'The Intensity, the Passion Can Smoulder beneath the Surface'

– Text meets context in Agathe Backer Grøndahl’s romance To the Queen of my Heart

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ABSTRACT
This musical analysis of “To the Queen of my Heart” starts out from reception materials connected to Agathe Backer Grøndahl’s and Nina Grieg’s performances of the romance and tries to trace the critics’ descriptions in the score. Focus is directed on how the performed song becomes performative via the reception materials, hers, the listeners’ and amateur performers’ “producerly texts” attached to them. In her interpretation of three different versions of the poem Backer Grøndahl shows her masterly ability to express unspoken, but very important words for thoughts that are not explicitly stated. In this way her romance, in a Mendelssohnian sense, explores the limits of language. On a general level the song’s identification process plays on what the composer, listener or musician places in the voice part. Not only does the voice construct impressions about the poem and the singer’s persona, it also assigns positions for the listener, whether or not s/he chooses to identify with the subject of the song or the object of her/his passion. The romance illustrates the possibility to choose interpretations that stay on good terms with alternative as well as recommended, gendered practice, whether a woman sings it to a man or another woman, or a man sings it to a woman or another man.

Keywords
Agathe Backer Grøndahl, music historical knowledge and canonisation, gender and genre, musical analysis and performativity, Women and the Lied
INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of my doctoral studies at the University of Gothenburg, I was encouraged to contribute to a popular scientific event at a university open day under the umbrella term 'Beneath the Surface'. As I was working on a thesis on the Norwegian composer Agathe Backer Grøndahl (1847–1907), participating seemed particularly fitting. In 1947, the Norwegian composer and music critic Pauline Hall held a lecture entitled ‘The Intensity, the Passion Can Smoulder under the Silent Surface’ at the 100th anniversary of Grøndahl’s birth. In fact, this very description of Backer Grøndahl seemed so fitting that part of it ended up in the title of my doctoral thesis, What smoulders beneath the surface. Agathe Backer Grøndahl (1847–1907), gender, genre and Norwegianness (2008). At the very beginning of my project, the choice of music for my rather short popular science lecture and article was easy: ‘what smoulders beneath the surface’ seemed a particularly fitting description of one of her earliest compositions, To the Queen of my Heart (Opus 1 No. 3), a setting of a poem attributed to Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822). Since my short article and the completion of my dissertation, I still feel the urge to revisit this romance in order to flesh out several aspects. Hence, extensive historical source materials form the basis of this article: reception materials connected to concert performances of the romance and to the composition itself; her letters, notebooks, workbooks, sketches and the printed score.

Performed by the composer herself and Nina Grieg on 25 October 1870, To the Queen of my Heart was published two years later by Wilhelm Hansen in Copenhagen. Instantly it became one of Backer Grøndahl’s best known and most frequently performed works. Starting out from the reception that performances of the song received, this article sheds light on the critics’ descriptions in relation to the score and relevant discussions on music, genre, gender, sexuality, performativity, and the needs of the ‘users’ of the song. This article discusses how a performed song becomes performative via the reception materials, along with the receptions of the listeners, the amateur performers, and Backer Grøndahl herself.

GENDER, PERFORMANCE, AND RECEPTION

The poem To the Queen of my Heart begins with the question ‘shall we roam, my love?’ and we are presented with two lovers taking a nightly stroll ‘to whisper there, in the cool night air, what I dare not in broad daylight’. After a concert in Bergen in 1873, Edvard Grieg’s brother, John, stated in Bergens Tidende that the song offers a particularly deep insight into a major talent in the romance genre:

3. Camilla Hambro, ”Intensiteten, lidenskapen kan ulme under den stille overflaten”. Kan musikk si mer enn ord i den norske komponisten Agathe Backer Grøndahls sang ”Til mit hjertes Dronning”? (Gothenburg, 2005).
A couple of these songs have already been well received, and deservedly so, by our music-loving audience (such as, the romance entitled ‘To the Queen of my Heart’ [...] ). We mention this one in particular because in our opinion it gives the clearest and fullest insight into a talent which also, and perhaps particularly in this field, must be acknowledged to be of an exceptionally outstanding character. Generally – and not without some degree of justification – one is less inclined to credit women with the power and energy required to produce a work of art in which an independent and universal individuality comes to light, and, in the realm of music in particular, it would seem that, judging by the results, the inferiority of the ‘weaker’ sex manifests itself more so than in any other form of art. When we therefore in Miss Backer’s composition in general, and in the abovementioned romance in particular, must acknowledge not only the presence of an intelligent and poetically inspired interpretation coupled with a highly advanced development of the technical treatment of the material, but also a truly singular character that manifests itself in distinctive melodic and harmonic combinations of unquestionable and expressive beauty and through which her creative skill closely and fervently joins in full artistic consciousness the best of what the modern movement within the same field has achieved, then it seems to us, as already mentioned, that this aspect of our talented compatriot’s talent deserves to be mentioned with no less degree of recognition and admiration.4

Three days after her first performance of the song, the critic in Morgenbladet on 28 October 1870 duly called attention to the ‘great melodious beauty’ of the entire opus and how well it came across in Nina Grieg’s ‘moving rendition’. On 29 November, Aftenbladet’s critic, ‘F’ (Aimar Grønvold), emphasised the ‘customary warmth and intensity’ in her execution of the songs. Moreover, he added that the song bore the same ‘natural, fresh resonance that characterises Miss Backer’s playing,’ and was marked by an ‘outstanding and singular beauty’.

