

MAGICAL MUSICKING: MUSICAL COMMUNICATION IN
CONTEMPORARY FANTASY LITERATURE

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Abstract

This dissertation considers the role of magical music in contemporary fantasy novels through a thematic comparative study of nine texts. It slots into a gap in the literature regarding the intermedial, ekphrastic depiction of music in the written word, as previous studies have largely focused on realist texts and ignored speculative fiction, as well as looking at a more diverse selection of texts than has been standard in the field of fantasy literature studies. I coin the term ‘magical musicking’, extending Christopher Small’s (2012) concept of musicking, denoting music as an active human encounter that confirms and affirms the relationships of the living world, to the magic-enhanced forging of connections in fantasy literature. Across six chapters, drawing on musicological theory, I consider research questions of how different fantasy texts portray the magic of music and why music is particularly suited for inclusion in the fantasy genre, how and why musical communication fails or succeeds in these texts, and why music is an effective tool to show both authorial and in-text diversity.

While there are a variety of themes interrelated with music to be found in these texts, leading to chapters on nature, death, temptation, self-expression, gender, and medium, I argue that the constants across all texts are musically aided communication and agency, the latter largely deriving from the former. Magical musicking profoundly shapes all nine narratives by making such communicative acts as physical entrainment, transference of emotion, and even communication of detailed messages both more physically and mentally concrete and more universal than their effects in the real world. Yet I also conclude that any intimation of a romanticised universality of music in these texts is limited by listeners’ individual wills and agencies as well as the magic systems in place. The fantasy genre is thus a space where beliefs in the power of music can be explored and defined beyond western scientific theory.

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Introduction

The Magic of Music

Music is magic. Magic is life.

- Jimi Hendrix

Why do we think music is magic?

If there is one question that underscores all the themes and analysis presented in this dissertation, it is this one. It is, of course, a rather large question that could – and I hope will, in due time – be approached from many angles in different academic and non-academic fields. My own approach to a partial answer is best illustrated with another question: how is the magic of music represented in contemporary fantasy? Putting together ‘magical music’ as a concept and fantasy, as a genre that explicitly admits magic as a narrative force, is perhaps an obvious step to take. Literary fantasy studies is still an emerging field, with much scope for analysis of untrodden ground, including its relationship to music. The intermedial nature of this relation complicates and enriches analysis, requiring me to draw on music in literature studies as well as fantasy studies to grapple with the portrayal of a sounded medium in a silent one. It is also necessary to consider how music plays out in the real world, making the field of musicology another aspect of this dissertation. The final field implicated by this research is mythology studies. Both literary fantasy and music have a close relationship to mythology that is often reflected in contemporary works of fantasy. As I strive to discuss varied and diverse texts in different languages and from different places in

the world, there is no one appearance of music in mythology that counts as the definite antecedent of contemporary musical fantasy – though the ancient Greek story of Orpheus makes a fair bid for it in the western canon – but the rootedness of contemporary fantasy in mythological and folktale traditions nonetheless adds to the discussion of music in the fantasy literature. The scope of this study encompasses close thematic reading of nine contemporary works of fantasy literature, focusing on the differences and similarities in their handling of magical music. While the study of the overlap of fantasy and music can also usefully and intriguingly be expanded into research in further media forms, from music in fantasy genre movies and television to fantasy video game soundtracks, I limited myself to the written word so as to keep the present study both cohesive and manageable.

When I first started this research, I had notions of overlapping themes that included the importance of nature in texts that feature magical music, encounters with death, the self-expression art and music are uniquely capable of, and the tempting power of music magnified by magical means. These became the structural backbone of this project, as each chapter focuses on one of these themes. What crystalised only during the writing process, however, is that even those themes largely rely on the underlying process of music granting characters agency. That in itself is hardly a surprise – one could argue that fiction narratives are all about either giving or taking away agency from characters and seeing how they deal with the consequences; music is only one of many tools in a fantasy writer’s kit able to accomplish this, though granted it is not necessarily an obvious one to choose. So, is there anything that sets magical music-given agency apart? Considering further, I reached the conclusion that magical music largely – and largely uniquely – relies on communication as its central concept as opposed to merely representing entertainment or art without signification. On one level, there is forthright musical communication in all texts, if sometimes between unusual parties. On another level, there is musical communication with

the universe, with the way the world is built and governed through forcing one's will to be made manifest via magical music and compelling the universe to respond. The many connections forged through music in these narratives are all in some way communicational, underpinning characterisation and plot.

At the same time, both music and the literary fantasy genre are haunted by questions of universality. Claims of music as some kind of universal language that bridges linguistic and cultural differences are never far from the discourse, for all that musicology (particularly ethnomusicology) nowadays largely emphasises the cultural and individual specificity of music interpretation and affect. Proponents of music as a kind of universal language include Marie Kathleen Higgins and Felicity Laurence, who highlight the connective and centralising nature of taking part in music acts. Other scholars phrase their arguments more cautiously but nonetheless point out aspects of music that imply a universalising trend, such as Richard Ashley noting music's "potential for unity" (487), philosophical discussions of music's transcendence by scholars like Anna Reid and Ferdia J. Stone-Davis, or Mark Carroll (2012) drawing on history and practical example to show the use of music in nationalistic movements. There is something indefinably tempting in considering music as something that can bridge and elide differences in a non-invasive, harmonious way. For all the academy's overall distrust of such romanticisation, evidence of such thinking is easy to find, from the chapters' epigraphs about music's power by working musicians (including Aretha Franklin, Louis Armstrong, and Lizzo, among others), to attempts to use music in diplomacy or humanitarian aid (for example Live Aid, or the USA's jazz ambassadors), to entertainment shows such as *The Piano* (UK)¹ or 乐在旅途 (*Enjoy the*

¹ Centred around public pianos in train stations across the United Kingdom, this programme showcases pianists of all ages and walks of life, often not classically trained and accompanied by stories of how music changed their lives in various ways.

Journey, China)² pitched to show music breaking down barriers, to humans sending music out into space in case of alien encounters. It is by no means a universal view, but one that is nonetheless prevalent in western cultural offerings. The musical fantasies considered in this dissertation play out the fantasy of music as a ‘universal language’ on an exaggerated scale, as (generally human) characters use music to communicate with such varied listeners or interlocutors as nature spirits, whales, the dead, their own inner self, and large audiences that range from armies to concert-goers. Yet, even in the nine texts chosen here, variations in the efficacy of this universal musical communication appear, based on the diversity of instruments and magical approaches, limitations imposed on the audience, and even breakdowns in communication. Additionally, the magic itself can be read as a non-normative element of the fantasy story narrative in the eyes of the audience: it disrupts the realism of events and offers its practitioners ways to express themselves beyond their expected roles in life, abilities, and indeed gender – such expectations may be different in a fantasy setting, but constructed societies generally still give their people labels. In particular, ‘soft’ magic systems, in which magic’s limits and methods are not rigidly defined, purposely defy definition, forcing the characters as well as the reader to look beyond pre-defined norms to the unique workings of magic – and magical music – in the narrative.

We are left with something of a paradox: on the one hand, the fantasy context drives the universality of communication, magic compelling even the universe to respond; on the other hand, we find diversity in backgrounds and approaches that tally with musicological research showing that music is diverse and culturally limited in what is communicated, and magic itself appears as a factor complicating normativity. The majority of recent musicological research falls under this latter category, with trends of the contextualisation of

² This programme sends famous mainstream singers to tour around China and experience traditional and folk music from all around the country.

music popularised by Susan McClary and others as part of the new musicology movement since the 1980s insisting on the situatedness of each piece and act of music in its cultural and historic milieu. Ethnomusicologists such as Bruno Nettl and Kenneth A. Gourlay also largely support a more culture-specific view of music's capacity for communication, as the discipline tends to highlight differences rather than similarities of human music making across cultures. While neuroscience finds some arguably universal effects of music in terms of arousal and entrainment, various studies have found that recognition of complex emotions differs between listeners with distinct cultural backgrounds (see Stevens 2012 for an overview), and musicologists' interpretations of such data tends towards analysing individualised responses. In contrast to Higgins' argument that music enables openness across cultures, musical sociologists such as Denora (2009) highlight every person's individual ways of engaging with the music, including the choice to be open to its effects. Thus, reflections of these opposing impulses in literature are what interest me. Returning to the initial question – why do we think music is magical? – I will pursue the answer from this angle of the failures and successes of the dream of universal communication in these magical music texts. My research questions, thus, are three-fold:

- 1) How do different fantasy texts portray the magic of music and why is music particularly suited for inclusion in the fantasy genre?
- 2) How and why does musical communication fail or succeed in these texts?
- 3) Why is music an effective tool to show both authorial and in-text diversity?

The thematic chapter structuring then gives these questions a scaffolding, examining the magic and communication of music through the lens of each theme.

Field overview

The inherently intermedial nature of this research makes it sit uneasily between fields. To shape my own analysis, I relied on context from four different fields. The first field is literary fantasy studies, most notably Farah Mendlesohn's advice on thematic criticism in the field, Brian Attebery's focus on the intertwining of mythology and fantasy and the smattering of research looking at the intersection with music, which includes work by Isabella van Elferen, Bradford Lee Eden and Faye Ringel. The second field is music in literature studies, aligning myself with culture-focused rather than structural studies, as found in Gerry Smith and Stephen Benson's work. The third field is mythology studies, focusing on Greek and Chinese musical cosmology as enumerated by Andreas Kramarz, Jamie James, and Erica Fox Brindley. While fantasy literature studies provide the bedrock of the type of thematic close reading I engage in and music in literature studies informs my approach to this intermedial topic, the critical work I am most in conversation with is largely situated in the fourth field of musicology. Most obviously, I expand on Christopher Small's concept of music in the fantasy context, coining the term magical musicking. I also take various discussions on the effects of music and their universality or non-universality in the field³ as a starting point for comparing these fantasy texts' descriptions of the power of music with real world assumptions. The overlaps with – and extensions of – musicologists' theories about music's effects, from referring to Anna Reid's discussion of musical transcendence in Chapter 1 to Sasha Geffen's positioning of music as a way of breaking gender binaries in Chapter 5, are what give the depictions of music in these texts their analytic edge, situating fictional accounts in their real-world contexts. However, given my focus on fictional literary accounts of music, I do not consider myself as contributing to the field of musicology *as such*, merely drawing connections between it and fantasy literature

³ See the previous two paragraphs for a brief overview of scholars and page 16 to 21 for a more detailed recounting.

that gesture towards real-world beliefs in music. In the following section of the introduction, I will briefly introduce all the fields involved in this project and give a little more detail on scholars and theories particularly relevant to this analysis of music in fantasy literature.

Fantasy literature

The field of literary fantasy studies is comparatively young and has thus far mostly been concerned with questions of legitimacy and defining itself as a field, as well as defining what ‘fantasy literature’ comprises. More recently, thematic studies or case studies of specific works or authors have been prevalent, with relatively few attempts to do large-scale or structural comparative analysis. Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2006) and its division of the genre into different types of fantasy (immersion, intrusion, portal-quest, and liminal) is an exception. She joins other influential scholars such as Brian Attebery, whose focus lies more on thematics and the inner workings of fantasy and has defined fantasy as a ‘fuzzy set’ with no easily discernible boundaries since 1983 (in response to the perennial question of ‘what counts as fantasy’) as well as examining its relation to mythology (2015), and Kathryn Hume, whose work on fantasy and mimesis from 1984 is still influential. She helped establish fantasy alongside literature more straightforwardly representing reality through her argument that all literature is the product of the two impulses of mimesis and fantasy, thus making a strict division between the two of them neither useful nor accurate. She argues that fantasy’s manifestations in a text serve purposes from “giving voice to authorial vision” to “manipulating and releasing audience tensions” because “fantasy helps activate whatever is in our minds that gives us the sense that something is meaningful” (20). Also notable is Rosemary Jackson’s 1981 work on psychoanalysis and fantasy literature, arguing that fantasy is primarily an expression of unconscious desires by looking at recurring themes such as metamorphosis, multiple selves and mirror images. Other scholars such as Lucie Armitt (1996) and Richard Mathews (2016)

give overviews of the genre via thematic analysis of sub-genres and select, influential works to elucidate the trajectory of the genre's development. My own work is also largely thematic, with an added dimension of intermediality, and does not offer any new methodologies beyond the framework of 'magical musicking' to the field – what sets it apart is the focus on music.

Music in literature

The focus of the field of music in literature (or, alternatively: literary music/word and music studies) has so far been on classification and terminology, on structural questions of music's appearance in literature, and more recently on culturalist views beyond structure. The structuralist side is represented by Steven Paul Scher, whose essays on what he calls Word and Music Studies have been edited into a collection by Walter Bernhart and Werner in 2004 and include his theory on verbal music (representation and presentation of music in words), his segmentation of types into 'literature in music', 'music in literature' and 'music and literature', and analysis of verbal music in various texts of German literature. He builds on work done by Calvin S. Brown in *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts* in 1948, which lays out the points in common between music and literature and singles out the Leitmotiv as a musical and literary device. Werner Wolf broadens the terminology into intermediality in *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (1999) which is largely concerned with creating a classification scheme of instances of music in literature that is more intricate than Scher's earlier one – he then applies his structuralist scheme to music in modernist literature by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and others. Culture-oriented analysis has been gaining steam since the late twentieth century, with early proponent Jean Pierre Barricelli favouring the term 'melopoiesis' and looking at non-western contexts such as China and India and various philosophers' thoughts on music in *Melopoiesis: Approaches to the Study of Literature and Music* (1988). Lawrence

Kramer, in his article “Dangerous Liaisons: The Literary Text in Musical Criticism” (1989), stresses that music should not be treated as an abstract entity but as always contingent on culture and history and looks at convergences between music and literature in light of that argument (though he is generally more interested in narrative music than the literary side). More recently, Stephen Benson’s *Literary Music: Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction* (2017) considers the questions of what idea of music is represented contemporary fiction novels and Lydia Goehr dissects musical ekphrasis as an expansion of the context of music “beyond its modern medium restriction” (389). Finally, Hazel Smith, in *The Contemporary Literature-Music Relationship: Intermedia, Voice, Technology, Cross-Cultural Exchange* (2016), traces the relationship of music and literature in relation to the increasingly globalised and technologized environment, arguing that the “interactions created by word-sound relationships can sometimes create specific culturally transgressive or boundary-shifting effects, and that in particular they can facilitate forms of cross-cultural exchange” (2). What all these theorists have in common is their focus on realistic narratives, often using modernist literature as their novels of comparison. Fantasy as a genre is mostly absent in discussions, occupying a bare four pages in Gerry Smith’s *Music in Contemporary British Fiction: Listening to the Novel* (2016).

On the fantasy literature side, large-scale comparative work on music in fantasy literature also remains absent. However, there are some studies into specific authors’ use of music as a theme, most notably J.R.R. Tolkien, whose works may well be the fantasy readers’ most likely gateway into thinking about fantasy and music.⁴ Studies into music in Tolkien’s secondary world include Verlyn Flieger’s *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien’s Mythology* (2005), which uses music as a way to structure discussion about Tolkien’s world and myth creation, based on Tolkien’s focus on oral tradition and the music

⁴ As they were, in fact, mine

of the Ainur calling Middle-earth into being, and the collection of essays *Middle-Earth Minstrel: Essays on Music in Tolkien* (2010), edited by Bradford Lee Eden. These essays are more specifically about music than Flieger's sweeping monograph, and display varied concerns: several consider the context in which Tolkien situated music, from comparing Rohan to Anglo-Saxon Mercia (Jason Fisher) to relations between *Sir Orfeo* and the tale of Beren and Luthien (Deanna Delmar Evans) and the influence of Victorian medievalism on Tolkien (Bradford Lee Eden); others consider Tolkien's musical influence, looking at compositions based on his works as well as musical influences on Tolkien (David Bratman) and the educational uses of music inspired by Tolkien (Amy H. Sturgis); more thematically inclined contributors are Amy M. Amendt-Raduege, who equates being the subject of music in Tolkien's world to a symbolic immortality, and Keith W. Jensen, who looks at free will vis-à-vis dissonance in the creation music. While these by no means represent an exhaustive analysis of music in Tolkien, whose work is sprawling enough to sustain a whole sub-field of fantasy literature studies, I decided to focus my own efforts elsewhere, highlighting fantasy texts whose relation to music has so far not been discussed. What resonates in all these essays and I am taking forward into my own work, is the real-world contextualisation of even fictional music in a secondary world setting. Not only are musical influences on the author a potentially fruitful avenue of study, there is also a need to keep real world parallels and outcomes in mind in a thematic study like this.

Outside the area of Tolkien studies, there are some further relevant critical works and scholars who have provided reference and inspiration for my work. Cameron Fae Bushnell's (*Postcolonial Readings of Music in World Literature: Turning Empire on Its Ear*, 2012) and Christin Hoene's (*Music and Identity in Postcolonial British South-Asian Literature*, 2014) postcolonial readings of music in literature helped shape my thinking about the impact of spreading music beyond boundaries, as well as initiating analogies between music's

displacement in the literary medium and its postcolonial functions and music's roots in respective cultures and, thus, entanglement with identity. More directly approaching the fantasy genre are Helen Dell's "“Yearning for the Sweet Beckoning Sound”: Musical Longings and the Unsayable in Medievalist Fantasy Fiction” (2011), Faye Ringel's “The Art of Patricia McKillip: Music and Magic” (2005), Allan Weiss' “Disharmony and Dystopia: Music in Classic Dystopian Fiction” (2012), and Isabella van Elferen's monograph *Gothic Music: The Sounds of the Uncanny* (2012) and article “Fantasy Music: Epic Soundtracks, Magical Instruments, Musical Metaphysics” (2013) that approaches fantasy and music from the viewpoint of soundtrack studies. Dell's exploration of music in medievalist fantasy fiction focuses on music's evocation of timelessness and taking up the space where language fails, which touches on my core focus of communication, while Weiss' work on music in utopias and dystopias incisively concerns the question of music's use by the structures of power. Ringel focuses solely on the works of Patricia McKillip, noting both the influence of the Orphean figure on contemporary fantasy and touching briefly on the core of my own work by noting the power of music via magic in the fantasy context. Most comprehensive on the genre as a whole is van Elferen, whose article on fantasy music in general notes fantasy as a “curiously musical genre” (“Fantasy Music” 4). While the article goes on to focus on fantasy soundtracks and their characteristics, it remains relevant in such claims as music often having a “distinct magical agency in fantasy” (11), which also forms one of the core theories in my own work. Van Elferen also touches on musical magic's close relationship with memory, affect, and imagination (11), its transcendental and transformative agency (21), and closes with this statement: “Thus, the musical fantastic is operative through a tripartite magic: the magic of words invites the magic of imagination to marvel at the magic of music” (22). This comment gestures to the

original question with which I opened this introduction, the magic we associate with music being highlighted and strengthened by the fantasy genre.

Music and myth

The relevance of mythology lies in its frequent use as inspiration and antecedent by contemporary fantasy literature authors. Brian Attebery provides much detail and a thoughtful discussion on the fantasy-mythology connection in general in his *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (2014), but for my purposes it suffices to say that depictions of music with marvellous effects abound in mythologies around the world. As a quite fundamental and, in prevailing theory, early pastime of humans, it is no surprise that mythologies and traditions around the world attach importance to music, whether by including it in stories, as part of rituals, or both. ‘Mythical’ music is thus a precursor to the magical music I discuss in this dissertation, and here I will briefly touch on four mythologies of direct relevance to the texts discussed in this dissertation: Greek mythology, particularly the figure of Orpheus, for its surpassing influence on western philosophical thought and fiction; Celtic mythology, with its direct links to the sub-genre of bardic fantasy; and Māori and Chinese mythology, as examples of a non-western mythology’s treatment of music with relevance to discussions in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

Instances of magical music abound in Greek mythology, from Amphion, who built the walls of the city Thebes alongside his brother Zethus by playing his lyre while the stones followed his call and settled into place without his touch, to Arion, whose playing on the kithara called dolphins to his aid when he was kidnapped by pirates, and, of course, the sirens who lured sailors to their deaths with their voices. However, one figure in particular has left his mark on western art and fiction: Orpheus, the Thracian bard who made trees and rocks listen and even moved the rulers of the dead to unheard-of pity. First appearing by

name in the Greek tradition, Orpheus's story persisted into Roman mythology and beyond, with adaptations appearing across European art media – paintings, sculptures, operas, poetry,⁵ and even philosophical thought. As an example of the power of music, Orpheus stands supreme. The magical dimension to his playing, whether seen as such at the time or not, has influenced depictions of music in fantasy up to today. Writing on American author Patricia McKillip's work, which includes a science fiction retelling of the Orpheus myth with a female protagonist (*Fools Run*, 1987) among other novels that strongly feature music such as *The Bards of Bone Plain* (2010), Faye Ringel notes that “[i]n any consideration of music and magic, we cannot avoid the figure of Orpheus” (182). Orpheus is deeply entrenched in western popular culture, generating adaptations of his story to this day. I discuss the strong association of Orpheus with both music and nature in Chapter 1, and his connection with death and the underworld in Chapter 2.

The various stories about Orpheus also give insight into the ancient Greek philosophies on music and the cosmos. Vladimir Marchenkov points out the holistic view of the universe inherent in the Orpheus myth, a trait he sees as having receded with early modern times in favour of the assumption that music's effects are confined to human psychology (xi). He notes the myth as expressing a “belief in the unity of the micro- and macrocosm: both are permeated by the same harmony”, which is the basis of musical magic (27). He also points out that the main themes of the Orpheus myth served as the foundation of Plato's mythopoeia of music and cosmology, politics, and psychology (xvi). Harmony, both as the musical concept of more than one note being played or sung at a time (when done ‘harmoniously’, this is called consonance, as opposed to dissonance) and in its

⁵ There is a whole Wikimedia commons section dedicated to paintings of Orpheus, including works by Cesare Gennari (‘Orfeo’), Jan Brueghel (‘Orpheus in the Underworld’), Gustave Moreau (‘Orphée’, among a whole series) and many more (“Paintings of Orpheus”). Auguste Rodin's famous ‘Orpheus and Eurydice’ sculpture is currently exhibited at The Met. Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* is one of several operas based on the story and the Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo* also references it.

meanings of people being peaceful and agreeing with each other, things seeming right and suitable together among other variations (Cambridge Dictionary), lies at the core of both ancient Greek thought on music⁶ and the Orpheus story. Orpheus uses his music to highlight the harmony of the world, including between nature and people, and also to perpetuate this harmony.⁷

Cosmic harmony and music's place in such a cosmos is also enshrined in ancient Chinese philosophical thought. As Erica Fox Brindley points out in *Music, Cosmology, and the Politics of Harmony in Early China*, music was seen as binding together the human and the cosmic, and came to be “associated with the harmonious patterns of the cosmos itself” (13). She goes through several of the classic texts of early philosophy. In the *Zhuangzi* (莊子), one of the foundational texts of Daoism written during the late Warring States period, the workings of the cosmos are described as a form of music (17). In the *Lüshi Chunqiu* (呂氏春秋) of the late Qin era, also known as *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*, the “cosmic roots of sound” are acknowledged, according with the belief that the music of the sages replicates cosmic harmonies (17). Finally, the “Yue Ji” (乐记), the chapter on music in the *Book of Rituals* (礼记) and a core text of the Confucian tradition, also defines music as the harmony of heaven and earth, in particular associating it with the seasons of spring and summer, and claims that the “forces and interactions of the cosmos constitute music at its very core” (19). In short, nature/the cosmos and music are intrinsically linked and often discussed in relation to each other. Fox Brindley, among others, has drawn connections

⁶ See both the music of the spheres and its cosmological harmony and anecdotes such as Pythagoras soothing an irate man with pleasant music (James 32).

⁷ A future avenue of research would be to delve into more detail concerning the distinction between Apollonian (ordered) and Dionysian (wild) music in the context of Orpheus and subsequent music philosophy (i.e. Nietzsche's argument that Orphic, increasingly rational reinterpretations of Dionysus corrupted the raw vitality of the original and contributed to the decline of Greek tragedy as a whole, and feminist discussions of the gendered aspects of the Orpheus myth). However, such analysis lies beyond the purposes of this present study.

between this ancient Chinese view of the musical cosmos and the Pythagorean concept of the music of the spheres⁸, which sees the planetary motions as governed by harmonic relationships that literally create music. Andreas Kramarz summarises early Greek philosophy as considering music to be essentially dictated by numeric proportions, thus suggesting that musical harmony is “a, or even *the*, cosmic principle” (461). But this cosmic harmonic principle, proving music’s exceptional power, is also paralleled in human souls, “as if the beauty and order of the whole universe were in some condensed way resonating in it” (452). Jamie James points out how the Greek concept of the music of the spheres and the musically harmonic cosmos has continued to be influential throughout western European history, long past the lifetimes of its first notable champions Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle. From Cicero to Galilei, Milton, Ficino, Kircher, Kepler, Newton and Mozart⁹ to Schoenberg and Holst, the harmonic cosmos has echoed through philosophical thought and musical compositions. Little wonder, then, that the same concept also finds its place in fantasy literature: two well-known examples of explicitly musical world creation are J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*, in which the Valar sing Middle-earth into being, and C.S. Lewis’ *The Magician’s Nephew*, which begins the *Narnia* series¹⁰ through Aslan calling the world and life into being by singing.

The many different Māori creation myths have the basic movement from darkness to light and the evolution of nature after sky and earth were separated in common, but do not feature music as part of world creation. Nor is there as preminent a musician figure as Orpheus in Greek mythology. However, music is still of great cultural importance, with extensive song and dance traditions which form part of an oral tradition preserving history

⁸ However, it is not known whether the traditions influenced each other (Fox Brindley 5).

⁹ Whose Tamino in *The Magic Flute* (libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder) also happens to be an analogue for Orpheus, as in act 1, scene 12 he entices wild beasts to come listen to his flute song (James 178)

¹⁰ in Narnian rather than publication history

and knowledge. Waiata¹¹ are associated with myth, in particular with the goddess Hineruhi and her companion Tanenore, who is said to be the origin of the haka (Higgins and Loader 2014). According to Brian Flintoff, the principles governing traditional Māori musical instruments are basic to Māori thought and a part of the “balance of spiritual and physical life forces”, leading for example to a kōauau flute being able to “summon spirits to aid in childbirth or in healing” (“Māori musical concepts”). Interesting in the context of communication and Chapter 1’s exploration of *The Whale Rider* is that traditional Māori music forms are based on “emotions displayed by the gods”, leading to songs characterised by sorrow, loneliness, anger, joy, peace, and so on (“Māori musical concepts”).

Finally, Celtic mythology has had a large impact on fantasy, particularly the so-called subgenre of ‘bardic fantasy’, which draws on (largely made-up) notions of travelling bards who disseminate tradition and culture in the Celtic world. The intertwining of fantasy and all things vaguely Celtic is so accepted that soundtrack composers nowadays use ‘Celtic’ sounds as shorthand for signifying something mystical. As Isabella van Elferen puts it, in the paradigmatic *The Lord of the Rings* soundtrack composed by Howard Shore, the Shire is “identified through the insertion of Celtic references into the orchestral idiom, an effect achieved mainly by the tin whistle (that unfailing musical signifier of all things vaguely Celtic, melancholy and mystical)” (7-8). I discuss specific instances of magical music in Celtic mythology in Chapter 1, in relation to the sub-genre of bardic fantasy which purports to be founded largely on Celtic influences.

While only two of my primary sources are directly based on a mythic story – Witi Ihimaera’s *The Whale Rider* and the Maori myth of Paikea in Chapter 1 and Michael Ende’s adaptation of the Pied Piper story into a contemporary libretto in Chapter 2 – mythologies’

¹¹ Meaning chant, song, poetry, to chant, to sing; there is no precise English equivalent (“Glossary”)

influences on contemporary fantasy are long-standing and pervasive, including in the thematization of music. By contrast, academic musicology is less likely to make appearances in fantasy fiction, but provides a crucial counterpoint when highlighting music's capabilities in fictional settings and the real world.

Musicology

The fields of musicology and music philosophy elucidate academic beliefs about what music can do in the real world, which I then contrast with its efficacy in fantasy narratives. The influence of musicology on my work is three-fold: I consider and contrast the current state of thought on how music affects humans, I engage with the debate on the (non-)universality of music (as a 'language' and beyond), and I adopt the specific concept of musicking, coined by Christopher Small, as a framework for the kinds of music acts that appear in fantasy narratives: the titular magical musicking.

Small defines musicking in *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (2012),¹² explaining that the core of the concept is that music is an activity rather than a thing (8). He sees musicking as a human encounter, which provides us with the language with which we can understand and articulate the sets of relationships that take place during acts of music (13), exploring, affirming and celebrating the relationships of the living world (142). He also points to musicking as a process of storytelling (139), echoing the narrative level of words that the literary texts I analyse consist of. This concept of musicking, thus, resonates with the focus on musical communication and connection explored in the chapters to come; I adjust the term to 'magical musicking' to highlight my concern with the fantasy aspect and the expansion of musical activity in a magical context, which may contrast with musicologically accepted effects of music in the real world.

¹² First published in 1998 and influential in the field since then

Exactly what music's affect is, and how extensive it is, has been a point of debate in musicology for a long time, and, given the nature of the stimuli involved, seems unlikely to ever be fully determined, scientifically or otherwise. That said, in order to contextualise the ways these fantasy authors play with what music can do, I want to give a brief overview of the major strains of thought regarding musical affect. None of these musicological theories should be seen as universal or universally acknowledged (and academics' judgments and discussions of musical affect may also differ from those of practicing musicians), but taken together as a tapestry of opinions, options, and research, they do give an idea of the general outline of western musicologists' thoughts on affect and the perennial question of 'the power of music'. I will briefly touch on the most relevant areas of musicological theory to the discussion of music in these narratives: physical affect and emotional affect.

That music can have physical effects on the listener and performer is well-accepted and often put in terms of entrainment, broadly seen as the alignment of internal rhythm to external rhythm. Ashley frames communication as "action intended to bring about alignment or coordination of states between individuals" (479), which is something music can do on several levels, including entrainment. Music's ability to foster a sense that people are "in touch" with each other through physical motions such as dance, tapping one's feet, bobbing one's head, participating in a drum circle, marching to a beat, and so on thus enables interpersonal coordination as motor systems are aligned physically (486). Kim et al. (2019) take the physical concept of entrainment as a starting point to investigate 'musical social entrainment', which further takes into account how such rhythmic effects are "embedded in social context and contributing to sociality" (1). This also calls to mind Small's concept of musicking and its power to connect performers and audience. Trost and Vuilleumier (2013) further point out that from a neurophysiological perspective rhythmic entrainment can function as a mechanism for inducing emotion, as the processing of timing features in music

“trigger specific neural processes” which contribute to certain emotional states (213), thus moving entrainment on the emotional plane as well.

