

GREGOR HERZFELD, *Poe in der Musik: Eine versatile Allianz*, Internationale Hochschulschriften 590 (Münster: Waxmann, 2013), 232 pp.

This monograph represents the published version of a *Habilitationsschrift* in musicology accepted at Freie Universität Berlin in 2012. It is encouraging to see that a musicologist focused his postdoctoral dissertation on a subject area which, to a large extent, has been the prerogative of literary scholars and cultural historians but which, doubtless, benefits from the input of further disciplines. As the author points out, it is rather surprising that musicologists have, so far, scarcely contributed to researching the overwhelming number of music-related adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe's works and biography (cf. 11). As at least 1,200 compositions have been documented, a monograph can only indicate trends and discuss case studies. Thus, Herzfeld's central goal and claim reside in demonstrating the versatility of Poe adaptations across centuries, national boundaries, genres, styles, and readings of the author's and his works' meanings and transnational cultural significance (cf. 11, 19 *et passim*). The monograph maps new territory by combining the perspectives and insights of music history, literary scholarship, social sciences, and the history of aesthetics (cf. 13) in the attempt to fathom trends within Poe adaptations regarding atmosphere, constructedness, biography, gender, song, and musical setting (cf. 12). Throughout the study, Herzfeld thus reflects on Poe's aesthetic theories (as expressed in "The Philosophy of Composition," "The Poetic Principle," and his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*) along with contexts and readings provided by the areas of interest listed above.

Unfortunately, the author does not consider adaptation theory or intermediality theory at all and thus disregards current scholarly discourse that could have added analytical depth to his, albeit often impressive and well-written, detailed descriptions and insightful interpretations of Poe's texts and of their adaptations by composers (see, for instance, Herzfeld's unanswered, presumably rhetorical question regarding differences between adaptation and appropriation [188], which has been discussed by theorists).<sup>1</sup> Among other things, the outdated belief in the artistic primacy of the source text, which has given way to regarding adaptations as works of art in their own right, remains unaddressed (cf., for instance, 20).

Herzfeld begins his study with Claude Debussy's opera fragment *La Chute de la Maison Usher* (for which the composer also wrote the libretto based on Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher") as this permits explaining that Poe's popularity in France predates his acceptance in his

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2005).

country of origin; he subsequently also discusses Poe in relation to other French composers such as Maurice Ravel and Olivier Messiaen. As an Americanist, looking at Poe reception from a transnational perspective would be an attractive project, but American Studies does not play a role in this monograph in terms of approach or scholarly discourse. For instance, the claim that Maurice Ravel's central tenets of composition can be seen as being based on Poe's aesthetics (cf. 63) exemplifies an insight into transnational and interart influence and creative processes, while it also opens up new perspectives in musicological Ravel research (cf. 66; also see the discussion of the often pejorative views on "effect" in Ravel's music [69] which recall similar criticism of Poe as a mere aesthete). Herzfeld's fascinating discussion of Boston as a "(City-)Soundscape" (43-44) could be extended from the perspective of recent developments in sound studies (as found in *American Quarterly* 63.3 [2011]). These remarks are not meant to diminish Herzfeld's efforts but rather to point out that further interdisciplinary cooperation and thinking will be necessary to do justice to adaptations such as the ones discussed in this monograph.

All in all, Herzfeld's focus on his choice of prominent features works rather well in acquainting readers with the immense breadth of Poe's appeal to musicians of various stripes. Even for an amateur musician, his discussion of the harmonic and melodic features of the compositions are understandable to a large extent, and Herzfeld succeeds in demonstrating that the simultaneity of multiple disciplinary angles in the study of Poe-inspired music yields fascinating insights into the potential variability and longevity of an author's influence on other artists. The discussion of tone and atmosphere illustrates the affective power of sound through its multiple levels of sound creation and culturally determined horizons of expectation as well as associations with specific sounds (cf. 60-61); as Herzfeld points out, the obvious connection between sound and atmosphere has prevented scholars from considering how artists construct soundscapes in order to trigger specific sense perceptions and emotional responses (cf. 61). In this sense, tone and atmosphere cooperate with the overall notion of a constructivist art, which Poe and many of his adaptors share.

In the chapter entitled "Konstruktion," the analysis of the significance of machines, particularly clocks, in works by Poe and Ravel resonates with cultural historical concerns regarding imaginaries linked to specific technological developments and their social contextualizations (cf. 79-84). Herzfeld thus, again, demonstrates that the study of Poe's legacy in music history does not need to concentrate on how literary texts are transferred into other arts but that it is epistemologically fruitful to consider various genre- and art-related ways of creating

soundscapes and of conducting what he calls “Soundstyling” (85). He then explains in his analysis of the Alan Parsons Project’s concept album *Tales of Mystery and Imagination: Edgar Allan Poe* (1976) (cf. 85-90). In addition to unraveling how this album evolved within popular music history and to discussing the genesis of the recording, Herzfeld reveals that Alan Parsons even included an unacknowledged quotation from Debussy’s *La Chute* fragment (cf. 87), which is simply one example of sampling across subsections of music culture—a technique that has garnered more and more attention within scholarship inspired by cultural studies. Ultimately, Herzfeld synthesizes the results of the chapters on tone/atmosphere and constructedness by explaining that these two features are inextricably connected sides of the same coin.

