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Music: The Magnifying Glass of Emotions in Drama

When people enter a theatre, they often hear music before they see any action. These opening sounds do more than decorate the space; they prepare the audience for emotional movement. This paper examines how music functions as a dramatic device that shapes mood, tension, and meaning on stage. To explore this function across different traditions, the analysis focuses on five major works: Schubert's song "Erlkönig", Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, Tim Minchin's *Matilda the Musical*, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*, and selected scenes from Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. These works were chosen because they show different relationships between music and narrative, ranging from art song and opera to spoken drama and musical theatre.

Although these works belong to different genres, they all use musical elements such as rhythm, harmony, and theme to guide the audience's emotional understanding. By analyzing these examples, this paper argues that music in drama acts as a magnifying glass for feeling. It intensifies emotion, prepares the mind for narrative shifts, and communicates ideas more quickly than words alone.

In this essay, drama refers mainly to spoken theatre (Sansone 12), in which actors use dialogue and movement on stage, while opera refers to works in which singing replaces most spoken lines and the music carries the story. When this essay uses terms such as pathos and

ethos, it follows rhetorical studies that define pathos as the emotional effect on the audience and ethos as the sense of character and trustworthiness created by performers.

Conventional drama analysis often primarily focuses attention on the script. It looks at characters, story, the order of scenes, and the meaning of lines. This method works well in a classroom, where readers can move slowly and think carefully about each part. Inside the theatre, the situation is different. When people sit in front of a live stage, there is no chance to stop and read again. The whole experience feels fast and emotional, not slow like reading a text. Acting, movement, light, set, and costumes appear together, surrounding the audience. Among these parts, music and sound effects often touch the feelings most directly. They guide how the audience understands the scene and how they react to each character. A single drum hit or a long note from a cello can suddenly increase sadness or fear more strongly than one spoken line.

This essay focuses on music and sound effects in drama and opera. It looks at five main points. The first point is how music can mimic natural sounds and everyday environments, such as running, wind, or a street full of people. The second point is how different types of sound can prepare an emotional mood before a character speaks. The third point is how rhythm and pace can influence the body, making the audience feel nervous or calm. The fourth point is how harmony and key can build feelings of sorrow, danger, and hope. The last point is that musical form, especially the beginning and ending of a piece, can gather many small feelings into a single result. From these five sides, the essay argues that music in drama is not a small decoration under the dialogue. It makes the feelings in a scene clearer and stronger.

Traditional drama has always mixed speech, melody, and movement (Sansone 10). In ancient Greek theatre, the chorus and instruments were not extra parts. They were important to the show. Actors did not stand alone in silence. They were supported by group singing and

steady beats that helped the audience follow the story and understand the mood. Later, opera and musical theatre elevated music even further. In opera, the singer is both actor and speaker at the same time. The voice is more than a nice sound. It is used to evoke feelings in listeners. A rhetorical study reminds readers that persuasion does not reside solely in logic (MacDonald 55). It also lives in tone, volume, speed, and pause. When these ideas are applied to drama, music becomes a primary tool for building pathos and shaping the emotional tone of a performance.

This song is a helpful starting point because it shows how music alone can create a dramatic scene without any staging or spoken dialogue. Schubert's song *Erlkönig* shows how music can shape an emotional frame for a story. The piano plays fast triplets almost without a break, which sounds like a horse running through the night. The left hand repeats strong chords that feel like a quick and worried heartbeat. As the song continues, the vocal line climbs higher, and the harmony shifts to increase tension. A listener who does not understand German can still feel that danger is growing. At the end, the music suddenly stops and falls into a cold, unresolved chord, a harmony that does not move back to a stable ending. In that moment, the listener knows something bad has happened. The words say that the child has died, but the music prepared this feeling earlier. In this way, the song works as a short piece of drama. The piano does more than follow the voice. It supports and pushes the sad feeling inside the text.

Tim Minchin is an Australian composer who writes music that feels sharp, honest, and a little rebellious. His work in *Matilda the Musical* turns children's emotions into sound in a way that feels real and powerful. *Matilda the Musical* offers a clear example of how songs can move between inner feelings and public scenes, making it easy to see how sound supports character development. In *Matilda the Musical*, the music clearly shows how sound can reflect a character's feelings. In the song "Quiet", Matilda talks about a place in her mind that no one else

can enter. This song works as a pause in the story, allowing the audience to enter Matilda's inner world before the plot moves forward. The number of instruments dwindles, the harmony remains narrow, and the music moves slowly. The melody stays high and light, almost as if Matilda is afraid to disturb the air. The quietness suggests emotions that are held back rather than expressed openly. When the melody becomes stronger and goes higher, it feels as if Matilda's will begin to grow. In another song, "When I Grow Up", the mood is different. The beat is steady and gentle. The melody is wide and open. The children sit on swings and sing together. This scene blends imagination with a hint of hope. The song not only says that children want to grow up. It connects the audience's childhood dreams with Matilda's view of the future. D. S. Mayfield calls this a layered form of pathos, in which music shapes feeling through gradual changes in rhythm and sound (Mayfield 35).