In fact, emotional affect is frequently addressed in musicology and is an oft-cited effect of music among laypeople as well. The literature acknowledges that “listeners routinely report that music represents, expresses, or communicates emotions, sometimes resulting in very powerful experiences” (Ashley, 484), with mode and tempo described as particularly important to inducing specific sorts of emotion, which is something that art can purposefully use. Mark Evan Bonds (2020) points out that the “essentially abstract, intangible nature of music has encouraged a widespread recognition of its ability to express or arouse emotions and mental states in ways unavailable to the verbal and visual arts” (705-6). A variety of theories aim to account for emotions in music, from arousal or evocation theories to self-expression or persona theories, and no consensus has been reached beyond the very basic fact that emotions are involved in some fashion. Becker (2009) notes the “human universal of arousal” (17), while also allowing for the ethnographic view of cultural, experiential, and empathetic differences in expressive or emotional reactions to music. Studies have found that listeners, when judging emotions, are more accurate when listening to music from familiar cultures (Stevens 2012), though such familiarity can be acquired through experience. On a more individual level, Denora (2009) voices the music sociology point of view of music’s role in “emotional construction” (7). Individuals use music to construct their self-identity, as well as to create and maintain a variety of feeling states through choice of music; music is a source for emotional experience. Thus, listeners are not merely ‘affected’ by music, but actively engaged in shaping how they are moved by music (13-14). Yet music can also become a collective shaping of emotion, used to further a cause or to incite or mediate a conflict (28-29).

Despite the potency of music discussed in various ways and theories, many theorists also note that a degree of ‘openness’ to the music is required for the affect to be notable and, conversely that the rational mind can overcome or ignore the effect if the listener is determined not to be touched. It is certainly true to say that effects differ from individual to individual, thus already disallowing any real thought of universality. However, that does not eradicate music’s potential for unity in particular (Ashley 487), resulting in its usage for propaganda as a targeted way to change behaviour, attitude, and thought (Perris 1985). It is no accident, for example, that music can be and has been used to establish and defend nationhood (Carroll, 2012), aid diplomacy (Dunkel and Nietzsche, 2019, Ahrendt et al. 2014), and generally steer public opinion. Though researchers (and musicians) may not agree on exactly how, why, or how much music affects people, practice has already shown that there *is* affect.

With the above limitations to any universality of affect in mind, the question remains: why is mainstream thinking so tempted by the idea of music being some kind of universal communicator – at the very least of emotion? The root of this may lie in music’s ubiquity in cultures across the world, as well as entanglement in local mythologies, religions, and rituals. While the details and style differ, there are some aspects of music, from the usage of voice and/or instruments to rhythms, that make it recognisably music even to those foreign to a particular style of music. Given the effects that music *does* have on performers and listeners as laid out in previous paragraphs, however many caveats researchers attach to it, the temptation to reach for universality is only heightened. I would also argue that there is a certain willingness on the part of both practitioners and those moved by art to see art in general as something transcendental and common to the human experience – from which there is only a small step to claiming some kind of communication. There is many a quote or aphorism ascribing languagehood to music; think, for example, of

poet and Harvard Professor Henry Wadsworth Longfellow calling music the “universal language of mankind”. Linguists will be quick to tell you that this is loose usage of the word ‘language’, and by most definitions music does not meet the requirements. It certainly is incapable of signifying and conveying the specificity and abstractness of concept that sets language apart. While there have been attempts to use music to *create* music-based languages (most famously Solresol) and there exist some music-based communication systems such as Silbo Gomero, a whistled register of Spanish used in mountainous regions to communicate across valleys and ravines, none are wide-spread and they all suffer from limitations that make it unlikely they would be able to fully replace language as a communication system. However, even setting aside full languagehood as an option, music could both be otherwise universal and still allow some limited communication across linguistic boundaries, and research fields as diverse as ethnomusicology, music philosophy, and neuroscience have considered this question¹³. Proponents of music as a kind of universal communication include Marie Kathleen Higgins, who argues in *The Music Between Us: Is Music a Universal Language?* (2012) that, while music is not a language, it is a means of experiencing and recognising common humanity and enables an emotional openness across cultures, and Felicity Laurence, whose edited collection *Music and Solidarity: Questions of Universality, Consciousness, and Connection* (2017) argues for music’s potential to unite across cultures and includes a chapter by Soufiane Feki, who sees music as a communicational space and argues against the uniqueness of musical cultures precluding their influence on each other. Steven Feld (1984) notes that communication is intrinsically interactive, as music is, and that while music cannot be translated to the verbal mode, its generality and multiplicity of possible messages and interpretations creates a

¹³ This leaves aside the question of musical universals (i.e. principles of rhythm, harmony, etc. that hold across all music in the world) themselves, which also constitute an ongoing argument in the field. See, i.e. Bruno Nettl (1999), Philip V. Bohlman (2002), Tenzer & Roeder (2011), Catherine J. Stevens (2012), Yurdum et al. (2023).

particular engagement on the part of the listener. There are, in fact, few who argue against music as a communication system – it is the limits of the system and the extent of its universality and the ethics attached to thinking of music as such that are more in question. Nomi Dave (2015), arguing against the unqualified usage of music as a human rights tool, notes that the question of universality centres on a morally idealist (and romanticising) view, which resonates with internationalist wishes for music as cross-cultural communication and ignores more nuanced views of varying music meanings across cultures. This suspicion of universal meaning (and thus communication) of music is echoed by many ethnomusicologists (i.e. Kenneth A. Gourlay, Bruno Nettl) and musicologists (i.e. Edward Pearsall and Byron Almén, Susan McClary).

This, then, is the platform that fictional accounts of music step onto: a common tendency to view music as something at least near-universal and transcendent, and an academic field that is divided on the subject but largely comes down on the side of being suspicious of this tendency. Romanticisation of music is in many ways the key concept to keep in mind while dealing with fantasy literature's fictional accounts of music's powers. In fantasy, realism is not necessarily desirable in all aspects and there are whole subgenres largely concerned with holistic, universalist approaches; and of course also those texts which take aim or parody that kind of 'fantasy' thinking.

Methodology and structure

This project, as a systematic comparative study, aims to extend the scope of thinking about fantasy and music in literature beyond single works and authors and diversify the discussion through considering texts as culturally varied as my competency allows. Currently, the fantasy genre is in the process of diversifying the established and entrenched western canon, and academic engagement with the genre should follow suit where

appropriate. By putting sources by marginalised authors in conversation with more mainstream ones, I highlight this growing diversity and draw academic attention to texts that have previously been overlooked. By refusing to look only at works in English by authors with a white American or British background, which do still dominate the genre, I hope to broaden the discussion of this topic beyond the established canon of western fantasy, without ignoring it entirely. My thematic analysis further draws out mainstream thinking about the powers of music, as displayed in these works of fiction, and contrasts this with academic musicological research, as well as linking back to mythological roots of contemporary fantasy. This kind of interdisciplinary and – by virtue of analysing descriptions of one medium in another – intermedial approach offers a less constrained view than staying strictly within one field’s boundaries would, allowing a connective view. Furthermore, I offer the concept ‘magical musicking’ as a framework for thinking about music in fantasy around which I frame the communicativeness agency of music in these texts.

A handful of terms that appear regularly throughout this dissertation need to be defined. First, I take the central concept of ‘communication’ in a broad sense of ‘transmitting information from one entity to another’. The entities need not be human, nor does the information need to be as specific as verbal communication allows. As I use music as the communicative structure, words may be involved in the form of lyrics, but mostly are not present, and what is communicated ranges from emotions to understanding, truth, non-verbalised concepts that nonetheless appear to be conveyed as clearly language would manage, and physical arousal or movements. In the slightly more abstract sense, communication as I use it is concerned with two entities’ engagement with each other, and thus exceeds mere information and comes to rest on a level of connection.

Throughout, I use the term ‘magic’ (and magical) in the western fantasy genre sense of supernatural effects, i.e. effects that the average western reader would not consider to be possible in the real world, such as the sound of a bell opening the way to an underworld or playing pipes compelling children to follow an adult like ducklings. The degree of what is considered to be realistic or supernatural naturally differs from individual to individual and between cultures. I am conscious of these differences, but both for the sake of argument cohesiveness and expected readership, and due to my own positioning, can only adopt this western fantasy-centric approach.

My selection of primary sources ran along two axes: suitability for the topic of magical musicking and diversity. For a text to be considered, the basic requirement is the presence of music in the narrative; this music has to be of plot importance, rather than merely incidental, and, as part of the fantasy genre set-up, have effects beyond what the standard western view would consider realistic or natural. I thus conceptualised possible sources as fitting within this schema:

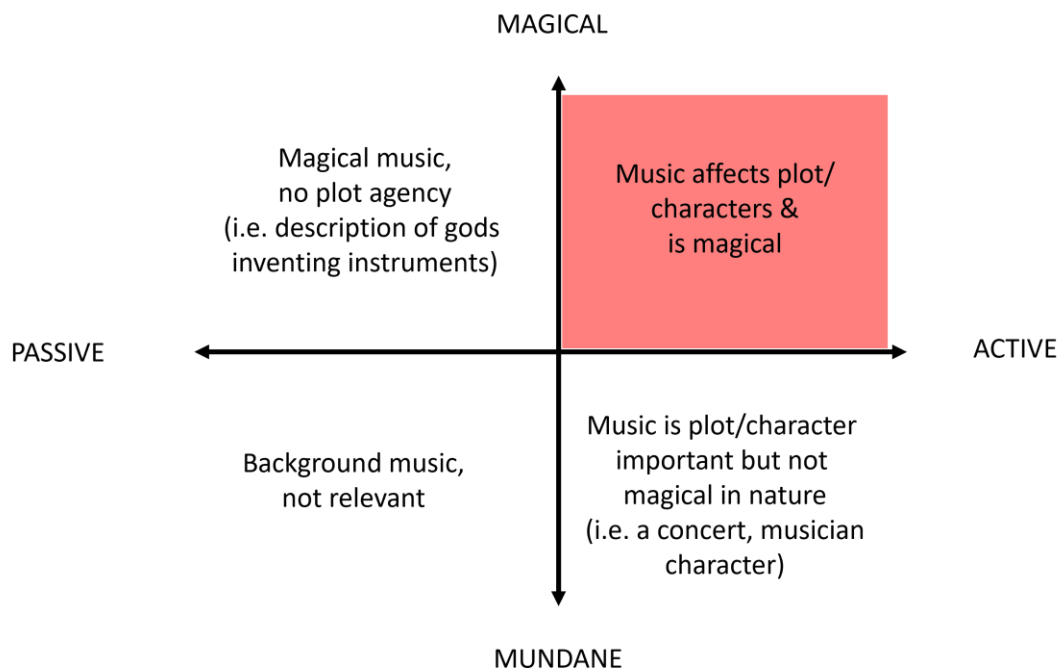


Figure 1: Magical music schema

Along the axis from ‘passive’ to ‘active’, passive describes music that is either in the background of scenes or not particularly relevant to the plot, whereas active music affects the plot and the characters. The second axis is a sliding scale from ‘mundane’ to ‘magical’. Even in the fantasy genre there can be music that is plot-relevant but not in any way magical; perhaps the main character is a musician without magical powers, or some plot point happens at a musical concert. The opposite is also possible, in the form of music that is clearly magical, but does not notably affect the plot or characters. An example of this would be the mention of supernatural beings having invented a certain instrument, without that instrument subsequently being magical in nature when used in the narrative. For this dissertation, I am solely interested in music that falls into the active magical rubric, both going beyond the mundane and strongly affecting the plot and/or characters. This still left me with a multitude of potential primary sources¹⁴. Staying in content considerations, I also selected texts which illustrate certain major ways fantasy deals with music: nature, death, identity, gender, and temptation – the structure of my chapters. That *still* left a decently large pool of options, so I decided to make my final selections based on diversity of text background. To me, a large part of what makes comparative study interesting is how similar topics and themes are considered in texts with very different backgrounds; in addition to wishing to highlight a greater diversity in fantasy texts than the established western canon often pays attention to, I strongly believe that there is something to be learned in paying attention to different approaches – not in terms of finding human universals, though it is also interesting to find similarities across cultures, but in terms of considering viewpoints and story antecedents different from one’s own. Unfortunately, reality still intruded, both through having to choose a mere nine primary sources to analyse, and through having to

¹⁴ One of the reasons for the existence of this project being, in fact, my noticing the preponderance of music in fantasy novels.

confine myself to texts in languages I have some competency in: German, English, and Chinese. Thus, this study is a starting point of diversity, but by no means able to be exhaustive or truly capture the dizzying variety of texts on music in a genre that can be likened to western fantasy.

My final selection of texts is as follows: Tanya Huff's *Sing the Fourth Quarter* (Canada, 1994) and Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* (Aotearoa (New Zealand), 1987); Garth Nix's *The Abhorsen Chronicles* (Australia, 1995-2003) and Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (China; original title 魔道祖师, 2015-2016); Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (USA/Nigeria, 2010) and Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Signal to Noise* (Mexico/Canada, 2015); Michael Ende's *Der Rattenfänger* (Germany, 1983) and Terry Pratchett's *Soul Music* (England, 1994); Ryka Aoki's *Light from Uncommon Stars* (USA/Japan, 2021). Three of these texts are fairly standard western examples of fantasy literature. I chose Tanya Huff's text both to illustrate a classic example of the bardic fantasy sub-genre which is uniquely concerned with music of a particular type in a particular setting and because Huff emphasises female character agency through music and incorporates queer themes into her work. Garth Nix's work is the representative of secondary-world young adult fantasy novels among these sources; I mainly chose it due to its extreme relevance for the theme of music and death dealt with in Chapter 2. Terry Pratchett is arguably the most well-known author among my choices. His Discworld series is very conscious of the tradition of (particularly English) fantasy novels that came before it, as any text which so gently and ruthlessly makes fun of genre tropes and conventions must be. At the same time, Pratchett's fantasy is very anchored in the real world, and I chose to feature it here partly because of the example of anthropomorphised music it provides and partly for its unique network of musical references to the real world, despite being set in a secondary fantasy world. The other six works bring more diverse viewpoints into the analysis. Witi Ihimaera's

work is strongly influenced by Māori history, culture, and traditions, including his treatment of music. Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's novel is set in a fantasy historical China and draws on ancient Chinese music philosophy, mythology, and instrument lore. Nnedi Okorafor is well-known for incorporating her Nigerian heritage in her work, offering postcolonial visions of Africa. Silvia Moreno-Garcia is an emerging writer, whose work I chose for its rootedness in a particular time and place (Mexico City, the late 80s). Ryka Aoki's novel is set in contemporary California, but looks at life and music there from a second-generation immigrant perspective, as well as focusing on a transgender main character. These two novels are my examples of urban fantasy set firmly in the real world and thus offer characters with a very different relationship to music, engaging with music's relationship to technology. Lastly, I chose Michael Ende and his libretto on the Pied Piper story for the modern adaptation of a folktale popular throughout Europe for centuries and which has become a byword for magical fantasy in the mainstream (though Ende's libretto is virtually unknown).

The chapters are structured thematically, most featuring a conversation between two texts that thematise music in similar ways. The first chapter is concerned with nature, and magical music providing access to nature and communication with it. The second chapter thematises death, a part and yet also flipside of nature, and how magical music can bridge the boundary between life and death. The third chapter considers music's shadow-side through the theme of temptation and music's power to lure the unwary. The fourth chapter deals with identity creation and expression through music, with a focus on how this gives agency to otherwise disadvantaged characters. The fifth chapter discusses gender as a more specific aspect of one's identity, and music's capacity to express an individual's private gender identity publicly. The sixth chapter, a coda, brings together aspects of several of these texts to consider how musical communication is affected by medium, through the lens

of fantasy. Together, these six chapters consider magical music in these nine primary sources, showing magical music as universally communicative, yet individually-inflected through worldbuilding, plot circumstance, and characters' experiences and motivations. Yet a few common strands do appear: music's capacity to cross boundaries, its emulation of language's specificity beyond realistic expectations and similarly inevitable emotional arousal, and its outward presentation of private identity and agency. If magic is music to these authors, then their common message is one of fostering, or even forcing, understanding; and understanding is the basis for all connection, magical, musical, or otherwise.

Chapter 1:

The Music-Nature Connection

“Music in the soul can be heard by the universe.”

— 老子(Lao Tzu/Laozi)

Singing trees, elemental spirits who listen to musical commands, flute music that makes birds stop in flight – an association between music and nature appears in many fantasy texts, ranging from the kind of explicit connection in Tanya Huff’s *Sing the Four Quarters* and Witi Ihimaera’s *The Whale Rider* that I explore here to underlying resonance that may never quite make its way into the main plot but adds colour to the complexity of worldbuilding. All of the texts discussed in this dissertation are in some way concerned with the communicative and connective dimension of music, of which a relation to nature is only one aspect. At first glance, this dimension appears tantalisingly – or perhaps suspiciously – universal, driven by the addition of fantasy elements which only heighten the possibilities inherent in musical activities without the necessary cleaving to reality. Music is used to build bridges between characters, situations, races, life and death, and more abstract concepts. Yet, the connection to nature is perhaps the most pronounced, with deep roots in the various mythologies drawn on by contemporary fantasy. This chapter considers music-driven symbiosis of nature and people, music-driven community building that is inclusive of nature, and how musical communication underlies and facilitates both. I show how the ‘magical musicking’ in these texts extends realistic musicologist assumptions about music into a narrative tool that shapes the intersection of humans and nature.

The importance of the theme of nature to the fantasy genre has been elucidated elsewhere¹⁵ and I shall not retread this ground here. It is, however, worth noting that connecting music and nature relates to what scholars have termed the holistic tendency of fantasy, in which the interconnectedness of both material and non-material phenomena counters what Mark Oziwicz calls ‘reductionist’ fantasy in which phenomena are predominantly understood in isolation and characterised by physical factors (4). Whether one accepts this particular critical distinction or not, the fantasy narratives examined here that focus heavily on music do indeed predominantly express a holistic worldview in which the interconnectedness of everything, including music and nature, is key to worldbuilding, narrative stages, and character development.¹⁶ Indeed, music, as I will demonstrate, in large part explicitly drives the building of such connections – and has done so for centuries, in many of the popular antecedents of today’s contemporary fantasy literature.

Music, nature, and mythology

In the western tradition, no story featuring an intertwining of nature and music has had greater impact than that of Orpheus, the Thracian bard whose music made trees and rocks listen and even moved the rulers of the dead to unheard-of pity. That both music and nature are crucial to the figure of Orpheus becomes clear with his introduction in Apollonius’s *Argonautica* (3rd century BCE), which focuses on Jason’s travels but also features Orpheus as one of the crew, introducing him thus:

¹⁵ See, for example, Laszkiewicz’s 2017 article on the importance of trees and forests in fantasy fiction, Brawley’s 2014 monograph on nature and the numinous in mythopoeic fantasy, Mark Wolf’s inclusion of nature as a crucial part of speculative fiction worldbuilding (2012), or the chapter on animal fantasy in Armit’s 2020 overview of the genre. Even aside from such direct mentions, scholars often seem to take the connection between nature and fantasy for granted, as can be seen in passing yet telling mentions in other seminal work. Genre-defining early works by J.R.R. Tolkien, William Morris and George MacDonald, all of whom linger on nature as a crucial element of story as well as setting, contribute to the association.

¹⁶ There is, of course, some bias in this assertion, as I particularly focus on stories that highlight music and nature, affording music a major role. I do not claim that every single recent fantasy work with some interest in music fits this framework.

First then let us mention Orpheus, whom it is said, Calliope herself once bore near the peak of Pimpleia, after making love to Thracian Oeagrus. And he, they say, charmed the hard boulders on the mountains and the course of rivers with the sound of his songs. And the wild oak trees, signs still to this day of his singing, flourish on the Thracian shore of Zone where they stand in dense, orderly rows, the ones he led forth down from Pieria, charmed by his lyre.

(Apollonius 5)¹⁷

Orpheus is clearly strongly associated with nature – four of these six lines concern his relation to it – and his image is inextricable from pastoral scenes. Not only does he play *to* nature, with nature as his audience, he even ‘charms’ it: a word choice that implies consciousness on the part of trees and stones. Whether nature becomes conscious through Orpheus’ music or was previously considered to be possessed of less strictly defined agency, or a combination of both, is hard to say, but in terms of today’s parlance it is certainly unusual to claim that music can emotionally touch rocks. This is the purview of fantasy, where both music and nature can be endowed with unusual powers. Orpheus’ association with nature is also highlighted in perhaps the most famous retelling of Orpheus’ stories: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1st century CE, ca. 8 CE). ‘The Songs of Orpheus’ section features this passage, which echoes Apollonius’ introduction of the character:

Such was the grove the bard had gathered round him,
and now, amidst the concourse of the birds
and the assembled beasts, he took his seat;
and after he had plucked the lyre strings
and felt the varied modes in harmony

¹⁷ Translated by William H. Race

(though each string had its own distinctive sound),

Orpheus began to raise his voice in song (Ovid, Book X, 197-204)¹⁸

While there is no explicit description of the music's impact on the elements of nature surrounding Orpheus, the fact that he can assemble birds and beasts to listen to him is already remarkable, speaking to the connection his music forms between himself and animals. He also, as in the *Argonautica*, plays outside in the forest; Orpheus's music is not usually associated with the hearth or buildings, where music might also take place.

At the heart of all stories about Orpheus lies music's power, at least in Orpheus's hands, to communicate: not on the level of words, or not merely so if singing accompanies the music, but as emotional appeals and enchantments, driven by music's capacity to create connections between humans, humans and gods, humans and nature. A monograph on the Orpheus myth by Charles Segal makes similar points. He notes that the "sympathy [Orpheus] creates between himself and the beasts, trees, and stones that he moves by his song reflects not an attitude of control but a resonant harmony between poet and nature" (10). Harmony is foregrounded, in the form of a connection created and lived between Orpheus and nature in particular. This connection is not passive; Orpheus is musicking, a conscious act that makes him part of this music-created network, and the extraordinary nature of his music makes it magical musicking, so that the network overtly rather than merely ideologically includes non-human entities of all natural kinds. The concept of musicking elucidated by Christopher Small (2012) rests on music not being an object, a work, but an action that people take part in, whether by playing music, listening, or otherwise engaging with the musical act. It is an encounter that establishes relationships and shares an experience, even tells a story. The Orpheus tales' foregrounding of music as an action that does not privilege the musician over

¹⁸ Translated by Charles Martin.

the audience ensures the equality of nature in this musically created network; it does not matter that the stones and trees and animals do not play music at Orpheus in return. That they are moved by and engaged by his music is enough to make them inextricable from this musical event. Neither does Orpheus tire of his non-human audience; he is never shown to disdain it. Unlike his failure in rescuing Eurydice from the Underworld, where his music afforded him a chance that his human shortcomings then failed to capitalise on, Orpheus' influence on nature is stable and, in not requiring any particular action of nature in return, safe. However much magic factors or does not factor into it, the Orphean worldview is inclusive of nature in all its aspects.

In the Irish Gaelic tradition, music appears as a signifier of the otherworldly and is often associated with faerie reaching into the world and vice versa. "The Voyage of Bran Mac Febal" starts with sweet music that enchants Bran, emanating from a "branch of silver with white blossoms" (Meyer, 2-4), and many of the descriptions of the Otherworld in that story feature music, often hand in hand with nature. The musical branch in Bran's story is echoed by a musical branch in the story "How Cormac Mac Airt Got His Branch", where it is afforded a greater role. Here, the king Cormac Mac Airt is tempted by the disguised Manannán, a king of the Otherworld:

...a glittering fairy branch with nine apples of red gold upon it. And this was the manner of that branch, that when any one shook it wounded men and women with child would be lulled to sleep by the sound of the very sweet fairy music which those apples uttered; and another property that branch had, that is to say, that no one upon earth would bear in mind any want, woe, or weariness of soul when that branch was shaken for him, and whatever evil might have befallen any one he would not remember it at the shaking of the branch. (O'Grady, 213)

The “soft sweet music” (215) of the branch is explicitly linked to faerie, making nature part of music’s bridging of the two realms as well as a signal of the otherworldly. The healing/soothing properties of the faerie music also resonate with the depiction of nature as pure and primal comfort to humans which appears as an undertone in the assumptions of holism in some fantasy literature. While the music in these two Irish Gaelic sources is not described in any detail, unlike its effects, harmony is once again recognisable from context. The music is sweet and soothing, and when the music of faerie is described later on it is in the context of joy and happiness (and trees). Music, nature, and harmony once again build a triangle of overlapping connections. Dissonance is notable mainly through its absence in these stories. Magical music is not associated with it, while harmony encompasses both the music and its effects: healing and soothing, a non-violent, non-contested link between humans and nature. This connection largely is borne out in contemporary fantasy literature as well, for all that the concepts of noise and dissonance have received more, and more positive, attention by researchers of late. At least in the western context, the predominance of harmonious music seems to still be engraved on people’s preferences as well as story creation, driven perhaps by a mixture of cultural consciousness cultivated by myths such as Orpheus and these Celtic examples and the pleasure brought by actively listening to harmony, or rather consonance, in music.¹⁹

While not always explicitly stated as such, in all these examples of music in mythological stories, music is inherently communicative. Communication may take the form of emotional resonance (Orpheus and his nature audience), a musically-aided plea towards leniency (Orpheus and Persephone), or clarifying otherness (the fairy branch). In this chapter,

¹⁹ Personal as well as cultural preferences in music taste differ, of course, and with them how privileged consonance is over dissonance; however, in western music it is generally documented that people like consonant (“mathematically perfect”, according to Pythagoras) intervals, with theories as to why ranging from biologically hardwired impulses to behaviour learned over centuries.

and throughout the dissertation as a whole, I will highlight communicative instances of music, aided by magic, and interrogate the universal connectiveness that seems to be invoked, yet is likewise complicated by limits imposed by all authors on the efficacy of such musical communication. I will explore the relation between music and nature through comparative analysis of Tanya Huff's *Sing the Four Quarters* and Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*. Analysis is divided thematically to compare how the topic is handled by the two authors, moving from the symbiosis between nature and people in the texts to the question of who is making the music and how it affects community, to gender roles and explicit musical communication. I contrast current arguments in musicology concerning musical affect, transcendence, community building, and relation to society with the magically-inflected musicking that drives the narratives of these two texts, showing how the heightened communicative ability of music in both texts encourages thinking and understanding of human and natural diversity.

Celtic and Māori influences: Huff and Ihimaera

Even outside the literal world creation in Tolkien and Lewis, music in the fantasy genre is deeply influenced by its mythological precursors, just as the genre in general often relies on mythological stories as inspiration or antecedent.²⁰ The figure of Orpheus as the wandering bard who is deeply connected to nature in particular is one whose influence can be seen in many works, including in Tanya Huff's *Quarters* series, which also draws on Celtic antecedents. *Sing the Four Quarters*, first published in 1994, is the first novel in Canadian author Tanya Huff's *Quarters* series, also comprising *Fifth Quarter* (1995), *No Quarter* (1996), and *The Quartered Sea* (1999). Deeply concerned with music, both on the plot and

²⁰ See Brian Attebery *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (2014) for an in-depth analysis.

worldbuilding levels, the series is a prototypical example of the sub-genre of bardic fantasy, defined by Brian Stableford in the *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* thus:

BARDIC FANTASY. Players of magical music are frequent protagonists of commodified heroic fantasy, often favored – like healers – by writers intent on avoiding the crude violence of swordplay. The strategy is particularly evident in the subgenre of Celtic fantasy, from which the term “bard” is borrowed. Although no clear boundary separates bardic fantasy from Orphean fantasy, the former usually features quests of a more conventional kind, undertaken without the necessity of journeying into an underworld. (35)

Stableford notes the overlap between Orphean fantasy and bardic fantasy; Orpheus is commonly described as a bard and the two categories facilitate similar themes of music and nature, while enabling a lack of swordplay-type violence. However, due to the prevalence of the Orpheus and Eurydice story, contemporary fantasy associates explicitly Orphic stories with journeys to an underworld as well as music. Many examples of bardic fantasy do draw explicitly on either Celtic sources or the somewhat nebulous (and at least partly artificial) concepts of ‘celticness’ propagated by those who were interested in creating a more homogenous Celtic tradition or, in some cases, were simply interested in fairies and the fairy world.²¹ Lloyd Alexander’s *The Prydain Chronicles*, Alison Croggon’s *Pellinor* series, and Ellen Kushner’s *Thomas the Rhymer* are only some of the many novels that fall into this category, while other novels, such as Patrick Rothfuss’ *The Kingkiller Chronicles*, Charles de Lint’s *The Harp of the Grey Rose*, Mercedes Lackey’s *Valdemar* series, or Alan Dean Foster’s *Spellsinger* series feature bards as main characters but are more divorced from the Celtic context. Among the many bardic fantasy stories in which music is depicted as explicitly

²¹ Arthur Conan Doyle being a famous example of the latter

magical, the effects vary from subtle manipulation of emotions to blatant feats of magic entirely beyond what we would standardly consider the scope of music's effects in the real world, such as using music to draw a terminally ill patient's pain out of their body²² or using harp music to drive creatures into battle frenzy to attack enemies.²³

Sing the Four Quarters falls into the bardic fantasy genre for a few reasons: the main character is explicitly identified as a bard; the types of instruments used and mentioned are those found in mediaeval western Europe (harp, flute, drums, bagpipes) and have a Celtic flavour; the focus of the story is on music; and, finally, nature plays an important role in the novel and there is an explicit connection between nature and music. A brief overview of the plot reinforces all these points. *Sing the Four Quarters* takes place in a secondary world²⁴ which features the western fantasy staple of an amorphously mediaeval setting among pre-industrial kingdoms. The main character, Annice, daughter of the king of Shkoder, has rebelled against her intended place in the world by joining the Bardic Hall. Bards spend their time wandering the kingdom and helping its people, as well as bringing and gathering news. Bards' powers are derived from their ability to sing to one or more of the elements, also called quarters: water, fire, earth, or air. Each element is embodied by elemental spirits called the kigh, whom bards can sing into doing their bidding. This enables all kinds of happenings, from passing messages a long way to making soil more fertile. The plot revolves around an attempted invasion of Shkoder by the neighbouring kingdom Cetamandia, where bardic powers are feared and reviled, by falsely implicating Pjerin, the duke of a border pass, in treason. As Annice is pregnant with Pjerin's child, she sets out to prove his innocence and avert the invasion.

