

Symphonic Theatre

Programmatic music inspired by works of Shakespeare
during the Romantic Period

by David Barton Harris, March, 2020

Preface concerning the notational decisions by the author:

- When a new term is introduced it is done so in *italics* once.
- Pieces of music are *italicized* while Shakespeare plays are in “quotes.”

Background

The Romantic period (roughly 1800-1910)¹ was a “rejection of the precepts of order, calm, harmony, balance, idealization, and rationality that typified Classicism.”² Romantic literature focused on nature and the primal state of man, which included his emotional impulses. Visual art depicted dramatic moods and supernatural characters and worlds. *Sturm und Drang*, a German literary and artistic movement espousing the expression of emotional turmoil and a rejection of classical values, spilled into music, which reflected these themes as well.

Composers of this era found less employment with churches and courts and more need to appeal to the public, which, in turn, created a greater demand for originality and the expression of extramusical ideas. Often they looked to literature for inspiration. Throughout the Romantic period “no source was as frequently drawn upon as Shakespeare’s plays.”³ This paper will examine four Shakespeare inspired pieces spanning the Romantic period: Mendelssohn’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream Overture* (1842), Liszt’s *Hamlet* (1858), Strauss’s *Macbeth* (1888), and Elgar’s *Falstaff* (1913).

Writing a piece of music inspired by Shakespeare would seem to be made easier by the inclusion of text. Would not opera or oratorio be the obvious choice for the portrayal of a Shakespearean drama? Suppose, however, that a composer wants to use an entirely instrumental medium. Is it possible to communicate a literary story (or even the general character of a nonmusical person, place or thing) through music alone?

¹ David Poultney, *Studying Music History* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1996), 147.

² “Romanticism.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, accessed March 30, 2020
<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9083836>

³ Hugh Macdonald, “Symphonic poem” *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://doi-org.proxy006.nclive.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.27250>

Liszt believed a piece could achieve this result, but would still rely on a textual explanation separate from the musical work, a *program*, which he defined as:

*a preface added to a piece of instrumental music by means of which the composer intends to guard the listener against a wrong poetical interpretation, and to direct his attention to the poetical idea of the whole or to a particular part of it.*⁴

Music with such a program was aptly called *programmatic music*, and, like many musical terms, necessitated a categorization for the music that preceded it. Thus, Classical music that made no reference to anything nonmusical was, by contrast, *absolute music*. Both these terms reference instrumental music. Music with any lyrical content at all is unfitting of either categorization.

Multiple genres of programmatic music emerged within the Romantic period (like the *character piece* for piano), but to generate the maximum amount of expression possible, composers wanted as much orchestral color as possible. This led to one of the defining genres of the Romantic period (and the genre of each of the four pieces under examination in this paper), the *symphonic poem* (*sinfonische dichtung*), a term that, like program music, was coined by Liszt and used to define 13 of his own pieces. It is worth noting that the *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* predicated Liszt's coinage by a decade, that Strauss used the term *tondichtung* (*tone poem*) to describe his pieces of more or less the same character, and that Elgar referred to his *Falstaff* as a *symphonic study*. Over time, the purview of the term symphonic poem has been broadened and most scholars recognize all four of these pieces as belonging to that genre.

⁴ Roger Scruton, "Programme music" *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://doi-org.proxy006.nclive.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.22394>

In 1932, musicologist R. W. S. Mendl defined the symphonic poem as:

an orchestral composition inspired by a literary, historical, or pictorial subject—or indeed by anything which exists also outside music (a natural scene, for instance)—...⁵

This paper concerns itself with pieces inspired by specific literary sources, but Mendl reminds us not all programmatic music requires such narrative inspiration. Bax's *November Woods* (1913) is an example which describes the character of a forest in autumn without telling a story. It is nonetheless a symphonic poem. Mendl continues his definition, stating the symphonic poem derives

its structure rather from the events or incidents or objects which it seeks to portray than from the inherited forms of the art of music itself.⁶

Here is one of the most important qualities of the symphonic poem; the structure is bred not solely from previously existing structures like sonata-allegro form, but by the actual subject of the piece's inspiration. Additionally, like its predecessor, the *symphonic overture*, the symphonic poem is almost always in one movement.