In 1882, Swedish critics stated that To the Queen of my Heart was perhaps the most popular of Backer Grøndahl’s romances,5 and took pride of place among her compositions.6 From a concert in Helsinki in the autumn of 1901, Uusi Suometar reported in a similar manner on 25 October: ‘In addition to the programme, the singer [Olivia Dahl], who was accompanied by Backer-Grøndahl [sic], performed encores, including To the Queen of my Heart, which at the concerts given by the Norwegians has become a favourite of our audiences’. Every time To the Queen of my Heart was put on the programme, Backer Grøndahl ‘brought the house down’,7 and sometimes it was even performed twice as an encore, as in Turku on 29 October 1901.8

During Backer Grøndahl’s career, an intermediate section consisting of romances and/or piano pieces was a natural, integrated component of just about all her public concert recitals. Subsequent performances of To the Queen of my Heart were often given by female singers. According to Lawrence Kramer’s model, the identification process in the romance plays on registers which the composer, audience, or performer give to the singing voice.9 Not only does the voice partly construct its own conceptions of the ‘I’ person in the lyrics, the singer’s role and, in extension of these, the artists Nina Grieg and Agathe Backer, it also

4. Bergens Tidende, October 13, 1873.
5. Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning, April 7, 1884.
6. Aftenbladet (Stockholm), March 23, 1885.
7. Nordisk Musik-Tidende (Kristiania), No. 6, 1890.
8. Åbo Underrättelser, October 30, 1901.
signals positions for the listener, whether he/she chooses to identify with the ‘I’ person or with his/her chosen one. Whether the subject in the poem is female or male, however, is difficult to determine when consulting the performance tradition of the song. Backer Grøndahl must have been well acquainted with the codes of behaviour that applied to men and women of her time, and would likely have learned to behave in a way that was deemed acceptable for women at the time. The romance genre was also gendered in conflicting ways. The listener (or the critic) would perhaps prefer to identify with the singer in a poem in which the lover (a man) invites the queen of his heart (a woman) to go out into the calm night, and proceeds to tell her something he has previously not been able to say. Perhaps he expects that the musical rendition should match the lyrics that dealt with the feelings of a man.

How were such courting love songs performed by two women perceived by music critics as mirrors of the female mind? When Louise Pyk and Robertine Bersén performed To the Queen of my Heart as an encore at a concert held at the Stora Teatern in Stockholm in the winter of 1883, it was, according to Stockholms Dagblad, ‘rendered in a pleasant and emotional manner – always apart from the unnaturalness of letting a love song to a woman be uttered by a female voice.’10 The voice has multiple dimensions as a figure, instrument, body, and individual. It communicates between the ‘real’ person seen by the audience and the perceived performative figure. Pyk and Bersén’s version of the love song troubled the male critic, who perhaps could not identify with the soprano in the subject matter dealt with in the lyrics (although it should be noted that neither Backer Grøndahl herself nor the female singers she accompanied faced this kind of criticism.) Men clearly had the monopoly on defining how men and women should conduct themselves, and for him it was clearly unheard of that a woman should perform a song that dealt with such a theme.

Perhaps the criticism against Pyk and Bersén was due to the fact that the genre’s expressive message in the nineteenth century was determined by men, and that such a song in the eyes of the critics should mirror a woman’s satisfaction at being courted by a man. On the basis of the poem’s title and lyrics, the critic perhaps expected a love song from a man to a woman: contemporary romances characterised women’s sexuality on the condition that they (in a platonic sense) should desire and satisfy men.

ABOUT THE POEM

For a long time, P. B. Shelley was thought to have written the poem, but the validity of this claim has subsequently been called into question, and it is now believed that the author was James Augustus St. John.11 The fact that the poem was attributed to Shelley perhaps gave associations to the general opinion regarding his ‘scandalous’ lifestyle. Although Backer Grøndahl had a good command of the English language, she did not choose to set the orig-

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10. Stockholms Dagblad, February 6, 1883.
inal to music, but a Danish translation in 100 Digte (1867) by Caralis, a pseudonym for the Danish painter and translator Caspara Preetzmann (1792–1876).

The poem deals with the relationship between an ‘I’ and ‘you’. The poet, composer, singer, and pianist create an imaginary picture of a romantic stroll for the listener. The music is experienced as if it originates from a couple walking together in the twilight. There is a sensual fusion of words and tones, and we experience the stroll through their eyes and ears. The descriptions of nature in the lyrics can be interpreted as metaphors for their desire: the moon is shining and caressing the loved one’s brow and cheek. The song’s subject is engaged in a conversation and is talking to someone, if only to himself or herself. The purpose of the stroll in the moonlight is, as the song goes, to ‘whisper, my dear, in the cool of the night what I never, never, never by daylight could say’. Throughout the whole song, we sit and wait for this vital disclosure, and the anticipation reaches its climax when the song sings of ‘kneeling secretly at your feet’.