²² Bard Stefen in *Magic's Price* (Mercedes Lackey).

²³ Caradoc in *The Harp of the Grey Rose* (Charles de Lint).

²⁴ A 'secondary world' in fantasy literature studies simply means that the author has created a fictional setting with its own rules rather than adding fantasy elements to a real-world setting (as, for example, some urban fantasy texts do).

Out of the many bardic fantasy novels, I picked *Sing the Four Quarters* to examine for two reasons: firstly, Huff's novel stands out in the comprehensiveness of the worldbuilding's involvement with music, woven into every level of the narrative; secondly, the gender dynamics and queer romance in this novel²⁵ sets it apart from the stereotypical 'male bard sets out to see the world and falls in love with a woman on the way' plot template²⁶, opening up the discussion about musical agency and gender dynamics towards the end of the chapter.

Contrary to the fairly prototypical (queerness aside) example of western bardic fantasy in the form of *Sing the Four Quarters*, Witi Ihimaera's short young adult novel *The Whale Rider*, first published in 1987, represents a departure from the canonical western perspective. Yet the story includes a similar emphasis on nature and harmony, highlighting the deep connections between human musicians and the natural world which facilitate the overall harmony of the world. *The Whale Rider*'s narrative is more explicitly mythological than *Sing the Four Quarters*, as the story is set in the real world and draws on Ihimaera's Māori heritage, stories, and cultural traditions. It is a retelling of the myth of Paikea, an ancestor who was saved from drowning and brought to Aotearoa by a whale (Te Maire Tau), interweaving the past and the present.²⁷ The story focuses on the girl Kahu, the great-granddaughter of the chieftain Koro Apirana. She has the skills, temperament and inclination to become the next leader of the tribe, being more attuned to the traditional Māori way of life than most in her generation, but is rejected by her great-grandfather because she is female. Over the course of the story, her deepening communion and communication with a whale

²⁵ Not a trailblazer at the time, but nonetheless published in a decade where queer representation was not yet as mainstream as it is becoming now.

²⁶ See, for example, Charles de Lint's *The Harp of the Grey Rose* or Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind*.

²⁷ It is notable that in the two versions of the story I read, there is no mention of music ("Story of Paikea", "Ngāi Tahu").

herd, in particular an old whale who had a bond with their long-ago ancestor, enables her to be fully accepted by her community and, eventually, her great-grandfather.

In both texts, music and nature are key aspects of the plot and character agency. Whether in a secondary fantasy world or contemporary Aotearoa, the main characters' musicking forges connections between humans and nature, highlighting music's capacity in fantasy literature to allow communication and harmony between disparate groups.

Symbiosis of nature and people

In *Sing the Four Quarters* bardic abilities are explicitly linked to nature, echoing the novel's ongoing themes of reciprocal impact and effect between humans and their environment. The magic system in this novel derives from the four elements, which are also linked to the four seasons and form the basis of the kingdom's religion. While each elemental spirit (kīh) type stands for one element, some bards have the ability to sense and communicate with more than one type; those who can sing to all four elements, such as Annice, are the most powerful in their ability to unite all of nature's aspects. Fundamentally, the magic powers in this story derive from a literal singing to, and communication with, the embodiments of nature, centring nature as a source as well as a recipient of power via music. For while bards sing to nature to affect the world, nature too can be affected beyond the kīh alone. A poignant passage in which Annice sings to greet the dawn while travelling confirms as much:

Climbing to the top of a small knoll, she turned to the east and dug her toes into damp ground. Almost without meaning to, she started to Sing. It began as a simple welcome to the day, a fledgling Song, pure tones chasing each other joyously up and down the scale. When the first light crested the mountains, it became the Song she'd Sung to the earth in the gardens of Elbasan. As the day

lifted out of shadow, it gradually changed again, becoming more complicated. Swaying, Annice spread her arms and opened her heart, pouring hopes and fears and dreams and self into the Song. Eyes half closed, she filled the valley with her voice, feeling it respond, Singing to that response. The more she Sang, the more energy she seemed to be pulling up through the soles of her feet and the more she poured into the Song... Stepping forward, she frowned, confused, at the ground. The grass on the knoll, cropped nearly to bare dirt by the grazing goats, had grown up thick and green and ankle high. As she watched, the whole valley seemed to ripple as her Song settled into the earth. Bees droned to the heavy heads of early wild flowers and birds answered her Song with a chorus of their own. (Huff 223-4)

This passage is telling with regard to both music and nature and their intertwined state in *Sing the Four Quarters*. First, we have (normal, non-sentient, non-kigh) nature being strongly affected by Annice's singing. Struggling vegetation still in the grips of winter is rejuvenated all at once, grass shooting up and animals suddenly appearing. In essence, a micro-climate has been created in this valley, which makes it appear to be in a different season than the rest of the land. Fertility is emphasised, the song enabling new growth. Second, in line with the themes that suffuse the whole story, there is an emphasis on reciprocity. Annice pours out energy into nature as she sings, and the more she does so the more energy she also pulls from the earth, creating a seamless cycle of give and take of energy that benefits both: Annice transforms the earth's energy into growth all around her, and feels "replete" at the end; she notes that this act of singing "feels good" (223). The cycle of power exchange is clearly a symbiotic one that benefits both Annice and the nature around her.

Furthermore, the entire scene is framed as a communicative interaction: Annice sings *to* the earth, pours her own emotions into the music. She feels it *respond*, and responds to the

response, the scene closing with birds *answering* her music. The word choices are clearly evoking a conversation taking place, if on a non-linguistic level, and music is the vehicle of this exchange. The reciprocal cyclicality of Annice's musicking can also be seen as a merging of herself and nature. The most extreme example of this blurring of boundaries between human and nature comes during the climax of the novel; Annice is in labour while a military attack is ongoing, and her painful birth contractions create a connection to the earth kigh in the area, who all form together into one giant earth kigh with unusual strength. One of the other bards in attendance points out that "Annice *is* earth right now", despite the kigh usually being "less physical" (311). Annice's connection to the element of earth goes from communicative interaction and reciprocal aid to a literal merging of the two – the human bard could not be closer to nature without completely dissolving herself. In this, too, music is the conduit.

In Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, the greater ecosystem and the way humans fit into it are also a fundamental narrative concern. While the sea is treated as its own domain, the land is not ignored entirely. In fact, in the prologue of the story which recounts the story of a past whale rider, the whales sing "a song to the land" (Ihimaera 5) when they emerge, immediately indicating a connection between the two domains. The whale rider on the back of the whale then throws small spears from the sea to the land, creating a physical and metaphorical bridging:

Some of the spears in midflight turned into pigeons, which flew into the forests. Others, on landing in the sea, changed into eels. And the song in the sea drenched the air with ageless music, and land and sea opened themselves to him, the gift long waited for: tangata, man. With great gladness and

thanksgiving, the man cried out to the land, *Karanga mai*²⁸, *karanga mai*,
karanga mai. (6)

In these first few pages, it immediately becomes clear how important nature is to the story; instead of starting with the main character, Kahu, we first get this myth-retelling, which posits man²⁹ among land and sea as a long-awaited gift and uses song to permeate both sea and land. ‘Listening’ is highlighted as a way to judge and connect to surroundings, as Koro Apirana makes clear: “Listen, boys,” he said, and his voice was haunted. “Listen. Once there were many of our protectors. Now there are few. Listen to how empty our sea has become” (50). The silence of the sea in the present time is a symptom of the degeneration brought on by modernity and colonialism, a move away from the traditional way of life; whale song in particular is a way for Koro Apirana to judge the health of the sea, and its absence comes through as a wound that also symbolises humans’ lack of symbiosis with nature at this time. The story’s climax centres on Kahu reforging this connection, not only to the whales, but through the whales to the rest of the natural world. This is made explicit by the whales themselves, at the very end:

“Very well,” the ancient bull whale said. “Then let everyone live, and let the partnership between land and sea, whales and all humankind, also remain.”
And the whale herd sang their gladness that the tribe would also live, because they knew that the girl would need to be carefully taught before she could claim the place for her people in the world. (147)

The partnership between land and sea is embodied by the whales and humans respectively, and it is clear that without it both parties suffer. Before Kahu came along, the whales were

²⁸ Māori: ‘call me’.

²⁹ The word ‘man’ is used instead of a more inclusive gender-neutral alternative in accordance with the text itself and its phrasing.

already readying themselves for extinction, a situation Ihimaera portrays as an equally insidious decline for humans on the spiritual rather than physically life-threatening plane. The moral heart of this story seems to be this: the connection between nature and people needs to be strong for everyone to live well.

Previous scholarship on *The Whale Rider* has also largely focused on Ihimaera's environmental and cultural concerns, which are in any case intertwined. Ihimaera himself, in his contribution to the 2023 collection *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Ocean*, stresses the understanding of Te Moana nui a Kiwa³⁰ not just being an ocean but “an environment, a set of relationships, a branching whakapapa³¹ involving transactional exchanges between man and sea” (28). It is the relationship between humans and the ocean, as well as the land, which the Māori do not see as starkly demarcated from the sea (28), that Ihimaera focuses on, and illustrates through myth and Māori ways of thinking that establish indigenous ways of thinking about the ocean (23). Susan Najita, in the epilogue of *Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific*, also highlights the concept of genealogy, the central relationality of Oceanic identity, which includes the “unification of human and non-human realms” (182) that she sees as central to *The Whale Rider*. Ruth Hsu (2023) takes a similar stance, focusing on the trans-species kinship of humans and whales in the novel. Reading the story as an analogy for the Māori struggle of decolonization, Hsu contends that the central idea in *The Whale Rider* is the viable future for the Māori community illustrated by “re-calling and reinvigorating their whakapapa and its oceanic origins” (332), as exemplified by the Whangara clan's bound fate with the whale herd in the story. The blurring of the species boundary between human and whale that Hsu calls a “mutuality of being” (336) is also pointed out by Ben Holgate (2019), who notes the merging of human, animal, and environment when Kahu spends days diving in

³⁰ the Pacific Ocean

³¹ account of Māori kinship networks

the ocean atop the great whale (101). Virginia Richter (2015) also points to human-whale encounters as confirming a multispecies continuum rather than divide between human and non-human animals in *The Whale Rider*, going so far as to note the “erasure” of this divide (159). In the novel, beached whales stand for ecological disasters that inevitably also affect humans. Another aspect of environmental concerns is the whales’ notice and worry regarding the nuclear bomb testing in the Pacific (i.e. Holgate 2019, Richter 2015). Extant scholarship on *The Whale Rider* predominantly focuses on these two angles of thought: reading the novel in a decolonising and postcolonial context in which Māori culture survives and adapts through its links to the environment and the whales in particular, emphasising its relationality; and reading the novel in terms of ecological and environmental concerns, always impacting both nature and humans. As stated above, all these topics are intertwined. Māori culture and myth, which Ihimaera uses as the bedrock of the story, cannot be extricated from nature and the two-way influence between nature and humans. What this chapter is concerned with and has not been discussed in critical scholarship to date, is the particular role of music in facilitating and strengthening this influence in *The Whale Rider*, embodied by Kahu’s musical interaction with the ancient bull whale.

The one and the many: individual and communal musicking

The communal impact of music as exemplified by the concept of musicking as creating a network of active participants in an act of music, whether they be fellow musicians or audience, is the focus of this section. While *Sing the Four Quarters* lacks the clear real-world reference *The Whale Rider* is built on, and its clearly fictional worldbuilding should not be set on the same level as the kind of reflection of the real world through a different lens than the western viewpoint that Ihimaera engages in, it does include a fictional religion based on nature’s cycles, and musical rituals punctuate the important dates in the year. In terms of magical power, the narrative makes it clear that anything involving all four

elements/seasons/quarters is the most impactful. Although the magic system is built on a four-way distinction of elements that is neither scientific nor truly reflects nature's complexity, it does treat nature as something multi-fold, which cannot truly be called on or embodied by a single person alone. Who is involved – is allowed to be involved, has the chance to be involved – in the act of musicking is as important as the effect achieved. As noted above, musicking represents an encounter that establishes relationships, shares an experience, tells a story. Seen in this light, who is present and involved in a given act of music arguably becomes more crucial than the music itself, which acts as a conduit for this network of relationships. What is particularly noticeable about the winter solstice ritual encountered early on in the story is the presence of several bards working together to call on all elements at once in an explicitly communal performance. While Annice can sing all four quarters, she can only do so one at a time, which means that working together in a group of bards to create musical and elemental intertwining is still indispensable. Collective musicking creates a whole greater than its parts and the symbiosis achieved between one character and nature widens to include several people on equal footing. Part of this ritual solstice ceremony is described early on in the novel, before Annice leaves the bards to find and exonerate the father of her unborn child:

Somewhere in the crowd, a priest called out, “From light into darkness into light again.”

The people answered, “The Circle encloses us all.”

From balconies in the four quarters of the chamber, the bards began to Sing.

First, air; Stasya's powerful soprano rose to open the shutters in the vault.

Leaning into the rush of wind, Annice called water into the Song and heard the fountain on the altar leap into life. The next instant, her body thrummed with the stones of the Center as Jazep's resonant bass evoked earth. The three of

them wove a melody for a dozen heartbeats, then paused for a dozen more as an achingly pure tenor Sang fire.

The darkness vanished in a burst of flame crowned the four great candles as well as the hundreds of smaller ones held carefully by the crowd.

Annice felt the hair on the back of her neck lift as the elements united into one glorious, all-encompassing whole and it became impossible for that moment to tell if she were singer or part of the Song. (Huff 52)

The 'circle' symbolises both all of life and more specifically the four elements and seasons; the passing of one is being celebrated here. The four bardic singers, each on a different voice part and element, not only sing the elements but also literally bring the elements into the ritual: wind through the window, water in a fountain, thrumming stones and flaming candles. Once again the themes of harmony and merging are prevalent. The elements unite into a whole greater than its parts, while Annice loses track of herself as an individual enough to wonder whether she is the singer or part of the song. She is both actively musicking and moved along by the greater whole without agency. A side-effect of the greater unity of many parts is a lack of explicit control for each individual. However, there is no hint that Annice dislikes that feeling; if anything, the opposite is true, as it is part of an experience and moment she describes as 'glorious'. The prevalent theme of harmony – in music, as well as among music, nature, and people – is portrayed as uniformly positive in this story, with very few plot elements which could argue against it.

Although both novels have one clear protagonist, in *The Whale Rider* Kahu is the only human whose music-making the plot focuses on, set apart by her musical connection to the whales more than included in the community. Annice, on the other hand, often makes music together with other bards, whether in ritual or in the pursuit of their work as bards helping the populace of the kingdom. Yet this does not mean that Kahu's musicking has no impact on her

community; in fact, the impact is very large, rippling outward from her connection to the whales to her ascendancy to the chief position in the community, from which she can pull her human social network into the network created by her music that holds both her and nature. *The Whale Rider* may focus on Kahu's singing, but there are also two brief mentions of communal music: a family dinner involving guitars, singing, and Nanny Flowers doing a hula (Ihimaera 80) and the school end-of-the-year ceremony featuring many different performances (85). These may be comparatively more mundane instances of musicking than Kahu singing to a whale, but they are nonetheless indicative of music's role as a community-builder and maintainer. The network and feedback loop created between audience/listener and performer through the act of musicking fosters a sense of belonging – which is also why it is so devastating for Kahu that her great-grandfather does not come to the school ceremony. Her wish is to be accepted by him, and because he does not appear, her musicking cannot help facilitate this connection. As a further effect of music on the community, Kahu's musical interaction with the whales is also less isolated than it may seem on the surface. As other scholars have discussed, the community's connection to the whales mirrors the survival of their culture; they live and die with the whales. Ultimately, Kahu's musicking is a main tool that reconnects the community to nature, through her connection to the whales. The whales themselves form a community is built upon music. Their communication with each other is exclusively carried through song, just as they communicate with Kahu through song.

Music-driven belonging is made very explicit in *Sing the Four Quarters* as well. The solstice ritual scene functions as an extension of something Annice already notes very early in the narrative: “the way I feel when I Sing; that sense of everything snapping into place and being, if only for a little while, absolutely right” (Huff 30). The act of musicking offers her a state of being characterised by belonging and certainty that she craves. This effect is further enhanced by widening that circle of belonging to other people joining in the act of musicking,

as in the religious ritual. While it would be interesting to see whether this sense of belonging and rightness would also appear in musicking that features dissonance rather than consonance, the story does not explore this. The point being made is clearly that of music's potential to connect people and nature positively, while at the same time being an all-encompassing activity. The exclusive focus demonstrated by Annice is a hallmark of the emotional affect of music. For those open to the music, the affect eclipses all else in the moment of musicking. The creation of connection among all those involved in the musical act is crucial for the concept of musicking. The extent to which this happens in real life is a continual source of debate for musicologists, but no one denies the potential. The entire academic and practical field of 'community music' is built upon the idea that music has something to offer the community, and can play a role in strengthening it and bringing it together³². Whether it is the community of listening invoked by Judith Becker in her anthropological perspective on listening (2009), Christin Hoene leaning on Edward Said's thoughts on orchestras to coin the "utopia of community and of being together in concordance and harmony" that music presents us with, while at the same time confronting us with the other (156), Mahiet, Ferraguto and Ahrendt pointing out in the introduction to a collection on music and diplomacy how the idea of a shared musical experience causing a new sense of community that makes a space to "imagine political change and conceive social alternatives" (6), or Susan McClary noting the way musical associations "sedimented into anthems, hymns, or songs can draw communities together into a single entity, temporarily united in body and soul" (1066), the connection between community and music is clearly present. McClary takes music as socially and historically contingent³³, arguing convincingly that music does not exist in a vacuum, and builds culture, and thus community, into every

³² For an introduction to the field, see i.e. *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music* (2018) edited by Bartleet and Higgins, *Community Music in Theory and Practice* (2012) edited by Higgins, or Willingham's *Community Music at the Boundaries* (2021).

³³ See McClary's monograph *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (2000)

analysis of music and its effects. This is also exactly what Huff and Ihimaera both explore in their novels. In both *Sing the Four Quarters* and *The Whale Rider*, it is impossible to isolate music or the magic done through music from the society that enacts it.

Adding a magical, supernatural dimension makes musical connections within the narrative more explicit and potent. The end of *Sing the Four Quarters* is a good example of this, featuring a poignant scene of shared music-making that resonates with emotional sympathy for someone previously seen and treated as an enemy. Albek is the antagonist throughout much of the novel, and yet at the end he is called to the other bards through music and reaches a state of emotional catharsis after having had his abilities suppressed and twisted all his life: “Albek was on his knees, sobbing in the circle of Tadeus’ arms, the dark head bent close to the gold one, and Singing the same Song” (Huff 324). Musical unity erases any prior enmity during this moment. Singing is explicitly framed as a communal activity, connecting people and facilitating understanding across divisions of ideology and war. Throughout the story, a variety of connections are forged in this manner: bard to bard, bard to could-have-been-a-bard-in-another-life, bard to kigh, bard to the land and nature, bard to the country and its people.

However, the act of listening as opposed to creating is positioned as equally important. While the King of Shkoder admits his envy for the bards’ ability to cultivate an awareness of the world around them through the kigh, he also notes the power of being able to *listen* (290) – a flipside of the power to make music that can be listened to in the first place. As someone without magical music abilities, he can only make sure to listen to the bards, whereas the bards can listen to the wider world. Both parties, however, have to be open to this listening; just having these abilities does not guarantee it. This is also something that modern musicology stresses when it comes to the impact of music. Kai Tuuri and Henna-Riikka Peltola’s theory of music listening as an “effortful activity” in which the processes of

hearing and imagination are intertwined (345) provides an interesting enhancement to the concept of musicking, which encompasses both performer and audience and avoids passivity for either. While listening is both an individual and culturally inflected activity³⁴ some amount of shared meanings can emerge in listeners among a certain population (346). Judith Becker also points out that from an anthropological perspective, the image of the “inwardly focused, isolated listener” (cciii) is inadequate for any studies approaching music and emotion, as groups of listeners also develop connections and shared meanings (ccxxx). However, regardless of whether taken as individual or as part of a group, the activeness of listening, people not merely being ‘affected’ but constructing their own engagement with music (Denora, cclxv), is a key element of the concept of musicking, also extending to the audience/listener (Small, 9-10). In Huff’s conception, while there is no immediate analogue to ‘the listener’, she places a strong emphasis on listening, both on the parts of the musicians and those reached by the music, linking it to wisdom and good governance. Listening implies openness, and listening to everyone requires concerted effort. By listening to the bards, the king of Shkoder acquires actionable information about his kingdom, but also enters the connection woven between the bards and the rest of the world. The same is true for the common people listening to the bards; their comments and complaints are also spread through the bards’ music. While the bards ostensibly seem to be the most important component of the network, the network would not exist without the audience, and the audience shapes the network through its input. Thus, active listening both on the audience’s part and on the bards’ part during an act of musicking is crucial to the sense of connection

³⁴ See, for example, Bruce Torff’s point that a variety of studies have found that emotional responses to music and musical experiences are heavily constrained by the individual background of the listener, as well as the effort it would take to adopt a cultural system not one’s own (211). One of the most salient arguments against any kind of ‘universal’ meaning to or interpretation of music comes from ethnomusicological studies which show musical engagement as culturally inflected to varying degrees.

and harmony fostered by the bards. Bards are taught to conceptualise their place in the world and their responsibilities like this:

...bards are the eyes and ears and voice of the country. We bring the mountains to the coast and the coast to the river and the river to the forest and the forest to the cities. We're what keeps all the little bits of Shkoder together – the people, the land, the kigh. We keep the pattern whole. We harmonize the physical and the spiritual, the intellectual and the emotional, joining body and soul (Huff 200)

Bards, and through bards the music that they use to facilitate all of this, explicitly provide a network for the country that connects everyone and everything in it. The inclusion of natural features such as rivers and forests in this network of connections affords nature a place as important as humans and other creatures such as the kigh. Furthermore, once again *harmony* is explicitly called out and foregrounded. Huff conveys harmony as the final goal of this network, and one facilitated by music. There is a resonance with the ideas of a musical cosmos to be found here, too, if on a smaller scale focused on one country rather than a whole universe – community, on a large scale.

Music as natural communication

Crafting connections and building communities requires and begets communication, if not necessarily communication in its most obvious linguistic guise. While connection is not synonymous with communication, it is inclusive of it and they often go hand in hand, whether it is Kahu communicating with the whales in *The Whale Rider* or Annice communicating with the kigh in *Sing the Four Quarters*.

Throughout *Sing the Four Quarters*, music is used as a form or tool of communication; most often it facilitates exchange, but there are also some instances where

clear communication is impeded. Due to the nature of the bards' powers, whose music's magical element is due to its connection to the elemental spirits (kigh), nature is always implicated in acts of musical communication in the story. Communication with the kigh is explicitly only possible through music, making it exclusively the purview of bards. Those without bardic talent have no chance of directly communicating with the kigh. Even among bards, the extent of the communication depends on which elements they have an affinity for: a bard who sings air can only communicate with air kigh, one who sings earth and air can communicate with earth and air kigh, and so on. Being able to sing all four elements makes Annice particularly powerful and also well-connected with nature, as a lynchpin of all elements. The kigh enhance several communication features to magical levels. Most notable here is the ability of the air kigh to send messages across long distances (Huff 205) and amplifying sound so that, for example, a herald's words outside a castle keep can be broadcasted to everyone within (296). That air is the element associated with these cases makes logical sense; the air kigh essentially extend the concept of sound being carried on the wind to impossible distances. Taking into account the non-human nature of these message carriers, it also follows that, outside very specific circumstances, the messages conveyed are not specific words but more an emotional imprint surrounding concepts. Bards communicate with the kigh via music, not words, so no replication of words can be expected. One of the first instances of Annice calling on the kigh is described thus:

Some bards argued that as long as the music was right and the desire strong, words were unimportant; that the kigh didn't understand the words anyway, so why tie rhyme and rhythm into knots in what was probably an unnecessary attempt to Sing a specific request. Personally, Annice preferred to repeat variations of short phrases over and over. It occasionally got tedious, but it usually got results. (9)

This passage does leave open whether kigh understand words at all, but the fact that the bards are not certain that they do implies that it is unlikely. They certainly do not answer in words, thus leaving the debate unsettled. What all bards agree on is that the music is key, however, and while instruments may call more kigh closer, it is only the voice – arguably the most naturally human instrument, innate and organic – which can command them (267). A standard aspect of magic in fantasy setting, it is desire and willpower that ‘power’ this musical communication – and the emotional resonance inherent in singing.

In the absence of linguistic communication, it is emotion that appears to form the basis of communication with the elemental spirits. Each bard’s music and power has an “emotional signature” resonating in the music and propagated by the kigh that carry the music further distances. In this way, Jazep, one of Annice’s friends, can immediately identify that she is the one who sang the valley into an early spring state, as the song resonating through the earth carries her emotional signature (224). This emotional transference can also be used to imbue statements with sincerity (53) and to convey specific emotions in messages to other bards (242). At the same time, there is an inherent veracity to messages conveyed via music, as another friend of Annice’s, Stasya, notes: “Words might hide the truth, but a Song never lies” (324). Just as the kigh cannot convey false information³⁵, neither can the music. Regardless of the amount of meaning that can be conveyed via music in this magical setting, it can never be meaning made as explicit as in language³⁶. The meaning lies more in the emotional content. However, the fact that music is not as clear as language is not portrayed as being a perpetual drawback. Annice draws on music when she cannot find the right words to

³⁵ for reasons never made explicit but that I would locate in their elemental nature, lying being a very human trait that embodiments of wind, fire, earth, and water would have little use for

³⁶ One of the few things a majority of musicologists seem to agree on is that music cannot directly signify as language does. See for example Feld (1974), Kramer (2003), Moss (2020), Lévi-Strauss (1969), Mâche (2024), or Margulis (2018).

convey what she means: “Something had to be said, but she didn’t know the words, so she closed her eyes and let the music speak” (198). This approach would not work if the content in mind was not essentially emotional to begin with, but the music manages to convey her regret, apology, and longing sufficiently for Pjerin to understand what she means, and the inherent honesty in the music convinces him where words might not have. Many times throughout this novel it is made clear that music is something that comes from the heart, conveying raw and unvarnished emotion, which feeds the connection bards create with nature as well as other people. The poignant scene at the end of the story where the antagonist almost-bard is extended an olive branch particularly highlights this: “Annice saw him first and fell silent. The Song she’d been Singing carried on. The voice was untrained, rough, but it didn’t matter because it was the heart that was Singing” (323). It does not matter that this is someone who was not trained in the bardic arts despite having the talent. The communally emotional nature of singing allows him to take up the same song because the emotions in his heart are the same, or similar enough to make no difference. With that same combination of emotions and music he can also reach the high, as naturally as the trained bards.

This kind of communication beyond words, on a level that is likened to nature, occupies a different niche from linguistic communication and echoes arguments about the affective and transcendental dimension of music. The story furthermore makes the argument that in these moments words are explicitly not needed, and that letting emotion ‘speak’ through music fulfils the communicational aim of the moment. This is another facet of the fantasy genre’s tendency to see and use music as something transcendent that touches the innermost heart and conveys feelings in ways that words cannot, thus fitting into the borderline utopian, holistic view championed by Oziwicz as an aspect of mythopoeia in fantasy, which focuses on the way all things are intertwined and belong to a greater whole. While Oziwicz does not directly point to music as an example of this, the way music is used

in texts such as *Sing the Four Quarters* does lend itself to that reading: connective matter that allows communication with and influence on all things, including nature. Transcendence is a concept that appears in both musicology and music and literature studies with some frequency. Music is singled out as an art that “has the ability to move people beyond their normal state of consciousness” (Reid 165), which allows for many things to be heightened: empathy for others, experiencing a wide range of feelings, and experiencing something beyond the “normal world” and thus understanding the normal world better as well (165). Music therapy and spirituality are also linked to transcendence (i.e. Moss 2019, Ansdell 2014, Engelhardt & Bohlman 2016). In her introduction to *Music and Transcendence* Ferdia Stone-Davis notes the relation between embodiment and transcendence, the “commingling of sound and the human body” (5), and defining music as something that passes thresholds while being both material and immaterial in the way it is produced physically yet moves within a space of its own (5). She argues that music allows humans to “go beyond”, acting transformatively and thus becoming a “a powerful means of locating oneself within the world and so making sense of it” (10). In all these views, while transcendence is, by definition, going beyond our normal state, it remains anchored in the real world and, ultimately, sheds light on the real world, much like fantasy literature sets stories in a setting beyond the real world while still anchored in it and commenting on it. Yet there is also criticism of such views on music; for example, Nomi Dave (2015) points out in her criticism of unqualified music use in human rights and development projects that the tendency to see music as something that transcends borders and cultural divides through its affective power and beauty leads to such initiatives ignoring cultural complexities and attendant difficulties. An over-romanticisation of music’s transcendent capabilities can easily lead to exaggerated hopes as to its efficacy in solving real world problems. In fictional fantasy settings, however, such difficulties are rarely touched on, the genre lending itself exactly to such romanticisation, as magic can be used to smooth over

any difficulties. Scholars discussing music in literature have pointed out how music transcending or accentuating boundaries also affects its inclusion in the written word. Hazel Smith argues that it is exactly the non-verbalisable in music that produces the “dream of transcendence that is so difficult for the writer who must always participate in the socially grounded medium of language”, but that this dream is illusory in the first place because music is also socially situated (19). Yet, music appearing in writing is, in itself, already a type of transcendence of medium, erasing the boundaries of the musical medium to fit music into literature, evoking a different sense of going beyond and different reactions from the audience/reader.³⁷

Musical transcendence lends itself to fantasy and comparisons to myth and magic; Christin Hoene, in her book on music and identity in South Asian literature, sees music as elevating our being, as it “bears an element within itself that transcends our being human—an element that is magical, mythical, superhuman, godlike, ephemeral, ineffable, transcendental, or, in short, aesthetic” (159). Isabella van Elferen connects music in fantasy to signifying magic, foremost, but also to something more “universal, primal, or even transcendental harmony” (16) in narratives, which allows readers to cross the borders between the real world and the fantastic world in the text (17). In fantasy, that is exactly the case: music in the texts discussed in this work are signals and signifiers of magic, of the intrusion of something supernatural into the mundane. In *Sing the Four Quarters*, this signification is especially clear, as all the magic in the narrative rests on music. In *The Whale Rider*, this signification is not so pronounced due to the myth-infused worldview that accentuates the entire story, but music represents one guiding line into said worldview, bridging former times and present, humans and animals, contemporary and traditional thought. In fact, I would argue that music’s rootedness in the real world is part of its transportive power in fantasy literature; if

³⁷ See Chapter 6 for more on music and medium.

the reader could not at all imagine what music described in a novel sounds like, it would fail as a way to cross the border into that world. It may still be abstracted, described via instruments or melodies that do not truly exist, but the reader still has a referent for it. In the case of some novels which are set in the real world but feature magical elements, the music may even be a direct reference to songs the reader may know despite their magic properties in-story, as we will see in Chapter 4. Music, thus, is a way to highlight the fantasy world's or fantasy aspects' relation to the real world, even while its effects may be exaggerated.