Obviously, shifts in the elements of music during the Romantic period occurred across a spectrum. A piece from the nascent of the period may have quite different qualities than one from its culmination, but it is also important to recognize there were concurrent opposing forces found at every step along the way. As such, this paper can only examine general trends in Romantic music and how they manifested in the

⁵ R. W. S. Mendl, "The Art Of The Symphonic Poem," *The Musical Quarterly* 18, no. 3, (July 1932), 443. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mq/XVIII.3.443>

⁶ Mendl, "The Art Of The Symphonic Poem," 443.

symphonic poem. This will become clearer through a more comprehensive study of the elements of its music: sound medium, melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, and form. Additionally, this paper will assess the four Shakespearean symphonic poems for their programmatic qualities, namely whether they approached the realization of their literary inspirations through emphasis on narrative or character or a mixture of both.

Sound Medium

The expansion of the orchestra, both in terms of total unique instruments and total number of performers, was an important factor in the development of the symphonic poem. As orchestras included more instruments, particularly low brass and percussion, timbral possibilities flourished. The inclusion of more players provided louder than ever dynamic possibilities. It is unclear whether compositional desires mandated the inclusion of more instrumentation or more instrumentation fueled more compositional possibilities, but we can be sure the two trends accompanied each other in an expansion of expression.

Melody

At the beginning of the Romantic period, phrase structures were still in alignment with Classical best practices. That is, they were generally balanced and parsed into antecedent and consequent units. However, as the period progressed, emphasis on the motivic power of melody sidelined these symmetrical qualities.

Thematic transformation, the mutation of a leitmotif or theme, aided in the expressive function harnessed by masters like Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner. Melodies

became increasingly chromatic and included significantly more non-chord tones to communicate an ever expanding array of programmatic ideas. They also tended to abandon the Classical practice of conjunct, generally stepwise motion for “melodic motives built on wide leaps.”⁷ This melodic freedom contributed to a much greater range of expression, which permitted the symphonic poem to depict everything from characters to events to settings and even philosophical questions, as in Liszt’s opening to *Hamlet*, which “refers to the ‘To be or not to be’ speech.”⁸

Harmony

*The harmonic vocabulary of Romantic music expanded rapidly to include much more chromaticism, more altered and borrowed chords, and new and more freely treated dissonances.*⁹

Romantic harmony is characterized by “stress on the minor mode,” is “full of tension,” and includes “extended modulations.”¹⁰ As the rigidity of the sonata-allegro form collapsed, composers were less bound by harmonic structure in their symphonic poems, some of which finished in a different key than they began. While the formal rules of Classical tonality laxer in the Romantic period, it should be noted that no Romantic music was atonal.

Rhythm

⁷ Barry S. Brook, “Sturm und Drang and the Romantic Period in Music” *Studies in Romanticism* 9, no. 4, (Fall 1970), 278.

⁸ Joanne Deere, “Form and Programme in Liszt’s *Hamlet*: A New Perspective” (master’s thesis, University of Birmingham, 2009), 39.

⁹ Poultney, “Studying Music History,” 148.

¹⁰ Barry S. Brook, “Sturm und Drang,” 278.

Unpredictable rhythms facilitated the expression of unpredictable emotions and events, significant aspects of the dramatic narratives composers sought to portray in their symphonic poems. In Romantic music “[i]rregular qualities of motion stem from manifold tempo changes, frequent use of accelerandi and ritardandi, and, at times, subtle cross-rhythms and macro rhythms....”¹¹ Within one symphonic poem a composer may employ a wide range of different meters, often to depict different characters. Additionally, even within one meter, motivic melodies often had asymmetrical phrase structures, contributing further to a sense of rhythmic unpredictability.

Texture

Like most music in the Romantic era, the four Shakespeare-inspired symphonic poems of this study are predominantly homophonic. Some of Mendelssohn’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is homorhythmic and some themes in Elgar’s *Falstaff* have a contrapuntal and thus polyphonic nature, but the majority texture of all four pieces is homophonic, the period’s trademark texture.

Form

A symphonic poem’s form (or lack thereof) is one of its defining characteristics. At the beginning of the Romantic period, sonata form was still the primary structure of symphonic music. As the period progressed, and particularly within the genre of the symphonic poem, increasing emphasis was put on music’s power to express over its ability to satisfy formal structures. Roughly speaking, as the period advanced,

¹¹ Poultny, “Studying Music History,” 149.

symphonic poems were said to exhibit first sonata form, then sonata expansion, then sonata deformation, and eventually cyclic form, free form, or a novel form dictated by the poem's subject. There is no consensus on the strict definitions of these divisions. What is important is the evolution from Classical structure which served absolute music, to whatever structure best suited the demands of each individual piece's programmatic narrative.

For instance, if a symphonic poem were composed, say, on the subject of aging, and was intended to mirror its chronology, its relentless march in one direction, would it not seem inappropriate to finish with an exact recapitulation of the first theme, presumably inspired by youth? Here, traditional sonata form feels unfitting.