The composition is based on only four of the poem’s six stanzas, each consisting of six lines. The beginnings of the two halves of the stanzas are set to the same music. Backer Grøndahl’s use of ritardando in the transition to the fourth line contributes to dividing the stanzas into two parts. The musical form of the first stanza can be depicted schematically:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lyrics:</th>
<th>1st line</th>
<th>2nd line</th>
<th>3rd line</th>
<th>3rd line</th>
<th>4th line</th>
<th>5th line</th>
<th>6th line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phrases:</td>
<td>a1</td>
<td>a2</td>
<td>b1</td>
<td>b2</td>
<td>a1</td>
<td>a2</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of bars</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 ½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar number</td>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>3–4</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>6–7</td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>8–10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Backer Grøndahl outlined the rhythmic design of her song in accordance with the widespread Danish translation by Caralis, which does not conform to the verse rhythm of the original text attributed to Shelley. Despite this, the first English edition of the song was printed with the original English text version, causing unattractive changes of the rhythmic outline of her melody to make it fit in with the ‘new’ text. When the song was reissued in another English edition in 1907, heed was given to Backer Grøndahl’s original rhythm, so consequently Caralis’ lyrics had to be translated back into English again (by Percy Pinkerton). All three versions of the lyrics are given below. Underlined words indicate repetitions in the song, with double underlines indicating multiple repetitions. Two stanzas omitted by Backer Grøndahl are indicated by a grey font:

12. A natural basis of comparison – musically as well as analytically – is the music by Delius, discussed by Christopher Morris in Reading Opera Between the Lines in the chapter entitled: ‘A Walk on the Wild Side’, 25 ff.
In the original version, the omitted stanzas – including the violent, frothing ‘restless sea’ and ‘boiling waves’ – had a more ambiguous sexual meaning than in the Danish translation, which is quite graphic. Did Backer Grøndahl consider them to be irrelevant to her reading of the poem?

To achieve the best possible adaptation to the content of the lyrics, Backer Grøndahl gave *To the Queen of my Heart* a modified strophic form, as she most frequently did in her romances. This particularly applied to the way in which she used contrasting stanzas, which she generally used to emphasise a contrast in the poem. Short transitions are often placed between phrases and within them:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
The transition between the second and third stanzas is divided into two parts, clearly marked by changes in tempo and beat. The first half of the transition, in bars nineteen to twenty-two, has strong similarities to the first four bars of the postlude and serves as a continuation and at the same time a conclusion of the accompaniment in the second stanza. The second half of the transition, in bars twenty-three to twenty-seven, serves as a prelude to the third and contrasting stanza, since it consists of a new melody in the pianist’s left hand and a tremolo movement in the right hand. The piano’s transition with a fermata in bar fifty-five, before the A section returns, perhaps hints at the two stanzas which have been removed.

ROMANTIC LYRICISM, MUSICAL DAYDREAMS AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF DESIRE

Could daydreams be recounted in music? The challenge of whether this question should or can be answered lies in retracing what the performers and their interpretations of the composition may have invoked of associations and reflections made by the audience, represented by the music critics. These considerations are complex and closely linked to who composed, performed, and ‘used’ the music. Lucy Green describes how performers, composers, and listeners together construct metaphorical composer and performer ‘masks’. However, she provides no analytical examples of how it is possible in practice to read a ‘delineated meaning’ within scores, performances, or critical reviews. In line with Erving Goffman’s sociopsychological theories, her ‘mask’ concept can be further interpreted to mean that the music was simply the ‘peg’ on which the collective product was hung for a while. The ‘masquerade’ could perhaps also work, like in Butler’s theories, as a façade that was so convincing that it seemed real. In accordance with this, users and listeners were mentally shaped not only by predominant ideologies, but also by Backer Grøndahl, users and listeners at the actual performance of the song, be it in affirmative, critical, or excessive ways. In extension of this argument, I regard To the Queen of my Heart as having numerous potential interpretations of meaning. Based on media scholar John Fiske’s theories, ‘masks’ seek to control or limit their potential meanings. At this point, it seems natural to seek help from outside musicology and refer to John Fiske’s theories about television viewer experiences:

The viewer’s power to make the meanings that suit his or her social experience is not, of course, unlimited. Texts seek to prefer certain meanings, and while offering space for open or resistive readings, simultaneously attempt to limit that space to varying degrees. [...] Put simply, different programs are designed (usually fairly successfully) to attract different audiences.

The user group transformed To the Queen of my Heart into a phenomenological reality. In parallel with Fiske’s argument, we ought also to consider the fact that the users and listeners

of the song create meanings that fit in with their own social experiences. If we ‘open’ the work, we can say that, according to Fiske’s model, it becomes a ‘producerly text’ when meanings which it is capable of making are activated through interaction with listeners and users. Listening, playing, and writing about a song are all parts of the process of creating ‘text’, and determine what type of text is reproduced. In masks as well as in texts, conflicts of interest between producers and consumers are reproduced. Parallel with Fiske’s description of soap operas and their ‘denial of a unified reading position and of a coherent meaning of the text’, we can therefore probably assume that users of To the Queen of my Heart have decentralised, flexible, and multi-focused subjectivity. Uncomplicated interpretations can be found, ones that lie in the surface in To the Queen of my Heart as well as in the dominant section of cultural life in which the song belonged. When the layer of dominant ideology was removed from the ‘producerly’ text, some of the users were likely to have been left with redundant meanings that could be used to exclude the ‘composition mask’. When we consider this analytically, this opens the door to include more complex positions for listeners and users of the song, who interweaved their own experiences with their perception of the song.