Returning to music's communicative capabilities, the relationship and communication between whales and humans is crucial to both the narrative and the world view presented in *The Whale Rider*. Though not codified in any way, and not entirely exclusive, music forms the basis of this two-way communication, and enhances the sense of the mythic in the story's contemporary setting. In fact, the narrative's timeline is two-pronged: there is the story of the first whale rider that takes place in the distant, undefined past – a 'mythic time'³⁸ – and, alongside it, the story of the new whale rider, Kahu, that takes place in the present time. In the past mythic time, which is the retelling and expansion of the Paikea myth, music is linked to the whale rider's use of instruments to call and communicate with the ancient bull whale. In particular, their musical exchange facilitates a cross-species love and understanding, as well as the communication of emotions. At the end of the first mythic time section, the whale remembers:

Once, he had a golden master who had wooed him with flute song. Then his master had used a conch shell to bray his commands to the whale over long

³⁸ Belinda du Plooy also points out the "cyclical temporality" of the narrative in *The Whale Rider* film in her comparison of it to Disney's *Moana* (8), while Ben Holgate notes the timelessness of the novel's theme of environmental ethics (95), as well as the narrative operating in a 'mythic' rather than linear time (99).

distances. As their communication grew, so did their understanding and love of each other. (Ihimaera 27)

Music is explicitly identified as the beginning of communication, and while it is hardly surprising that communication leads to greater understanding and allows a bond of deeper emotions to form, there is no hint that this exchange ever moves into the realm of language; given a whale's possible range of vocalisation, I believe it is fair to assume that music remains the form of communication between them, which, in this mythic setting, manages to convey enough of each of the two figures' character to create this bond. Instead of using his voice, the whale rider relies on wind instruments to convey his musical intention. The conch shell³⁹ in particular has obvious associations with the sea and is a traditional Māori instrument with ceremonial use. Yet it is the flute⁴⁰ which is singled out as more directly imitating whale song:

The human had heard the young whale's distress and had come into the sea, playing a flute. The sound was plangent and sad as he tried to communicate his oneness with the young whale's mourning. Quite without the musician knowing it, the melodic patterns of the flute's phrases imitated the whale song of comfort. The young whale drew nearer to the human, who cradled him and pressed noses with the orphan in greeting. (12-3)

That the man and the whale first happen upon each other during a moment of mourning is as significant as the fact that the whale rider's flute playing manages to imitate a comforting whale song. Grief at the loss of loved ones is an emotion that can easily be imagined to be transferrable between two otherwise very different beings. People may argue about the degree

³⁹ Also known as conque, seashell horn, or shell trumpet. Though the text does not specify its Māori name, the pūtātara is a traditional Māori conch shell trumpet and may have been the reference.

⁴⁰ There is no detailed description of the flute in the text, making it impossible to judge exactly what kind (nguru, kōauau, rehu, etc. are all traditional Māori flute instruments).

to which animals have the capacity for such things, but as a meeting point in a story that both makes a point of the unity of humans and nature and grows out of a tradition which deeply respects whales, it provides a convincing setting of ‘first contact’ via music⁴¹. It is also the act of listening to the whale’s sorrow that leads the whale rider to initiate the contact, an act of musicking that draws in the audience to form connections. The conveyance of emotion through the music is clear and direct, while being non-specific enough to not arouse doubt. Meanwhile, the melody of the flute conforming to a whale song strikes the reader as a mythic element, brought forth by unprecedented resonance between the two musicians. This, too, shows a form of symbiosis: unconscious conforming to musical patterning. While the degree of this patterning and mutual understanding may not be scientifically likely or provable, whale music has inspired and continues to inspire composers and musicians⁴², as well as scientists⁴³.

Kahu’s story in the present is in many ways an echo of the first whale rider in mythic time. However, she communicates with the whales purely through her voice rather than with specific instruments, suggesting an action of spontaneous song with less specific intent. This complements the plot development at that stage: the exhausted bull whale is beached near Kahu’s home, after many whales have already died on the shore,⁴⁴ and she is determined to

⁴¹ According to Catherine Stevens’ 2012 review of recent ethnomusicological research, recognition of emotions in music is more accurate for music from familiar cultures, but the broad categories of anger, fear, happiness, and sadness received the highest recognition rates, even across cultures (662). Studies cited include one on the recognition of emotions in foreign and domestic music in Japanese listeners (Balkwill et al. 2004), one on the universal recognition of three basic emotions in music (Fritz et al. 2009), and one on universal and culture-specific factors in the recognition and performance of musical affect expressions (Laukka et al. 2010).

⁴² See, for example, classical compositions by John Cage or Toru Takemitsu, Paul Winter’s compositions based on Dr. Roger Payne’s album of recorded whale sounds *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1970), or Sara Niksic’s electronic remixing of whale song. For a more exhaustive list, see Alex South’s blog post (‘Whale Song in Human Music’).

⁴³ Perhaps the most famous example is David Rothenberg’s interest in music-making beyond the human realm, as an example of communication across cultures (48-9). Playing his clarinet from a boat, he found that a whale reacted to clarinet phrases, creating a duet of sorts, whose sound Rothenberg asserts was heard as music by nearly all leading humpback scientists he asked to evaluate the recording (48). This musical back-and-forth is not as clearly communicative and emotion-laden as the example in *The Whale Rider*, but it does present a real-world analogue for human-whale musicking.

⁴⁴ Mass strandings of whales happen with some regularity on remote Aotearoa beaches.

save him. Kahu's uncle Rawiri, who is the narrator of the parts of the novel set on land, describes the moment: "I heard Kahu's high treble voice shouting something to the sea. She was singing to the whale. Telling it to acknowledge her coming" (125). Once again, music accompanies the first meeting between human and whale, setting the tone for the relationship to come and reminding the bull whale, who is implied to be the very same whale as the first whale rider's mount despite the intervening ages, of his lost human partner. It is Kahu's presence, reminiscent of the whale rider the bull whale still mourns for, and auditory encouragement which allow the whale to exert enough energy to return to the sea and survive. The returning energy is also put into musical terms, the "pulsing strength" manifesting itself in "stronger and stronger whale song" (128) that gives hope to the waiting herd. The bull whale's mate, called the old mother, also communicates with Kahu via song. Notably, in an inverse of the prior scene in which the first whale rider strives to comfort the whale with his flute song, the old mother whale is now comforting Kahu, "singing gently to the whale rider, telling her not to be afraid" (147). It is left unsaid whether Kahu understands this message, but the intent is the same kind of easing and sharing of emotion. Music in general and the singing of the whales in particular, are portrayed as a positive and beautiful force. Descriptions range from "glorious echoing music" (150) to "song of benign tenderness" (142), "graceful ornamentation" (141), and "awesome singing" (95). The word choices reflect beauty and harmonious sound, which echoes through the sea and holds the narrative, nature, and humans together. Listening to this music and being able to hear it is what has set Kahu apart throughout the narrative. The very last paragraph of the novel affirms this: "'Oh, Paka, can't you hear them? I've been listening to them for ages now. Oh, Paka, and the whales are still singing,' she said" (150). Whale song and the importance of listening to it close the narrative, achieving a three-fold effect: capping Kahu's arc from overlooked girl to accepted carrier of traditions, harkening back to the first musical encounter of whale

and human in mythic time, and strengthening the symbolic connection between whale herd and human coexistence saving each other. Listening to nature saves the community from losing its tradition and culture entirely in the postcolonial context, a reminder of spiritual rather than physical health. As noted above, listening denotes a certain level of openness, of willingness to take those listened to seriously; for a culture which has historically survived and thrived through its understanding of the ocean and the lands they eventually settled on, 'listening' is used here as a shorthand for respect and a continuation of tradition. Kahu, as the one who hears and has always heard the whale song, is the human embodiment of this link between nature and the community's spiritual health.

The communication between Kahu and the whales in *The Whale Rider* is smooth, according with the cultural symbiosis between Māori and nature. The story does not rest on questions of practicality, which would form an intrusion into the mythical time and sense suffusing the novel. The communicational ability of music in *Sing the Four Quarters*, however, is not quite straightforwardly without issues. Relying on nature in the form of the kīhī to transmit messages also puts the characters at the mercy of the elements. Nature cannot be fully tamed, and the capriciousness of the elements impacts what is possible for musical communication to achieve. As previously noted, messages delivered through music and the kīhī primarily feature emotional content rather than language (Huff 78), making these messages not devoid of meaning but certainly a little less easy to interpret and leaving space for any individual recipient to interpret the message slightly differently. Similarly, while people may hear an instrumental piece of music performed in the real world and, depending on their musical experience and cultural context, come away with the same general impression of the mood conveyed (be it joyous or sad, threatening or jubilant), any further

interpretation will be increasingly individualistic unless there are programme notes⁴⁵ or work titles⁴⁶ to guide the imagination. This means that for musical messages delivered by the kigh, while the general impression will likely be the same for any bard, whether the details are all correct, or even present, is more questionable. A character also notes that a “strong emotional content” (78) is needed to convey anything clearly, which means weaker messages may not be interpretable at all and the message sender needs to be able to impress their emotions into the music in a way that conveys what they want to say.

On a more physical level, given that the communication happens via the kigh, if there are no kigh around, the communicational advantage disappears. Thus, a bard trapped inside a small space that is not open to the elements cannot call for help because no air kigh can reach her (277). There may be earth kigh in the space, but that would not help for two reasons: not all bards can sing all elements, and only air kigh are suitable for transmitting messages. This exchange shows how the kigh echo their elemental attributes in terms of abilities:

“Stas, how would you hunt for someone you can describe in detail?”

She shrugged. “I’d ask the kigh.”

“You’d ask the air kigh,” Annice corrected. “Because water is confined and fire is self-absorbed and earth keeps its own council. Only air has enough curiosity to be of any use in something like that.” (133)

Just as hunting for someone, which in effect means asking the kigh for information, can only be done by air kigh, so can messages only be transmitted through the air. It is telling how the

⁴⁵ One common way for programmatic music to tell its audience what the piece is about. A famous example of programmatic music is Prokofiev’s “Peter and the Wolf”. In Werner Wolf’s scheme programmatic music would count as ‘literature in music’, the inversion of the ‘music in literature’ that is the focus of this dissertation.

⁴⁶ The other common way for programmatic music to tell its audience what the piece is about. See, for example, Rimsky-Korsakov’s famous piece “Flight of the Bumblebee”; while the general reaction to this piece when knowing the title is often, though not always, ‘oh yes, it *does* sound like a bumblebee buzzing around’, if the listener is not aware of the title, it seems unlikely that they would be able to identify, say, that this is emulating a bumblebee in particular.

bards ascribe human traits to the different elements: water cannot go beyond its boundaries, fire would not care, earth is cautious and tight-lipped, and air has curiosity and playfulness, making it more suited for communicational interactions. The downside of relying on air kigh for communication is thus obvious; when they are absent, no music-assisted communication can happen outside of earshot. Moreover, there are slightly less obvious consequences as well. The bard who is cut off from the kigh through imprisonment for a long time shows signs of mental trauma and stress, as well as a damaged throat since she kept singing without being answered (277). She sends out a musical call for help that causes physical strain when she persists past her body's limits, as she is so used to being connected to her community and, crucially, always being *heard* no matter where she is that she cannot bring herself to cease her efforts despite clear evidence that she cannot reach the air kigh outside her prison. Another bard, who is blind, uses the air kigh to navigate/'see', and finds himself cut off from this aid when the air kigh are gone (310). Thus, over-reliance on the music-nature connection brings its own set of dangers and potential pitfalls. The bards are very used to being able to take advantage of their ability to communicate with and through air kigh and find themselves helpless when they cannot. This is not something that non-bards have to worry about, lacking the ability in the first place; it also makes clear that this form of communication, which is bard-specific in any case as they are the only ones who can send and receive messages like this, cannot entirely take the place of linguistic communication. It may enhance it, but while nature may be omnipresent, communication with and through it is not. The same is shown in a less direct way in *The Whale Rider*, where Kahu is the only who does communicate with the whales and, at least in the present day, this is seen as unusual (though welcome) in her community.

Musical agency: gender roles

Having examined the communal drive of music in both texts, there remains a need to point out the way in which characters still stand out from the whole. Both *Sing the Four Quarters* and *The Whale Rider* give space to their respective female protagonists exerting or finding personal agency through their musicking. In this way, music not only moves the plot forward but is also crucial to character development and the characters' places in their worlds. *Sing the Four Quarters* has a fairly standard, vaguely western European mediaeval setting and attendant gender roles and expectations – except for the bards. The main character, Annice, is a princess who did not want to be used in a political marriage to strengthen diplomatic ties by her brother, the king-to-be; her method of escape is music⁴⁷. Her driving wish to be part of Bardic Hall, as well as natural magical aptitude, allow her to give up her identity as a princess and fully immerse herself in her passion for all things bardic instead. Music is her calling, the thing that sets her mind at rest and makes her feel like she is exactly where she should be and belongs (30). As seen throughout this chapter, music and musicking allows Annice to express herself and her emotions in ways beneficial to her goals and relationships. Furthermore, Bardic Hall seems to make no distinction between gender at all, treating its bards equally: it boasts a supportive system for having children, including community help for child-rearing and time off from walking all over the country during and after pregnancy; the bards are also supportive of queer relationships, with Annice living openly in a sexual and romantic relationship with her best friend Stasiya, as well having partners elsewhere. While no homophobia is explicitly seen anywhere in the story and queerness may thus conceivably be generally accepted in this secondary world⁴⁸, queerness is also not explicitly shown beyond the bards. This creates the impression that the bards are particularly open-minded – given the deep and visceral emotional communication that

⁴⁷ Like any art form that requires and engenders imagination, music is often linked to escapism; so is fantasy literature, which has long been accused by detractors as well as lauded by supporters as being escapist through its other worlds and supernatural narratives.

⁴⁸ Already a little unusual for a fantasy novel published in the early 90s.

happens between bards via music and the kigh, it is reasonable to speculate that this kind of bigotry would be much harder to sustain. The story strongly pushes music-generated empathy, with understanding being extended to even the apparent villain at the end, whose song echoes and merges with the protagonists'. Music is used throughout the narrative to highlight individual choices and agency, and to give them the space to bloom.

In *The Whale Rider*, music plays a similar role in affirming the main character Kahu's status in her community. Overlooked and verbally berated as not being suitable for carrying on the old traditions as a female, through her singing and the connection it creates to the ancient whale she not only resurrects the oldest of traditions, she also takes over the male role of the first whale rider, Paikea. In the eyes of the narrative she becomes Paikea first, and only then evolves into being seen as the seed of Paikea, the gift he left for the land. She both enters the original myth and starts to create her own in the present time. Musicking, then, functions as an escape from restriction and a vehicle of affirmation of status and capability that was previously denied due to gender. As in *Sing the Four Quarters*, music represents and effects the chance to follow a calling. Kahu knows what she can do and feels called to do, but only when she sings to the beached whale and disappears into the ocean with the herd as a result, does her great-grandfather allow her to step up to the role everyone else can see she should occupy.

In both texts, nature facilitates gender agency by being 'gender blind'. The kigh and elemental affiliation make no gender distinction in *Sing the Four Quarters*, and thus neither do the bards. Gender remains palpable only through outside influences from the bards, as well as physical distinctions; Annice spends the entire narrative pregnant, which is one way Huff refuses to entirely elide gender – or at least biological sex – while at the same time rendering it less significant than often seen in fantasy novels of the time. In *The Whale Rider*, this disinterest in human gender norms is even more obvious on the part of the whales. While

Kahu constantly has to deal with the entrenched misogyny of her family, the ancient bull whale cannot even distinguish her from Paikea, her male ancestor. Once the great mother whale convinces him that Kahu is not Paikea himself but a descendant, the bull whale still does not seem to care that she is female – it does not even feature as a consideration in his mind. Human is human; the important part is not gender, but the connection forged between them through Kahu’s singing and listening.

Music and musicking function as an equaliser between genders and an affirmation of capability in both novels. Thus, agency is another important theme that fits into the interwoven import of the other main themes of communication, connection, nature, and harmony in these texts. Agency through music allows Annice to escape an arranged royal marriage and save the father of her child, while Kahu reforges old traditions and finds her place in her community. Yet, amid the focus on harmony and community building in *Sing the Four Quarters*, one point is made about the bards’ power that disrupts this near-utopian ideal: the fact that bards can command others, make them speak the truth, and bend their will. While this bardic power is not shown as musical in the same way as most their powers are – these commands are spoken, not sung – it is still inherently bardic, and calls the personal agency of anyone who is not a bard into question. While both texts portray music as a positive force of connection, *Sing the Four Quarters* also offers a small hint of the flipside of what music this magically powerful can be used for.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ For more on music’s power to compel against one’s will see Chapter 3 on the theme of musical temptation.

Chapter 2

Passing Boundaries: Music and Death

“Music is life itself.”

– Louis Armstrong

We have seen that music is a way to connect and communicate with nature. As death is a part of natural processes, it is a logical extension that music is also linked to death. Under the purview of the fantasy genre, death can become permeable, a state to be reversed and a realm to be entered and exited – and reached through music. Extrapolating from Louis Armstrong’s metaphor of music as ‘life itself’, music’s touching of the dead bestows a measure of life on those otherwise beyond it, a diffusion of life carried by music, so to speak. The two texts to be discussed here, Garth Nix’s *Abhorsen* trilogy (1995-2003) and Mo Xiang Tong Xiu’s *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (orig. 魔道祖师, 2016), highlight music’s connective and communicative traits by utilising it to bridge life and death. Both texts feature specific instruments that achieve this, unlike *Sing the Four Quarters*’ and *The Whale Riders*’ focus on the organic spontaneity of voice and singing. Rules govern the exchange with death and the dead, and the keeping and breaking of these rules raises questions of agency and the ethical implications of musical control over the dead in turn. In these two texts, music both transcends and accentuates the boundary between life and death: it calls the dead back to an imitation of life, allows communication with the dead, and even makes it possible for the musician to cross into Death without dying themselves. Yet, the porousness of the boundary between life and death when approached with music does not

alter the fundamental difference between the dead and the living, and leaves all the power in the hands of the latter, who strive to return the dead to their proper place: at rest. I discuss three aspects of music's relation to death in this chapter: the use of instruments as tools of magic to deal with death and the dead, the musical giving and taking away of the dead's ability to communicate with the living, and the pressing questions regarding the agency taken from the dead through this musical intervention in the natural order.

While necromancy is not an indispensable aspect of stories involving death or an underworld, it is central to both texts in this chapter, along with the consequences attached to the revival of those who have already died. Necromancy is also a staple of speculative fiction: in the contemporary western canon one need not look any further than Tamsyn Muir's *Locked Tomb* series, Martha Wells' *Death of the Necromancer*, or Max Gladstone's *Three Parts Dead*. A universal human concern, death as a theme of story is not confined to the western canon, either. Tales of desperate lovers separated by death, unjust killings which lead to unquiet souls, or wagers that require a journey into the realms of the dead are found in mythologies around the world, sometimes accompanied by themes of music or musical ritual. In the western sphere, the Orpheus and Eurydice story is once again especially relevant. Previously I focused on the connection to nature emblematic in Orpheus as a bardic figure, particularly on the effect of his music on animals, trees, and rocks. However, the arguably more famous aspect of the various myths of Orpheus is his using music in his journey to the underworld to bring his beloved Eurydice back to life.⁵⁰ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* describes the scene of music in the Underworld thus:

⁵⁰ For a brief while, depending on which version of the story one consults. Most versions feature the fateful moment of Orpheus looking back to make sure Eurydice is still behind him despite being told not to do so, causing her to slip back into the underworld.

These words, accompanied by the plucked strings,
so moved the bloodless spirits that they wept;
Tantalus did not seek the receding water,
and on his wheel lay Ixion, astounded;
the birds let go the liver, and the daughters
of Danaüs were resting by their urns,
while you, O Sisyphus, sat on your stone.
Then, for the first time ever, overcome
by the effects of song, the Furies wept,
nor could Persephone reject his prayer,
nor he who rules the underworld deny him; (10.53-62⁵¹)

This entire passage highlights how the combination of Orpheus' words and lyre playing convinces entities in the underworld who usually show no compassion at all (including, in a call-back to Orpheus the nature bard, the birds pecking at Prometheus' liver) to grant his wish to return to the world of the living with Eurydice. While there is no way to distinguish how much of this impact stems from the words Orpheus chooses and how much from his music, the "effects of song" are referred to explicitly, implying that the music is crucial in his success. Music is inextricable from Orpheus' petition in the underworld; coupled with his general fame as a bardic figure, it is no surprise that the association lingers. Remembering the definition of bardic fantasy in the previous chapter, which notes the lack of "clear boundary" between bardic fantasy and Orphean fantasy, we also find Stableford pointing to the necessity of a journey to an underworld as the marked criterion for the latter (35). Examples of art which adapt the story of Orpheus and Eurydice are numerous and diverse across media types

⁵¹ Translated by Charles Martin.

and creators, including stage musicals,⁵² films,⁵³ and graphic novels.⁵⁴ By virtue of the original story, all of these adaptations are concerned with music and, generally, with the affective power of music.

Influencing the dead via music in a fantasy setting is an extreme extrapolation of how music affects people in reality. I have already talked about various theories of musical affect – physical and emotional – in the introduction, but I want to note one aspect discussed by scholars which is particularly pertinent to my discussion about how music affects death and the dead in *The Abhorsen Chronicles* and *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*: ‘openness’ to music. In the real world, it is safe to assume that not everybody experiences and is touched by music the same way, differing along such axes as willingness to be moved by the music, cultural background, and personal taste. While I generally argue that the magical dimension of music foregrounded in these texts makes its effects more homogenous and universal as long as the magical musician’s power and will is great enough, the effects on the listener do still vary and resistance to the effects is possible if not common. However, transplanting these effects onto the listener category of ‘the dead’ calls for this hypothesis to be amended. The crucial point of difference between the living and the dead illustrated in both *The Abhorsen Chronicles* and *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* is that the dead have either very limited or no ability at all to resist the influence of magical music, whereas the living can exert their own will and agency in an attempt to resist the effects.

Instruments bridging life and death: all the bells and whistles (and guqins)

The Old Kingdom series for young adults by Australian author Garth Nix clearly fits into the grouping of fantasy texts focused on necromancy, standing out among other texts in

⁵² i.e. *Hadestown*.

⁵³ i.e. Marcel Camus’ 1959 film *Black Orpheus* (set in Rio de Janeiro).

⁵⁴ i.e. a run called “The Song of Orpheus” in Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* graphic novels.

this subgenre through its great focus on bells as the instruments of breaching death. The first three books, *Sabriel* (1995), *Lirael* (2001), and *Abhorsen* (2003), are collected as *The Abhorsen Chronicles*, forming a contained story built on similar themes and concepts and a unified narrative arc.

At the heart of *The Abhorsen Chronicles*'s worldbuilding lies what can be described as musical necromancy: the dead are reanimated through the sound of magic-infused bells wielded by those willing to risk venturing into the underworld. This interplay of necromancy and bells does not appear to be grounded in any particular culture or mythology, be it western or otherwise, drawing only on general concepts such as underworlds. However, as in the Orpheus story, we encounter literal journeys into the underworld which are hazardous and aided by music. Necromancers, who are the only ones who dare enter the river that flows through the underworld,⁵⁵ use a set of particular bells to keep themselves from being drawn too far into Death. The bells also function to command and compel the reanimated dead. Throughout the trilogy, the Abhorsens, a title given to those who wield the bells but only seek to lay the dead to rest again, struggle to contain several 'greater Dead' (dead creatures with greater power and consciousness than usual) and to prevent the freeing of an evil entity sealed away long ago. While abilities with the sword and general magic are also helpful, the key to the Abhorsen's power is their use and control of the necromancing bells. Music functions as the primary connection with the dead and bridges the finality of death. However, it is emphasised throughout that this bridging is an unnatural process, hence it being the Abhorsens' work to send the reanimated dead back into true death with the bells. Generally,

⁵⁵ Also a concept found in several mythologies, from the Styx and Lethe in Greek mythology to the Wang Chuan 'River of Forgetfulness' (忘川) in Chinese mythology. Nix's underworld, or Death, consists of a cold river rushing through nine gates. The passing of each further gate makes return harder as the river becomes more treacherous. Those who pass the ninth gate can never return – the dead woken again by necromancers are those who managed to linger in parts of Death before that last gate and it is the Abhorsen's task to force those dead past the ninth gate never to return.

their confrontations with the dead take place among the living, but there is also the occasional fight in Death itself. The dead are either thralls to the necromancer who woke them, without clear conscious will, or evil figures bent on killing the living to increase their own power and strengthen their ability to remain in the lands of the living. There are no ‘good’ or even neutral reanimated dead, which I see as further evidence that necromancy in this setting is cast as a distortion of what should be, with no desirable effects for those who are not bent on acquiring brute power. The villainy of these dead also obscures questions of robbed agency that would otherwise appear as more questionable to the reader, as I discuss in the final section of this chapter.

Which type of instrument is used to raise or pacify the dead is crucial in this text. Only two instruments – bells and panpipes – play a significant role, and their particular effects are never replicated with different instruments. While technically ‘sound’ seems to be the crucial element of the necromantic magic in *The Abhorsen Chronicles*, as there are also scattered instances of whistling, singing, and clapping calling forth magical effects, instruments – and thus music – are portrayed as the more effective tools when it comes to dealing with the dead. Unlike the primacy of the voice and singing in *The Whale Rider* and *Sing the Four Quarters*, here we encounter “wind flutes”,⁵⁶ panpipes, and bells, with a clear increase in potency from the former to the latter. The bells are preeminent, harkening to the western bell symbolism of time and mortality, tolling at set times and to announce or commemorate people’s deaths.⁵⁷ The wind flutes have the advantage of working in the absence of the original enchanter, pacifying the dead merely through the sound generated by the wind; however, they are also less potent and fail upon the death of their installer (37).

⁵⁶ Something like a cross between flutes and wind chimes; hollow hanging instruments through which the wind blows.

⁵⁷ Among other symbolisms; various religions also attach more specific symbolism to bells, such as casting it as the voice of God in Christianity. In Chinese culture bells are related to thunder, while massed bells are considered a representation of universal harmony; bronze bells are among the oldest artefacts found in Chinese tombs.

Interestingly, the wind flutes “play a song only heard in Death” (37), unlike both the panpipes and the bells, which are also audible outside Death. This transference of music to a completely different place highlights music’s ability to transcend boundaries in this canon, connecting the realms of life and Death without completely eliding the barrier between them. This singular mention of wind flutes is the first highlight of the sonic dimension of magic in the text; noiselessness can be seen as the mundane status quo, disrupted by sound and music which call forth magic and relate to death. As a first example of the sonic permeating boundaries, wind flutes are notably more organic than the more prominent bells; they rely on nature to function once created and require no further human will or agency. The panpipes do require an active performer and are modelled on the bells, if less powerful than the bells. This is exemplified in the construction of the instruments: panpipes are bundled together in one instrument, with each aperture easily accessible in turn, whereas the bells are separate and need to be stopped from sounding through accidental motion to avoid unwanted effects. While there is no in-text explanation as to why bells were chosen as the primary necromantic instrument (though one may venture that there are some practical considerations, such as the small yet adjustable size of bells, making it easy to wear seven in a special bandolier without issue, unlike many other potential instruments), their pre-eminence is never doubted in the plot.

The bells are explicitly connected to death and all their purposes are related to the dead. Each of the seven bells is named, as well as being given an epithet that summarises their effect:

“Ranna,” she said aloud, touching the first, the smallest bell. Ranna, the sleepbringer, the sweet, low sound that brought silence in its wake.

“Mosrael.” The second bell, a harsh, rowdy bell. Mosrael was the waker, the bell Sabriel should never use, the bell whose sound was a seesaw, throwing the

ringer further into Death, as it brought the listener into life.

“Kibeth.” Kibeth, the walker. A bell of several sounds, a difficult and contrary bell. It could give freedom of movement to one of the Dead, or walk them through the next gate. Many a necromancer had stumbled with Kibeth and walked where they would not.

“Dyrim.” A musical bell, of clear and pretty tone. Dyrim was the voice that the Dead so often lost. But Dyrim could also still a tongue that moved too freely.

“Belgar.” Another tricksome bell, that sought to ring of its own accord.

Belgaer was the thinking bell, the bell most necromancers scorned to use. It could restore independent thought, memory and all the patterns of a living person. Or, slipping in a careless hand, erase them.

“Saraneth.” The deepest, lowest bell. The sound of strength. Saraneth was the binder, the bell that shackled the Dead to the wielder’s will.

And last, the largest bell, the one Sabriel’s cold fingers found colder still, even in the leather case that kept it silent.

“Astarael, the Sorrowful,” whispered Sabriel. Astarael was the banisher, the final bell. Properly rung, it cast everyone who heard it far into Death.

Everyone, including the ringer. (57)

The epithets are largely concerned with the bells’ effects: “sleepbringer”, “waker”, “walker”, “voice”, “thinker”, “binder”, and “Sorrowful” or “banisher”. All the effects are related to death and the dead in some way, from bringing sleep to giving freedom of movement and voice. The bells clearly cannot function as normal bells, as their ringing is always magical and the effects unavoidable. The warning that no Abhorsen should ever use Mosrael, the waker of the dead, highlights that the reanimation of the dead is not seen as a positive or permitted thing, but something the protagonists should avoid at all costs. Throughout the

series, Ranna is the bell used most often, along with Kibeth and Saraneth, because these three bells allow the wielder to pacify the dead and then force them back into Death. The final bell, Astarael, is singled out with two epithets: the Sorrowful and the banisher. The latter is self-explanatory, but the Sorrowful stands out – it is capitalised, unlike all the other epithets, and it is the only epithet that describes a feeling rather than an effect. Astarael’s description is also a first hint that these bells, while aimed at commanding the dead, do also impact the living, and put the wielder at great risk. For the wielder to plunge into Death alongside the dead they are trying to banish is a powerful and final last resort. It is also interesting that not every bell is described in terms of its sound; some are described as low or harsh or producing several sounds, but only one, Dyrin, is singled out as “musical”, implying that the others are not seen as such. This distinction between music and sound receives no further elaboration in the story. On a purely definitional level, each bell alike should produce music; yet the fact that the bells are not necessarily “musical” hints at the transcendental quality of music, which goes beyond the way we tend to describe sound. The bells are defined by their function and never ring for enjoyment alone. Music, even in fantasy texts such as this one, generally carries a connotation of art and beauty which is absent here. It is furthermore significant that the “musical” bell can give a voice back to the Dead, and with their voice a crucial bit of agency – though the flipside of stilling tongues is not neglected, either. Music is explicitly coupled to voice, and voice requires something beyond the other bells’ functional sounds.

