seventh chord with an added minor ninth,

⁵⁸ August Ludwig, “Peter Cornelius: Gunlöd,” in: *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* 48, 1894, no. 46, p. 497f., here p. 498.

⁵⁹ H. E., “Quatrième soir,” in: *Le guide musical* 22, 1876, no. 37, p. 234–237, here p. 235.

⁶⁰ Richard Wagner, “Ein Rückblick auf die Bühnenfestspiele des Jahres 1876,” in: *Bayreuther Blätter* 1, 1878, no. 12, pp. 341–351, here p. 349.

which the flute and oboe interject as accents (m. 12) (and which is resolved chromatically to the dominant seventh chord). The sudden attacks in the high winds do not blend with the other instruments; instead, they burst on to the scene like a foreign body that at the same time seem to be brought to a standstill by the surroundings.

The curtain remains closed for a while and then after it has opened, “the moon suddenly appears shining a glaring light on Hagen and his immediate surroundings; one can make out Alberich cowering before Hagen, his arms resting on his knees.” The winds play the interval structure of a half diminished seventh chord in fortissimo in the high register before an abrupt change towards the pianissimo of the muted strings, some playing tremolo, some carrying the melody. The horns are stopped. The harmony now consists of a diminished seventh chord (B – D – F – G-sharp) with A in the bass. Some of these elements return more frequently over the course of the scene. After Alberich has spoken to his son, Hagen reacts apparently talking in his sleep, “softly, without moving, so that he appears to sleep on, although his eyes are open.”

*

The last example comes from the opera *Françoise de Rimini* (1882) by Ambroise Thomas. H. Moreno collected several reviews of the work in *Le Ménestrel*.⁶¹ Two of these critics make clear references to the sematic field of the uncanny. Both refer to the prologue “L’Enfer”; the first is by Ernest Reyer, the second by Gaston Berardi:

N’importe, ce prologue est superbe, avec ses harmonies sombres, lugubres, ses accords fantas- tiques qui font penser à Weber, et en même temps plein d’intérêt par la façon ingénieuse dont le compositeur a su tirer parti de la combinaison des instrumentes et de voix.⁶² [In any case, this prologue is superb, with its somber, dark harmonies, its fantastic chords that are reminiscent of Weber, and at the same time it draws our focus to the ingenious way that the composer has used the combination of instruments and voices.]

On se rappelle que dans *Hamlet*, la scène de la terrasse d’Elseneur est aussi l’une de celles où le musicien a trouvé les accents les plus saisissants. Ici encore l’impression est lugubre; le chœur haletant des damnés a un accent qui glace, et la symphonie descriptive de l’orchestre, pendant le passage des ombres, évoque bien le souvenir des vers du

⁶¹ H. Moreno, “Françoise de Rimini devant les critiques musiciens,” in: *Le Ménestrel* 48, 1882, no. 22, pp. 171–173, and no. 23, pp. 178–180. H. Moreno is the pseudonym of Henri Huegel (see William James Gibbons, *Building the Operatic Museum: Eighteenth-Century Opera in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, Rochester, NY, 2013, p. 200, footnote 21).

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 171.

poète: «L'ouragan infernal ne s'arrête jamais, entraîne les esprits dans son tourbillon, et les tourmente en les roulant en les entrecho- quant... Et comme dans un temps froid, les étourneaux sont emportés par leurs ailes en troupes nombreuses et pressées, ainsi cette rafale emporte les mauvais esprits...» L'admirable décor de M. Lavastre achève de donner à cette épisode une impression de grandeur fantastique qui a [Page 38] rarement été égalée au théâtre. Le troisième acte de *Freischütz* met en scène des être vivants aux prises avec des apparitions surnaturelles: l'impression de terreur est plus directe. Ici, nous sommes en pleine fiction, parmi de fantômes, dans un milieu créé par l'imagination, et nous nous sentons touchés. C'est un succès dans lequel le musicien et le peintre ont chacun à revendiquer une part. [One is reminded that the scene on the terrace of Elsinore in *Hamlet* is also one in which the composer found the most striking accents. Here too the impression is dark; the wheezing choir of the damned has a frosty accent, and during the procession of ghosts the orchestra's descriptive symphony recalls the verses of the poet: "The infernal storm never stops, pulls the spirits into its vortex, and tortures them by sweeping over them and cashing into them. ... And just as the starlings carried away on their wings in vast and scudding swarms in cold weather, so too do these gusts carry away the evil spirits. ..." The stunning set by Mr. Lavastre rounds off the this episode giving it the impression of fantastic grandeur, which has seldom been achieved in the theater. The third act of *Der Freischütz* depicts living beings that must fight against supernatural apparitions: the impression of terror is very immediate. Here, in contrast, we find ourselves in a piece of fiction, surrounded by phantoms, in an environment that is a product of the imagination and we feel touched. It is a success that the musician and the painter both played a part in.]