In this context one can, as Andreas Ballstaedt and Tobias Widmaier do with Lieder in their book on Salonmusik, regard To the Queen of my Heart as a song that can trigger daydreams about, for example, a person. To achieve this effect, the song must not have been too difficult to understand, nor presented too much opposition for users or listeners. The purpose was not to intervene in reality or to change it, but rather to induce an experience of a better ‘dream world’. The magnificent natural scenes in the poem set to music could thus be transformed by the composer and performers/users to a scene and projection screen for a yearning for something beyond trivial reality. The young girls of the Norwegian bourgeoisie continued to live with their parents during the ‘waiting time’ prior to marriage, and this also applied to the newly engaged Agathe Backer in the beginning of the 1870s when she composed To the Queen of my Heart. The girls were totally dependent on their parents; they spent large parts of their day at home. In their expressive forms, perhaps Lieder – which Lawrence Kramer wrote – are surprisingly cinematic: as with films, the pictures and the music blend together right from the start, and this gives them a dream-like quality. Based on this view, Backer Grøndahl recreates acoustically and verbally the missing images and the poem’s imaginary world or, put another way, the components that are not found in language. In this way, the romance becomes a visualisation of the image. As an extension of Kramer’s argument, one could perhaps say that romance composition in Backer Grøndahl’s day worked in the same way as does a film today, as a form of ‘dream industry’. Consequently, this was a part of the ‘genre contract’ between her as the composer, the amateur musicians, and the audience. In his book entitled Music and Morals published in 1871, the music critic

and preacher Hugh Reginald Haweis described how music took young girls with half-closed eyes far away from their everyday boredom. Secretly and manipulatively, they entrusted the music they played with ideas which they would never have said to anyone. What they played was ‘only a dream – a dream of comfort sent by music’.24

This might explain why part of the point in composing To the Queen of my Heart was to make a large number of people happy through daydreams or other performed, creative uses of song. As long as there were unfulfilled or unsatisfied wishes in the user group in the home music market, there was a need for songs or piano pieces through which one could daydream. The dreams could be about praise, gold, or (burning) love for a ‘prince’ who became a husband, as examples. In everything they did, young women in the increasing longer waiting period (before they got married) should show that they had become ‘ladies. In 1904, the Norway feminist pioneer Ragna Nielsen commented: ‘Naturally, the only thing they dreamed of was getting married. Marriage brought meaning to life, significance, respect [...] whether the women admitted it or not, they thought that a man, no matter how wicked he might be, was better than no man at all.’ 25

The users of romance songs were interested in the sentimental expression of the songs, and how such expressions could be conveyed to others with the help of dramatisation. Otherwise this type of music was characterised by its ‘sentimentality’, and the possibility to perform a small theatrical or programatic progression (even if this was rarely realised).

One can vividly imagine how young girls could experience whole novels in daydream form while they played the keys on the piano and sang. The dreams contained all the phases of passion: farewells and reunions, jealousy, possession, and loss.26 In a letter to Fliess, Freud describes how his Die Traumdeutung (similar to To the Queen of my Heart) was set up as an ‘imaginary stroll’.27 Together, he and the reader should wander around in the dream landscape. Daydreams often served as imaginary fulfilment of conscious desires. In this way, they were perhaps a solution to an unbearable situation in an otherwise grey everyday life. For Freud, dreams were cunning coded messages for suppressed sexual desire. Consequently, his work was discussed at the same level as the romantic dream books that could be found on the kitchen maid’s bedside table, printed on inferior paper.28

Leonard Meyer also writes in Emotion and Meaning in Music (1956) about the relationship between music and dreams:

Often music arouses affect through the mediation of conscious connotation or conscious image process. A sight, a sound, or a fragrance evokes half-forgotten thoughts of persons, places, and experiences; stirs up dreams ‘mixing memory with desire’; or awakens connotations of referential things. These imaginings, whether conscious or unconscious, are the stimuli to which the affective response is really made. […] Music may give rise to images and trains of thought which, because of their relation to the inner life of the particular individual, may eventually culminate in affect. But if such image process is really unconscious, we can never know them.29

25. Ragna Nielsen, Norske Kvinder i første Halvdel af det 19de Aarhundrede (Kristiania, 1904), 34 f.
27. Siegmund Freud, Drømmetyding (Oslo, 1999), xiv.
The music for the home market gave a daydreaming female audience precisely such powerful stimuli. At the age of sixteen, once she had finally finished her ‘compulsory’ education, Backer Grøndahl wrote to her cousin Gonka of how music helped her forget slush and rain, and to daydream instead: ‘There are no feelings or passions which it cannot create, arouse to the highest degree of randomness, you can cry or rage, be gripped by the most excited enthusiasm and feel more wretched and humble than the felon in chains.’30

Her description of how she used music in her everyday life gives associations to Tia DeNora’s much later descriptions of Music as a Technology of Self, where she lists numerous examples of how music stabilises or explores different aspects of the self or enables it to do things. Her informants used music as their subjective attributes so that it worked like a catalyst in their experience of themselves. At the same time, many reported that music had caused reactions within them through the experience, in such a way that they subsequently felt that they themselves had been changed:

…Music is appropriated by individuals as a resource for the ongoing constitution of themselves and the psychological, physiological and emotional states. As such it points the way to a more overtly sociological focus on individuals’ socio-cultural practices for the construction and maintenance of mood, memory and identity. […] the ostensibly ‘private’ sphere of music use part and parcel of the cultural constitution of subjectivity, part of how individuals are involved in constituting themselves as social agents.31