In contrast to *The Abhorsen Chronicles*’ Orphean journeys to the underworld, this chapter’s second text is completely outside the western tradition of fantasy texts, and its use of music as a magical tool to affect the dead is heavily influenced by traditional Chinese philosophy and mythology. The webnovel 魔道祖师 (*Mo Dao Zu Shi*) was first published by author 墨香铜臭 (Mo Xiang Tong Xiu) in a serialised format from 2015 to 2016; an English

translation by Suika appeared in five volumes (2021-2023), under the title *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*.⁵⁸ The novel's focus on, and narrative use of, music is based on traditional Chinese philosophy, which affords music preeminent standing culturally and cosmologically. Various historical texts such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü* (呂氏春秋) or the collection of philosophical writings *Xunzi* (荀子) note the importance of music and sound in the worldview of ancient China.⁵⁹ Not only was sound centrally important to conceptions of the cosmos and the music of the heavens, influencing the concept of art with the analogy between cosmic harmony and musical harmony (DeWoskin 177), it was also linked to wisdom and sagehood, due to “the special importance attached to hearing as the central link between the mind and the outside world and the exploitation of hearing and aural sensitivity as a metaphor for perspicacity in general” (7). Furthermore, music was seen as demonstrating unity, or the interaction between otherwise separate entities, be it music performed during sacrifice linking descendants to the spirits of their dead ancestors, music during rituals linking rulers to the heavens, or music allowing lone wanderers to commune with nature (30). In the straightforward words of Robin R. Wang in *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*: “Music, *yue* 樂, represents the harmony (*he*) of heaven and earth...the perfect blend of yin and yang” (114-5). Music, put simply, represents the harmony of the elements of nature. The spiritual importance of music is aptly summarised by a well-known story recounted in several sources, which coined the term 知音 (*zhiyin*). A literal translation of *zhiyin* would be ‘know music’ and in its verb form it does mean to have a thorough understanding of music, but the noun form has come to mean

⁵⁸ I will be citing the English translation, while also consulting the original Chinese for specific wording.

⁵⁹ To name only two of many. For overviews of music in ancient China in English, I recommend further study of Kenneth J. DeWoskin's *A Song For One Or Two: Music and the Concept of Art in Early China* (1982), T.C. Lai and Robert Mok's *Jade Flute: The Story of Chinese Music* (1985), Victor H. Mair and Mark Bender's *The Columbia Anthology of Chinese Folk and Popular Literature* (2011), and *The Oxford Handbook of Music in China and the Chinese Diaspora* (2023, eds Yu Hui, Jonathan P.J. Stock).

something like ‘soulmate’ as an acknowledgement of the deep connection forged by understanding music the same way as someone else. This meaning originates from the story of Bo Ya, a famous Chinese musician from antiquity, and Zhong Ziqi, a small businessman or woodcutter, depending on the version of the tale. Zhong Ziqi was able to understand and interpret Bo Ya’s melodies correctly no matter what he played (“Liezi”, “Lü Shi Chun Qiu”). It is also notable in the context of the theme of death that when Zhong Ziqi died, Bo Ya destroyed his guqin and never played again because he believed that no other person could understand his music as Zhong Ziqi had (“Lü Shi Chun Qiu”). Death thus ends the great musician’s musicianship due to the permanent breaking of his connection with Zhong Ziqi. In this non-fantasy story, it is impossible for music to breach death and playing the guqin does not reach deceased spirits as in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, which is part of the Chinese *xianxia* genre.

The *xianxia* genre of Chinese literature admits the presence of ‘magic’, or rather the magic-adjacent concept of *qi* cultivation; in the case of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, this *qi* cultivation can be driven by music and be used to communicate with and command the dead. *Xianxia* (仙俠) is also variably called *xiuxian* (修仙) or *xiuzhen* (修真) (Ni 1-2), but internationally, *xianxia*, which the appendix of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* glosses as “immortal heroes”, appears to be the most-used term, likely because it derived from the more well-known *wuxia* martial arts novel genre popularised by Jin Yong.⁶⁰ Zhang Ni’s (2020) definition of *xianxia* highlights the genre’s focus on Daoist alchemy, as well as general Chinese religion and culture, set in “an imaginary world in which cultivators pursue immortality through rigorous self-training, fierce competition with rivals, and strenuous

⁶⁰ Jin Yong is a Hong Kong author who published serialised *wuxia* stories from the 1950s on and made the genre hugely popular in Sinophone communities. Two of his most famous works are *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (射鵰英雄傳) and *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* (雪山飛狐). He is one of the few Chinese language authors who has consistently been translated into English.

fighting against monsters” (2). The central concept of xianxia fiction is cultivation, that is the cultivation of qi (气).

Consequently, the entry for qi is the longest of all glossary entries in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*. The term is laden with cultural, historical, and philosophical significance which is hard to summarise in a few words. While the definition given in the glossary is by no means exhaustive, it does give context specifically for the musical cultivation that is the focus of this chapter and is thus worth quoting in full:

Qi (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.⁶¹ Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation. Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do powerful damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to feel for potential danger. (Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, 1: 390)

⁶¹ These terms are generally found in traditional Chinese medicine, where upright or righteous qi (正气) is a general term for various qi protecting the body from being invaded by evil or pernicious qi (邪气), which is variably defined as deleterious outside influences of pathogenic nature, such as wind, cold, heat, improper diet, and particular emotions.

Qi is not magic in the way western readers of high fantasy would define it, being deeply rooted in traditional Chinese cosmology and, as most commonly used in xianxia, Daoist principles. However, its narrative role is similar to magic in western fantasy. The cultivation of qi confers supernatural powers to its practitioners, as described above. Crucially for the xianxia context, much of ancient Chinese philosophy, particularly the cosmological beliefs, intertwine sound and music with qi, including *yin* and *yang* qi, providing the intersection point that leads to music's plot-relevant appearance in the genre. The traditional treatise *Liezi* (列子), for example, notes the invention of the five-string zither to generate yin qi (Wang R. 115). Thus, using music to cultivate, guide, and control qi appears as a natural extension of the importance of both concepts in ancient Chinese philosophy, particularly in light of the strong association both have with harmony, unity, and connectivity.

It is thus no surprise that the xianxia genre features recurring tropes of musically aided or musically driven cultivation that range from crucial to the plot to aesthetic sidenotes. While a cultivator's standard weapon is a sword, other options such as bows, staffs, fans and fists exist, and some characters also use musical instruments to channel their qi. Most often these are types of flute, such as the *dizi* or the *xiao*, or stringed instruments such as *guqin* or *konghou*. Instruments that appear in xianxia stories are generally traditional Chinese instruments, in accordance with the historically influenced setting. For example, popular xianxia novels such as *Enduring a Thousand Tribulations* (千劫眉) by Teng Ping (藤萍) and *Till the End of the Moon* (黑月光拿稳) by Teng Luo Wei Zhi (藤萝为枝) feature both konghou and dizi.

In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, several varieties of flute and the guqin play major roles within a system of musical cultivation which also links to necromancy breaching death. The novel is set in a fictional world reminiscent of ancient China and focuses on the

lives of members of several cultivation clans. The main character, Wei Wuxian, is a prodigy who ends up straying from the path of righteous cultivation, using controversial methods, including the use of ‘resentful energy’, as opposed to the type of qi normally cultivated by a cultivator, to wake and control the dead. The story is told in two intertwined arcs: the past story of how Wei Wuxian discovered and developed this path of ‘demonic’ cultivation and how this led to his death at the hands of other cultivators, and the present story of his reincarnation and attempt to uncover the conspiracy behind events then and now that led him into such desperate straits, as well as his blossoming romance with Lan Wangji, a cultivator from the Lan clan which specialises in musical cultivation.

Music, in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*’s setting, mainly appears as a method of cultivating qi used by several clans and their disciples; the powers derived from music are used to fight walking corpses, lingering spirits, and their malevolent energy, thus linking music to death. Both the Lan Clan of Gusu and the Su Clan of Molding predominantly specialise in playing the guqin, which reflects the qin’s pre-eminence in early musical lore in China. The qin is not only associated with many major figures in mythology but also appears in popular tales as an instrument with “precise talismanic or magical powers that are used to summon or control spirits, regulate weather, open magical doors, communicate over great distances, or cure disorders of the body and mind” (DeWoskin 117). Many of these folktale powers appear in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, with a focus on musical cultivation being used to raise, pacify, or communicate with the dead. As part of a cultivator’s arsenal, intended to fight monstrous – and often undead – creatures foremost, music here can be more directly violent than is common in most fantasy texts, in which music is more often about influence than outright deadly attack.⁶² For example, Lan Wangji can fight simultaneously

⁶² As seen in *The Whale Rider*, *Sing the Four Quarters*, and *The Abhorsen Chronicles*; none of these narratives include music used for violent combat.

with sword and guqin, the latter's sound exploding the heads of walking corpses (Mo Xiang Tong Xiu 2: 81) while the sword fends off their advances, and can use a secret Lan Clan technique called the 'killing chord',⁶³ which is described as "suited for use in both long-range and close combat" as it slices "through bones and flesh like mud" (3: 66). The description of the killing chord and its inventor Lan Yi highlights the dichotomy in instrument use, switching between aesthetic and destructive: "The seven strings, arranged from thickest to thinnest, could play immaculate melodies under her soft snow-white fingers one moment and transform into a lethal weapon the next" (3: 66). This emphasises music's capacity for both beauty and horror, transgressing that boundary from one note to the next, which is a theme throughout this novel that also mirrors music's involvement with creating peace and beauty (through calming melodies and pacifying the dead) or disturbance and horror (through agitating melodies or raising the dead). While texts like *Sing the Four Quarters* and *The Whale Rider* focus on the beauty created by music, and *The Abhorsen Chronicles* barely lingers on the sounds themselves in favour of showing the necromantic utility of the bells, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* notes both the beauty and its opposite. The descriptions of music are too ornate to evoke the feeling of seeing it as merely a tool; for example, Lan Wangji's first introduction highlights him producing notes that sound "ethereal and clear, carrying with them the twinkling bleakness of windswept pines" (1: 54), despite him using those notes in battle. At the same time, we also get descriptions of less beautiful music, such as it sounding "sharp and piercing" (1: 317) when raising the dead, and Wei Wuxian's music is often described as eerie or shrill.⁶⁴ This disparity is consistent throughout: an "idyllic melody" is calming to the mind (5: 103), and generally harmonious melodies are described as calming, pacifying, or clarity-inducing,⁶⁵ whereas discordant notes are more likely to rile up

⁶³ Note that the translation as 'chord' is dubious one; the original Chinese is 弦杀术, which translates to 'string' or 'cord' killing technique, and has no connotations of playing a group of notes in a given harmony.

⁶⁴ See for example 1: 210 or 2: 67.

⁶⁵ See for example 2: 316 or 3: 210.

people and spirits and incite aggressiveness. The sound and use of music in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* thus reflects the dichotomy between death and life, and moral attitudes towards disturbing the dead.

While both texts feature instruments being used as a tool for exerting power over the dead and it is made clear that using or waking the dead is seen as an unnatural and undesirable break with how the world should be, *The Abhorsen Chronicles*, which is set in a secondary world not obviously modelled on a real world setting or culture, treats music and musical sound very neutrally, highlighting the bells' functions and functionality and not attaching any moral judgment to dissonance or harmony. *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, which draws on Chinese philosophical thoughts on music and the world, places much more emphasis on descriptions of the musical sound, the effects of harmony versus discordant notes, and the negative moral judgment attached to anything non-harmonious.

Voicing Death: explicit musical communication

In the process of bridging life and death through music, communication with the dead and lingering spirits becomes a possibility. Yet, unlike *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, which features a whole language dedicated to exploiting this musical connection linguistically (see below), *The Abhorsen Chronicles* offers only a very limited glimpse of this in mentioning that one of the bells, Dyrin, can give a voice back to the dead. Aside from the rare greater dead, the returned dead have no way to vocally communicate unless enabled by Dyrin. This only explicitly happens once, when Sabriel receives a message from her nearly dead father, Abhorsen before her, via a dead creature while in Death:

Dyrin rang, sweet and clear, several notes sounding from that one peal, mixing together like many conversations overheard in a crowd...Sound seemed to envelope the monster, circling around its head and muted mouth...

The creature's mouth moved again, and now it had a tongue, a horribly pulpy mess of white flesh that writhed like a slug. But it worked. The thing made several gurgling swallowing sounds, then it spoke with the voice of Abhorsen. (234-5)

Dyrim's function as the bell that gives voice is emphasised again through the description of its ring: it not only sounds like several notes all at once, counter to musical expectations, but also like "conversations", thus evoking human speech rather than musical sound. The result of giving the humanoid dead creature a voice is not seamless or pretty – is in fact described as something quite horrific – and, more importantly, it is not the creature's *own* voice that is enabled by this process. It is Sabriel's father's voice that finally comes from its mouth, underlining the complete lack of agency that the dead creature has in this exchange. The dead is explicitly called "Abhorsen's mouthpiece" (236) as Sabriel and her father have a whole conversation through it without the dead ever speaking for itself. Once the conversation is over this does not change – the dead merely disappears. It remains unclear whether it is possible for the bell to achieve anything more, or if there simply never is any narrative reason for the Abhorsens to *want* the dead to be able to speak for themselves.

At the same time, the bells themselves are afforded some measure of sonic agency. *The Abhorsen Chronicles* contrasts a largely functional depiction of the bells' sounds with a sparse but impactful relation of the bells to voice and song. On the metaphorical level, the Abhorsen acknowledging the bells' voices, for example when she runs "her hands over the smooth wood of the handles, feeling their voices within, eagerly awaiting release" (137), may just be a way to refer to the bells' sound. However, as the associations of the word 'voice' most often signifies human vocalisation, the usage of 'voice' carries an implication of personification. The communicative aspect of voice (as opposed to its purely sonic aspects) are also notable in the context of the quote; the Abhorsen senses eagerness in the bells'

voices. While this does not give the impression of nuanced communication capable of conveying specifics, it is both more than standard for an inanimate object – even one with glimpses of sentience – and aligns with the previously noted tendency for musical communication to function via emotion rather than more concrete words.

The communicative aspect of music – the ability for one to attribute meaning to it – is highlighted in the climactic scene in which the protagonists defeat the great evil Orannis:

He [Touchstone] drew his mark, and as it flared, he was first to sound his bell [Ranna]. Then the Clayr added Mosrael's voice, the Dog began a rhythmic bark, Ellimere swung Dyrin, Sam rang Belgaer, and Sabriel let Saraneth call deep and low over them all. Finally, Lirael swung Astarael, and her mournful tone joined the ring of sound and magic that surrounded Orannis. Normally, Weeper would throw all who heard her into Death. Here, combined with the other six voices, her sound evoked a sorrow that could not be answered.

Together, the bells and Dog sang a song that was more than sound and power. It was the song of the earth, the moon, the stars, the sea, and the sky, of Life and Death and all that was and would be. (1123-4)

This scene reveals the reason for the final bell Astarael's second epithet 'the Sorrowful' – once again music is used as an inexorable evocation of emotion, in this case sorrow.⁶⁶ The implicit conceit is that everyone who hears it will recognise said emotion, regardless of race, background, gender, or allegiance – just as the bell will cast anyone, including the ringer, into Death. Furthermore, this is one of the very few usages of 'song' to describe the bells, and a rare mention of music in general. While there is a strong focus on instruments in *The*

⁶⁶ While listeners are more accurate when "judging music from familiar cultures", studies have found that the broad categories of anger, fear, happiness and sadness "received the highest recognition rates and were recognized across cultures" (Stevens 662).

Abhorsen Chronicles, the concept of song and singing does eventually make a notable appearance in this climactic scene. As mentioned above, before the climax of the narrative the ringing of the bells is rarely compared to song, nor afforded musical description or vocabulary. While they are instruments, their function as music-creating devices is subordinated to the effects of their sound on the Dead. Yet, in this scene, the bell sounds resolve themselves into song, into music, thus carrying a connotation of beauty, of non-functionality, which previously absent despite their tremendous effect. So, we have song; and this song is vast and inclusive, a “song of the earth, the moon, the stars, the sea, and the sky, of Life and Death and all that was and would be” (1124). This calls to mind once again the cosmic music of the spheres, the musical world creation we can find in J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis’s works, and the same impression of music as something so fundamental to the functioning of the world as we find in *Sing the Four Quarters*. The sudden vastness of the musical association, encapsulating the entire universe, is only emphasised by how little *The Abhorsen Chronicles* otherwise lingers on the subject, only making these grand connections at this most pivotal moment in the story. That the song also resounds with “Life and Death” (1124) is less surprising, as it is built into the function and use of the bells to begin with. It caps the bells’ function in connecting life and death throughout the novel. Thus, the bells are shown to both give some form of voice to the undead otherwise incapable of producing sound and to, with their own voices, impart emotions and sing a song that encompasses life, death, and the natural world.

What sets *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* apart from *The Abhorsen Chronicles* and other texts in this dissertation is that it features a ‘musical language’ which allows the living to *clearly* communicate with the dead through the Lan musical cultivation skill ‘Inquiry’, which forms a bidirectional link between the guqin player and the spirit being questioned. This direct communication is accomplished solely through music. While in *The*

Abhorsen Chronicles spoken commands often accompany the influence of the bells to underscore their driving force, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* features a whole musical ‘guqin language’ aimed solely at talking to the spirits of the lingering dead. ‘Inquiry’, consequently, is a rare skill rarely executed, as it requires mastery of the instrument as well as having learned this musical language. There are two major instances of Inquiry being used in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*; first, it is introduced when Lan Wangji uses it to figure out the location of a companion in a tomb; second, his apprentice Lan Sizhui uses it to ascertain the identity of a mute fierce corpse. In the former instance, Inquiry is directly described as “a famous song composed by the forebears of the Lan Clan of Gusu” (1: 236), which works like this:

One who wished to pose an inquiry made it known through the guqin’s melody, and with “Inquiry” serving as the conduit, the answer of the deceased would be transformed into notes and plucked upon the strings.

When the strings moved on their own, it meant that Lan Wangji had successfully gained an audience with one of the deceased within this stone bunker. Next, both parties would engage in a duet of question and answer through the language of the guqin. (1: 236)

This musical communication is a clear back and forth, with the guqin serving as the conduit for both question and answer as it is plucked in turn by the living inquirer and the spirit of the dead answerer. While it is not described very clearly in the text how exactly the language works, in the second scene of its usage Lan Sizhui notes that “‘Who art thou’ and ‘who killed thee’ are the easiest and most frequently asked questions during a session of Inquiry. They’re the first and second verses everyone who studies Inquiry learns” (2: 71). This implies that there are set verses for all kinds of questions that need to be practiced on the instrument,

though it remains unclear whether there is an underlying structure to the musical language which would allow innovation and extrapolation once a certain number of verses are learned.⁶⁷

The text does not afford descriptions of this language enough space to be able to approach the concept with linguistic analysis. Nonetheless, the guqin language is portrayed as direct and unambiguous; it appears possible to formulate clear questions, such as “What is this place?” (1: 236) and receive equally clear answers, even if the answer is only ‘I do not know’. When Lan Wangji inquires as to the location of the body of the spirit he is communicating with, the method of Inquiry is able to give him precise instructions where to turn and to keep moving one step forward with every note that the spirit plucks until the spot is reached. While the medium of communication is not human language, the author has devised a musical language which seems able to fulfil the same role and function as precisely as human language. Its main limitations lie in the scarcity of people able to master the guqin language (which also requires the inquirer to be a cultivator), the need for a guqin to be present, and the rigidly turn-based structure, with the spirit unable to speak of its own volition and needing to wait for the inquirer to ask a question it may then answer. An extension of this latter concern is that the spirit cannot lie when answering during Inquiry; while the communication is bidirectional, it is not on an even footing – the inquirer is in control and the spirit at their mercy (1: 237).

Nonetheless, this musical communication avoids the prevalent pitfalls seen in other texts, such as the imprecise communication between bards and kigh in *Sing the Four*

⁶⁷ I am put in mind of Jean-François Sudre’s attempt to create a universal musical language in Solresol, built out of seven syllables which correspond to the seven tonic tones, which in turn correspond to solfège. With a cap of five syllables per word, 11,000 possible words can be constructed. Solresol never caught on, not least due to such limitations as being hard to understand in its spoken form, being strongly influenced by its creator’s mother tongue of French (despite its claims to universality), and the word limit which does not allow for overly difficult conversations.

Quarters. As previously noted, this imprecision echoes the real-world limitations of musical communication, which tends towards emotional expression rather than unambiguous passing on of linguistic information. Among the texts analysed in this dissertation, the guqin language is unique in managing the latter, extending the potential of musical communication into a parallel of human language. However, *Inquiry*, for all its apparent flexibility of communication, has a specific aim: finding peace for restless spirits. It is an instrument of clarification, clarifying the surroundings of someone's death, their killer, and why they are lingering – all in order to then pacify the answering spirit in line with the Lan Clan's use of musical cultivation as detailed above. The guqin language is thus explicitly intended for communication with the dead, avoiding the use of emotional or embodied impulses as seen in other works.

In contrast, the communication taking place via the bells in *The Abhorsen Chronicles* is not as direct. The closest equivalent is the bell Dyrin's sound regrowing a tongue for a dead creature, but it then speaks with someone else's voice rather than its own, and that speech act is no longer music and merely enabled by the music; while *Inquiry* features an uneven power dynamic, the answering spirit does have its own voice. Beyond the example of Dyrin, the bells' communication is not at any point linguistic but conveys emotions and relations to the world in song.

Music commanding the dead

In *The Abhorsen Chronicles*, protagonists and enemy necromancers alike utilise the bells to command the dead, either to return them to true death or to make them heed commands in the lands of the living. While the bells also affect the living (including the wielder), and can affect some other forces such as the weather in some circumstances, their effect is undoubtedly greatest on the resurrected dead. Subjugation of the dead is one of the

most frequent aims of using the bells, and one of the reasons why Kibeth and Saraneth are the bells used most often throughout the narrative, as both serve to shackle the will of the Dead to the bell ringer. In the hands of the Abhorsen, this exertion of will is almost always aimed at forcing the dead to return to Death and no longer terrorise the lands of the living, as can be seen in this scene of Lirael banishing remnant “Gore Crows”:

The two blots [Gore Crows] reared up like salted leeches and almost somersaulted as they sought to evade the sound. But there was nowhere for them to go, nowhere they could escape Kibeth’s peremptory call. Except the one place the spirit never wished to see again. But it had no choice. Shrieking inside, the spirit obeyed the bell, and the two blots vanished into Death.

(945-6)

This passage makes clear both the advantages of using sound as a vehicle for power, as evasion of sound in the open air is impossible (especially when magically enhanced), and the irresistible force of the command of the bell when rung by someone trained in the arts of the necromantic bells. The spirits “had no choice” (946) and no way to resist the banishing back into Death – they are entirely at the mercy of the necromancer, with no will or agency of their own once they come into contact with the sound of the bell. Questions of will and agency are less marked for minor dead like the Gore Crows, who do not exhibit much, or any, sentience after resurrection, but when it comes to the Greater Dead, these questions become paramount, as the Greater Dead do have the power to resist the compulsion of the bells to some degree. For example, Chlorr of the Mask, an antagonist who appears in the second part of the trilogy, manages to flee one adversarial encounter instead of being banished back into Death, though she is “pursued by the sound of Saraneth” (1028), and the main antagonist of the first novel, the greater gead Kerrigor, manages to thwart the sound of the bell so that it “was not the clear, true sound it should be,” for his bulk “took the sound in and warped it” (308). The

degree of resistance possible depends on the strength of each party's will, as well as whether the encounter takes place in Death. While Chlorr could flee, a subsequent confrontation with another antagonist in Death ends with that antagonist being forced through the ultimate gate from which there is no return by "a tune that it couldn't ignore", as it was "too close to the Ninth Gate, and the compulsion was strong" (1073). Despite their ability to resist to a degree, they are both clearly still subordinate to the full might and compulsion of the bells.

The bells affect the living as well as the dead. Though occasionally they are affected in the same way, such as the final bell Astarael casting both ringer and surrounding dead back into Death, mostly the effects on the living and the dead differ, as in this scene featuring the less powerful panpipes:

Lungs expanded to the full, he chose the Kibeth pipe and blew. A single note sounded, high and clear – but then it somehow became a lively, infectious jig. It cheered the soldiers and even made them smile, their weapons moving with the rhythm of Kibeth's song. But the Dead heard a different tune, and those with working mouths and lungs and throats let out horrible howls of fear and anguish. But howl as they would, they couldn't drown out Kibeth's call, and the Dead Spirits began to move against their will, thrust out of the decaying flesh they occupied and back into Death. (1095)

Where the living are cheered, emboldened, and driven to greater coordination with each other while fighting against the dead, the dead literally hear "a different tune", which drives their souls back into Death. This draws a clear sonic line between the living and the dead, showing that while the bells connect life and death in many ways, the fundamental difference between the two states of being remains. There is also an implication that the living are favoured sonically; the effects of the Kibet pipe on humans are much more desirable, engendering

positive emotions and strengthening of people's spirits. The dead, on the other hand are abruptly forced back into Death, with no connotation of positivity at all. Thus, not only does the bell music clearly distinguish the living and the dead, it also enforces a hierarchy that mirrors the expectation of the natural order that dead should be dead and remain so.

The Abhorsen Chronicles draws no analogies between harmonious sound and the living, and dissonant sound and the dead. While the Abhorsens try to avoid “discordant notes” which happen when they are mentally “unbalanced, and the bell [doesn't] ring true” (1057), they can also make use of dissonance themselves to interrupt rival necromancers' use of the bells (427). Using two bells at once can also cause purposeful dissonance; for example, the combined sound of Mosrael and Kiraeth is described as “[h]arsh alarm joined with dancing jig, merging into a discordant, grating, but energetic tone” (236). Used by protagonists and antagonists alike, dissonance thus is neither inherently negative nor only linked to the dead, but appears as a riskier last resort compared to just having one source of sound.

Paralleling *The Abhorsen Chronicles*' core narrative struggle between those raising the dead and those sending the dead on into true death, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* features two major musical types of commanding the dead: righteous cultivators' efforts to pacify restless spirits and the undead, and Wei Wuxian's use of his flute to wake and direct the dead. These two types of practices are unequivocally portrayed as either 'righteous' (the Lan clan with its musical cultivation aimed at cleansing and calming) or 'evil' (Wei Wuxian's method of controlling the dead which goes against the natural order and is seen as a perversion of the Lan Clan method). Accepted uses of music to influence the dead are all aimed at laying restless spirits to rest, thus moving them beyond music's power to further influence them. Letting the dead linger is seen as both disrespectful to the dead and harmful to the living, who may be influenced by the dead's resentful energy. The guqin language

discussed earlier is one method to find out what is keeping restless spirits from passing into death, but the Lan Clan also has other secret musical techniques, called ‘tones’, which affect the dead. For example, the Eradication Tone has “evil-repelling effects” (4: 168), while the Purification Tone is meant to cleanse or suppress resentful energy and “clear the heart and calm the mind” (2: 316). The first introduction of Lan Wangji is heralded by his playing of the Eradication Tone:

Another strum. This time, the note was higher pitched, piercing through the sky like the austere harshness of winter’s first approach. The three fierce corpses shrank back while covering one ear with their right hands at the same time. However, it was impossible to block out the Eradication Tone of the Lan Clan of Gusu in such a way. They only managed to back up a few steps before there was the faint sound of cracking in their skulls. (1.56)

The effects of this music on the fierce corpses are immediate and impossible for them to resist, returning them to a state of true death. More powerful and difficult to learn are the Lan’s melodies, which have similar but more powerful effects: for example, the piece “Cleansing” will also purify and calm, but with the “utmost effectiveness” (3: 201) when played correctly. Yet, the dangers of this method are also shown, when one of the villains slightly alters the melody to have deleterious effects on the person they are purportedly calming (3: 202). These deleterious effects are specifically caused by dissonance and the emphasis on harmony is strong. Less rigidly bound by the format of tone or melody, a powerful cultivator like Lan Wangji is able to use his instrument to influence the dead ad-hoc, subduing fierce corpses through strums of his guqin strings (4: 72), or forcing oncoming hordes of corpses to kneel (3: 244). All of these musical techniques are clearly aimed at forcing reanimated souls or corpses back into death and their proper place. As in *The*

Abhorsen Chronicles, the effects of the music are impossible to avoid fully for the dead, and they have no agency in responding to the music. Aside from the guqin language with its clear communicatory aim, all the techniques and melodies either bind (i.e. make harmless) the dead or return their souls to true death. A strong binary is upheld, which divides the living and the dead. Harmony is strongly associated with the living world and dissonance with the dead, which then paints the eradication of the dead as eliminating dissonance that should not have been there in the first place. This echoes the alignment of musical harmony with cosmic harmony in traditional Chinese philosophy.

Because it breaks this cosmic harmony, the terror that Wei Wuxian instills in other cultivators stems directly from his ability to both summon the dead and control them through music – actions neither condoned nor performed by the Lan Clan as their musical cultivation is not suited to it. While he is just as able to pacify the dead as the Lan, and does help do so at several points in the novel, Wei Wuxian has developed his musical cultivation further to also *use* the dead. He is described as being able to summon “all the evil lurking on the mountain with a whistle” (3: 286); likewise, the “sharp, piercing melody” of his bamboo flute causes dead bodies to emerge from the ground as he actively raises buried corpses (1: 317). Wei Wuxian is then able to use the reanimated dead as a personal army against other cultivators, setting off a chain of events that eventually leads to Wei Wuxian’s own death and resurrection. At the same time, his use of the dead for his own ends is in itself the basis for his strife with the other cultivators, for doing so is seen as both a distortion of the natural order of things and a violation of cultural norms and expectations as to the respect and reverence due the ancestral dead. While pacifying restless spirits and corpses is in line with these norms, *animating* the dead is not, and neither is controlling their bodies for one’s personal aims.