This is not to say that all symphonic poems will unfold without repetition. A poem whose subject is the character of an object, say a rotating carousel, would seem to suggest repetition in its form. The point is that, in the symphonic poem, the artistic demands of the poem's subject supersede those of traditional musical form.

We can apply Liszt's definition of the symphonic poem to earlier pieces and recognize it was present in spirit before its coinage. Beethoven pioneered the evolution of the Classical period into the Romantic in part due to his desire to express more nonmusical ideas. His Pastoral Symphony, was not intended to communicate a specific plot, but it was programmatic:

Beethoven's descriptive movement titles for the "Pastoral" were made public to the audience before the premiere. The first movement, "Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arriving in the country," engages with a long musical tradition of pastoral music.¹²

¹² Christopher H. Gibbs, "Notes on Beethoven's Sixth Symphony," Program note, The Philadelphia Orchestra Association, 2006, *NPR Music Online*, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5478661>

However, being a large scale symphony in multiple movements using traditional forms, it would be wrong to call the Pastoral a symphonic poem. The closest Beethoven comes to a symphonic poem, Mendl argues, is in the 2nd Leonora overture, where the great composer sacrifices form for narrative purposes, omitting he recapitulation:

He clearly felt that after bringing the concrete events of the drama into high relief by sounding the trumpet call which heralded Florestan's deliverance, it would be inappropriate to recapitulate the themes associated with Leonora's courageous enterprise and her husband's grief in prison...¹³

No small amount of credit is due Beethoven for his daring here. Here we see a brave and notable instance of form taking a back seat to narrative, a trend that will continue throughout the Romantic period as one of the trademarks of the symphonic poem.

Tables

The following tables (figures 1-5) illustrate the elements of sound medium, melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, and form in the four Shakespeare-based symphonic poems of the Romantic period that are this paper's subject. The final table includes information on the programmatic quality of each work, which will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent section of this paper.

¹³ Mendl, "The Art Of The Symphonic Poem," 446.

Fig. 1

Composer:	Mendelssohn	Liszt	Strauss	Elgar
Symphonic Poem:	<i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>	<i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Falstaff (1st division)</i>
Nationality:	German	Hungarian	German	English
Year:	1842	1858	1888	1913
Sound Medium:	Orchestra: (bold indicates additions from previous orchestration) - flute - oboe - clarinet - bassoon - french horn - trumpet - ophicleide - timpani - strings	Orchestra: - flute - oboe - clarinet - bassoon - french horn - trumpet - trombone - bass trombone - tuba - timpani - strings	Orchestra: - flute - piccolo - oboe - english horn - clarinet - bass clarinet - bassoon - contrabassoon - french horn - trumpet - bass trumpet - trombone - bass trombone - tuba - timpani - small drum - cymbal - tamtam - bass drum - strings	Orchestra: - flute - piccolo - oboe - english horn - clarinet - bass clarinet - bassoon - contrabassoon - french horn - trumpet - trombone - tuba - timpani - small drum - cymbal - bass drum - snare drum - tambourine - triangle - harp - strings
Medium by programmatic component:	Varies by characters: - fairies: just strings - court and actors: full orchestra - lovers: thinner, mid-range orchestra, omitting flutes, low brass, low strings and percussion - intro and outro instrumentation increases as the transition to and from the supernatural world becomes more complete	Different orchestral sections are used for different themes. - "To be or not to be" theme is in winds, separated by sparse percussion - Hamlet's theme is a conversation between the brass and the strings, trading off melodic material, but sometimes homorhythmic - Ophelia's theme delicately uses solo flute and solo violin, in stark contrast to Hamlet's	Instrumentally the timbre is quite thick except during the Lady Macbeth theme where the brass and percussion are more or less absent Brass and percussion are most prominent in military themes	Themes get passed between strings, winds and brass