DeNora further points out that the music’s rhythm, gestures, harmonics, style, etc. can be used as references or representatives of where the user wants to be or to go, be this in an emotional, physical, or any other sense. The most frequent use her informants had for music was romantic or intimate:

Music helped them to recall lovers or former partners and, with these memories, emotionally heightened phases or moments in their lives. […] Reliving experience through music is also (re)constituting past experience, it is making manifest within memory what may have been latent or even absent the first time through.32

When the amateur musician played To the Queen of my Heart at home, she controlled the music like an object, because perception and action (which are separated in the concert hall) entered into a dynamic relationship with each other. The song could be experienced as an idealised love discourse, with the ‘meeting’ placed in a context that increased ‘romance’ and protected ‘love’ from complicating circumstances. While she sat and played the piano, she could allow her thoughts to wander with greater ease.

In this way, multiple discourses were constructed via the body’s sensory mechanisms.33 The music in To the Queen of my Heart made it possible to ‘imagine’ incidents at the same time as the romance could ‘procure’ them when the user sang it in social settings.34

32. DeNora, Music in Everyday Life, 63 and 66.
33. Eric F. Clarke, Ways of listening: an ecological approach to the perception of musical meaning (Oxford, 2005), 150.
this romance was perhaps for some users an attempt to converse, seduce, excite, or confide: in other words, to converse with specific intentions in mind. Even though To the Queen of my Heart could be used as a form of courting scenario in the present, the fundamental nostalgic perspective has always been dominant. Thus, the song places the listener in a situation of ‘eavesdropping’ on a ‘private’ conversation, thought monologue, or intimate confession. In this manner, we can also envisage that the song could be performed at private parties in order to put oneself on display.

For more ‘sophisticated’ audiences, To the Queen of my Heart could take on several of the functions of discourse and express that which language could not manage or was not permitted to express. To express ‘all that never in daytime I said’ would be to make what ought to be left unsaid objectively visible. Words could say too much. Where music evokes associations, words are specific. They could dilute the declaration of love and make it impersonal, make the unusual become usual. Still the message had to be decoded by a potential recipient. Young girls were aware of the potential the piano had as a backdrop for meetings between people, flirting, and sexual behaviour. If the recipient was interested and had access to the girl’s home, they could remain by the piano, something which could be interpreted as foreplay to ‘forbidden’ desire. While the girl let her fingers run across the keys and read the notes (or looked inside them dreamily), the young man could sit in the background, or stand by or lean on the piano and cast longing glances at her. The music could be used as a strategic code or even to camouflage amorous conversation from eavesdropping. It is through the individual user’s feelings and body that the romance is naturalised and how it – quite literally – can physically function through the mechanism which Foucault calls the disciplining of the body.

A precondition for producing this type of response lies in the title of To the Queen of my Heart. It gives a vaguely positive mood and wonderful, good feelings so that, already in the title, users could interweave their own dreams. As Ballstaedt and Widmaier have pointed out,


Subsequently, the song could serve as a form of foreplay, or a surrogate for erotic pleasures which many of the young bourgeoisie were denied: anyone who was dealing with Cupid would perhaps buy a composition with titles such as Yearning for Love or To the Queen of my Heart when he/she was clearly searching for a like-minded soul.

ON THE ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT, COLOURS, AND TEXTURES

Beginnings are always strategic for every genre because, along with the title, they can establish the appropriate mental setting in which the genre codes in a work can be appreciated.

The introductory and intoning prelude immediately puts us in the mood, situation, or state of mind from which the song arises. The broken and playful chords, which shift between tonic and dominant, have a wandering, undulating, or whispering effect. As the critic in *Uusi Suometar* wrote at the performance of *To the Queen of my Heart* in Helsinki in 1887: "The accompaniment is of great consequence [...] and, if handled correctly, has a spell-binding effect with its abundance of colour and poetic grace." Thus the accompaniment contributes to place the user at the centre of the nature that is being depicted in the lyrics. At the same time the motif adds, in a sense, a spatial metaphor for taking a stroll. When the singing voice begins to sing, the following question is explicitly asked: 'Shall we stroll awhile?' Already at this point, the swaying and suggestive introductory motif in the accompaniment can be interpreted proleptically with respect to the omitted stanzas in the poem. The melody of the singing voice also adds musical tension between strolling (through thoughts, dreams, or even reality), and turning back. The interval leap at the start of *To the Queen of my Heart* (a major sixth in the third bar) comes across as an emphatic metaphor for escapism, like a gesture of wanting to break loose, as the users of the song perhaps attempted to 'take a stroll' for a short while. The users were quickly – or not so quickly – overtaken by reality in the same way as the melody, which eventually reverts to the introductory tone. The leap (and the perceived attempt to break away) is, however, repeated in the sixth bar.

Backer Grøndahl's romance has something secretive about it. Emotions are played out con sordino. This intimate song forces us not only to hear but to listen: there is whispering at fast tempo, with wandering sixteenths in the accompaniment. On the manifest level, it is the soulful and tender pitch that is dominant, and nothing louder than a piano dynamic is given. The passionate song never bursts into forte: even if the singer occasionally 'forgets' him or herself with crescendos and ritardandos, he/she quickly regains control with the help of diminuendos and a return to the original tempo.