The approbation of Wei Wuxian's actions in using musical cultivation to raise the dead is anchored in traditional Daoist and Confucian beliefs about death, burial rituals, and ancestor worship.⁶⁸ Confucianism placed importance on proper burial and proper rites for the dead, denial of which was seen as a shame on the family and descendants, as well as charging descendants with continued veneration of deceased ancestors.⁶⁹ Being unable to bury the body of a dead relative, went against proper ritual – and so did disturbing the burial site afterwards, which may further incite fear of misfortune caused by displeased dead ancestors (Hsu et al. 155). Contrary thereto, the Daoist thought emblematised by the philosopher Zhuangzi contends that such ritual is unnecessary and that death should be seen as a part of the natural cycle in which a person's existence as an individual ceases, but their qi energy merely returns to nature, where it survives (Sterckx, 307-9). While not focused on the sanctity of ritual and respectful handling of the dead in comparison to the Confucian approach which most colours *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, the topic of qi in relation to death is also central in Daoist thought. Along these lines, Wei Wuxian's perversion of the qi left behind by the dead through his musical cultivation would also be abhorrent. Taking into account historical Chinese attitudes towards the dead and burial, it is clear why there are accepted ways of using music to allow the dead their rest as exemplified by the Lan, and unacceptable ways such as Wei Wuxian's disturbance of the dead and harnessing of resentful energy.

The majority of music cultivation in this novel deals with the dead, who are more susceptible to musical control than the living. However, there are some effects which affect

⁶⁸ The history of China and Chinese (already a contested term when taking into account the different cultures subsumed under its banner at different points in time) beliefs is large and complex, but Daoism and Confucianism arguably have the largest influence on contemporary art set in historical or faux-historical contexts, such as xianxia.

⁶⁹ See Wang (2012) for context on Confucian burial rituals and tombs and Hsu et al. (2009) on Confucianism and filial piety in regards to the dead.

the living as well. The living can be purified of negative emotions or resentful energy with specific melodies just as the dead can. As in previously examined texts, music is coupled to emotions, reflecting the emotions of the musician such that calmness on the part of the player is required in order to produce the desired results (4: 147). Lan Xichen's flute emits a "mournful moan" (5: 98) when he is in distress, as well as indicating his overall character and present state of mind in this scene:

After a long silence, Lan Xichen lowered his eyes and took out [his flute] Liebing. A gust of night wind elicited a murmur from the xiao, low and heavy, like a sigh. Wei Wuxian had heard Lan Xichen play Liebing before. The sound of the xiao was just like Zewu-jun [Lan Xichen's sobriquet] himself, like spring breeze melting into rain – warm and gentle and refined. While the music was as exquisite as ever, it left a bitter taste in one's mouth. (3: 214)

Here, music is once again likened to nature, as well as explicitly mirroring the player's emotion and causing a specific emotional reaction in the listener. The influence on the living is not exclusively positive or purifying; it depends on the kind of music played and the intention behind it. Just as unstable qi can be calmed and balanced through Cleansing and Purification melodies, the 'Songs of Turmoil' do the direct opposite: stirring up negative emotions such as rage and despair and disturbing the cultivator's internal qi. Any individual piece of music outside of Inquiry's direct correspondence to the dead, then, can have the same effects on the living and the dead, and the same melodies can be used to influence both categories. However, the dead are fully controlled by default and have no way of defending themselves against it outside of greater resentful energy overpowering the living cultivator, whereas the living still have their own mind, will, and ability to communicate.

Both texts explicitly use musical means to not only raise the dead but also further suborn the dead to the musician's will. By default, this musical control over the dead is comprehensive and unavoidable for the dead, whose bodies are manipulated and moved at the necromancer's will. While both texts also feature the odd instance of a very powerful dead with some consciousness – as opposed to the large majority of dead bodies or creatures who are not shown to possess much intelligence or sentience – resisting the musical commands for a while, they always eventually fail to compete with the music's thrall. In contrast, those living who hear these necromantic melodies are either impacted differently by the music than the dead (for example, by having their moods influenced but not their bodies taken over) or have the ability to consciously resist the effects.

Music, agency, and the dead

The Abhorsen Chronicles and *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* open up a space to note the way music in fantasy novels, while often described in beautiful, natural, and transcendent terms, also has a tendency to elide the agency of those caught within the network of musicking without being the musician exerting their will over said network.⁷⁰ Agency is a topic of great interest whenever magic enters the narrative fray in fantasy. This is particularly the case when only a subset of characters has access to it. Furthermore, it is a topic that reasserts itself when considering magical music, which, in many texts, enables effects tending towards mental influence rather than brute force. While this chapter is focused on the dead and their skewed power relations with the living as emphasised by musical control, I also posed similar questions about the bardic use of music in *Sing the Four Quarters* to, for example, compel people to tell the truth and command them. In the texts discussed in this chapter, music's control over the dead is more all-encompassing, as there is

⁷⁰ See also Chapter 3: Music's Temptations

essentially no agency given to the dead and the question whether the dead *ought* to have agency is less straightforward than when discussing the agency of living beings. After all, if the dead no longer have a mind or consciousness, do they *need* agency? Is it even possible for the dead to *have* agency?

In *The Abhorsen Chronicles*, while resistance is shown as possible through the application of great will, the one wielding the bells always has the advantage, and generally succeeds in their goals. The degree to which the dead can resist musical commands depends on the power level and consciousness of the dead; as discussed in the previous section, while most are helpless to counter the Abhorsen's power, the stronger greater dead, who also retain enough self to talk and think, can sometimes resist successfully and do so on occasion throughout the narrative. However, the bells are a major advantage and instrument of control. Once an Abhorsen is experienced enough, none of the dead can stand against them. The text lingers on the theme of freedom versus control, though it never argues in favour of the rights of the dead. Song is used as a metaphor for life and control. The overarching villain of the series expresses his desire for freedom and control using the imagery of singing, railing against a world that does not hear his 'song':

'Broken in two and buried under hill, Forever to lie there, wishing us ill'
But it is not my song, Hedge. The world spins on without my song. Life that knows not my lash crawls unbidden wherever it will go. Creation rums amok, without the balance of destruction – and my dreams of fire are only dreams. But soon the world will fall asleep, and it will be my dream that all will dream, my song that will fill every ear. (786)

Older, primordial forces in the novel appear to see the world in terms of music – and they use song rather than specifically bells or other instruments to visualise it. Perhaps this is due to

the individual interiority of such song, which is unaffected by ‘external’ materials and thus can be framed as an undistorted representation of one’s will. Importantly, in *The Abhorsen Chronicles*, named instruments all have at least vestiges of their own will, as remnants of other primordial forces, and thus alter the dynamics of agency involved in their playing. On the one hand, the one wielding the bell makes the decision to sound the bell, and it is their will that matters in exerting the bell’s function (be it waking, casting into Death, or something else) over the dead who hear its sound. On the other hand, if the bell has a certain amount of sentience, it may affect the wielding, as we can see in moments when a bell seems to tempt the Abhorsen to play it, and even if it does not, it is now implicated in the effects it causes more directly than if it were fully inert. Furthermore, their own freedom to ring as they wish is restricted, though this is not seen as a divisive point as the primordial beings whose will lingers in them consciously made the choice to become these functional tools and suborn their own desires – agency willingly given away to aid a greater cause. It is also notable that *The Abhorsen Chronicles* ends on an act of freeing, “the brief chime of Belgaer, so strange after the massed song of all the bells, its single voice freeing [the primordial being] Mogget from his millennia of servitude” (1129). Mogget is not a dead creature – his increasing agency after millennia of lack is highlighted throughout the narrative, until a final act of music frees him entirely, whereas the dead can only be ‘freed’ into final death.

As in *The Abhorsen Chronicles*, in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, control of the dead is also close to absolute, and the very reanimation of dead bodies is a breach of agency, as the dead have no chance to resist this breach of their rest that countermands both natural order and cultural values. However, there are two ‘dead’ characters, Wen Ning and Song Lan, who retain their consciousness and, once freed from their original controller, can think and act on their own behalf. They contrast the dead who are under complete control and are generally unnamed and not specifically mourned. While the narrative makes it clear that it is

anathema for such corpses to be reanimated, through all righteous cultivators' horror and disgust at the notion, no one argues that they should be given their own agency, given their lack of consciousness – instead, the only goal is to lay them to rest once more, just as in *The Abhorsen Chronicles*. The sole exception to this passive role is the “fierce corpse” of Nie Mingjue, who shows at most glimmers of consciousness but is so powerful and filled with resentful energy that the corpse manages to resist attempts to control and pacify it for a long time, causing chaos in the process. In this case, too, the ultimate goal and freedom is pacification and true release into death.

The moral implications are similar in both texts; the musicians always have agency, and there is no way for the controlled dead to turn the tables outside of rare instances of great force against inexperienced musicians; both narratives portray the musician's eminence as positive and natural. Resistance may be possible in the case of dead creatures with great power and a degree of consciousness, but they have no way to counter-control the musician. Whether the reader seems to be intended to sympathise with the choiceless dead seems to depend on the level of cognition present in the dead character in the case of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, or whether death has already warped the dead into evil, as in the case of *The Abhorsen Chronicles*. In the latter case, ‘evil’, if defined as preying on the living in an effort to remain in the living world, is inevitable, thus leading to less (or no) sympathy for the dead creatures. Furthermore, in both texts instrument use is a point of privilege, not available to everyone and definitely not to the dead. In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* only cultivators from specific clans have both the power and the opportunity to learn musical cultivation techniques, thus raising their abilities above the common people and giving them this power over the dead. In *The Abhorsen Chronicles* use of the bells and pipes is even more restricted, making this kind of musical control over the dead even more rarified. In both texts music can be wielded in ways that are seen as explicitly positive (in its pacifying or purifying

capacity) and explicitly negative (through resurrection and control of the dead regardless of the degree of their consciousness). The music itself is a neutral force, malleable into whichever aim the cultivator or necromancer pursues. However, *The Abhorsen Chronicles* complicates this dynamic by giving the bells themselves a degree of will and character, involving remnants of primordial forces which, while generally tending towards preserving life and the status quo, are still somewhat perilous to the mortal wielder. Exactly how negatively the use of music to resurrect and control the dead should be viewed depends on the readers' views on whether the dead in a fantasy setting where such things are woven into the possibilities of the world should be afforded the same agency as the living.

Chapter 3

Music's Temptations

“I like beautiful melodies telling me terrible things.”

- Tom Waits

Contrary to the largely positive depictions of music in previous chapters, in which texts highlighted how the connective nature of music can promote harmony between humans and nature and lay unquiet dead to rest, this chapter considers music's power to tempt as part of underlying questions about agency in the face of musical impact enhanced by magic and its effects on the minds of unwary – or even wary – listeners. Temptation can be considered as a form of communication, a dialogue that offers something the interlocutor wants in return for giving in to a (generally unwise) desire. Temptation can be verbal, but is also often a wordless luring that echoes the kinds of musical communication seen in *Sing the Four Quarters*, *Who Fears Death*, and *The Whale Rider*. Yet temptation differs from more general communication through its darker edge. The texts in this chapter feature the least positive and most ambivalent depictions of music – even more so than the questions of agency raised in Chapter 2, as those concerned ‘merely’ the dead and the overall aim of laying the unquiet dead to rest is sympathetic. In Michael Ende's *Der Rattenfänger*⁷¹ and Terry Pratchett's *Soul Music*, beautiful music can lead both the listener and the performer astray. Both texts explore the flipside of music's beauty and affect in fantasy narratives through the form of temptation: musical temptations are portrayed as near irresistible because they work on the emotional,

⁷¹ Literally translated as ‘The Rat Catcher’. No officially published English translation of this work exists, so all translations used in this chapter are mine.

non-rational level, aided by the anthropomorphising of music and special instruments, whose goals and desires affect musicians and audiences alike.

Musical temptation is a particularly prevalent trope in many mythologies: the Greek sirens are a classic example, leading travellers astray through their singing and the fae in Celtic traditions are either themselves seduced by mortal music or lure mortals into faerie – neither of which is beneficial for the mortal in question. The Hindu god Krishna, often described as carrying a flute that plays mesmerising tunes, is just one example of the mythological deities who play a music that is both beyond the ken of mortals and deeply attractive to them. The musical act perhaps most associated with temptation is the sound of music luring the audience physically to a different location – beautiful or otherwise alluring music making people stray from marked paths into dangerous territory, changing the course of their ship, or leading them into other realms altogether. The European folktale of the pied piper is a classic example of this and of particular relevance to this chapter. There are many versions of this tale; likely the most well-known is the German folktale ‘Der Rattenfänger von Hameln’ (‘The Rat Catcher of Hameln’) popularised by the Brothers Grimm. In the version curated by the Grimms, ‘Die Kinder von Hameln’ (‘The Children of Hameln’), the piper is described as whistling on a small pipe; all the rats and mice in the town follow his call until he steps into the river Weser, drowning the rodents. When the piper is denied his remuneration, he uses his pipe again to lure children away from the town, disappearing with them into a mountain. Only three children escape this calamity: a blind child, a mute child, and a small boy who turned back to get clothes (Grimm 269-70). Based on real, if unclear, events in Hameln in 1284,⁷² as well as wide-held beliefs in men who hold uncanny powers over vermin like snakes or rats through playing flutes or pipes, the core of the story,

⁷² There is much academic debate as to what actually caused the disappearance of many young people from the town in that year (for which there is strong evidence in town records), with theories ranging from an act of revenge to plague to labour migration or colonising migration into the east (‘Ostsiedlung’).

regardless of version, features a piper who is able to enchant both rats and children through his playing.

Music's power to lure

Music plays a crucial role in Michael Ende's 1983 libretto adaptation of the pied piper folktale, luring rats, children, and adults in turn while being used by the narrative to cast moral judgment on human greed. In this version of the story, the rat plague that harasses the town is not a natural occurrence but invited by a group of people of high social standing, including the mayor and the bailiff, who want to increase their wealth. They have called upon the mystical figure of the 'rat king', who excretes gold in exchange for his shadow rats plaguing the town. When the piper arrives in the town and leads all the rats away with his music, weakening the rat king, the mayor's group conspires not only to cheat the piper of his reward but also to steal his magical shawm⁷³ from him and render him powerless as well as speechless, as he is mute when not communicating through music. The mayor's daughter, Magdalena, helps him escape, and as he leaves the town he plays and takes the town's neglected children with him. His music splits open a mountain into whose golden light the children walk. The piper gives one of the children his instrument and turns to stone as the mountain gate closes again. While *Der Rattenfänger* is based on the pied piper folktale, Ende adapts and modernises the story heavily, adding themes of class difference and poverty, while introducing elements that are more explicitly supernatural and showing the piper as a much less villainous figure.

Previous scholarship on the pied piper story is largely focused on the historical context and the various sources of the folktale across Europe.⁷⁴ Despite the centrality of

⁷³ A mediaeval and Renaissance European double-reed instrument with a conical bore that was eventually overshadowed by the oboe.

⁷⁴ See Wolfgang Mieder's thorough handbook on the pied piper (2007) for a detailed bibliography as well as a list of adaptations.

music to the tale, there is surprisingly little mention of music in analyses – perhaps because most versions of the text do not linger on the music and afford it little description. However, in recognition of its musical topic, it has frequently been adapted into musical form, for example Viktor Ernst Nessler’s *Der Rattenfänger von Hameln*, an opera in five acts (1879), and John Rutter’s 1981 school opera *The Piper of Hamelin*. Michael Ende’s libretto *Der Rattenfänger: Ein Hamelner Totentanz (The Rat Catcher: The Dance of the Dead of Hameln)* was written in a collaboration with the composer Wilfried Hiller. Ende, who is better known for his longform writing,⁷⁵ is primarily a writer, not a musician, though he does play the guitar and has composed some songs. Notably, he has always been interested in connecting “word, music and image” (“Michael Ende”), which this collaboration with Hiller fully realised.

The libretto reads like a play, with stage cues and occasional added music cues. These music cues are not very specific, and mainly give the reader a general impression of the music to expect in a scene – for example, noting that the piper plays the rat king motif (Ende 33) or that the carnival music is “shrill and eerie” (55). Nonetheless, unlike the novels looked at in previous chapters, here the libretto form is intrinsically linked to performed music. It can be read entirely separately,⁷⁶ just as plays can be read without seeing them performed, but the fact that music is intended to be part of the experience renders it different from that of a novel text which is intended to be silent rather than accompanied. The music-word relation is more intentional, words playing a complementary role to the musical score composed later, as evidenced by the music cues and the care taken to have characters note sounds and music in

⁷⁵ Non-German audiences are most likely to know his *The Neverending Story*.

⁷⁶ And indeed likely often is: the opera had only a very limited run of stage performance. There does not appear to be a full video publicly available online, which makes it likely that there are readers of this libretto without experience of the musical production.

the dialogue. Yet, at the same time, both the musical score and the libretto are expected to stand on their own as well; I will analyse the latter without reference to the musical score.

Regardless of adaptation or specific interpretation, the pied piper plot is about luring first rats and then children via music. *Der Rattenfänger* offers several different dimensions of temptation, from straightforward luring from one location to another to physically compelling dance or sleep and elicitation of calculated emotional reactions. In the libretto, the moment of the iconic rat luring is rendered as a stage cue – the action is too important to not indicate in the libretto for all future productions:

The player begins, very slowly, to stamp his feet. A muffled echo sweeps through the whole town like a subterranean tremor. The rhythm quickens, becomes a manner of dance. At the same time, he begins to play, an eerie, shrill, magical melody... a myriad of rat ghosts... circle the player, who continues to play his captivating music.⁷⁷ The ghosts cannot reach him but surround him greedily. Very slowly he moves outside, walking backwards and continually playing. The rat ghosts all follow him, although they are visibly reluctant. They are forced. (Ende 36-7)⁷⁸

This is the first of several instances of the player's music being called 'magical', leaving the reader in no doubt of music's place among the supernatural elements in the story.⁷⁹

Furthermore, the description of the melody as 'eerie' and 'shrill' implies that it is unpleasant to listen to, despite the benevolent intent to free the town of these parasitic rat ghosts – there is no clear parallel between nice-sounding music and purity of intent. Instead, the description

⁷⁷ Translation note: the original German is 'Beschwörungsmusik', which could also be translated as "music that conjures". All possible translations fit well with the theme of luring; both "captivating" and "conjuring" call to mind enthrallment.

⁷⁸ Stage cues in the form of prose are italicised, contrasting the non-italicised dialogue. I keep the text's original formatting.

⁷⁹ Other aspects of the supernatural include the rat king and rat ghosts, transformed from the folktale's actual rats, and the player turning to stone at the end of the narrative.

emphasises the otherworldliness of the music and its distinction from commonly heard forms of music in the town. Magic also explains the emphasis on the rats being explicitly forced to follow the player; they are clearly depicted as having no choice in the matter, the music's magical lure an inescapable command. At the same time, there is a strongly physical dimension to the playing. The player incorporates steps that recall dancing and the rat ghosts crowd close and physically follow him. The music exerts a physical – rather than solely emotional – pull, which is fitting as the rat ghosts are not characterised as particularly sapient to begin with, not being showcased to have any emotions or motivations beyond hunger and greed. While not explicitly stated, the fact that the rat ghosts are forced into compliance without any chance at resistance (unlike the greater ambiguity in the successful temptation of humans I will discuss below), echoes Chapter 2's argument that music tends to affect the dead differently and more potently than the living in fantasy literature; dead creatures have no agency in the face of musical temptation or compulsion if they have no proven sapience, and are still disadvantaged even if they do.

In contrast to the music used to lure the rats, when the player calls to the children his melody is “quiet” and “tender” (61), recalling the melody with which he is first introduced to two of the children at the beginning of the story. The distinction between the eerie, shrill music aimed at the rat ghosts and the gentle music aimed at the children suggests that it is not only the intent of the music that shapes its characteristics but the music's intended audience and how the player feels about the listeners. The malevolent rat ghosts are treated to much less pleasant music than the innocent children. At the same time, the children do not display the rat ghosts' reluctance: the first few are hesitant (61), but once they all ring him silently their exodus is described as a “solemn procession”, while the player's music is called a song rather than ‘merely’ a melody. The degree to which the children choose to follow the player's music, as opposed to being forced as the rat ghosts were, remains unstated throughout the

narrative. However, there is an implication of free choice encapsulated in three aspects: the first is that the player ceases playing his melody before they reach the destination, at which point children captivated solely by the music could choose to turn back (63); the second is the theme of unjust social conditions highlighted in Ende's version of the story, which gives the children motive to want to escape the town; the third is the final destination of the children, a crack in the mountain emitting golden light that the children marvel at (63). Yet, the children are described as entering the crack as if dreaming (63), in contrast to the above, does not imply rational thought. It can also be argued that the player's intention was to save the children from the army that slaughters its way through the town at the very end of the libretto (an addition by Ende not found in the folktale), as the children are safe wherever the mountain led them. Overall, the ambiguity in the player's and children's choices highlights the ambiguity of the music itself – it is neither a purely positive force nor a purely negative one, and whether it is the music acting through the player or the player using music to impose his will remains an open question.

Aside from music luring listeners to another place, another physical aspect of musical temptation is the catchiness or infectiousness of music. This is classic example of what musicology calls musical 'entrainment' effects: the synchronisation that happens between people during activities that involve music (i.e. what I have been calling musicking). Two quite disparate examples of catchy music occur in quick succession in *Der Rattenfänger*. On one end of the physical spectrum, the player gains access to the town by putting the bailiffs barring his path to sleep. The woman who recounts this notes that the effect of the music was so strong that the bailiffs fell asleep "in one blow" and are still "snoring as if drunk now" (30). In contrast, a few lines later, the player begins to play a tune "which is so infectious that everyone has to jump and dance" (30). This is a far more classic example of the catchiness of music, but both putting people to sleep and making them dance uncontrollably until they

“have to gasp for air” (31) are excellent examples of musicking that leads listeners into responses they might not consciously choose otherwise. In both cases, there is an element of temptation, as the listeners may well subconsciously desire the outcome but are constrained not to give in to it – whether by their work guarding the gate or by the need to evaluate the player’s powers rationally.

The calling forth of particular emotional reactions that aid the player, tempt listeners to trust the player, and ‘bewitch’ them complements the physical dimension of the music’s influence. The player’s first appearance in the text is heralded by music and witnessed by some of the poor children who he eventually leads away from the town: “*From afar one hears the player’s melody. The children stand up and stare at the river, spellbound*” (19). Before they can even see the player, they are already caught by his music, focussed entirely on him. While they are afraid for a little while, the player begins to tell them stories and jokes through the music so that the children lose their fear, and “want to trust the player” (20). The music has a demonstrable impact on their assessment of the stranger’s trustworthiness and their reaction to him, priming them to follow him later. Nor is this emotional impact confined to children: the mayor’s daughter, Magdalena, listening to the player play a “strange melody” during their first encounter, is “totally enchanted” (32), and this, too, sets the tone for their subsequent interactions. She ends up helping him against the will of her parents, and to her own detriment. The player’s musicking thus clearly exerts an influence on people’s minds and attitudes, even when not tempting them to any particular course of action. Much like the ambiguity surrounding the way the piper takes the children away, it remains unclear throughout how intentional these effects are on the player’s part: whether it is a side-effect of his inability to speak and his reliance on music as a substitute for speech, whether he is planning his course of action from the start, or whether the music is acting through him rather than caused by his actions – the latter option comes into stark focus when the player turns to

stone without his instrument, and thus the music, to sustain him at the end of the narrative. His final fate does not necessarily imply that none of the prior choices were his own, but when music is explicitly equated to both the player's life and his soul (57) questions about his agency do arise.⁸⁰

It should be noted that both of the above are examples of emotional enchantments on people toward whom the player is positively inclined. When confronted with the mayor's wife Atela, who is greedy and lusts after him, the effect of his music is harsher:

The player begins to play his instrument. It is the magical melody of eternity.

ATELA

(with increasing fright)

No! No! Stop! What are you doing to me?

I feel naked and bare in front of you,

but different than I wanted!

You force me to look into the mirror.

.....

Now I see myself in front of eternity,

alone – in everlasting darkness ...

.....

Oh, force me no longer to see the truth,

or I must be ruined by horror! (47-8)

⁸⁰ More on personification of music in both *Der Rattenfänger* and *Soul Music* in Chapter 6

The player's response to being assaulted is a kind of anti-temptation: instead of tempting Atela further with his body or into a particular kind of action, he stops her in her tracks by confronting her with her loneliness and darkness in the greater scheme of the world. His musicking forces her into complete emotional collapse: not the wondrous enchantment of the children and Magdalena, but a horrifying enchantment that is not in any way designed to arouse goodwill in her. Music holds up a mirror to her character, abhorring rather than tempting or beautifying her. As with the other examples, physical and emotional, in this scene the music leaves no way out, no way to deny or avoid its impact. It is the most primal form of communication.

As it also features an instrument that bestows the power of temptation on its player as a core driver of the narrative, the role of music in Terry Pratchett's *Soul Music*, first published in 1994, is as central as in *Der Rattenfänger*. In this novel there is an explicit characterisation of music as an anthropomorphised primordial force that is both essential to life and the universe and has its own goal distinct from that of the performer: to spread itself everywhere by making itself irresistible to both its performers and its audience. Temptation is thus a core goal and tool of music throughout the narrative. *Soul Music* is the sixteenth novel in Pratchett's Discworld series, which features a large cast of characters in a magical secondary world setting which nonetheless resembles the real world closely in terms of character behaviour and motivation, social and historical issues, and general outlook on life. Pratchett also often introduces anachronistic real-world inventions or trends into the faux late mediaeval setting⁸¹ and lets them interact with the fundamentally magical make-up of the Discworld. In the case of *Soul Music*, this modern invention is rock music. The narrative unfolds around Buddy (formerly Imp Y Celyn, in a pun on Buddy Holly), a young harpist

⁸¹ Pratchett mixes and matches from several periods in history, as well as locations, but the main city and location of many Discworld narratives, Ankh-Morpork, has guilds and a patrician and no electricity or steam machines throughout most of the series, so the general impression is one of late mediaeval Europe.

seeking to become famous in the city, where he meets his band members – a dwarf and a troll – and starts playing a magical instrument: a guitar. The band becomes very popular very quickly due to the new and infectious style of music (‘music with rocks in’); it eventually becomes clear that the primordial force of music is using Buddy as an avatar to extend its influence. The other main character, Susan Sto Helit, the granddaughter of Death currently burdened with Death’s job, tries to prevent this by forestalling Buddy’s death, which would create an immortal legend from which the music could feed.

While the story is not set in the real world, there are many real-world references sprinkled throughout the text. Most importantly for the context of this chapter, there are numerous music references, from specific ones to artists like Bob Dylan, Meat Loaf, and Chuck Berry, and famous locations like the night club in which the Beatles first performed, to more generic references to how the music scene works, from roadies to bands trashing their hotel rooms while high.⁸² While music undoubtedly has supernatural aspects and effects in this novel, *Soul Music* is the only text analysed in this dissertation which draws a clear *distinction* between music and magic. One of the members of the band, the dwarf Glod notes that “this didn’t *feel* like magic. It felt a lot older than that. It felt like music” (Pratchett 118), while the university wizards agree that it feels like “more” than magic (155) and cannot be stopped because music is not susceptible to magic (237). In a setting in which magic is commonplace, music is thus afforded a special status that goes beyond magic, older and more powerful, echoing the ubiquity and often importance of music throughout human history.

Soul Music’s narrative arc about the inevitability and primacy of music is embodied by music’s effects escalating throughout the text, tempting the audience not only into

⁸² This list barely scratches the surface of the references in the text, Pratchett being a famously referential writer. For a very comprehensive list of *Soul Music* references, see its entry in the Annotated Pratchett File on lspace.org, a website dedicated to providing information about Pratchett and his work in the manner of a fan wiki, though it predates most others (“Annotated Pratchett”).

shouting and dancing but also into acts of youthful rebellion. Unlike *Der Rattenfänger*, the focus in *Soul Music* is equally on the music's influence on the audience and the players themselves. The temptation of the audience is more immediately apparent, however, with widespread effects that range from physical to emotional. As in *Der Rattenfänger*, music is described as catchy:

‘And, Dean, will you stop tapping your feet?’

‘Well, it’s catchy,’ said the Dean.

‘It’s *catching*,’ said Ridcully. (127)

Making the distinction between ‘catchy’ and ‘catching’ highlights the potentially dangerous aspect of music that tempts people into moving to its beat. ‘Catching’ implies infectiousness, against one’s choice, whereas ‘catchy’ gives a milder impression as a normal description of a musical experience. An instance that highlights this more forceful impact of Buddy’s music is a scene in which Buddy commands complete silence in a rowdy room simply by playing a few chords:

[The chord] rang like an iron bar dropped on a library floor at midnight.

Echoes bounced back from the corners of the room. Each one bore its own load of harmonics. It was an explosion of sound in the same way that a Hogswatchnight rocket explodes, each falling spark exploding again...

Imp’s fingers caressed the strings, picking out three more chords. The axe-thrower lowered his axe. This was music that had not only escaped but had robbed a bank on the way out. It was music with its sleeves rolled up and its top button undone, raising its hat and grinning and stealing the silver. It was music that went down to the feet by way of the pelvis without paying a call on Mr Brain. (104)

First, the sound is extremely loud and poignant, unlike what one would expect from an ordinary guitar. It swallows up every other sound, thus by default causing silence outside its own soundscape. The comparison to fireworks evokes feelings of wondrous noise, something that spellbinds people despite (or because of) the assault on their ears. The danger of this music's power is then elaborated through a series of comparisons to criminal activity, from escaping to robbing a bank and stealing things in a suave manner. Style is strongly implied in these comparisons: music is the kind of criminal that audiences like to root for, handsome and swaggering. This leads straight back into temptation, which always works better when it is at least semi-voluntary. As the last line notes, the tempting appeal of 'music with rocks in' in *Soul Music* is largely due to the way it bypasses rationality, playing with people's bodies without the brain's input. However, that does not mean there are no effects on the mind at all: while the physical is emphasised first, the arguably more efficacious temptation comes in the form of emotional effects that draw in particular on memories. The way the Dean of the wizard university is affected demonstrates this point:

'Actually, it didn't feel magical,' said the Dean. He sighed. He was seventy-two. It had made him feel that he was seventeen again. He couldn't remember having been seventeen; it was something that must have happened to him while he was busy. But it made him feel like he imagined it felt like when you were seventeen, which was like having a permanent red-hot vest on under your skin. He wanted to hear it again. (131)

The force of the music's effect on the Dean – he ends up abandoning his work, dressing in black leather etc. – lies in its evocation of the memories of his youth. Or rather, in its evocation of memories of an idealised youth the Dean never, in fact, experienced, but in retrospect yearns for. It is not true nostalgia, though music is also capable of evoking that, but an idealised *what if* that erases all the boring parts of what it was actually like to be

seventeen. This is temptation because it is addictive: he explicitly wants to hear the music again so he can recapture that feeling, tempted into listening again and again and largely forgetting or setting aside his usual life in order to do so. The Dean is not the only character to be thus tempted. This rebellion against the established order, which echoes the rock music movement's impact on society, is wrapped up in the temptation; not only are people changing their own lives to chase the music, they also disrupt society to do so, from servants at the university refusing to carry out their jobs to audience threatening to trash the music hall when the band fails to appear as scheduled. The effects of this magical musicking are widespread, catching nearly everyone who listens. In a scene in a bar where the band is playing, Archchancellor Ridcully feels "all alone" (155) because everyone else is carried away by the music and has, from his point of view, completely lost their heads. The music's effect on the audience is described in the text as an act that creates a network – the very definition of musicking. Buddy notes that he can "feel the music flowing out of him and into the audience" (262), a connection that neither he nor the audience can escape.