Both commentators found the music to be "lugubre"—lugubrious. Moreover, the first adds the term "sombre"—somber, which is difficult to differentiate in terms of content. And in both excerpts the word "fantastique"—fantastic is used: in the first instance in reference to the scenery, the other excerpt even mentions the term in connection with the chords. Moreover, Reyer emphasizes the configuration of the instruments and the voices, in particular the timbre, and Berardi points out an accent in the off-stage choir that freezes ("qui glace").

The prologue is extensive, and the observations of both commentators are not so precise as to allow us to readily identify which exact element they refer to. As in the previous longer examples, we will proceed with the examination of the passage section by section:

- The Andante maestoso, which opens the opera and which can be seen as a sort of short prelude, begins with a series of block-like chords, which are shortly thereafter repeated in a modified form. Here Thomas takes advantage of the effect of parallel major keys. Already in the second measure, the unexpected A-flat major stands out, but when the passage is repeated, the effect is intensified because, instead of simply repeating the sequence of chords and returning to the minor tonic by way of the minor subdominant as in the first repetition, Thomas follows the A-flat-major triad with what seems to be a G-

flat-major triad, which is perhaps best interpreted as a rogue Neapolitan chord. It leads directly back into the chromatic neighboring F-minor chord. The reference to “accords fantastiques” could very well be due to such unexpected harmonic changes (other chromatic neighboring triads, abrupt modulations, mediant relationships, and sudden changes from minor to major will be highlighted in the following). The block chord passage is interrupted by the repetitive sextuplet figures in the low bass register, which appear in increasing frequency but in different guises (at the end as naked tremoli). This change in texture, which continually stops the flow of the music and also at one point accompanies the portentous solo voice that oscillates between C and D-flat, could itself be a feature of the uncanny. In the further course of the excerpt, the sextuplets are combined with a chromatic descent in the upper voices.

- The following section consists of a setting of perhaps the most famous words out of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which are sung by the “Chœur invisible”: “C’est par moi qu’on connaît l’éternelle souffrance! Vous qui passez mon seuil laissez toute espérance!” [Through me the way to the eternal pain! Abandon every hope, who enter here. {Mandelbaum}] This is presumably where the accent of the invisible choir of damned souls mentioned by Berardi is to be found: this consists of the basses singing in unison, who sing unaccompanied the sequence of pitches F – C – B right at the beginning. [Page 39] The B (on the word “moi”) is marked with an accent. Admittedly, this is really more of a topos of pain rather than the uncanny. After the choral setting of the first sentence, the music stops: the only sound to be heard is a low F played in tremolo. Time is as it were standing still, the words are given space so that their effect can sink in. Something similar happens after the second sentence, only now the moment of the stand still is portrayed sonically with a tremolo and a held note—the pitch D-flat doubled over several octaves. The second half of the second sentence—“laissez toute espérance!” [abandon all hope!]
—is repeated in a threatening manner and emphasized by the monotonous nature of the pitch material: the basses recite the sentence only on the tone F. The invisible chorus repeats the words again some time later; most features are the same, but Thomas does change a good deal. He now reaches C minor by way of an abrupt modulation to B major, and he no longer has the choir sing unaccompanied, instead adding a continuous bass tremolo on C that provides a foundation for the voices. Accordingly, there is also now more activity in the pauses between the recitation of the text: in the first break, we hear an

augmented sixth chord, which hangs in the air unresolved and clashes sharply with the C tremolo in the basses. The transition to the threatening repetition of the last half sentence is abbreviated and now happens through an abrupt harmonic shift from the C-minor context by way of the difficult to interpret chord A – G – D-flat – E, which is accented and marked fortissimo and then followed by a D-flat-major triad in pianissimo. The sonority is, however, disrupted by a tremolo on the pitches A-flat and B-double-flat in the bass. A short postlude, which closes the repetition of the invisible choir, opens with a rapid chromatic ascending motion and ends with a slow chromatic descent into the bottomless depths.