Tension in drama often does not come from characters directly saying they feel afraid. On the page, a scene may look calm, but in the theatre, the air still feels heavy. The reason often lives in the sound under the lines. Faster music can make hearts beat faster. Sudden loud sound can make the body stiff. A chord that does not resolve can make the listener feel that something is wrong. Rhetoric describes dramatic speech as a call sent toward the audience (King 3). Every sentence tries to change a belief or action. Music also sends a call, but it uses sound instead of words. Before the meaning of a sentence is clear, the ear has already heard the beat, and the body has already reacted.

Andrew Lloyd Webber is a modern musical composer known for writing melodies that stay in the audience's mind. The Phantom of the Opera uses strong musical themes to create a dark, emotional atmosphere around the characters. These dramatic works by Williams and Lloyd Webber show how composers and playwrights can use recurring themes to guide the audience's

expectations. Robert L. King, in an analysis of *The Glass Menagerie*, notes that Tennessee Williams uses offstage music to guide the audience at key moments (King 23). In many scenes, a short, soft tune can be heard from far away. Sometimes this tune slows down and becomes sad. Sometimes it moves like a small dance. Because it recurs, the audience remembers that the family lives between memory and reality. This supports Williams's idea of a memory play, in which sound serves as a bridge between present action and remembered emotion. A similar style appears in *The Phantom of the Opera*. At the start of the overture, the organ plays dark chords. The strings move quickly and repeat a short figure. The harmony often moves by half steps, which makes the music feel unsteady. Even if the story is unknown, this beginning tells the audience that the Phantom's world is dangerous and strange. The body becomes tight long before the masked man enters the stage. In both examples, music does more than sit behind the action. It builds and sustains the drama's tension.

Franz Schubert was a young composer from the Romantic period, and he liked writing music that felt very direct and emotional. "Erlkönig" is one of his most dramatic songs, almost like a short play told through music. In *Erlkönig*, tension and sadness are closely tied. Near the end, the pitch rises, the lines become shorter, and the child's voice sounds more worried. The piano keeps the same fast pattern without stopping. It feels as if the horse cannot slow down, and there is no safe place ahead. A similar pattern appears in the "Revolting Children" scene in *Matilda*. The drum-like beat, the group chanting, and the sudden change in harmony together build a mood that feels like both a parade and a small rebellion. The audience senses that the children are about to cross a border. This is not decoration. It is a careful musical work that pushes the emotion to a turning point.

Satire becomes clearer when music and story pull in slightly different directions, so Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* and the song "School Song" from *Matilda* provide strong examples. Mozart was a classical composer who liked using humor and fast musical ideas to bring stories to life. *The Marriage of Figaro* is one of his most playful operas, and the music often makes fun of the characters while still driving the story. Satire in drama is also linked with music. The strength of satire usually does not live only in the words. It grows out of the gap between the lines and the performance. A scene can criticize unfair power while the music sounds bright and happy. In public theatre, performance can act as a social practice. Comedy often uses a light tone to address serious problems. It can repeat habits and turn order upside down to show issues that hide in daily life. When this tradition moves into opera and musical theatre, many meanings of satire are carried by rhythm, tempo, and melody.

The Marriage of Figaro gives a clear example. The story shows how nobles use their servants and how the servants try to fight back. At the same time, Mozart's music is quick, light, and full of small jokes. When the Count appears, the music sometimes feels close to a march. The beat and chords seem to support his position. However, the melody moves high and fast with many playful notes. The Count's serious image slowly becomes slightly funny. The audience hears both meanings at once. On the surface, the music seems to respect him. Under the surface, the notes weaken his image. This effect is similar to what rhetorical theory calls irony.

In musical theatre, satire stands close to daily life. In the song "School Song" from *Matilda*, the scene initially appears to be a normal school event. Children sing the alphabet while moving desks and chairs into lines. The tune is simple and easy to follow. However, the words describe strict rules, and the harmony sometimes adds notes that sound a little wrong. Slowly, the mood changes from light to heavy. The classroom begins to look like a small prison. In this

situation, the music becomes a second storyteller. It shows that behind discipline lies fear and pressure. Histories of theatre say that in medieval and Baroque plays, clothes, gestures, and fixed stage patterns were used to teach moral lessons without long speeches. Modern drama similarly uses music as a sound tool that brings questions about justice and power.