As Buddy realises, in *Soul Music* the player is as implicated by the music's temptations as the audience. One consistent question is whether the player is playing the instrument or the instrument playing the player. The first mention of doubt about whether Buddy is playing the instrument or being played by it appears in narration, describing Buddy holding the guitar like a spear as its strings glitter with sparks: "It was hard to know who was playing what" (105). This is then backed up by various characters throughout the narrative. Susan notes that "[t]he music was playing him, not the other way round", doubting that his fingers even touched the strings (160); even later on the band discusses the kind of music they seem to be producing without their own input:

'I don't know what I'm playing. It just comes in my head and down my arms.'

‘Yes,’ said Glod. ‘Me, too. Seems to me I’m getting stuff out of that horn I never put in there.’

‘And it ain’t proper playing,’ said Cliff. ‘That’s what I’m saying. It’s more like being played.’ (205)

Over the course of the story, the focus changes from Buddy alone being played by his own, clearly magical, instrument to the whole band being played by music as an entity-like force. Music is an embodied action, with physical motion becoming almost autonomous from the brain in its trance-like state. It is interesting to note that Cliff does not consider what is happening to be ‘proper’ music, the implication being that ‘proper’ music is intentional on the player’s part, requiring skill rather than merely their bodies as directed by the music itself. In short, proper musicking requires being in control of the music rather than letting oneself be controlled.⁸³ The band feels helpless in the face of the force of music acting through them.

Yet while the instruments may take charge, the players do still have the option to resist. They are simply tempted not to do so by the advantages this supernatural music offers them. For example, Buddy notes that he can easily play this guitar when he picks it up, an instrument he has no prior experience with as a harpist; in fact it is “impossible to play badly”, the strings mirroring the tune in his mind no matter how he places his fingers (87). Both he and the instrument are merely a conduit of the music. This is naturally a temptation: “It was, in solid form, the kind of instrument you dream about when you first start to play – the one you can play without learning” (87). Yet, even in this description, the seeds of the temptation’s limits are already sown; Buddy is not a student anymore, he is an experienced musician, so “when you first start to play” no longer applies to him. At his level other things become important, such as creative expression and not being bored by the process – both

⁸³ This is not an ubiquitous opinion in the real world; plenty of musical genres thrive on a measure of getting caught up in the music on the players’ part.

aspects that the sentient music takes away from him to some degree. To avoid losing its avatar, the music layers more temptations on top of that one: an addictive feeling while playing and a resonance with the magical instrument that makes other instruments pale in comparison. Buddy notes towards the end of the novel that only his own guitar “sounds good when played” anymore (311-12). This appears to be part of the same addiction that marks his playing towards the end of the novel:

It was fine when he was on stage or, as it had been tonight, on an old barn door set on a few bricks. Everything was in bright colours. He could feel white-hot images arcing across his mind. His body felt as though it were on fire but also, and this was the important bit, as if it was meant to be on fire. He felt alive. And then, afterwards, he felt dead. (262)

While Buddy is playing, everything feels good and bright and exciting. As soon as he stops, the world loses colour and lustre. He is, quite literally, addicted to the music he plays at this point, regardless of when and where and how he plays. He is becoming little more than an avatar of the music, a channel for it to enter the world. There are various further drawbacks to giving in to this temptation. Playing makes him feel tired and stretched (111) and he becomes increasingly obsessed with spreading the music everywhere, like an apostle of music. Even when it puts his and the other band members’ lives at risk and completely sucks him dry, he insists that people “should hear our music” (169). All of this culminates in a strong self-destructive impulse:

Buddy hung from the rear wheel, feet over the drop, and jerked as the music played an eight-note riff on his soul. Never age. Never die. Live for ever in that one last white-hot moment, when the crowd screamed. When every note was a heartbeat. Burn across the sky. You will never grow old. They will never

say you died. That's the deal. You will be the greatest musician in the world.

Live fast. Die young. The music tugged at his soul. (339)

This is the music's final temptation; it promises eternal fame beyond the limits of life, without the slow decline of skill and popularity as one ages, all in exchange for an early death. It is not a spurious temptation, either. In-text it is clear that this *would* happen, as the laws of narrative⁸⁴ demand it, and, given the enduring appeal of composers and artists long dead in the real world, the reader would not find it hard to believe in the possibility either. This temptation pits life against everything a musician might want to achieve – or be told to want to achieve – through their performing of music. The potency of the temptation is increased by music's status in *Soul Music* as a sentient, immortal, primordial force of great power that created the universe (345) and has witnessed everything since. The absence of music is equated to a total death of the universe (348). It is thus not really surprising that it both understands its own narrative force and can tempt and manipulate its chosen instruments to such an overwhelming degree. At the same time, in a very Pratchettian conclusion, an ordinary character such as Buddy is able to stand against it in the end and choose to turn away from temptation due to more commonplace feelings of love. It is Susan's presence and intervention that finally gives Buddy the strength to resist this temptation, choosing to give up the guitar and with it his fame and addiction to this electrifying music.

⁸⁴ See also Pratchett's thoughts on 'narrativium', the "narrative imperative" which suffuses the Discworld series with repeating motifs or themes which are known to all and lead both to near-predetermined outcomes of story patterns and to astounding similarities between the Discworld and the real world (Pratchett & Simpson 22). Coincidentally, there is a reference to the pied piper story in *Soul Music*, the magical shop from which Buddy buys his guitar also boasting a flute that would lead to being "knee deep in rats" when blown (229). Pratchett and Simpson, in fact, note the pied piper story as a "fine example of the weird power of narrativium" (375), as sober accounts of what happened in Hameln in 1284 – a man leading a children's exodus from the town – were eventually superseded by a story filled with rats and a pipe and a strangely dressed stranger because surely the story has to "have more to it than that" (376). Pratchett clearly had a particular interest in the folk tale, as he also parodies the pied piper tale directly in his children's novel *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* (2001); I chose to analyse *Soul Music* instead for its greater focus on music as a magical force and larger variety of musical themes.

Where *Der Rattenfänger* stresses the physical aspect of music, luring rat ghosts and children to different locations, *Soul Music* focuses on the emotionally transformative and addicting power of music, which recalls nostalgia and childhood freedom in the audience while offering the players fame and skill in playing they would not otherwise possess. Aside from the rat ghosts which are fully compelled, *Der Rattenfänger* maintains an ambiguity as to the forcefulness of the musical temptation and whether the children in particular could have resisted it and simply chose to accompany the player. This ambiguity is absent in *Soul Music*, where the narrative explicitly shows that at some level everyone tempted by the music chooses to be so; even Buddy, most closely tempted by music's schemes via his guitar, is finally able to choose to let go of it. Nonetheless, both texts stress the large scale impact of music, physically and mentally, on the audience, using magical effects to highlight how the connective network created by musicking can be manipulated towards eliciting certain actions and reactions from audience and players alike.

Communicating temptation

I have already noted that temptation itself is a communicative act, which brings all the examples in the previous section under the purview of communication by default. However, I also want to highlight several dimensions of particularly direct communication in both texts, which feature magical instruments that communicate on their own behalves as well as with the listening audience.

In *Der Rattenfänger*, the piper's magical instrument speaks for him throughout the narrative; as seen in the previous section, its temptation of those it lures works on an emotional, instinctive level that requires no words to convey its intent. The player is described as mute and never uses language to communicate, whether in spoken or written form. However, he appears to be perfectly able to make himself understood solely through

music. In his introductory scene, the two children who interact with him note that they can understand him “word for word and yet he has not spoken any” (20). The music is communicative enough that he can tell stories and jokes with it, and while citizens of the town later note that he cannot tell them even his name, they all understand what he wants to say regardless (30). It is also specifically noted that the player can convey moods and emotions through his playing; for example, he “laughs and cries on his instrument” (20) during his first interaction with the children. The player’s music appears to strike a balance between emotion and language-like communication, never solely conveying one or the other. The temptation exerted by his acts of musicking thus can both draw on the emotional affect created by the music and be communicated more precisely through the player’s ‘speech’ on the instrument. As in previous chapters, music functions as a communicative tool beyond language, working also on the emotional level, and the temptation it enacts does not require words. Yet, at the same time, music seems to communicate for the player as if it were words, managing to convey something as complicated as a story, even though he cannot tell anyone his name. The text leaves it a mystery how this word-like communication functions; unlike, for instance, the guqin language in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, which is structured through rules and exchanges, the piper’s music seems entirely unstructured and yet appears completely clear to the audience. The player’s final communicative act consists of shaking his head when one of the children tries to draw him into the mountain with them and giving the child his instrument. Once the instrument that gives him his power and allows him to communicate beyond gestures is gone, the player has no further ability to tempt anyone.

The most direct musical communication in *Soul Music* is between instrument and player: the magical guitar, as an avatar of the primordial force of music, and its communicative (and manipulative) connection to its player Buddy. When Imp first comes across the guitar, he whispers his name to it and the strings “hum” in reply (35). The guitar

then proceeds to make him forget about his destroyed harp, for which he is seeking a replacement through strings that “[hum] gently in harmony” and lull him with their “imperceptible sound” (42). Temptation colours even this first meeting between player and instrument, tempting Imp away from his original instrument through sound with clear intent. This is not yet clear communication, but as the bond between the instrument/the music and Imp grows, so does the specificity of their meaning exchanges until they can have literal conversations:

Glod, who was closest to him, heard him murmuring. ‘Just once? Cwm [sic] on? Just one more time? And then I’ll [sic] do whatefer [sic] you want, see? I’ll [sic] pay for it.’

There were a few faint chords from the guitar.

Buddy said, ‘I mean it, see.’

There was another chord. (315)

Buddy speaks to it with words and seems to perfectly understand the guitar’s answering chord sounds which bear no resemblance to words. This exchange is unmistakable as communication, despite the different mediums of the interlocutors. As in *Der Rattenfänger*, the instrument’s musical communication relies solely on music itself and yet is mysteriously clear to those listening – it does not merely function on the emotional level. In the case of *Soul Music*, however, this communication appears to rely on a bond between the instrument and one particular person; Glod does not understand the guitar as Buddy does. As the one from whom this new and overwhelming music largely originates, Buddy seems to be closer to the music and thus understands it better. The guitar’s resistance to anybody else playing it – literally biting Glod’s fingers when he tries to touch it (118) – reinforces that bond. The guitar’s sentience is furthermore highlighted by its communication with the world around it.

In another scene, when Buddy proposes an idea the guitar “whines” and needs to be calmed down by Buddy playing a few chords, which leads him to conclude that it “liked the idea” (188). It also has a communicative adaptability, as it can “sound like anything”, as Buddy theorises when it suddenly starts sounding like a piano (169); later on it can “play raindrops” (303), proving that it also makes connections to its non-sentient environment. Another scene makes it clear that the guitar engages in the other essential aspect of communicative action: listening. When Glod talks to Cliff about getting Buddy away from the guitar, he finds “a fuzzy echo to his voice” and realises that the guitar’s strings are listening to them (227). The guitar also never ceases to make noise: “The guitar twanged gently to the rhythm of the wheels. He picked it up in one hand. Strange how it was never silent. You couldn’t silence it even by pressing on the strings heavily with both hands; he’d tried” (337). Its communicational abilities are thus irrepressible, outside of leaving its sonic radius or stoppering one’s ears. This echoes also the overwhelming effect of the band’s music on its audience, which is not as directly communicative as Buddy talking to his guitar, but does lead to large-scale audience temptation.

Explicitly information-sharing communication is thus driven by magically-endowed instruments in both *Der Rattenfänger* and *Soul Music*. The former features a mute player who relies entirely on his instrument to communicate in more than gestures, while the latter’s guitar can clearly communicate with Buddy through its sounds, both to first attract him to it in the shop and to then impress its will on him as their bond deepens. These instances accompany the more general communication of emotion and temptation that affect audiences in the texts; the instruments are clearly and inherently magical, pushing communication into the concrete and beyond the scope of realistic possibilities of musical affect.

Positionality: who is tempted by music?

One further aspect of the depiction of music's temptations in both texts is that the question of who ends up tempted is used to highlight questions of position and privilege in the societies depicted. In *Der Rattenfänger*, music serves to highlight economic class issues, punishing those responsible for the rat plague due to their greed while leading the innocent children to salvation. Who is affected in which way by the music is strongly indicative of this class and wealth split. A theme in the work on the pied piper tale by other scholars is that there is "much more to the 'Pied Piper' folktale than meets the eye or the ear. The captivating music of the pipe is not necessarily evil" (Mieder 116). Mieder notes that the moral of the story is not only to keep your promises – in this case to pay someone for services rendered – which is a moral aimed at children, but also the ambiguity and ambivalence of the pied piper figure, "who must be seen as both an abductor and a savior" (28) and should not be so quickly made into a scapegoat (29). Mieder also raises the question of the willingness of the children to be led away by the piper – one of the key ambiguities in Ende's version. Ende very clearly positions exploitative class dynamics and poverty as the 'real' evils of the story. It is the ruling class of the town, such as the mayor, the priest, and the bailiff, who cause the rat plague in the first place, by being greedy for the money the rat king excretes,⁸⁵ and who then persecute the piper for interfering in their rule. At the same time, those who are tempted away by the music are largely neglected children mistreated under the rule of the wealthier, and are thus 'rescued' by the music which leads them to a potential utopia. The music, in fact, creates a gateway to the promise of a better life and land for the children. Even the children of the wealthy who are led away still seem to fit this schema, as we see Magdalena, the daughter of the mayor, being mistreated for standing up for the player. The player's music is clearly targeted: all the children hear and follow it, yet none of the adults are tempted despite

⁸⁵ That the rat king literally excretes the gold they are so greedy for is certainly also symbolic of the dirtiness of that money.

there being no indication that they cannot hear the music. However, the class division is not consistently applied: if that were the only criterion, the poor adults of the town should also be tempted away by the music in the end. As that is not the case, it suggests there is another aspect to it, such as the general innocence of the children, or their greater helplessness.

Those tempted or not by music in *Soul Music* are, at first glance, merely divided into ‘almost everyone’ and the handful of people who are too rational and unimaginative (for example the wizards Ridcully and Ponder Stibbons), or too focused on a particular goal that requires all attention (for example the thugs sent by the music guild to stop the ‘illegal’ music) to be carried away by the music’s effects. However, a poignant scene featuring a group of beggars complicates the picture:

Arnold gathered up the scraps and put them in a basket on his trolley. There was going to be the prince of a primal soup under the bridge tonight.

The music had poured over them. They ignored it. Music With Rocks In was the stuff of dreams, and there were no dreams under the bridge. (Pratchett 318)

There is an aspect of luxury to letting oneself be influenced by music and its transporting, dream-inspiring quality which not all members of society can afford. Once again, a class distinction is made; those who live hand-to-mouth and whose main concern is where their next meal will come from do not care about the kind of youthful nostalgia the music evokes, and do not waste energy by letting their bodies move to the music. Being tempted by everything the music offers is not a luxury they can afford. In a narrative in which music is so primal and powerful, being confronted with this exception is particularly thought-provoking. As illustrations of poverty go, its eclipsing of the temptation offered by the very musical power that started the universe and has dominated the narrative up to that point is a very pointed observation on Pratchett’s part – particularly in light of the ‘rebellion’ that music with

rocks in engenders in people from the strata of society who can afford to run wild for a few months without thereby ruining their lives.

Like Ende in *Der Rattenfänger*, Pratchett uses music and its effects to highlight real-world issues that counter anything temptation might offer a character. Also like Ende, who offers a mysterious utopia to the children, Pratchett follows this bleak observation of poverty with something hopeful, also using music to do so. During the open-air concert the beggars hear from afar, Buddy, who has bargained with the guitar, plays not 'music with rocks in', which has so far been the only music really depicted in the narrative, but the folk music he grew up with. The effects are as strong as those of 'music with rocks in', but on a different level:

Glod's mouth hung open. And then the music unfolded in his head. It wasn't Music With Rocks In, although it used the same doors. The fall of the notes conjured up memories of the mine where he'd been born, and dwarf bread just like Mum used to hammer out on her anvil, and the moment when he'd first realized that he'd fallen in love. He remembered life in the caves under Copperhead, before the city had called him, and more than anything else he wanted to be home. He'd never realized that humans could sing hole...⁸⁶ It was sad music. But it waved the sadness like a battle flag. It said the universe had done all it could but you were still alive...

Then [the beggars had] stopped and listened, as new music poured out over the park and took every man and woman and thing by the hand and showed him or her or it the way home. The beggars stood and listened, mouths open.

Someone looking from face to face, if anyone did look at the invisible

⁸⁶ A shorthand for dwarf homes and culture, as they tend to live and work underground, attaching great importance to all things subterranean.

beggars, would have had to turn away...When the band were playing Music

With Rocks In again, the beggars got back down to earth. (315-9)

The music with rocks in does not move nor tempt the beggars at all, whereas the folk music elicits pause and emotion. Glod's description of the folk music as something that waves a flag to being alive despite all hardship logically would resonate with the beggars, whose overarching goal is to survive despite the odds stacked against them at the fringes of society; their coming "back down to earth" at the end implies that they were in flight during the performance. This type of music is not characterised as temptation in the same way as the rock music, though it also explicitly draws on nostalgia, memories of the past, and impressions of intangible concepts such as home and what makes a being a being; it does not lead anyone into doing anything other than listening. Yet, that too could be seen as a temptation one could get lost in, both losing time to it and afterwards pining after the feelings it has evoked. For the beggars that temptation proves fleeting and quickly extinguished again by the return of the rock music. There is no indication that they would have been able to hold on to that hope outside the music, so at best it is a brief escape reminding them of something good. On the other hand, they also do not seem bereft when it is gone, unlike Buddy's addiction-esque reaction to the music.

The illusion of the player's position vis-à-vis the music as a dominant one, in fact, haunts both texts. Throughout *Der Rattenfänger*, the narrative maintains a mysterious ambiguity in the relationship between the piper and his instrument with the music he plays. There is an expectation that the player will be in charge of, and thus in some way favoured by the music they play. At first glance it appears that the player indeed has all the power: the evil rat king spirit has no way to resist the music's temptation and neither do adult humans, if the music is directed at them; and while it remains unclear whether the children choose to follow the piper's music or are compelled to do so, there is no dissent among them. Yet the player's

elevated status is largely illusory. He is socially an outcast and treated badly by many of the adult citizens of the town. While there is some initial protest from the townsfolk when those in power decide not to pay the player for freeing them from the rat plague, they believe the accusation that the player raped Atela with very little prompting and turn on him as one. The player's silence when asked to defend himself is taken as an admission of guilt, despite the player never speaking without his instrument. His dependence on his instrument to communicate is another point that highlights his lack of privilege. Even when he does have the instrument in his hands, he appears to be more of a channel for the music, the instrument having power over him rather than he over the instrument. The most explicit proof of that is his lack of life without the instrument; he literally turns to stone once he gives it away. What power – to tempt and otherwise – the music and instrument give the player, is overshadowed by his lack of agency beyond it, making him into little more than an avatar of music.

Soul Music also features a ruthless channelling of music through its players, who become increasingly robbed of control of both the music and their lives as the narrative progresses. Here, too, the player's expected privileged status remains largely absent and the return to the status quo without the temptations of magical music at the end is hard-won. While the audience is completely tempted by the music played by Buddy and the band, the bands' lives become more and more miserable. They grow famous and receive the adulation of fans, yet cannot truly enjoy this state of affairs because they also face attacks by the jealous, condemnation by those in power for disrupting society, and increasing fatigue as the music leeches them dry of energy. The players, particularly Buddy, are merely the channel for the music, which does not allow them their own artistic creativity, and the guitar's hold over Buddy's mind increases throughout the narrative until he can barely make his own decisions. Between this loss of agency and the negative health effects (that mimic being strung out), any advantages they may have attained through their fame appear secondary.

With the forced rat ghosts proving the sole exception, which I argue is due to their status as dead and largely non-sentient, the power of musical temptation in both *Der Rattenfänger* and *Soul Music* relies on people being tempted into actions by music despite rational judgment. The aspects of music in fantasy narratives explored throughout this dissertation, from music's power to communicate to its power to manipulate and elicit emotions, make this temptation particularly potent. With the act of musicking binding together players and audiences in a shared web of temptation, the shadow side of magical musical power comes into stark relief: children will follow a mysterious stranger on the promise of a utopia waiting for them, players will become addicted to the music they produce, and audiences will be thrown into illusory nostalgia. Temptation in *Der Rattenfänger* is one of a largely physical luring, whether it is an overriding of physical autonomy or an offering of salvation from poverty and war that leads those affected to physically move elsewhere. Temptation in *Soul Music* revolves around addiction; the temptation is wanting to hear the music again and again, to keep playing it and only it and attain everlasting fame through it. Yet in both texts social commentary underlies why people are tempted and who is most likely to succumb. In *Der Rattenfänger*, the music tempts away the poor and the innocent, leaving the powerful and greedy to likely perish when faced with an oncoming army. In *Soul Music*, those who give in to the temptation and addictive quality of 'music with rocks in' are those who can afford to spend time dreaming and neglecting their lives, with the poorest in society, beggars living under a bridge, remaining unmoved. Musical temptation thus doubles as social commentary. At the same time, both texts starkly highlight the active and narrative powers of music, through making the music and instruments in some way sentient, ascribing goals and preferences to them. In giving the instruments themselves some form of agency, communication between the magical force of music and its players and

audience becomes possible; yet it also encroaches on the agency of everyone exposed to these instruments, making the process of temptation more potent.

Chapter 4:

Musical Self-Expression

“Music is change, and I’m gonna change right along with it.”

— Aretha Franklin

Music and musicking are constructed in fantasy narratives as capable of giving performers power over themselves and their choices, enabling them to grow in character and strength in ways that are neither forced by circumstance nor reliant on an increase in skill or training. A previous chapter focused on music which takes away agency from the dead; conversely, this chapter considers the potential of music to empower the disenfranchised. While in some fictional cases musical empowerment results in the direct, active power to defend themselves (such as the bardic powers in *Sing the Four Quarters* or the battle applications of musical cultivation in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*), the focus of this chapter lies in empowerment occurring through a private and personal musical exploration and building of the self; this, in turn, leads to a greater certainty and self-assurance that eases the forging of supportive connections to others. Contrary to the externality of the connections to nature, death, and temptation in the previous chapters, this chapter considers a largely inward impact of musicking. In both the texts discussed here, music is used as a way to cement private identities and then to show these identities to the world and configure them to fit – or not fit – with their communities. While Nnedi Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death* (2010) focuses on the positive change brought by such self-expression through music, Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Signal to Noise* (2015) highlights how the increased power to project the self to the world (and thus change one’s surroundings) can also lead to *disconnection*. In both

texts, music demands a price for its large-scale use. I have chosen to contrast these two novels, despite outwardly quite different settings and drastically divergent narrative tones because they both feature teenaged female main characters who grow and discover themselves while being in disadvantaged positions societally. Both texts tread the fine line between music as art and music as a tool to enable growth and communicate it to the world.

Both authors use music as a tool and impetus to highlight the characterisation and character development of disadvantaged girls. Such development is important for any character in any novel, of course; however, taking context – both in-text and real-world – into account, the kind of inward acceptance of the self that then blooms outward into the narrative through music is of particular worth to those more constrained by their circumstances to begin with. Despite its superficial distance from the real world, fantasy literature often recreates real-world patterns of oppression to engage with them on a fictional level. In the case of *Who Fears Death* and *Signal to Noise*, that superficial distance is already diminished due to the settings being a postapocalyptic yet recognisable Africa and contemporary Mexico City respectively; without the remove of a secondary world setting, these narratives point to instances of oppression – systemic and otherwise – that are tied to a particular place and time.

At the same time, on the metatextual level separate from the content of these texts, we also must consider the traditional male whiteness of the fantasy genre. As noted in the introduction, the western field of fantasy literature was largely formed and influenced by a series of European (particularly British) male writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and George MacDonald. While female writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Mercedes Lackey, Diana Wynne Jones and Octavia Butler started rising to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, it is only in the last two decades that fantasy literature has more prominently included female authors and authors of colour, increasingly calling the genre's original denial of (or disregard

for) racism and misogyny⁸⁷ into question and engaging with the dynamics of oppression replicated in this genre.⁸⁸ Academic engagement with the issue is also slowly following suit. Helen Young's critical examination in *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (2016) is particularly notable here, opening up the field to more critical engagement with the postcolonial theory and critical race theory which, though not entirely absent, had previously been far from the foreground of the discourse. Young's central argument is that fantasy "formed habits of Whiteness early in the life of the genre-culture, and is, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, struggling to break them" (10), pointing to the perpetuation of racist tropes such as the embodiment of fear of racial difference through monsters (as a way of dealing with 'otherness' in general) and characteristics passed down genetically. However, she also notes that the non-mimetic nature of fantasy makes it "safer for cultural work" around fraught issues such as race due to its rhetorical distance from reality even as it is not truly separate from it (2). This is an important point to keep in mind for any engagement with fantasy texts; the measure of distance from the real world included in the fantasy setting (though it is more pertinent for secondary world fantasy rather than, say, urban fantasy) easily highlights an author's unconscious biases as well as narrative aims. If racist structures are replicated in a secondary world without nuance or engagement, a reader will wonder why the author chose to do so. At the same time, authors of colour have the option to use fantasy settings to explore such topics. In her article "Writers of Colour", Nnedi Okorafor (also the author of one of the two texts analysed in this chapter) notes both the importance of representation, including what she calls the "moment of identification" (3), and that the "tools of the fantastic offer a powerful way to address the contemporary world as well as the distant past" (4). She gives many examples of writers from

⁸⁷ Queerphobia is also relevant, but not an issue specifically addressed in this chapter.

⁸⁸ It should be noted that an increasing number of high-profile writers of colour does not equate to publishing equality. There are still disproportionately many white writers in print.

around the world who not only have used fantasy to address the many forms of racism and colonialism, but have also contributed critical examinations of the genre, from Jamaican-Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson to Nigerian writer Ben Okri.

Okorafor's own work has been subject to considerable academic discussion, though none of it centres on her use of music. Bevin Roue, writing on how Okorafor decentres whiteness by creating new visions of marginalised subjectivities and bringing a hybridity to the genre that circumvents the genre's limits, notes that scholars have mostly focused on "Okorafor's postcolonial critique of Western modes of being and knowing" (82). This includes Okorafor's expansion of western concepts of the human, read in the light of ecocriticism theory by Alice Curry (2014) and race theory by Judith Rahn (2019), her expansion of the genre in postcolonial ways (Joshua Yu Burnett 2015), and her creation of new sites of resistance to neocolonial thought in children's literature (Louisa Uchum Egbunike 2015). Okorafor herself, talking about fiction that cuts deep and affects readers in profound ways, argues that such fiction can "remind people of what they have lost and encourage them to go beyond what they have dreamed" ("Writers" 2). I contend that music has the potential to function as just such a reminder for characters within the narrative, and thus by extension also for the readers.

Music is by no means solely a tool of liberation, though it is often used as such in fantasy narratives. A potent example of the use of music by political structures is its depiction in utopian and dystopian works. Allan Weiss (2012) discusses the important role of music in both settings, arguing that in utopias music reflects and embodies those societies' characteristic harmonies, while regimes in dystopias use music as a tool to instil its ideology and maintain power (285). He summarises music's role as cultural *expression* in utopias ("transcendently beautiful and lead[ing] to spiritual enrichment" [287], though stifling artistic freedom and creativity) and cultural *imposition* in dystopias – an imposition which can

condition people and reinforce what they are meant to feel to aid political aims (293). Despite utopias' surface positivity, in both utopias and dystopias music is used to drive and encourage conformity, and thus becomes one of the tools of the dominant power structure to perpetuate itself.⁸⁹ This kind of use and effect of music is also noted by Cameron Fae Bushnell (2012) in relation to the colonial and postcolonial aspects of music in literature and beyond. Her starting point is that western music is complicit in imperialism by reflecting western values, structures, and references (2), still presenting a reminder and symbol of western cultural imperialism to this day (3). At the same time, she argues that the displacement of music in literature, allows music to function as postcolonial itself by forcing it into the shape of another medium (169). Christin Hoene (2014) takes a similar stance when she points out that the very existence of music in literature is a challenging and transgressing of medium boundaries; this dislocation of music into literature not only mirrors postcolonial experiences of dislocation but also creates an alternative space for previously absent voices to be present and heard (3), as well as connecting people on a level not concerned with politics of origin while retaining cultural identity through traditions of music (156). Music, then, can both be used by dominant structures to support themselves – for example, through musical genres such as national anthems and military music, and through music censorship – and by those attempting to retain their own identity through art and connect beyond those structures or even destroy them. Examples of the latter include the genre of resistance or protest music, as well as the increasing cultural hybridity of music across the world. The fantasy genre in particular draws upon concepts noted by Hoene: transcendentalism⁹⁰ and transgressing beyond human experience, as well as crossing between worlds (156). This chapter's thematic analysis takes Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Signal to*

⁸⁹ This does set music up as a potential tool of resistance, when used outside the ways approved by the dominant system – see, for example, Ursula K. Le Guin's short story 'The New Atlantis' (1975).

⁹⁰ See Chapter 1 for a more in-depth discussion of the term in relation to music.

Noise as starting points to consider music's involvement with structures of oppression and freedom thereof, looking at acts of transgression and connection as they relate to musicking characters' own identity and display of self. Sections on musical self-expression, connection through musical self-expression, and the agency given by musical self-expression show how the connective network created by musicking serves not only to make identity outwardly visible and accessible but also to inwardly formulate and settle it for the individual who is musicking.