- After the first entry of the invisible choir and its famous words, a slow tremolo texture emerges, which leads into a chromatic descent; the central harmonies that result are the augmented sixth chord and the diminished seventh chord, which sounds on several scale degrees in quick succession. At the end of this excerpt, which closes on the note F, there is a “long silence,” after which the music starts up again with an abrupt harmonic shift to C-sharp minor.
- Dante enters and sings the words: “De quelles visions suis-je assailli dans l’ombre?” [From which visions am I attacked in the play of shadows?] These are framed by a dramatic moment that is shocking in two ways: The “leggiero” in the high register consisting of a repeated F-major chord is abruptly cut off by a diminished seventh chord. Staring with the words “le soleil s’est éteintsous un voile de sang” [the sun is obliterated under a veil], the sequence D-major triad – E-flat-major triad with and augmented sixth is heard in pp. The last chord could be interpreted as an incomplete dominant seventh with a lowered fifth and a lowered ninth, but its surprising effect is clearly in the foreground. [Page 40]
- Vergil appears; Dante addresses him as “homme ou fantôme vain” [vain human or phantom] and perhaps it is Vergil’s ghostly nature that motivates the harmony. There is an abrupt shift to the mediant from a seventh chord on E, which frustrates our expectation to resolve to A-major instead moving to C major and shortly thereafter followed by a chromatic modulation from the seventh chord built on C to D-flat major in second inversion, which leads to a seventh chord on A-flat. Now for the first time D-flat major is established as a tonal center. This gives the words “renomme” and “Rome” added emphasis: “La terre où je passai, me renomme, comme toi, Je fus poète comme toi! Je

naquis à Mantoue et j'ai vécu dans Rome Sous Auguste empereur et roi." [In the region/country/territory through which I passed, I am held in high esteem, like you, I was a poet, like you! I was born in Mantua and lived in Rome under Augustus the Emperor and King.]

- When Dante sings of the divine good upon seeing Beatrice ("O divine bonté!"), there is once again a sudden modulation by a chromatic mediant relation (G major to B major). This, as with all the other sudden modulations in Vergil's vocal lines, could be interpreted as a symbol of the fantastic—"accords fantastiques."
- The second scene opens with a "Symphonie" and a "Chœur des damnés." At first the music consists of rapid scalar passages in alternation with sequences of chords that are played *marcato*; in two of the four chordal passages, a diminished seventh occurs. The passage segues into a low bass tremolo, which reduces the overall dynamics from *ff* to *p* in order to set the scene for a new atmosphere: when Vergil and Dante appear on a barge on the banks of the river surrounding the underworld, the music tosses and turns in the lower register with ascending and descending chromatic passages heard simultaneously. Shortly afterwards the tremoli in the bass register join the texture.
- In the following section, the stage directions call for aubile "plaintes et clameurs lointaines" [distant wailing and screams], which are followed by the text "mes os brûlent!" [my bones are burning] Thomas clearly depicts the wailing and screams mentioned in the stage directions. The screams can be located at the sudden entry of the mediant C-major triad played *ff* in the high register that is transformed by the addition of the A-sharp into an augmented sixth chord, which at the same time pulls the triad into the depths. Tremoli, eight-note figures played *marcato*, and the sextuplet repeated notes from the beginning complete the churning sonic tableaux of physical pain: "Ah! Ma peau s'embrase! Mes dents heurtent en grinçant!" [Ah! My skin is burning! My teeth are chattering and grinding.]
- Next there is a driving repeating rhythm (16th, 16th, 8th). Then somewhat later on, the invisible choir depicts the demonic torture with chromatically ascending and descending sextuplets that are repeated several times: "Lehideux démon boit mon sang! Il m'étouffe! son pied m'écrase! Ah!" [The demon Lehideux is drinking my Blood! He's choking me! His feet are crushing me! Ah!] Harmonically, the accompaniment of these words is based exclusively on the diminished seventh chord.

- Over the course of the prologue, many of the elements already mentioned repeat in a similar manner. The prologue ends in B major, which is interrupted in the penultimate bar by the chromatic median G-major triad, admittedly with a disruptive tremolo on A-sharp and B in the bass register, with the tonic reasserting itself in the last bar. [Page 41]

III. Evaluation

The above examination of the references to the uncanny allow us to make several conclusions about the musical means that were employed in the 19th century to depict uncanny events or experiences, or at least those events and experiences that historical sources perceived as uncanny (it is not possible make a distinction between these two perspectives using the approach adopted above, as the experiences of the sources was linked to the aspects of the actual content of the works in order to make the methodology more robust). The extensive account of the uncanny passages in the previous section was necessary in order to move beyond a purely subjective attribution of the uncanny, as was the case in the approaches that were criticized at the outset of the present study.

Taken as a whole, the examples also help to zero in on the uncanny. By comparing and juxtaposing the pieces with one another, we can make a further determination: elements that occur in several works in the appropriate context would be more likely to be experienced as uncanny than passages that only occur once in the sample. At the same time, this implies an unavoidable limitation of the researcher's perspective: over the course of the analysis, the more specific materials are identified as typical, the more narrowly the analyst's attention is focused on these elements. This is a methodological problem to the extent that it can lead to other aspects being overlooked. On the other hand, the investigation here does not pretend to be an exhaustive survey of compositional means, just at the bare minimum identifying some of these means. And in achieving this goal, such a narrow focus can even be an advantage.