Fig. 2

Composer:	Mendelssohn	Liszt	Strauss	Elgar
Symphonic Poem:	<i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>	<i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Falstaff (1st division)</i>
Nationality:	German	Hungarian	German	English
Year:	1842	1858	1888	1913
Melody:	Symmetrical phrase structure Highly motivic: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- fairy theme is fluttery eighth notes- Duke's theme has courtly fanfare in brass	Asymmetrical phrase structure Highly motivic: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Bottom's theme contains braying figure to represent his transformation into a donkey- lover's theme uses stepwise descending diatonicism	Asymmetrical phrase structure Highly motivic: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Hamlet's theme is more excitable and anguished, dotted rhythm in brass and strings- Ophelia's theme is softest, most melodic, in winds	Asymmetrical phrase structure Highly motivic, Themes repeat in a cyclic fashion, treated to different textures,
Harmony:	Tonal, but with borrowed chords True to sonata form, the second subject is presented in the dominant	Dissonance, altered chords Non-functional harmonic progressions, non-diatonic scales such as whole tone, fully diminished and augmented chords	Dissonance, altered chords Some non-functional progressions, but still tonal and each section of the sonata form is separated by a cadence	Chromatic, often obscuring tonal centers Least classical of all examples
	Major qualities used sparingly and mostly with reference to Ophelia	Implies B minor, but highly chromatic	- Macbeth theme is a double motif with an upward ascension implying D minor with mode mixture - Lady Macbeth theme is more melodic in flutes and clarinets implying F# minor - Macduff victory theme is a fanfare in D major	Modern, 20th century
			Dissonance, altered chords, borrowed chords	Non-functional progressions, Themes in different keys played in direct succession with little harmonic preparation
			Frequent changes of tonal centers,	
			Development is more harmonically stable than the exposition	
			Starts and ends in D minor	

Fig. 3

Composer:	Mendelssohn	Liszt	Strauss	Elgar
Symphonic Poem:	<i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>	<i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Falstaff (1st division)</i>
Nationality:	German	Hungarian	German	English
Year:	1842	1858	1888	1913
Rhythm:	Steady rhythm; simple duple throughout, no meter changes	Hamlet's theme is most rhythmically punctuated of all the themes, but regular pulse is not felt throughout much of the piece	Time is not sensed steadily throughout	Meter changes occur frequently within divisions to accommodate varying thematic material,
	rhythmic figures vary by theme: - intro and outro use sustained whole notes - fairies use constant eighth notes	"To be or not to be" theme has little sense of beat - Bottom's theme is a quarter note pickup to an accented dotted half note	Militaristic music is in 4/4 with lots of dotted rhythms	Switches between duple (2/2) and compound duple (6/4) depending on motiv
Texture:	Mostly homophonic, yet some sections and themes exhibit homorhythmic texture (intro, outro, fairies theme)	Primarily homophonic	Homophonic	Homophonic with occasional instances of polyphony

Fig. 4

Composer:	Mendelssohn	Liszt	Strauss	Elgar
Symphonic Poem:	<i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>	<i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Falstaff (1st division)</i>
Nationality:	German	Hungarian	German	English
Year:	1842	1858	1888	1913
Form:	Sonata Form extended with: - intro and outro to symbolize journey to the supernatural - multiple themes per subject to accommodate more characters - extended coda to match the plot of the play	Free form Does not "display sonata organization" - Kaplan "Sonata deformation" - Hepokoski "developed from its own laws" - Morteite	More "expanded sonata" than "deformed sonata" Out of the four pieces in this paper it is probably the second closest to traditional sonata form (second to Midsummer Night's Dream)	The entire piece is in what Elgar calls a "symphonic study." It is comprised of four divisions that are meant to be played straight through with no break.
	Can essentially be understood as an ordering of themes: 1 "To be or not to be" (and/or Ghost) 2 Hamlet 3 Ophelia 4 Hamlet 5 Ophelia 6 Hamlet 7 "To be or not to be" (and/or Ghost) 8 Hamlet (much slower)	The development section (mm. 145-323) is actually more harmonically stable (mostly Bb major) than the exposition (mm. 1-144, D minor, F# minor, F major) In the Coda (mm. 433-558) the Macduff victory music in D major is a new theme, representing the programme of the play	Harmonically it does not resemble a sonata; the exposition alone, featuring 3 tonal centers (C minor, Eb Major, E minor)	It can be interpreted as a highly deformed sonata, the first division being the exposition.
				The piece features two interludes in A minor, which are representative of the dreams of the composer himself, Elgar. These moments are somewhat akin to the intro and outro of <i>Midsummer</i> , in that they reference the real, non-literary world.