If pathos is about how the audience is moved, ethos is about who is speaking and what kind of picture that person shows. Dramatic rhetoric says that trust in a character comes not only if pathos is about how the audience is moved, but also if ethos is about who is speaking and what kind of picture that person shows. Dramatic rhetoric says that trust in a character comes not only from the lines in the script but also from how the actor uses voice and body (King 3). King describes ethos as the trustworthiness and character picture that a writer or performer creates within a work (King 3). In drama, this must be shown live. In opera and musical theatre, music is a powerful tool for shaping this image. Before a character speaks a clear sentence, the theme associated with that character already reveals something about them.

The story of the eighteenth-century singer Farinelli helps to show this. Many records describe how his singing changed over time. At first, he used long ornaments and high notes to show his skill. People were surprised when they heard him. Later, his style became simpler. His technique stayed strong, but he used smoother lines and small changes in volume. Because of this, his singing felt more genuine and less like a display of skill. From a rhetorical perspective, this change means the performer was shaping a new ethos. He no longer wanted to appear only as a machine of skill. He wanted to be seen as a person who felt and suffered. The image of the singer was conveyed not only by the story but also by how he sang each phrase and controlled the sound.

A similar method appears in pieces such as *The Phantom of the Opera*. The Phantom's theme uses low organ notes, strong beats, and lines that move by half steps. Together, these sounds create a feeling of danger and control. Christine's theme is the opposite. Her melody is high and clear with soft strings and harp. The sound suggests she is gentle and easy to hurt. Before the whole story is known, these themes help the audience build early images of the two people. As the musical continues, the Phantom's theme returns in a slower and sadder form when his pain is shown. This repeated sound helps the audience understand that he is not only a simple villain. There is loneliness and hurt behind his actions. In *Matilda*, a short and intense rhythmic figure appears when Matilda makes a critical choice. Each time it returns, it feels as if her mind becomes clearer and stronger.

Drama and rhetoric are closely related because both depend on live presence and shared time. The audience gathers in the same place and watches the same action from start to finish. They do not receive information piece by piece. They take part in a shared emotional journey. King writes that this live nature gives drama the ability to warn, comfort, shock, and inspire, like a public speech (King 120). On the stage, this power does not live only in words. It spreads through bodies, lights, music, and sound. D. S. Mayfield also writes that drama uses hearing and sight as its main paths (Mayfield 22). Speech, background music, sound effects, and even small noises from the hall all join the event. In this shared space, music is often the easiest part to change. It does not need new sets or a new script. It can move quickly in tone and speed, and in this way, it can move feelings.

Rhetoricians sometimes use Roman Jakobson's idea of a calling function of language, which describes how speech reaches outward to influence a listener (MacDonald 55). This idea holds that words can be aimed at a listener to change that person's feelings. Dramatic dialogue

often has this function. Almost every line tries to change something in the world of the play. Music can also be understood in this way, even though it has no fixed meaning. A quiet talk with slowly rising strings can feel like a soft warning. A loud fight with fast but bright music can feel less severe and more like a comic scene. In this sense, music adds color to the text and complements the drama's rhetorical work.

At the end of many plays, music gathers and releases the strongest feelings. From the last part of "Ode to Joy" to the closing chorus of *Matilda*, theatre often uses group singing, a return of the main theme, and a rise in key to make an ending feel full (Beethoven). No matter whether the story ends in happiness or in a mix of hope and loss, the final music gathers many emotions into a single moment. King writes that if the audience is convinced by how something is said and by who says it, acceptance becomes trust, and that trust gives a logical argument emotional force (King 120). This helps explain why music on stage has such a strong effect. The presence of sound and the performer can lend weight to the story's ideas. Many people enjoy this guidance. They know that the music is leading them, but they still choose to cry or feel excited in the last minutes of a show. For this reason, music in drama can be seen as a magnifying glass for feelings. It not only repeats feelings that already exist. It enlarges them and sometimes creates new ones, helping the audience understand both the play and their own reactions.

In the end, the close connection between sound and story shows that every production carries a choice about how to use music. A director can decide to let music support the words, question the words, or move in a different direction. Careful work with rhythm, harmony, and sound color can make a simple scene feel deeper and turn a familiar script into a new emotional journey. As earlier pages have suggested, music in drama can be seen as a magnifying glass for

emotions. When theatre uses music well, a performance becomes more than a story. It becomes a shared moment that helps the audience understand what they feel and why.

A final point can also be added. Even though modern entertainment has changed, the effect of music in drama remains strong because it works alongside the performer's live presence. Screen media can show many things, but the feeling of shared space still belongs to the theatre. When music moves through that space, it helps the audience clearly and simply follow the story's emotions. This connection has not disappeared. It continues to show that music and drama have consistently grown together, and they will continue to shape each other in future performances.

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