It should not be forgotten that the results are related to music that is based on an uncanny subject. Whether the music alone would have the same effect is a question that for the time being must remain unanswered; strictly speaking, all that we can say for sure is that the musical techniques were suitable for the musical settings of uncanny subject. It must also not be forgotten that all the passages employ several means and that the effect is due to precisely this combination

of different elements; we must also not lose sight of the situation in which the music was heard—numerous works are theatrical (in the review of Thomas’s *Françoise de Rimini*, the set design was explicitly highlighted).

If we now begin looking for features that were more frequently encountered in the excerpts described above, we must not be seduced by the illusion that these features can just be “objectively” listed. While there are certainly elements that can be described relatively precisely and unambiguously from a technical perspective, their interpretation often hinges on which overarching categories they can be assigned to. Such an assignment is however rarely clear-cut. A category such as “suspending the processual nature” includes elements that are very different from a technical standpoint; nevertheless, the interpretation of these elements’ relationship to the uncanny is dependent on exactly this categorization—it is already an interpretive act. Thus, it is crucial here to test the plausibility of the interpretation, although the extent of the evidence is very different and the interpretation also purely speculative in some cases. [Page 42]

a) Harmonic disturbances

The majority of the examples studied exhibit harmonic disturbances, which can of course be of different natures. The most frequently encountered harmonic element that can be understood as a disturbance is the diminished seventh chord. Very often it is directly associated with ghostly apparitions. In his commentary on *Der Freischütz*, Damcke terms it an “uncanny Proteus chord,” and in addition to its “four dissonances,” he highlights above all its ambiguous quality. It latches “onto sixteen different keys like the legs of a spider.” The diminished seventh chord disrupts the harmony to the extent that it introduces uncertainty. The chord contains pitches that do not belong to the previous key, and it is not possible to predict in which direction it will lead; it is multifarious. This leads to a certain degree of confusion in the experiences. As a result of its frequent use in the context under investigation, this chord admittedly might have become a sort of cipher. (It’s not always possible to separate the expressive and symbolic effect of musical devices.)

In addition to the diminished seventh chord, many composers use chromatic elements.⁶³

⁶³ Frequently, these passages were harmonized based on a model such as the so-called *Teufelsmühle* (a chromatic bass line harmonized with a combination of dominant and diminished sevenths, and minor second inversion triads)

Chromaticism can have more of an ornamental character, or it can be used in the tradition of the sighing motive in connection with pain (as is the case in several sections from *Françoise de Rimini*). However, when chromaticism has a more prolonged influence on melodic construction and voice leading, it necessarily also brings about a harmonic disruption to the extent that it introduces frequent harmonic changes that are difficult to predict. This is especially true in cases where the chromatic movement is slow or isolated in the bass.

A third type of harmonic disturbance is use of unexpected, often remote harmonies. This category includes for example mediant relationships, chromatic neighboring triads, or simply remote keys that are reached without modulation / by a sudden harmonic shift. Frequently, they lead to uncertainty and ambiguities or to a temporary suspension of the harmonic function because the absence of goal-oriented modulations gives rise to openness and unpredictability. The “hexatonic poles” that Richard Cohn put so much emphasis on could in this sense indeed be a candidate for musical elements that signal the uncanny, even though they were not encountered in the analysis of the material that I examined here.⁶⁴ However, these relationships clearly do not occupy a special position—except perhaps for the semantic field of the coming of darkness and the ultimate end as explained in the discussion of Cohn’s work in the first section.

It is also worth noting how often surprising shifts to the major were observed. They are encountered in very different forms and are thus more difficult to define as a category than the previously discussed characteristics. [Page 43] Loewe’s Erlkönig episodes in G major are clearly different than Max’s scream upon laying eyes on the Wolf’s Glen, and this is in turn quite distinct from the chain of major triads from the postlude of the depiction of hell in Berlioz’s *Damnation de Faust* etc. However, the surprising commonality they all share is a doubly unexpected major character: doubly unexpected because, on the one hand, the radiant character of major triads does not seem to fit with the uncanny and, on the other hand, because this shift to the major is not predictable in the context of the harmonic progression in which they are integrated and they do not follow any usual modulation pattern, and they no longer have any—or at least any obvious or unambiguous—functional harmonic meaning (thus they seem to be, so to speak, illogical and “fantastique”). In some cases such as the *Szenen aus Goethes Faust* and in *Françoise de Rimini*,

or similar patterns (cf. Marie-Agnes Dittrich, “‘Teufelsmühle’ und ‘Omnibus,’” in: *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 4, 2007, pp. 107–121).