Herzfeld opens the chapter on adaptations that focus on specific readings of Poe’s biography and character with reflections on the troubled relation between biography and musicology. His all-too-brief characterization of Hayden White’s theories misrepresents discourse on the reciprocal influence between historiography and fiction. In this context, an in-depth discussion of more current theories, also from the subject area of life writing, would have been desirable. This section certainly illustrates the utter necessity of intensified transdisciplinary cooperation and exchange. Similarly, some of the references to literary scholarship stem from the 1960s and do not reflect current Poe studies (see, for instance, 96 fn. 232). Nevertheless, the chapter provides an impressive panorama of musical theater that makes use of Poe’s life story. Some of the works, such as composer Frank Nimsgern and librettist/lyricist Heinz Rudolf Kunze’s musical *Poe: Pech und Schwefel*, transcend historicizing depictions and rather employ Poe’s life and his literary works to address more abstract concerns regarding the relationship between reality and art (cf. 106). In the subsequent chapter focused on two operas, one by a female and the other by a male librettist-composer team, Herzfeld contemplates current discourse on gender issues.

The chapter about song adaptations of Poe’s most famous poems again delves deeply into popular culture and, at the same time, integrates Poe’s own notions of how poems could and should be turned into songs (cf. 135). Herzfeld explains the tradition of the ‘sentimental ballad’ before discussing various adaptations of Poe’s “Annabel Lee” since the 1850s in a broad variety of song genres. Further work seems necessary to fathom notions of “authenticity” in the context of country and folk music (148), especially because Poe’s highly aestheticized ballads do not necessarily fit the mold of folk legends or of politicized balladry. Also, Herzfeld’s discussion of singer-songwriters outside of North America, such as the Israeli artist Gilad Hesseg (cf. 152-54),

indicates a vast field for inquiries into transcultural adaptation. A separate chapter deals with the highly productive realm of what Herzfeld, adopting a sociological perspective of the study of youth culture, dubs “Subkultur – Szene.” Again, the breadth and sheer numerousness of adaptations in “Gothic” and “Heavy Metal” (cf. 154-72) is dazzling; similar to the brief remarks on paratextual elements such as CD booklet visuals earlier in the monograph (cf. 112), Herzfeld pinpoints the tantalizing participation of cover art in the overall aesthetic enterprise of Gothic albums (cf. 157-58). These elements deserve further exploration from an intermedial perspective.

The closing chapter, “Vertonung,” addresses the historically rooted implications of the concept of ‘musical setting.’ Herzfeld lucidly argues that his study demonstrates the necessary openness of this concept because of the immense range of forms composers have chosen (which may, independent of the verbal center of a Poe text, exclude the verbal and the vocal as in a symphonic poem or other purely instrumental piece of music) and because it allows us to consider the complex matrix within which such adaptations are created, performed, and received (cf. 176). Herzfeld thus closes the monograph by returning to the opening concern with sound in the widest sense, be it of spoken language, of music, or of a specific setting-related soundscape. Awareness of the recent shift in adaptation studies away from comparing so-called originals with their adaptations and toward a cultural-historical focus would have substantially supported Herzfeld’s findings and claims regarding musical theater and dance (cf. 192). Ultimately, the author stresses that, in addition to tone/atmosphere and structure/constructedness, musical Poe adaptations demonstrate that music creates its own nonverbal semantics that must be analyzed contextually (cf. 204).

Like the majority of monographs, this one also includes a fair share of typos. It is unfortunate, however, that personal names as well as English words are misspelled to an unpleasant extent (e.g., “Sidaina Grippius” instead of “Sinaida Gippius” [37]; “palipate” instead of “palpitate” [42]; “tumultous” instead of “tumultuous” [42], “New York Harald Tribune” instead of “New York Herald Tribune” [53], “Orson Wells” instead of “Orson Welles” [87, 89], “Phantasy” instead of “Fantasy” [throughout the text], etc.). The repeated use of the, to my knowledge, non-existing word, “Versalität” (11) instead of “Versatilität” is astonishing as it is part of the central claim of the book. These details could, of course, be easily remedied in a second edition. They certainly do not diminish Herzfeld’s highly appreciated contribution to the interdisciplinary study of Poe adaptations that, as he also expresses, is merely the beginning of understanding an extensive body of works. I hope that Poe studies will yield further scholarship

on such adaptations, possibly jointly conducted and published by multidisciplinary groups of researchers, including musicologists and Americanists.

Graz Nassim W. Balestrini