Pauline Hall highlights 'the confessional fervour one encounters in many of her [Backer Grøndahl's] romances, the gently modulated intonation of the melody and the accompaniment's almost aggressive collaboration in the musical interpretation of the fervently agitated poem.' Contemporary reviews of Backer Grøndahl's songs remarked that she often gave the piano accompaniment a wide and independent scope. For example, Karl Flodin points out that the songs occasionally, but infrequently, work as piano pieces with voice obligato. Most often, however, he believes that song and piano form an artistic unit of high quality in which the accompaniment paints the poem's mood and expression.

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Figure 2. Facsimile of the first page of “To the Queen of my Heart” (bars 1–10), from one of Backer’s notebooks (National Library of Norway, Oslo)
It seems as if most critics regarded the accompaniment as an indispensable contribution to the interpretation of the lyrics and the musical structure of the songs. Maybe it is the joker in the pack that will give us more clues to what glimmers under the surface. It is precisely the experience of the sensual identity of the piano that can ‘smoulder’ beneath the surface of the singing voice and the lyrics.

Critics often describe Backer Grøndahl’s accompaniments as ‘pure virtuosity in tone painting.’ Thus it explores the limitations of language and expresses the latent, concealed, or suspected meanings in the poem. This has become part of the message in *To the Queen of my Heart*, and whatever is not expressed in words is perhaps expressed musically as the song is sung. The swaying and suggestive introductory motif in the accompaniment can perhaps already be interpreted proleptically with respect to the omitted stanzas in the poem. With this background in mind, it is natural to assume that the driving accompaniment is interpreting the subtext. In this regard, the accompaniment becomes a mood creator, a symbol bearer, or picture painter that counterpoints the singing voice. As Karl Flodin puts it in his *Nya Pressen* review during Backer Grøndahl’s first visit to Helsinki the autumn of 1887: ‘Her intrinsic poetic nature permeates a secret poetic text that underlies everything she interprets musically.’

Relatively few resources are needed to lead the users of such romances into the longed-for acoustic space of total harmony. A pleasing harmony was important for success, and usability in the home music market is also confirmed by the way in which it was received. One of the means of generating the right mood and emotions consisted of a heavy application of arpeggios and broken chords. As Ballstaedt and Widmaier phrase it: ‘Broken chords have something so agreeable about them for romantic souls’ (Ballstaedt & Widmaier: 303). In both the short prelude and further on in the accompaniment to *To the Queen of my Heart* (see facsimile on page 21), we find relatively heavy application of arpeggios and broken chords which end up in unprepared suspensions (*Seufzer* figures), almost like a metaphor for the sensual. Inverted *Seufzers* also occur, mostly in the middle section, where the suspended chord is chromatically raised from F sharp to F double sharp in the thirty-third and forty-first bars (see example note on the next page). As Ballstaedt and Widmaier have pointed out, the suspension symbolises the daydream in real life: an excursion, an attempt to hold back the course of things or, in the figurative sense, to hold back an unsatisfying reality. Suspensions are only defined through the necessity for them to be resolved (or, in the case of the metaphor, reconciled). In parallel, reality will sooner or later enter the daydreams, which will disappear. Because suspensions are short and transitory, like daydreams, they are often repeated. They delay the harmonically correct chord tone, hold it back and thus make brief breaks in the melodic progression, or lead to an interruption in the harmony. Because the piano sustains this tension throughout the entire romance, including the little postlude in bars sixty-six to seventy-one, it can be said to represent part of the ‘sensual’ throughout the whole romance.

A number of tone-colouring effects have also been inserted. We find one example in the ninth bar (see facsimile on page 21), where the composer clearly wants to underline

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the word ‘never’, since she inserts a brief and meaningful break that builds the tension before she repeats the word as many as three times. The tritonic interval, which is harmonised with a German augmented sixth chord, helps to heighten the tension in that it postpones the dominant’s resolution, which also comes directly on the third beat, without having to take the usual ‘detour’ around the cadential 6–4 chord to avoid consecutive fifths.

Another ‘sentimental’ ingredient to be noted is the primarily chromatic falling bass line in large portions of the middle section. The chromatic voicing contains some surprising chord progressions, such as the transition from the shortened secondary dominant in bar forty-four to the subdominant minor in bar forty-five and the tonic (second inversion) in bar forty-six (all related to C sharp major, the temporary key in most of the middle section):
MUSIC AND TEXT: ‘ALL THAT NEVER IN DAYTIME I SAID’

At the very core of To the Queen of my Heart lies a contrast between what can and what cannot be put in words. The solution was to let the music itself express the omitted stanzas and the possible sexual implications of the lyrics. To stroll quietly out into the night and the secretive darkness to whisper was perhaps not on everyone’s agenda. What could not be said is the code: singing the romance could send a personal love message to the ‘chosen one’. In one of her books on decorum, Isa von der Lütt spoke passionately about music expressing emotions deeper, stronger and more powerful than words; in Backer’s time the spoken word could be no more than indirect. Consequently, the romance had to be ‘read’ in and by its cultural context. Against this background, To the Queen of my Heart could provide a solution to the question of how to express a love that could not be put in words.