⁶⁴ At least, I was able to find confirmation of the uncanny effect of the passages in *Götterdämmerung* mentioned by Cohn: Heinrich Porges, “Die Bühnenproben zu den Festspielen des Jahres 1876,” in: *Bayreuther Blätter* 4, 1881, no. 7, pp. 198–206, here p. 205.

biting dissonant tremoli also imbue the major triads with an expressive ambivalence. As such shifts to the major also occur in examples that are not threatening at all and are thus peripheral to our investigation here, in particular the choir from the depths of the sea in *Vineta*, we can at least tentatively formulate the hypothesis that such shifts to the major pushes the moment of the fantastic as opposed to the threatening into the foreground.⁶⁵

Of course, composers had other techniques available to create harmonic ambiguity; several examples can be found in the above descriptions, including the bitonality in *Der Fliegende Holländer* and perhaps also the numerous augmented sixth chords in *Françoise de Rimini*. The sporadically observed prominent dissonances are employed partly as a means of harmonic disruption and partly as an expression of fear (tone painting of screaming or expressively due to their painful effect).

It seems reasonable to draw a connection between these types of harmonic disturbances and the “lack of orientation” that Jentsch felt was pivotal for the experience of the uncanny. However, it is clear that not every lack of orientation evokes the experience of the uncanny. This is similar to the situation when we are missing a name for a color because it does not fit in the familiar categories. For example, a color is neither red nor orange. Nevertheless, it does not seem uncanny. Thus, the way I understand Jentsch or rather what I find to be a plausible explanation of his theory is that he cannot be referring to any arbitrary lack of orientation. An arbitrary “strange,” “puzzling,” and “unfamiliar” thing does not evoke the feeling of the uncanny. It is rather something for which there is no longer any possible explanation within the perceiver’s own worldview because it resists the familiar explanatory strategies. Jentsch’s example that calls into question the boundary between a soulless object and a subject endowed with a soul (regardless whether the concept of a soul seems to be antiquated) is thus aptly chosen. An unfamiliar color is not the sort of lack of orientation that has the capacity to shake our worldview; it is only phenomena that call our understanding of reality into question that can do this. [Page 44] Therefore, we must ask ourselves if music is capable of creating this degree of disorientation. Music is certainly not able to depict the same sort of doubt in reality that literature or film can describe or visualize. Music does not possess a comparable relationship to reality.⁶⁶ So in the best case, if a musical grammar—in our case the harmony of the 19th century—is felt so intensely as a

⁶⁵ In Paul Hindemith’s *Sabinchen* (1930), the ghost of the murdered girl appears to the cobbler. He comments: “A-major and tremolo; that has to be a ghost.” I would like to thank Wiebke Rademacher for directing me to this source.

⁶⁶ Cf. Gabriele and Norbert Brandstetter, “Phantastik in der Musik,” in: Christian W. Thomsen and Jens Malte Fischer (eds.), *Phantastik in Literatur und Kunst*, Darmstadt 1980, pp. 514–530, here p. 515.

law of nature that its suspension seems to be inexplicable, it is at least capable of evoking a similar effect. It would then at least approximate the sort of mysteriousness so that it could evoke or contribute to evoking an experience that is similar to the experience of the uncanny, supporting or helping to shape an artistically evoked experience of the uncanny.

b) Suspending the procedural character of the music

A second set of related features is much more resistant to description relying on the usual technical terms of musical analysis. It occurs about as frequently as the harmonic disturbances just discussed above: again and again musical processes are suddenly suspended, switched off, or set aside. A rupture appears in the dramatic arch of a piece, or such an arch is not even established in the first place. Motives that are “developed” in the sense of the classical-romantic tradition occur less than material that hangs in the air like erratic objects. Often the music seems to suggest a sort of standstill.

Despite all the similarity of the phenomena collected under this rubric, the individual excerpts consist of quite different events that we can however to some extent group together: Held notes or sustained chords occur quite frequently, often of unpredictable length as is the case in Schuman, Berlioz (*Les Troyens*), Wüerst, and Boito. Another group is made up of passages in which sound objects hang in the air lacking any context and playing no part in the development of the music. In *Les Troyens*, this category is exemplified by the held D, chords set as string harmonics as well as the held chords in the winds. But the held notes in Schumann’s *Szenen aus Goethes Faust* need to be mentioned here which makes it clear that these subgroups are at the same time indeed distinct from one another. The high wind chord in Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* and the series of completely different sound events at the beginning of the prologue from *Françoise de Rimini* are further examples for this second subcategory. A third subgroup could be seen in the excerpts that feature harmonic standstills. At least in *Götterdämmerung* and in Verdi’s *Aida*, these moments of harmonic stasis are prominent. But we could perhaps also be justified in mentioning the introductory bars of the Wolf’s Glen Scene from *Der Freischütz* in this context: although its harmonies do not in the strictest sense remain static and instead wanders about aimlessly, [Page 45], this aimlessness—along with the very quiet dynamics and the unchanging tone color—does indeed give the impression of a standstill. The Erlkönig episodes in Loewe’s