Fig. 5

Composer:	Mendelssohn	Liszt	Strauss	Elgar
Symphonic Poem:	<i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>	<i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Falstaff (1st division)</i>
Nationality:	German	Hungarian	German	English
Year:	1842	1858	1888	1913
Programmatic Quality:	Themes represent characters and settings, but not plot. However, the themes are stitched together in an order that coincides with the plot.	Hamlet's programme, more than any other in this paper, is character driven. Yes, the vision of Hamlet's father's ghost and the death of Hamlet are in chronological order, but the majority of this piece is a character study of Hamlet and to a lesser extent, Ophelia.	Like Liszt's Hamlet, Macbeth is largely character driven.	Themes represent actions of characters, not just the characters themselves.
		There are some references to plot, like the opening fanfare to represent Macbeth's victory as well as the D major fanfare in the coda to represent Macduff's victory over Macbeth, however, the piece is mostly a character description of the anguish and guilt within Macbeth and the seductive power of Lady Macbeth.	As such, the programmatic quality is highly narrative, the entire piece describing Falstaff's actions in both parts of Henry IV and Henry V	Additionally, the piece features two interludes in A minor that describe the Elgar himself

Mendelssohn - Midsummer Night's Dream (1842)

The earliest of the Shakespearean based symphonic poems this paper addresses is Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* (1842). Not only does this piece predate Liszt's coining of the term, symphonic poem, it is also essentially in sonata form, two factors that some feel disqualify it from the category. However, this may be a rare instance where sonata form, which is musically satisfying, is also apt for the telling of this Shakespearean comedy, in which no characters die or are otherwise prevented from making a "recapitulation." In fact, one of the more poetic features of this overture is how every musical section may be fitted to a scene from the play with a high degree of chronological accuracy. This works because Mendelssohn's musical ideas represent the character of:

- a specific character, say the weaver Bottom, whose donkey braying mimicked with descending ninths:



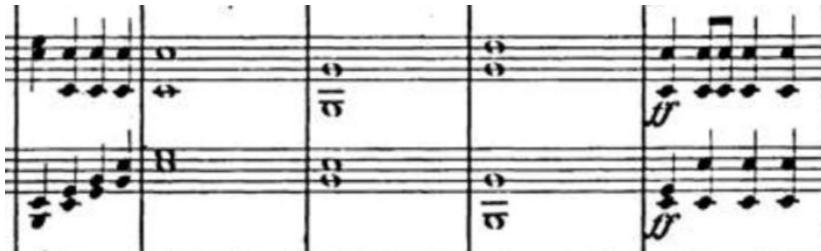
- a dynamic between two or more characters, say the love between Lysander and Hermia:

¹⁴ George Grove, "Mendelssohn's Overture to 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,'" *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 44, no. 729, (November 1903), 737.



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- the pomp of the court, a “fanfare-like transition”¹⁶ in brass:



- a broad behavior like the mettling of the fairies:



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In this way Mendelssohn has given himself building blocks that can be used to reconstruct the chronology of *Midsummer Night's Dream* without the need to score the specific plot of each scene. For instance, when the love theme that first represented Lysander and Hermia is repeated in the exposition, it can just as easily represent the

¹⁵ George Grove, “Mendelssohn's Overture to 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,’” 737.

¹⁶ Marin Alsop, “Marin Alsop's Guide To Mendelssohn's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,’” May, 2014, *NPR Music Online*, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2014/05/23/315246245/marin-alsops-guide-to-mendelssohn-a-midsummer-nights-dream>

¹⁷ George Grove, “Mendelssohn's Overture to 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,’” 737.

love Lysander feels for Helena after he has been poisoned, and because the action of the faeries is always mettlesome, the recurrence of that music to represent any fairy scenes is always apt. For these reasons, Mendelssohn gracefully succeeds in writing a symphonic poem ahead of its time and it conjures the play's narrative almost as successfully as the character of the play's components, all while adhering to a fairly strict interpretation of sonata-allegro form.

Airy and buoyant, this orchestration is fitting for a piece inspired by a comedy, the only of its kind described in this paper. Its melody and harmony is the most classically tonal of the four examples and its rhythm the most balanced.

Liszt - Hamlet (1858)

Liszt's *Hamlet*, a much darker, more dramatic and brooding piece than *Midsummer Night's Dream*, makes use of an expanded low brass section with the addition of trombone, bass trombone and tuba. This medium is a natural fit for a tragedy so consumed with self doubt, rumination and lamentation.

The harmony is dissonant and pained, a stark contrast to Mendelssohn. Half diminished and fully diminished chords are commonplace and, in fact, define the "to be or not to be" theme. The melody is significantly more chromatic than that of *Midsummer*, but both are highly motivic. Liszt's motives include the:

- “To be or not to be” theme

Musical score for the "To be or not to be" theme. The score consists of five staves of music. The instruments listed are: 2 Flöten (später Piccolo), 2 Hoboen, 2 Clarinetten in A, 2 Fagotte, and 2 Hörner in E. The dynamics and performance instructions include: *p solo voce*, *dimin.*, *p*, *dimin.*, *2e p*, *tr*, *dimin.*, *Solo*, *gestopft.*, *p schwankend.*

- Hamlet's theme (shown here in violins)

Musical score for Hamlet's theme, shown in violins. The score features a single staff of music with six measures. The first measure has a asterisk (*) above it. The dynamics are indicated by vertical lines with dots.