Characteristically enough, Backer chose to omit the Danish translation’s more sexually loaded stanzas about ‘rocking with me on the crest of the waves’, ‘the struggle’ that raged ‘in my breast’, and ‘the strange voice that rose up from the sea’. She chooses instead to focus on the stanzas in which the feelings the couple have for each other are expressed con sordino. The predominant ideals of the day suspected most female expressions of desire and lust of being unnatural. Publicly expressed feminist issues focused on temperance and moral decency. It was possible to treat these norms with a certain degree of creativity, as fiction

42. Ballstaedt & Widmaier, Salonmusik, 234.
did in ways that were difficult to suppress. Thomas Laqueur, however, emphasised how in the 1800s it was asserted that women were passionless, should be modest, and should create, but not feel, desire.43 Nevertheless, Claes Ekenstam states that the forbidden sexuality smouldered just below the surface.44

If we follow this line of thought further, could it be that the omission of the two stanzas in the original poem are audible in the music, and that we can hear a musical ‘ellipsis’? Could there – as Christopher Morris brings up in his analysis of Delius’ music – be parallels in the music with the well-known technique before film sex, when the camera fades out to give the impression of a discreet withdrawal from a passionate scene?45 Before the omitted stanzas and what some of the users may have felt as an ellipsis in bar fifty-five, a tiny glimpse is given of what one misses out on, at the same time as the ‘sigh figures’ in the A section’s accompaniment are ‘anticipated’ in C sharp major in bars fifty-two to fifty-four (the notes A sharp – G sharp) and the upbeat to bar fifty-eight in the ‘correct’ pitch (D sharp – C sharp).

![Figure 4. “To the Queen of my Heart”, bars 52–59](image)

43. Thomas Laqueur, Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge, Mass, 1990), 150.
45. Morris, Reading Opera Between the Lines, 38.
In the following bars, the composer, the pianist, and the singer discreetly withdraw from the more passionate sections of the poem. When they return, one can get the impression that the mood has changed so that the A section functions like a summary of whatever has – or has not – happened.

Perhaps Backer Grøndahl encoded the two omitted, more erotically loaded stanzas in the poem to intentionally make the song ambiguous? By not expressing the lyrics in the two stanzas, Backer Grøndahl created more points of entry into the song for the users. Thus the song becomes not one romance, but rather several romances that can be heard or performed in parallel. Users of the song who chose only to engage themselves in the surface and the lyrics that were on display, as they were expressed, could experience the song as relatively ‘innocent’, and rightly so.46 In this way, the romance would reach a wider group of users who would then want to buy the score. Backer Grøndahl’s substitute for implicative classic structures is perhaps, as Subotnik describes it in Chopin, discreet ‘analogy’.47 In this regard, Backer Grøndahl perhaps avoided users discovering that they performed or listened to different romances in parallel. Any ‘vices’ could consequently be left to more sophisticated performers and listeners of To the Queen of my Heart.48 Listeners and performers who already knew (and had perhaps recited) the poem would immediately have precisely those two stanzas in mind, and in a more sophisticated interpretation would find that these stanzas, through their absence, smouldered beneath the surface of the tone setting. Some of their interpretations of the song would have inevitably been performance interpretations that could not easily be written down in the notes. How the users interpreted To the Queen of my Heart would be influenced by the way in which the listener or user related to the content of the two omitted stanzas in relation to the song. Backer Grøndahl offers an incentive to ‘read inside’ the romance or to activate the textual ‘absence’ (the ellipsis) in ways that open up an intertextual field of many possible meanings which are not explicitly articulated in the romance as ‘text’.

CONCLUSION: BODY, VOICE, AND SMOULDERING FEMALE PASSIONS

Backer Grøndahl often performed To the Queen of my Heart at the same concerts as Felix Mendelssohn’s Lieder ohne Worte, and during her London visit in 1889, George Bernard Shaw praised precisely her ‘Mendelssohnic sense of form in composition’.49 It is in the ‘wordless’ sections of the romance that the true To the Queen of my Heart emerges. The phrase ‘All that never in daytime I said’ gently hints at the omitted stanzas as subtext never being expressed verbally. ‘Thoughts that were never put into words’ could perhaps mean an idea, primarily pertaining to emotion. As Carl Dahlhaus points out, the feelings portrayed were perhaps neither ‘outside of’ nor ‘ahead of’ the musical form of expression and performance, but rather ‘coincided’ with them.50 In a letter to Marc André Souchay in Leipzig on 15 October 1842, Mendelssohn, who never published a word about music, stated how he distrusted language:

50. Carl Dahlhaus, Klassische und romantische Musikästhetik (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1988), 140.
Es wird so viel über Musik gesprochen, und so wenig gesagt. Ich glaube überhaupt, die Worte reichen nicht hin dazu, und fände ich, dass sie hinreichten, so würde ich am Ende gar keine Musik mehr machen. – Die Leute beklagen sich gewöhnlich, die Musik sei so vielseitig; es sei so zweifelhaft, was sie sich dabei denken hätten, und die Worte verstände doch ein jeder. Mir geht es aber gerade umgekehrt. Und nicht bloß mit ganzem Reden, auch mit einzelnen Worten; auch die scheinen mir so vielseitig, so unbestimmt, so missverständlich im Vergleich zu einer rechten Musik, die einem die Seele erfüllt mit tausend besseren Dingen als Worten. Das, was mir eine Musik ausspricht, die ich liebe, finde ich gar keine Musik mehr machen.