ballade, which fall outside of the dramatic action in the way described and imbue the Erlkönig with his own, fixed key, and the sudden suspended interruptions of the demonical, wild depiction of hell in *La Damnation de Faust* do not fit into any other subgroup; however, they belong to this group due to their consistent tendency to suspend the procedural character of the music.

Pausing, suspending, breaking off, standstill, etc. are terms that—even if they are just metaphorical—suggest what seems to be music stepping out of the temporal flow. For music of the classical-romantic tradition, which was expressly associated with ideas of goal-orientation and development, such a moment represents an exceptional event. Beyond the musical, we connect experiences of time being suspended with the altered states of consciousness brought about by drugs or in dreams or also with visions and mystical experiences, that is to say with liminal experiences that like the experience of the uncanny call reality into question or rather juxtapose our trusted reality with another mode of perception. The perception of time in a dream is markedly different from the experience of the passage of time in a waking state; similarly, the events experienced in a moment of terror are perceived as if in slow motion.⁶⁷ It is specifically the suspension of logical consistency, giving up causal sequence in favor of associative interconnections in dreams and under the influence of drugs that is remarkably analogous to the seemingly disjointed collection of events like the sound objects in *Les Troyens*. Thus it is perhaps not too farfetched to say that the suspension of the procedural nature of the music imitates an experience that is comparable to a dream, drug trip, or mystical vision. From a less psychological perspective, one could also invoke the analogy of a rupture in reality or the intrusion of another world; just as this other world functions according to other rules than our familiar world, so too does the music in such passages obey another logic that transcends our understanding.

c) Monotony

Ghosts, witches, and damned souls sing in a monotone. This can be seen very clearly in examples from Weber, Berlioz, Boito, and Thomas. And in contrast to the two features of uncanny music discussed so far, it is possible to find support for this interpretation of this stylistic device in contemporary sources. In the year 1800, it was no other than August Apel, the author of the

⁶⁷ For more on these sorts of psychological phenomena, see Marc Wittmann, *Wenn die Zeit stehen bleibt: Kleine Psychologie der Grenzerfahrungen*, München 2015.

literary work on which *Der Freischütz* was based, who posed the question how ghosts should be portrayed in the arts. The text was printed in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in 1805.⁶⁸ [Page 46] Apel makes a distinction between two types of ghosts: those that play an active role and wield power, and those whose effect is due solely to their mere appearance. This last sort of ghost was of particular interest for him, and he characterized these second type of ghosts in the following manner: “It belongs to two worlds, between which humanity resides: through its knowledge of destiny it has a foot in a higher world, the source of life and free existence; through its powerlessness to act it is stuck in a lower world—the realm of the dead. Its manifestation is thus indeterminate, ambiguous, and therefore terrible and gruesome.”⁶⁹

According to Apel, the artistic portrayal must do justice to this moment of the indeterminacy, ambiguity, and paradox connected with the ghost. It is remarkable how closely Apel’s explanation of the gruesome character ghosts approximates Jentsch’s concept of the uncanny: “It is thus not just the dread at the threatening evil that evokes this effect of the terrible-sublime, but mainly the horror brought about by the dark secret of another world, by the unknown which even theoretical reason is not able to penetrate.”⁷⁰

Based on these observations, Apel comes to the conclusion that the musical device for depicting the ghostly is monotony. For if language and music are communication media for human expression and if the ghostly is distinguished by the indeterminate state between the living and the dead or rather its inner conflict, then the music must clearly express the contradiction between living expressivity and dead emotionlessness:

The required conflict is namely able to be experienced through music, when sensation begins to be articulated but imbued with signs of absolute emotionlessness without changing notes and rhythms; thus, if the apparition does sing then in monotone and in uniform divisions of the beat that only change due to purely grammatical considerations and not according to logical or aesthetic principles. [...] The recipient experiences a depiction of the highest and most indelible conflict here because language and song announce the most alive sign of emotions and humanness and now a terrible monotony like the cold, emotionless voice of faith itself suddenly sounds.⁷¹

⁶⁸ *Ueber musikalische Behandlung der Geister (geschrieben 1800)*, in: *AmZ* 8, 1805, no. 8, pp. 119–127, and no. 9, pp. 129–134.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122f.—In addition to its affinity to Jentsch’s concept of the uncanny this characterization is also similar to Rudolf Otto’s ideas of the numinous (*Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen [1917]*, reprint Munich 2004).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