- Ophelia's theme (split between solo flute and solo violin)

Musical score for Ophelia's theme, split between solo flute and solo violin. The score consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Solo Flute, and the bottom staff is for the Viol. Solo. The dynamics and performance instructions include: *Solo.*, *smorz.*, *dolcissimo.*, *poco rall.*, *pp*, *2e*, *dolcissimo.*, *poco rall.*, *Solo.*

Hamlet, with its sustained sections of thick dissonances, and frequent rhythmic asymmetry, is arguably the least melodic of all four symphonic poems in the paper.

Whereas all the themes in *Midsummer* use the same meter, Liszt uses different meters for different themes, a trend we will see in Strauss and Elgar as well. Hamlet's theme is in duple meter, Ophelia's in triple. These masculine and feminine metric

assignments will be used by Strauss for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, respectively, 30 years later.

Hamlet certainly does not portray the complete plot of Shakespeare's masterpiece. Some scholars believe it conveys no specific plot at all, simply the character of Hamlet himself, Ophelia, Denmark, the tumult of the tragedy's bloody end and/or the play's central philosophical pondering, "to be or not to be." However, research into Liszt's composition by his most famous biographer, Lina Ramann, reveals he did intend certain sections to communicate literal narrative, such as at letter D, which conveys Act I, Scene v; the moment Hamlet's father's ghost tells him the story of his murder and requests the young prince exact revenge¹⁸. The asterisked note instructs the bass to play "schaurig," meaning eerily.

A musical score page showing two staves of music for orchestra and piano. The top staff is for the piano, featuring a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a common time signature. The bottom staff is for the orchestra, featuring a bass clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a common time signature. Measure 11 begins with a forte dynamic (ff) in the piano part, followed by eighth-note patterns in both staves. Measure 12 continues with eighth-note patterns, with a dynamic marking of sf appearing in the piano part. The score concludes with a measure ending in common time.

Markings in the composer's score like "auf Ophelia hindeutend" (suggesting Ophelia) at measures 160-174 could imply other plot points. However, Steven

¹⁸ Joanne Deere, "Form and Programme in Liszt's *Hamlet*: A New Perspective" (master's thesis, University of Birmingham, 2009), 53.

Mooretele argues that, without this information explicitly written into a programme, “[e]very attribution of programmatic meaning... remains hypothetical.”¹⁹

In Liszt’s essay *Berlioz and his “Harold” Symphony*, the very source of his definitions of both programme music and the symphonic poem, Liszt writes:

*No longer does the poem aim to recount the exploits of the principal figure; it deals with affections active within his very soul. It has become far more important to show what the hero thinks than how he acts...*²⁰

This indicates that, at the time of this writing, Liszt was more interested in conveying the character of a poetic source, than its plot. Although the composer may have made specific plot-based notes in his personal manuscripts, it would seem he is not concerned that the listener stream the plot of Hamlet in sync with the performance of his poem, but that he or she instead evoke the impression of that play and its rich characters.

Mooretele uses the term “sonata deformation” to describe the form of Hamlet and other symphonic poems by Liszt:

*...Liszt’s Hamlet can best be understood as a sophisticated interaction between program and autonomous musical form, in which the deformation of normative sonata-form characteristics guides the construction of a narrative by the listener.*²¹

¹⁹ Steven Vande Moortele, “Form, Program, and Deformation in Liszt’s Hamlet,” Dutch Journal of Music Theory 11, no. 2 (2006): 73.

²⁰ Franz Liszt and Lina Ramann, “Berlioz and His ‘Harold’ Symphony” (Leipzig: Breitkopf Und Härtel, 1881). Translation provided by Geoffrey Chew, accessed March 30, 2020, https://is.muni.cz/el/1421/podzim2008/VH_751/liszt.html

²¹ Steven Vande Moortele, “Form, Program, and Deformation in Liszt’s Hamlet,” 71.

Compared to Mendelssohn, Liszt makes more dramatic deviations of sonata form to accommodate the narrative of his symphonic subjects. Some may interpret Liszt's symphonic poems as purely free in form, unbound by any previous structural systems, but Mooretele sees the form as still connected to sonata, be it deformed.

The programmatic quality of Liszt's *Hamlet* is not purely *narrative*, nor is it purely *character*. The form of his symphonic poems is not purely sonata, nor is it purely free.