Mendelssohn would not tell his friend whether he had had certain words in mind when he composed his *Lieder ohne Worte*. The preciseness of the feelings expressed through the music was precision in music itself. If titles, like ‘melancholy’ or ‘resignation’ were added, these notions would entail different things to different users of the compositions. According to Mendelssohn, the totally abstract peculiarity with which music was perceived by many philosophical aesthetes was ‘specific’ and therefore impossible to talk about, since the influence of music was sensual, emotional, materialised, and physical – though not distinct from cognition. Thus, music assumes many of the functions of discourse, or as Caralis put it in the song, music expresses ‘all that never in daytime I said’. To use the same words was, in Mendelssohn’s opinion, an inadequate guarantee of a common understanding. When an authentic emotional experience was reported by a listener, having put it in words might have distorted it, or as Meyer has remarked: ‘For emotional states are much more subtle and varied than are the few crude and standardised words which we use to denote them.’

Accordingly, what Mendelssohn points out in his letter is that one or two parties, using the same words about an experience, are feeling, thinking, wanting, and fearing different things.

In *To the Queen of my Heart*, Backer Grøndahl shows what Hall described as her skillfulness in expressing unspoken but extremely important words musically. At the same time, music, as Carolyn Abbate points out, is apparently without discursive meaning – and this makes problems of critical reading and interpretation acute. Compared to music, words used to discuss it are often perceived as simple and less beautiful. What gets ‘lost in translation’ becomes what goes without saying, or what is not possible to mention explicitly in words. All attempts to distinguish writing about music from ‘the music itself’ are pointless, since interpretive writing about a composition becomes somehow part of it as it

travels through history. Edward Cone refers to Roger Sessions’s statements about how music reproduces the most intimate essences, all the fine nuances of dynamic variation of our inner lives:

Emotion is specific, individual and conscious; music goes deeper than this, to the energies which animate our psychic life… It reproduces for us the most intimate essence, the tempo and the energy, of our spiritual being… – all, in fact, of the fine shades of dynamic variation of our inner life. It reproduces these far more directly and more specifically than is possible through any other medium of human communication.55

Would users of To the Queen of my Heart – as Morris suggests – ‘rather feel music with their bodies than understand it with their emotions?’56 Roland Barthes wrote extensively about the musical body. As stated by Richard Leppert, ‘Barthes’ insight is that making music, unlike “mere” listening, necessarily brings the sensual body “back” into the equation. […] To make music is a cognitive-physical act, in which the separation of mind from body momentarily disappears.57 In The Grain of the Voice Barthes proposes that music could be regarded as ‘physical stereophony’, and writes that music holds the body’s figures (‘somathemes’), where the texture forms the musical meaning process. His listening is sensualised by his understanding of what he in other places calls ‘the grain of the voice’.58 As Ansa Lønstrup points out in Stemmen og Øret, the sound of the voice becomes the body’s acoustic representation or echo. It refers to the body’s physical space as much as to the space around it.59

‘The grain’, Barthes explains in a passage on the ‘body’ of the singing voice, is the hand that writes the music, or the body parts that perform it. Barthes is interested in the singing voice as a source of attraction, and understands its ‘grain’ as qualities that make the individual voice something special and worth listening to. He also insists that the ‘grain of the voice’ is not only the voice’s timbre. Barthes takes Julia Kristeva’s ‘geno-text’ and ‘pheno-text’ as his point of departure, and adapts them to apply to music by using the terms ‘geno-song’ and ‘pheno-song’. In Barthes’ interpretation, ‘pheno-songs’ are the phenomena that make up the structure of sung language, the rules of the music genre, and the composer’s idiom and interpretative style: in other words, what it is in the performance that serves the communication, representation, and expression. ‘Geno-songs’ represent the other layer in the voice: the volume or space, where meaning is generated from the language and its material dimensions. ‘Geno-songs’ form a ‘play on meanings’ that has nothing to do with communication. In ‘geno-songs’, the meaning-bearing is disregarded in favour of a sensual meaning.60 The ‘grain of the voice’ is, as Lønstrup points out, the body in the voice as heard by another body.61 If we hear the ‘grain’ in a song and ascribe it with theoretical value (i.e. the occurrence of the ‘text’ in the work), we make an assessment, part of which will be individual and part of which will compel the listener to listen to his/her relationship with the

56. Morris, Reading Opera Between the Lines, 30.
61. Lønstrup, Stemmen og Øret, 18.
singing voice. Such a relationship is, according to Barthes, erotic, but by no means subjective. Accordingly, the ‘body of the voice’ would also eroticise the listening, in that those who listened to the song, for example to To the Queen of my Heart, would relate it to their own body. The musical pleasure was constantly repeated and did not revolve around a particular ecstasy. As Leppert indicates, if the semantic and the empirical are anywhere near being orgasmic at a time when music as a practice was culturally coded as feminine, then the scandal associated with such music was more serious that previously believed. According to Leppert, Barthes’ point is that, contrary to ‘pure’ listening, music-making brings by necessity the sensual body back to the action. Victorians as well as Oscarians were in fear of this body.\footnote{62}

Perhaps To the Queen of my Heart was a higher substitute for a sensuality that women could not express otherwise. The voice of the heart – the implied layer of meaning – was the utterance of the stifled ego. The surface itself represents the very essence of simplicity and innocence, while the intense and passionate simmers beneath for those who choose or need to interpret it thus.

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