This description and explanation of the musical monotony seem to go to the heart of the phenomenon. In the examples laid out above, the monotony, which is mainly achieved through melodic and harmonic means, is often underlined by the use of unison passages. [Page 47]

d) Distorted sounds

In relation to distorted sounds, it is probably sensible to make a distinction between distorted voices and distorted instruments. For despite all the similarities of the methods applied, distorted voices have a semantic dimension that is not present to the same degree in instrumental sounds: the distorted voice has a moment of dehumanization and can thus rapidly take on a ghostly character (although the far from trivial question when such distortions come off as comic or when they are perceived as uncanny cannot be answered from the material that is available at present). On the other hand, distorted instruments can be effective exclusively due to the less familiar, less common nature of the sounds and perhaps also because of the greater noise content of such sounds.

In Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*, megaphones are used, and Damcke seemed to be thinking of a similar device—"an acoustic contraption"—when he expressed his wish for Samiel's voice to be distorted somehow. While the sound of brass was distorted by using stopped notes (Berlioz, Wagner), harmonics fulfilled an analogous function in the strings (Berlioz, Verdi). (Muted strings could contribute to setting the uncanny atmosphere as in the examples from Wagner; however, as this timbre is such a commonly heard technique, it cannot really be classified as a distorted sound.)

Distortion often plays an important role in combination with the uncanny: in particular, distorted or decontextualized faces can be uncanny. But even objects can become uncanny if they are distorted when we think of the expressionistic architecture in Robert Wiene's *Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920). In this sense, distorted tones can also seem uncanny.

e) Distant, invisible sound sources

In several works, the composer works with hidden, and also often distant sound sources. In view

of the plots of the works, the distant voices can belong to very different *dramatis personae*: Ghosts (Weber), Priests (Verdi), damned souls (Thomas)—or the characters portrayed remain indistinct (Wüerst, Boito). In the case of Cornelius's *Gunlöd*, the bass choir placed at a distance represents an echo, which however when embodied in the choir now seems to be animated to a degree that it is addressed by Suttung as an interlocutor. When ghosts, damned souls, or unassertive beings appear as the source of the vocal material, the effect of this device is, on the one hand, connected with the fact that the unseen sound source lets the imagination of the audience run free. On the other hand, song from unseen voices hints at another level of reality that only manifests itself acoustically however not visually. On the whole, this gives the impression of an intangible presence of something unknown. [Page 48]

f) Other elements

The remaining features do not each merit a detailed individual treatment, but they do however deserve to be mentioned briefly, especially as widely disseminated topoi of the uncanny are to be found among them. In almost all excerpts, tremoli are encountered, mostly in the strings. Of course, it is important to differentiate between loud and soft as well as static and moving tremoli. However, the transitions are fluid. In this context, the tremolo itself seems to possess only a slight uncanny character, i.e. it supports in its manner more salient stylistic devices: together with a wind machine and timpani rolls, the string tremoli in *Der Fliegende Holländer* contribute their part to the depiction of the ghostly storm. In *Der Freischütz*, the tremoli add to the seemingly frozen soundscape that opens the Wolf's Glen Scene, etc. Just like a held note, a tremolo creates a sense of expectation and thus creates tension as is familiar enough in film music, although the tremolo is in no way limited to this function.

Muffled timpani can also be included among the topoi of the uncanny. We encountered them in Weber, Berlioz, and Boito. With this device, the suspicion that first comes to mind is that they are perceived in a latently sematic manner: they tend to be heard as noises and are perceived as an index (in the semiotic sense) for the presence of something hidden. In this sense, H. Werner understood the pizzicati in the contrabasses—which in fact are doubled with muffled timpani attacks—in *Der Freischütz* as a dark power approaching (“l’approche d’une puissance oc-

culte”).⁷²

There could be several reasons for the frequent preference for the lower register: On the one hand, the low register increases the noise component of the sounds so that it is possible, much like the muffled timpani, to perceive them as a semiotic index. At the same time, one could draw a connection with the association that low sounds have with the tradition of the underworld, which is often reflected in the iconography of horror and the uncanny. The Wolf’s Glen Scene portrays an abyss; in Berlioz, Faust and Mephistopheles fall into a gorge; the voices in *Vineta* call out from the depths, etc. Evil is a threat that comes from below. However, a third possible reason for the emphasis on the bass register that should be mentioned is that extremely high, sometimes shrill sounds are also heard with a certain regularity, although not as often as the lower register (*Freischütz*, *La Damnation de Faust*, *Götterdämmerung*): in the music of the uncanny, normality is avoided; the sounds exploit exactly the sound regions that are elsewhere more rarely heard.