Strauss - Macbeth (1888)

*On 24 August 1888 Richard Strauss wrote to Hans von Bülow of the “ever increasing contradiction between the musical-poetic content that I want to convey a[nd] the ternary sonata form that has come down to us from the classical composers.”*²²

The invention of Strauss's own term, tone poem, to describe his works would seem to speak to this contradiction. “[A] tone poem is less dependent on symphonic procedures than a symphonic poem, but the distinction has never been strictly applied.”²³

Strauss may have thought of himself as less bound by the sonata than his predecessors, but *Macbeth* adheres more closely to sonata form than Liszt's *Hamlet* (although certainly not as closely as Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*). The two themes of a traditional sonata exposition (sometimes referred to as the masculine and feminine themes) represent Macbeth and Lady Macbeth respectively. Macbeth's is

²² James Hepokoski, “Structure and Program in *Macbeth*: A Proposed Reading of Strauss's First Symphonic Poem,” in *Richard Strauss and His World*, ed. Bryan Gilliam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 67-89.

²³ “Tone poem,” *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://doi-org.proxy006.nclive.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.28114>

in D minor. Were this a classical sonata, Lady Macbeth's would be in the relative major (F), but instead hers starts in the unexpected key of F# minor before eventually finishing in F major.

Mostly in Bb major, the development section is actually more harmonically stable than the exposition.. The recapitulation alters Lady Macbeth's theme, presumably to show her character change from the confident seductress she was in the first act to the guilt-ridden, drudging shell of a woman she is in the fifth. In this way, classical form has been sacrificed for narrative quality, a common trait in the symphonic poem.

In *Macbeth*, Strauss continues the expansion of orchestral range with the addition of piccolo, english horn, bass clarinet, contrabassoon, and bass trumpet, in addition to the significant timbral opportunities afforded by a much expanded percussion section. These timbres contribute to a range of dramatic depictions spanning military victory, seduction, murder, and guilt.

The melodies in Strauss's *Macbeth*, 30 years after Liszt, are still chromatic and asymmetrical, but they are more singable and traditionally melodic than in *Hamlet*. In particular, the Lady Macbeth theme is beautiful and borderline saccharine, presenting a romantic characterization of Shakespeare's femme fatale that is not true to most modern portrayals of her.

These are the most prominent themes of *Macbeth*, parsed and presented by Moore and Heger:²⁴

²⁴ Earl V. Moore and Theodore E. Heger, *The Symphony and the Symphonic Poem: Analytical and Descriptive Charts of the Standard Symphonic Repertory*, 6th Ed. (Ann Arbor: Ulrich's Books, Inc., 1974), 251.

- Macbeth's themes:



- Lady Macbeth's theme (Exposition):



- Lady Macbeth's theme (Recapitulation):



Like in *Hamlet*, these themes are in duple (masculine) and triple (feminine) meters, respectively. The coda introduces a brand new theme in D major to represent Macduff's victory over Macbeth:



This theme, joyful and triumphant, is as unfitting to the overall tone of "Macbeth" as the Lady Macbeth theme. When reading or watching "Macbeth" the audience feels no gleeful satisfaction that Macduff has conquered Macbeth. We experience the defeat of Macbeth, as morally fitting as it may be, through the perspective of the protagonist. That is, we feel the tragedy of Macbeth's very existence; we do not delight in his just deserts. It is this, paired with the unfitting depiction of Lady Macbeth, that make Strauss's *Macbeth* the least successful at evoking the narrative of its Shakespearean inspiration of all the symphonic poems in this paper.

Elgar - *Falstaff* (1913)

One of the most important features of Elgar's *Falstaff* is the program that accompanied it, an extensive article that was published in *The Musical Times* to coincide with the piece's premiere. In this article, Elgar himself states his compositional intent and shows exactly which themes he intended to represent specific plot points or characterizations. For this reason he referred to his work as a symphonic study, not a symphonic poem.

Formally, *Falstaff* is the most free of any of the examples in this paper.

The musical interpretation, or, as it is preferably called study of the character of Falstaff, is practically in one movement, with two

*interludes... and falls naturally into four principal divisions which run on without break.*²⁵

The two interludes are important narrative decisions. They occur after the character of Falstaff “sneaks away and falls asleep behind a curtain.”²⁶ However, they represent not Falstaff’s dreams, but Elgar’s from his own childhood. Among the four pieces in this paper, this is the most blatant reference to the real world, the only other example being the intro and outro of Mendelssohn’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which represent leaving the real world to visit the surreal and then returning. Formally speaking, *Falstaff* is the most unique of the four Shakespearean pieces in this paper.

Falstaff expands the orchestra even farther than Strauss with the addition of snare drum, tambourine, triangle and two harps, inclusions which fulfill the piece’s ambitious demands of a narrative portrayal of Sir John Falstaff throughout three Shakespeare histories (“King Henry IV, Part 1,” “King Henry IV, Part 2,” and “King Henry V”).

Melodically, *Falstaff* has more distinct themes than any of the other works. While they certainly speak to the characters of Sir John Falstaff and Prince Hal, they do more to reflect the story of Shakespeare’s plays than any other piece examined in this paper. There is not just one Falstaff theme, but many, representing him in a variety of settings and actions. Here are just a few:

²⁵ Edward Elgar, “*Falstaff*,” *The Musical Times* 54, no. 847 (September, 1913), 576.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/908045>

²⁶ J. P. E. Harper-Scott, “Elgar’s Invention of the Human: *Falstaff*, Op. 68,” *19th-Century Music* 28, no. 3 (2005), 233.

- “in a green old age, mellow, frank, gay, easy, corpulent, loose, unprincipled, and luxurious”

Ex. 1. *Celli, Fag. & Bass Cl.*
Allegro.
f ten. ten.

- saying “I am not only witty in myself but the cause that wit is in other men”

Ex. 2. *Cl. Str.*
p p &c.

Cor., &c.

- “as cajoling and persuasive: ‘Sweet wag, when thou art king’ etc.”

Ex. 3.
scherzando.

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Rhythm is used freely to achieve whichever narrative ends Elgar desires. This piece shares this trait in common with both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, although the tone is much more lighthearted, true to the jovial nature of Sir John Falstaff compared to the troubled and tragic essences of the tragedies.

²⁷ Edward Elgar, “Falstaff,” 576.

It is impossible that someone who has never read the literary inspirations for these works should listen to their symphonic derivatives and somehow discern the plots of the plays that sired them with any degree of specificity. However, if the source material is known to the listener and/or shared to him prior to the performance in a program, it is possible for the listener to construct a narrative in his or her mind informed by, and even in step with, the music. In some ways this is an admission that music will always need nonmusical references to depict nonmusical ideas.

The choice to examine only Shakespearean based symphonic poems was made to compare and contrast ways their composers conjure the essence of well known and time-tested stories. Some do so by implying a linear arc with musical representations of specific events. Elgar and Mendelssohn succeed most in this regard. Others evoke the *character* of their characters, settings and philosophical quandaries. This was the achievement of both Liszt and Strauss, although Liszt does so more aligned with Shakespeare's vision than Strauss. All four of these composers use some combination of narrative and characterization in their symphonic poems. Since the character of each Shakespearean play is different, judging the symphonic poems inspired by them against each other (like judging an apple by the traits of an orange) is an inherently flawed endeavor. Perhaps a better study would only examine pieces inspired by the same work, say Liszt's *Hamlet* versus Tchaikovsky's *Hamlet*. However, it is not unreasonable for a listener to assess how well these symphonic poems depict the narrative or character of their Shakespearean inspirations. *Midsummer* brilliantly succeeds at evoking the character of the mystical setting and entertaining characters of Shakespeare's comedy. In doing so, it constructs a compelling scaffolding of the plot.

Hamlet effectively conjures the melancholy and fractured quality of Hamlet, Ophelia and the rotten state of Denmark. *Macbeth* communicates plot with some efficacy, but its characterizations of Lady Macbeth and Macduff are somewhat deaf to the perspective of the play's protagonist. *Falstaff* is the most incidental music examined herein. It depicts a high number of the actions in the Shakespearean plays that inspired it, but it also succeeds in portraying the complex character of its namesake.

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<https://doi-org.proxy006.nclive.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.28114>

Scores and Recordings on YouTube

Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* (1842)

- <https://www.dropbox.com/s/bp57hl0c1u0m0fk/Midsummer%20Night%27s%20Dream%281826%29.pdf?dl=0>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEkcP8IZvZA&t=234s>

Liszt's *Hamlet* (1858)

- <https://www.dropbox.com/s/aon99frpxcbwaif/Hamlet%20Orchestra.pdf?dl=0>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MywDbD5nETk>

Strauss's *Macbeth* (1888)

- https://www.dropbox.com/s/u28718s5yeao6nh/Richard_Strauss_-_Macbeth.pdf?dl=0
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBtJW5pbauw>

Elgar's *Falstaff* (1913)

- <https://www.dropbox.com/s/loqksiihebyqdz2/Falstaff.pdf?dl=0>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irwSApqwU3k>