[Page 49]

Finally, series of crescendos and decrescendos are a feature found in many compositions. It is difficult to say what gives this device its effect. One immediate association is an onomatopoeic depiction of the wind, which is not infrequently of significance in uncanny scenarios; and at least in *Der Fliegende Holländer*, we encountered a wind machine. But the uncanny effect of wind—such as in an abandoned building—is presumably a result of the similarity of noises generated to vocal sounds or music, i.e. to something associated with the living thus raising the same doubt about whether an object possesses a soul that Jentsch described. However, this particular effect is not created by these sorts of dynamic swells in the music. Perhaps, it is rather that these gestures inject a sense of confusion about the course of the music. Normally, crescendos or decrescendos are used to build up or dissipate tension, which is closely bound to the dramatic arch of the composition. On the other hand, when the music is constantly alternatingly louder and softer, it is not longer possible to understand the dynamics as a part of a goal-oriented process. The effect is then similar to the suspension of the procedural character of the music.

⁷² Cf. E. T. A. Hoffmann’s commentary on Beethoven’s 5th Symphony: “Why the master left the dissonant, non-chord tone C in the timpani until the end can be explained by the character he was aiming for. These muffled attacks with their dissonance, which have the effect of a foreign, dreadful voice, evoke fear of the strange and unknown—the dread of ghosts.” ([review of] *Sinfonie ... composée et dédiée etc. par Louis van Beethoven, à Leipzig, chez Breitkopf und Härtel, œuvre 67, No. 5 des Sinfonies* [1810], ed. Hans-Joachim Kruse, Berlin 1988, *E. T. A. Hoffmann, Schriften zur Musik: Singspiele*, Berlin 1988, pp.22–42, here p. 37).

*

Several of the features worked out above can be used in combination, others not. Thus, standstill and harmonic disorientation are for the most part mutually exclusive (even though we can find a notable borderline case in Weber). However on the whole, the examples analyzed suggest that for the evocation of the uncanny as many elements as possible are used in conjunction in order to increase and control their effect, for when taken on their own, most of the devices extracted here are hardly sufficient to create the impression of the uncanny. (And we should also again remind ourselves that a corresponding subject is always part of the reception of the work.) Moreover, there are uncountable nuances of the uncanny, which the above interpretations of the different features have already hinted at, but which could surely be more precisely elaborated in further steps. Despite selection criteria that were as specific as possible, the examples investigated displayed a broad spectrum of emotional expression that ranged from implicit, psychological dread to explicit terror, although it was nevertheless possible to establish that the quiet, slower music that one would more readily associate with implicit, psychological dread was clearly more predominant. But even within these rough categories, we should make further differentiations, as the uncanny experiences evoked by harmonic disorientation and those arising from the suspension of the procedural character of the music are not identical. One direction for future investigation would be to try to further subdivide the experience of the uncanny by comparing different works that display the same features.

Moreover, the musical features associated with the uncanny that have been identified in the present study are not exhaustive. An example for a potential device associated with the uncanny that was not dealt with here can be found in E. T. A. Hoffmann's review of Beethoven's 5th Symphony. [Page 50] In the third movement, the cellos and contrabasses take over the theme, but they need three tries to get going, i.e. the first phrase is repeated two times before they are able to continue on with the theme as would be expected (mm. 162–166). Hoffmann comments: "Some would find this to be comical; for this reviewer, it evokes an uncanny feeling."⁷³ It is for the time being just speculation, but considering the importance of automaton-like quality for the uncanny in Hoffmann, he could have associated the three attempts to get started with something automated, perhaps even an automaton that becomes stuck before it eventually gets in gear. Here we would be observing a conflict between the living-expressiveness and the mechanical-

⁷³ Ibid., p. 36.

emotionlessness, which would again tend to bring us back to Jentsch's concept of a lack of orientation (but also reminiscent of Apel's explanation of monotony).

It is important to remember that the goal of the present study was simply to establish at least some of the central devices for evoking the uncanny musically based on a sound methodology. More problematic than the fact that there were additional devices for portraying the uncanny is that we are lacking a way to cross check the musical means that have been derived from this study, and given the present state of research in the field of musicology into the history of emotions and expressivity, which has thus far only scratched the surface, such corroborating evidence will not be forthcoming soon: an attempt to falsify the hypotheses put forward here would need to investigate whether the devices identified here can also be found in completely different expressive contexts. In doing so, it would be crucial to examine the particular constellation of the individual features, as it is obvious that devices such as tremolo or held notes are to be found in other contexts. There is still much to do in the musicological research into the history of emotions.

Frank Hentschel, Universität zu Köln, frank.hentschel@uni-koeln.de