Musicking the self

Nnedi Okorafor is a Nigerian-American author with a focus on African culture in her works of Africanjujuism and Africanfuturism ("Africanfuturism"). *Who Fears Death*, first published in 2010 as her first novel for adult readers,⁹¹ is set in a region of post-apocalyptic Africa in which two tribes are locked in struggle. The Nuru tribe has enslaved the Okeke people and is using the Great Book as both justification and prophecy of their supremacy. The protagonist Onyesonwu, born of an Okeke woman raped by a Nuru juju⁹² practitioner, discovers early on in her life that she has powerful abilities such as shapeshifting and travelling in the spiritual world. Throughout the novel she faces prejudice due to her identity as half Okeke and half Nuru, as well as the dangerous search for her Nuru father who was hoping to sire a strong son to train. In the novel's finale, Onyesonwu confronts both her father and the legacy of the Great Book.

Music in *Who Fears Death* is thematically and narratively crucial both in tracing the strictures of oppression imposed upon Onyesonwu and in leading to relief therefrom.

Okorafor uses a post-apocalyptic African setting to move away from present-day neocolonial

⁹¹ Though she had by then published two young adult novels and numerous short stories.

⁹² Juju is the name for magical power used across Africa, particularly in West African ("Juju"). 'Magic' in the narrative is referred to as juju, though there are also numerous mentions of 'sorcery' and 'sorcerers'.

reality,⁹³ in what Burnett calls a “postcolonial revision of speculative fiction and a speculative revision of postcolonialism” (133), yet is still clearly criticising colonialism; the story is about oppressive structures being overthrown, and the oppression of the Okeke by the Nuru carries echoes of history, including the slave trade in a more localised fashion within Africa rather than extending beyond the continent. The influence of music throughout the story is generally subtler than juju powers like shape-changing and dream-walking, but its effects nonetheless so potent that there is little doubt it belongs among such powers. Music is also a part of the engagement with postcolonialism in the text; it is used to reinforce the oppressive structure, as exemplified in a demeaning song sung during the mass rape that opens the narrative (18-9), yet most of the instances of music lie outside the limits and structures of the society depicted, representing Onyesonwu’s self, freedom, and choices through its association with the unpopulated desert and her winning of others’ approval despite society’s discrimination. As in Chapter 2, music trespasses boundaries, but this time in largely positive ways unrelated to death; music is focused more on the elevation of Onyesonwu’s individual self, and only at the very end of the narrative spills over to greatly affect the rest of the world.

In *Who Fears Death*, musicking is concentrated on the self, both as an expression of Onyesonwu’s deepest feelings and connections, and as an act that affects primarily herself rather than the outside world. This is particularly so in the first half of the book, when the reader is first introduced to this character and her inner world; Onyesonwu is explicitly an outcast forced to largely fend for herself, and thus more likely to spend a lot of time looking inward. Singing is not only crucial to the potential of Onyesonwu’s power, but also her concept of self and her emotional landscape. The first mention of singing in the story already links it directly to Onyesonwu’s identity:

⁹³ While the novel was written fifteen years ago and some circumstances may have changed, the overall neocolonial structures have not disappeared and arguably have even been strengthened in the intervening time.

And a lovely voice Onyesonwu had. She learned to sing by listening to the wind. She often stood facing the wide open land and sang to it. Sometimes, if she sang in the evening, she attracted owls from far away. They'd land in the sand to listen. This was the first sign Najeeba had that her daughter was not just *Ewu* but very special, unusual. (*Death* 29)

Music is founded on Onyesonwu's connection to the land, which remains a bedrock of her character throughout the narrative. That she learns to sing from the wind rather than her mother or other human characters not only highlights that connection, but also sets her apart as 'other' even in the eyes of her mother. It is also related to Onyesonwu's juju powers, as an outside sign of her potential. Later on, her teacher points out that singing, as a form of communication, is a tool for juju (143). Musicking is thus a part of the arsenal of a sorcerer for her, although it is never stated to be crucial or something every sorcerer relies on – it is specific to Onyesonwu that part of her power is channelled through music. It also aids our understanding of her character that her singing calls animals of the desert to her, in particular birds. In contrast to her evil sorcerer father, whose voice brings lizards and scarab beetles while he beats his apprentice (185), her voice attracts the quiet, free, and majestic owls, whose presence delights Onyesonwu.

That the animals who come at Onyesonwu's call are all birds recalls the freedom Onyesonwu had in her childhood in the desert and fights to have again. Onyesonwu uses music to recall a childhood happier than her current circumstances: "I sang [Mwita] a song I'd made up when I was happy and free and five years old. My memory of those times was fuzzy, but I clearly remembered the songs I sang" (53). It recalls the creativity of her younger self, who expressed herself through the music she made up, and lingers in her memory more clearly than other aspects of her childhood. Music entwines with memory to bend time and

lend the past a clarity it otherwise lacks.⁹⁴ This echoes Burnham and Graham's (2020) discussion of musical enchantment, including music's ability to immediately "transport into the full emotional impact of a memory" (992). It is notable that Onyesonwu recalls a happy memory, despite the negativity bias positing that humans are predisposed to remember sad or traumatic moments more clearly.⁹⁵ As this is her own music, performed to an audience, Onyesonwu is showing part of herself to others; she specifically chooses a song that reminds her of a happy and free time in her life rather than something representing her current circumstances, thus curating the impression she leaves on her audience.

Onyesonwu's musicking is also shown several times to help calm or maintain her emotions as well as having a healing effect on her.⁹⁶ In one scene she sings to her friends, and finds that as she sings she is filled with "joy, a rare emotion for me" (*Death* 182). Onyesonwu consistently feels happier and more at peace when she is musicking, regardless of outside stimulus and audience. However, she does not consciously make use of this aspect of music often; usually, she sings for other reasons and then finds her mood stabilising, so that while the potential is there, she does not make full use of music to affect her own emotions. In fact, her partner Mwita tells her she should sing more often because "your voice heals you" (184). We see instances of music taking away her persistent headache (182), making her look "better" after singing (184), and the "sweet sound and vibration" from her throat radiating through the rest of her body, smoothing away "anxiety and sadness" (265). The last example, in particular, lingers on the physicality of her singing, the embodied effect of vibration in her body working together with the emotional plane. Musicking is explicitly good for

⁹⁴ There is a lot of anecdotal as well as neurological evidence for this. See, for example, studies on music enhancing memory in Alzheimer disease patients (i.e. Katlyn J. Peck et al. (2016), Simmons-Stern, Nicholas R., et al. (2012)). Both van Elferen (2013) and Smyth (2008) also specifically note the connection between music and memory as a "widespread tendency" (Smyth, 137) in fiction.

⁹⁵ See i.e. Rozin and Royzman (2001)

⁹⁶ There is a host of precedent for music being used for healing purposes in various cultures (see i.e. *Musical Healing in Cultural Contexts*, edited by Penelope Gouk (2017) for examples).

Onyesonwu, both physically and emotionally, and the scenes in which she sings make for rare moments of peace and happiness for her in an otherwise often grim narrative.

However, Onyesonwu's relationship with her voice is not entirely smooth. While she never comments on music negatively, she does feel torn about her voice being "a gift from an evil man" (53). As a physical characteristic, she feels the voice is connected to her rapist father, who uses music to do sorcery in unpleasant ways. This does not, however, stop her from using her voice to sing again and again, to the delight of many, and in the end using song to defeat the narrative's final evil. While she struggles with her father's relevance to her life early in the narrative, she does not keep explicitly worrying about her voice as her confidence in herself grows; she claims her voice for herself every time she sings and uses it to convey herself to the world, heal herself, and strengthen her connection to nature and other people.

This chapter's second text is also concerned with musical self-expression. Mexican-Canadian author Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Signal to Noise* was first published in 2015 and is her first novel. Set in Mexico City, it is composed of two narrative strands: one between 1988 and 1989, when the main character Meche is in school, and one in 2009, when she returns to the city for the funeral of her estranged father. The plot revolves around Meche's discovery that she can do magic by playing music, mostly through vinyl records. With her friends Sebastián and Daniela, she navigates broken families, school bullying and ostracization, and first love, using magic only on a very small scale. Eventually, the use of magic starts to strain their friendship, as they disagree on what it should be used for, and the 80s arc of the story ends with a fracturing of Meche's friendship with Sebastián. Twenty years later, as an adult with a high-paying job in Sweden, Meche returns to the city for her father's funeral, and has to face the fractures and traumas of the past. Notably, this later time does not include any magic, musical or otherwise. *Signal to Noise* is an urban fantasy novel with magical realism

elements, and as such is firmly rooted in the real world. The depiction of Mexico City is realistic, the characters are concerned with issues that many readers may have encountered in similar forms, and much of the setting is never touched by magic, which most other characters do not believe exists. The story is an exploration of teenage growth and the transition to adulthood while ostracised and helpless among peers and as such the stakes are much smaller than in Okorafor's more sweeping *Who Fears Death*. Yet, both narratives show a focus on music's role in self-expression, connecting to others and discovering one's own agency – at a price.

In *Signal to Noise*, with its many real-world musical references, the focus of musical characterisation lies in Meche's choices of which music to listen to and which music speaks to her when performing magic; it is a curated form of self-expression that gives her stability during the turbulent teenage growth period. In terms of 'mundane' music, the reader learns about Meche's taste in music, how passionate she is about music, and the connection with her father she maintains through that shared passion for music despite his many shortcomings, including his frequent absences, his alcoholism, and his reliance on her mother's money when their finances are already very tight.⁹⁷ While none of these aspects are inherently magical, music is Meche's chosen medium of self-expression and a way to cope with her life. When she is bullied at school, she turns to music to try to regulate her emotions: "her stomach was an ugly black pit which had to be filled with something. She filled it with music" (Moreno-Garcia 18) – in this case, The Doors' debut album.⁹⁸ Music is escape and outlet at the same time. Meche feels hopeless and unable to "appeal to a higher power" like

⁹⁷ More on the father-daughter relationships in both texts in Chapter 4 on gender

⁹⁸ Moreno-Garcia is always careful to name the music being listened to but rarely explains why a specific song or album is chosen. This is left for the reader to imagine through context and their own understanding of the song.

teachers or parents, so instead she puts all her hopes and beliefs into the music she is playing on her record player (19): this is the genesis of her discovering her magical powers.

Music is also the point of access for magic into the otherwise realistic setting. It is never made explicit in the story why it is music that makes the magic happen; in fact, the one other person who knows about magic, Meche's grandmother, used needlework to "stitch spells" (109) in her youth. When asked by Meche whether there could be magic in music, she answers that there is "magic everywhere, if you look carefully...the trouble is wanting it enough, and holding on to it" (42). This implies that the form and medium of magic is personal to the caster, who shapes reality through their own predilections. Music is not inherently magic, but in Meche's case magic is music. Given music's important status and role in her life, and her own belief in it, described to her friends as "Why shouldn't music have power? My dad says it's the most powerful thing in the world. Nietzsche says that without music, life would be a mistake" (29), it is no surprise that magic manifests as music for her. Music is her chosen medium of self-expression, and thus eminently suited for channelling her determination into magical effects. While Meche can express her identity through music choice mundanely, once magic is introduced the magical music allows her a greater degree of agency in her choices and control over life. At the same time, the process of choosing which music to use to channel the magic is also an act of self-expression. She argues about it with her friends and their characters are indicated through their respective opinions on effective tracks:

"We are picking spell music," Meche said.

"What spell are we doing?"

"Something about success."

"Okay, why don't we use the Iggy Pop song?" Sebastián asked, holding up a record.

“Too obvious,” Meche said.

“What? We get points for being cryptic?” Sebastián said.

“You don’t just go out there and blurt it out,” Meche replied.

“Why not?”

“Because it would be too easy.”

“Easy is good.” [...]

“Fine,” Sebastián said. David Bowie. We play Fame and call it even.”

“That’s about two degrees less lame,” Meche said.

“David Bowie is lame?”

“No, using that song is lame. There’s like zero effort.”

“Oh, okay. So let’s go with this guy we’ve never heard of,” Sebastián said, holding up another record, “because that’s not lame.”

“Without Robert Johnson you wouldn’t have Elvis, no Beatles, no...”

“The lyrics you showed me don’t say a single thing about success.”

“They don’t have to. He’s standing at the crossroads because he’s about to sell his soul to the devil.” (64-5)

Meche’s thought process is more subtle and convoluted than Sebastián’s, while Daniela’s timidity and hesitance mean that she offers no opinions at all. It is also clear that Meche has the greatest grasp on how the magic works; as she is the lynchpin who makes it all happen, her friends mainly act as support for her. It is worth noting that Meche generally gets her way with the music selection; she is assertive in ways she cannot or will not be in other areas in her life. She is certain in her music choices and unwilling to compromise that certainty. However, the personal dimension of each spell also extends to the music choice. Later in the narrative, when Sebastián wants to do a spell, it is he who feels one record “beating” when he touches it, making him certain that it is the correct choice for the spell, while Meche feels

nothing (117). This fits with the magic requirements, which are never clearly stated as the friends discover them through trial and error throughout the narrative, but are clearly linked to the willpower and imagination of the caster. While searching for the right music for another spell, Meche forces herself to “think it *would* be there” and “all she had to do was reach forward and her hands would alight upon the right record” (162). It is also her willpower, combined with belief, that first allows her to discover magic, wishing for a bully to stumble so hard that when she puts on music he does fall (20). Magic, in this setting, is ill-defined and intensely dependent on the person calling it forth, thus functioning as an extension of character and character agency. It further parallels the uncertainties of adolescence and a teenaged protagonist figuring out her identity and place in life – just like the magic, the process of coming of age is individual and different for everyone. Unlike the other texts considered in this dissertation, music in *Signal to Noise* is not highlighted as inherently magical or possessed of some kind of transcendence that lends itself to magical effects; it is made magical by Meche and her belief and reliance on music, and thus an outward projection of her personality and taste.

Concern with expression and curation of identity is not a rare thematic beat for fictional narratives, particularly those which focus on one main character and whose plot is character-driven. Part of the author’s work is to convey the reality of a made-up character’s self. This is even more pertinent in settings where characters are not, by default, allowed to express themselves as they wish, whether due to cultural norms, racial oppression, repressive parents, or a host of other potential inhibitors. In both *Who Fears Death* and *Signal to Noise*, the main characters are ostracised, outsiders in the society that they are part of and very aware of it. Onyesonwu is a mixed-race child born from rape, which makes her physically and visibly distinct from everyone around her, rendering her the target of scorn and humiliation. She also has supernatural powers that further set her apart. Meche’s ostracism is

more ‘mundane’ but nonetheless marks her. She is not popular at school and is bullied there, her family is fractured and her parents either make no effort to support her or do not understand her, and she has never felt that she belongs in the area and city she grows up in. While Onyesonwu’s racial and cultural identity is superficially on display for everyone whether she wants it to be or not, and at the outset overshadows any other ways she might wish to present herself, Meche hides her self defensively from beginning to end, having been taught that her real self is not something the people around her want to see. Neither of them takes the ability to express herself for granted – leaving space for music to act as a channel for agency related to identity and expression thereof.

In the field of music sociology, scholars discuss the role and potential of music in constructing a person’s identity. Tia DeNora (2009) notes listeners’ active engagement with music on several levels: both consciously and unconsciously constructing self identity (for example, through music and genre choices), creating and maintaining various feeling states, and being used as a source for emotional experience and creation of a personal environment, as well as a collective shaping of emotion in a social context. In her overview of the field, DeNora cites, among many others, her own 2000 study that showed that participants showed “considerable awareness about the music they ‘needed’ to hear in different situations” (16) and were aware of how to “mobilize music to arrive at, enhance, and alter aspects of themselves and their self-concepts” (16). She gives the example of someone putting on Schubert’s *Impromptus* while feeling stressed because the music was her father’s favourite and she knew listening would relax her. Such mood alteration via engaged listening is not always so consciously directed as in this example, but there is plenty of evidence that people engage in this kind of mood and self construction through music. Onyesonwu and Meche both do all these things, and successfully so. At the same time, while engagement with music shapes their identities for themselves, it also shapes their communal identities and the ways

they relate to everyone around them. Public performance, whether it is Onye's singing or Meche's musical rituals with her friends, projects the self outward.

Connection through musical self-expression

While music is used as a way to affirm the self in both texts, this affirmation concurrently allows connections to grow, as others react to these emboldened expressions of self. In *Who Fears Death*, Onyesonwu's musicking creates effortless links to nature, which is also implied to have taught her music, and elides the differences between her (a racial outcast) and the people around her, allowing her to show her identity without the discrimination usually attached to it. This is emblematic of a greater degree of agency given to the character through music. The connection to nature comes first, prior to Onyesonwu's interaction with others, and builds the base for subsequent reaching out. In *Who Fears Death*, the land itself is singing, not just taking part in the musicking as part of the audience or as inspiration, but actively producing sound that is judged to be music, giving the land a voice and a degree of personification and agency that runs alongside Onyesonwu's discovery of her own self and agency. Onyesonwu refers to the "desert's song of peace" (Okorafor, *Death* 53) and the "song of the desert" (182), clearly ascribing to the place she grew up in a particular kind of sound. The desert is also the source of her music. As mentioned in the previous section, Onyesonwu learned to sing by listening to the wind. The description of this process, emphasising facing the open land while singing to it and learning to sing by listening to the wind highlights the bidirectionality of the process (29). Onyesonwu sings to the land, and nature reacts in the form of owls coming to listen to her music. Later, we learn that Onyesonwu also learned specific songs from the desert when she was young (265); singing them not only recalls good memories from her childhood but also heals her. During the climax of the story, Onyesonwu sings another song she made up when she was a child in the desert, a time she calls the "happiest time of her life". What she had sung "to the desert when

it was content, at peace, settled”, now spreads peace through the magical book she sings it to in an attempt to break decades of oppression (376). Another aspect of Onyesonwu’s relationship to nature is her connection to animals and ability to communicate with them, to a degree, via music. Whenever she sings her desert songs, she attracts birds such as owls, hummingbirds, and brown parrots. She knows what kind of song would attract the owls, for example, thinking that as nocturnal creatures they would like “the song of the desert on a cool night” (182), while the hummingbirds react to the desert’s song of peace (53). The birds hoot “in appreciation” (182) before flying off again, making it clear that Onyesonwu understands what they convey with their own sounds. Much like the wind, her voice also carries far across the desert, still audible to Mwita “miles away” (183), and thus managing to attract birds from afar despite the illusion of the desert’s vast emptiness. Onyesonwu’s attracting of animals and communion with nature and the land rings particularly hopeful in this post-apocalyptic setting, in which the land has previously suffered and is characterised by the difficulties of living in the dry climate and the desertification of previously more fertile lands. The land is never an enemy or faulted for its dryness, but her affinity with the desert which others try to avoid and consider dangerous set Onyesonwu further apart during her childhood.

That very connection to the desert and its birds also facilitates Onyesonwu’s acceptance by the people around her, some of whom have previously shunned her. The first time her three female travelling companions hear her sing they are amazed and applaud, making Onyesonwu proud of herself “for once” (142). This is one of the first unqualified moments of acceptance in the story and Onyesonwu is clearly unused to it. Furthermore, her companions begin to ask her to sing because they want to see the birds she can attract with her voice, giving Onyesonwu the space to show her self and deepen their budding friendship (181-2). Music shapes her outward self among her peers into something she has some control over, rather than their previous stigmatising assumptions about Onyesonwu based on her

status as a mixed-race child of rape. While her singing forges bonds with people who have known Onyesonwu for a while and previously avoided her, it also builds connections with complete strangers of a different culture during their travels. The Ssolu people ooh and ah when Onyesonwu's singing calls a brown parrot to her shoulder, open with their praise and appreciation in ways Onyesonwu is unused to. Onyesonwu specifically notes that she feels comfortable among these people because the idea of her singing "having such a calming effect on them didn't bother them" (272). Acceptance of her music and its effects means acceptance of her, and her singing is one way to bridge the difference between her group and these strangers. As long as her listeners are open to being affected by her music, it makes everyone feel good, soothing and giving good dreams. While the focus remains on how her music makes Onyesonwu feel better herself, the less racially biased Ssolu people highlight that this effect is not confined to herself. For Onyesonwu, who has lived as an outcast most of her life, this is a revelation which strengthens her sense of self, showing alternatives to her prior existence. As in *Sing the Four Quarters* and *The Whale Rider*, music is narratively used as an effective tool to bridge differences among people, and between people and nature.

In *Signal to Noise*, on the other hand, music does not create new connections so much as deepen relationships that are already present. Meche can do magic alone, but as in *Sing the Four Quarters*, *The Abhorsen Chronicles*, and *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, magical musicking is more powerful when performed in a group. At the same time, this is the first text in which the physical items that 'store' music, such as records, are foregrounded as part of the connective net creating and created by musicking, creating an explicit connection to the inanimate medium of music. As a medium, records are both explicitly technological and less easily portable than other alternatives such as boomboxes or Walkmans. It anchors Meche to a place and time.⁹⁹ While the magic system is never clearly explained and all the reader

⁹⁹ More on different mediums for music in Chapter 6

knows about it is based on Meche's speculations, it becomes clear after several attempts that casting magic alone rather than in a group is more tiring. Meche theorises that they are stronger together, like a "bunch of batteries in a remote control" (150); while she feels tired and cold afterwards if she casts spells alone, this effect does not appear when she does it with Daniela and Sebastián. This also works on a symbolic level, as a discussion with her grandmother reveals:

"A circle is the most perfect shape, isn't it? A witches' circle uses this perfect arrangement. It is a wholeness of persons joining and connecting."

Meche thought about records being essentially circles. Power harnessed into the right shape.

"But can you have lone witches?"

"You can. If they are powerful enough." (152)

The connection attained through a circle is emphasised; the shape of the record is significant in this context, mirroring Meche's theories about the circularity of magic and thus lending itself as the perfect medium to channel magic. It is Meche who then applies the concept to music, in the form of the records she uses to cast magic. These are her connection to both the music, which originates from the record rather than her own body (as would be the case with singing, and partly the case with playing an instrument), and to the magic – a physical representation of both. Used records store power, related to their previous owners in a "patina that somehow impregnated the vinyl, like thumb prints upon the surface" (267), while new records do not hold any. This implies that the magic derives from interaction with the music, whether it be through listening, through the emotions evoked during listening, through memories attached to specific albums, or through some other engagement. It does not matter that the music is merely 'stored' in the record; musicking nonetheless takes place as soon as it plays to an audience, and that is what gives it the magical power that Meche then harnesses.

Conversely, records can also be drained (332) after being used for casting a spell; the ‘patina’ is not endless, and neither is the power of music.

The plot features a strong emphasis on physical connection, despite the abstract concept of drawing power from someone else’s prior engagement with a piece of recorded music. The way Meche handles the records is important, and there is feedback from the records as well, despite expectations of them as inert: “Meche grabbed the record and felt a tiny, electric charge running up her arm. Like static electricity. It almost... felt warm. As though it had been resting on top of a stove” (99). The magical musical power manifests not only as a tangible warmth that signals its presence, but also as an electric charge that penetrates deeper into Meche’s body, connecting her nervous system to the record. A later scene emphasises that even when Meche cannot hear the music – the sense usually most associated with music as a medium and art form – she can still feel it while casting a spell, “swimming up and stretching up her arms” (260). Music is described as tactile, seeking physical connection with her beyond a single point of touch. This makes the entire experience of casting magic more explicitly embodied. Meche may not be creating the music herself, but her body feels and reacts to it nonetheless. Similarly, the three friends instinctively dance to the music while casting spells; though their dancing is not organised or choreographed and none of them are knowledgeable about dance, Sebastián notes that “his feet seemed to know the necessary moves” (149). The bodily movement is thus a key part of the magical musicking process. At the same time, when casting spells together, the three friends connect physically by holding hands. Compared to the music’s “odd current churning through [Meche’s] blood” (100), the physical connection between the three of them is described much more mundanely: sweaty hands, a steady grip (100). Similarly, while Daniela experiences the music as “dizzying and hypnotic” (67), she does not get dizzy from the movement of dancing. This contrast is narratively meaningful; the magical music transports and

hypnotises, going beyond the mundane, while holding hands with friends and dancing together grounds the entire process, providing an anchor physically and metaphorically. As the friends become more practised, they do not need to hold hands or dance anymore (246), mirroring the increasing lack of connection between Meche, Daniela, and Sebastián as the narrative progresses. The better they become at casting spells, the less their friendship holds together and the less anchored in reality they remain. Eliminating the bodily dimension also removes the rootedness required to withstand the lure of power. Instead of relying on their greater strength together, Meche and Sebastián start doing magic on their own. This opens up some opportunities, as Sebastián manages to avoid being beaten up by school rivals because he is able to use a street musician's performance to cast his spell (298), but mainly mirrors their diverging intentions of what to do with the magic – or whether they should keep using it at all. Instead of physical connection, what lingers for them is the physical toll of casting magic alone.

The difference in treatment of the physical dimension of musicking creates diverging impressions in the two texts. Onyesonwu's musicking is embodied through her singing and the healing effects on her own body but does not lead to physical connections with the world around her. Meche's musicking is not embodied in the music *creation* but nonetheless characterised by a clear physicality in her relationship to the records that produce music and her connection with her friends. Onyesonwu fosters spiritual connections with nature and human companions through her singing, while Meche fosters physical connections that eventually splinter when the neglected spiritual connection to her friends not only leads to a breakdown in their friendship but also results in Sebastián literally breaking the record that creates her physical and magical connection to the music. These differing narrative outcomes are deeply rooted in how Onyesonwu and Meche choose to use the agency afforded them through magical musicking

Agency through musical self-expression

Self-expression through music has the potential to affect the surrounding world beyond creating connections. Once the ability to express herself and her identity has developed, and – through this – the ability to draw connections to others has subsequently grown, Onyesonwu is strengthened to the point that during the climax of *Who Fears Death's* narrative she can use music as the channel through which she materially changes the system of oppression around her. Throughout her process of strengthening herself, making connections, and increasing her agency through music, Onyesonwu grows into her identity and gathers confidence, culminating in the climax of the story:

This book was full of hate, and that was what caused its sickness. My right hand was full of Daib's hate.

"I don't hate you," I whispered. "I'd rather die." Then I began to sing. I sang the song that I had made up when was four years old and living with my mother in the desert. During the happiest time of my life. I had sung this song to the desert when it was content, at peace, settled. I sang it now to the mysterious book in my lap.

My hand grew hot and I saw the symbols on my right hand split. The duplicates dribbled down into the book where they settled between the other symbols into a script I still couldn't read. I could feel the book sucking from me, as a child does from its mother's breast. Taking and taking, I felt something click within my womb. I stopped singing. As I watched, the book grew dimmer and dimmer. (376-7).

Though previously less directly plot-relevant, music is Onyesonwu's key tool to fight and alter the book that had been used to oppress her people. The book represents a culture of

inequality that her people, the Okeke, had accepted and stopped fighting against. Onyesonwu now uses music as the catalyst to change this. It does not matter that she cannot read the book; her music does not require the kind of literacy responsible for writing and reading, but rather an oral literacy based on the musical teachings of the desert in her childhood. The book's hate is countered with a song about the peaceful, content desert, setting nature against the man-made book. The re-writing works: through music, Onyesonwu gives powers to all women of both peoples (380-1), and enlightens both oppressors and oppressed, to the point that the young woman whose point of view ends the story thinks "in that moment, everyone, all of us Nuru understood where we'd gone wrong" (380). We do not see the final outcome of this paradigm shift, but the concluding lines are hopeful. By refusing to give in to hate, Onyesonwu has given the land and its people a chance to live together peacefully. While the process ultimately kills her, it is a great expression of her own agency; an agency which is only only surpassed by the agency given by this act to others, especially women who were previously denied equality by the structures of society. That music is used to bring that choice into reality is significant – the hope is made manifest, and the connections she has been making through music throughout the narrative radiate outwards to everyone else on a large scale.

At the same time, this climactic moment of agency is as strongly gendered as Onyesonwu's prior experiences. Her very existence is predicated on the gendered violence of rape inflicted by her father on her unwilling mother leading to pregnancy, and she has subsequently been judged by her father for not being born male as he had wanted a male heir to continue his legacy. Onyesonwu herself is almost raped at one point in the narrative, by men who assume she is a prostitute because of her mixed-race identity. Yet, when she rewrites the book that enforced her people's oppression, her song draws energy from her, and when that is not enough from her unborn child as well – a last resort that would not have been

available to someone without a womb. It is her biological gender that sees through her efforts, thus ensuring that no other woman would suffer as she had during her life. Previously, Onyesonwu's musicking had not been linked to her gender beyond the embodied dimension of singing as her female body inflects her vocal quality, and the music itself remains outside of gender concerns; that gender becomes so crucial at this moment of narrative climax parallels the emphasis on gender divisions and female struggle throughout the text.¹⁰⁰

Signal to Noise's coming of age story is much more contained in scale than *Who Fears Death's* social commentary, but nonetheless charts a course wherein Meche's music-engendered self-expression and growing confidence in herself as a woman start to manifestly affect the world around her. Discovering that she can weave magic through using the right music gives Meche the chance to actively change her trajectory, gain confidence, and bond with her two friends. Everything she and her friends achieve through music is an immediate response to what is going 'wrong' in their lives, starting with comparatively small things: she makes a bully stumble and fall (20-1), they fix Sebastián's broken motorbike (101) and gain money from a very full and conveniently lost wallet (132). It is significant that Meche's first magic is to strike back at her bully; her status as an outcast at school who does not fit in is a large source of unhappiness and identity confusion, as who she feels she is is not accepted by her peers. In Meche's case, the internal pain and strife this bullying causes is significant enough to spark her talent at magic through the Walkman she is gripping as a lifeline. A more extreme example of social – and gendered – oppression occurs later in the narrative, when Daniela is molested by a teacher and the principal does not believe her report when she tries to get the teacher held accountable because she is a teenager (255-56). In response, Meche decides to take matters into their own hands, using 'Candyman' by Siouxsie and the Banshees to telekinetically make books and shards of glass physically attack the teacher to intimidate

¹⁰⁰ More on the theme of music and gender, including music's gender blindness in Chapter 4

him; once he is frightened, she brings the point home by telling him that “if you ever touch another girl again we’ll make you cut off your balls and eat them. Believe me, we can” (261). Though this magical musicking is sparked by Daniela’s harassment, this is also the sole example of Meche using her powers explicitly to also help people outside their small friend group. She does not want other girls to be harassed by this teacher and her increased agency helps make this happen in an explicit act of gender solidarity. At the same time, though it is a clear escalation of her use of magical music to enforce agency against oppressive forces, it also pushes her into violent use of these powers that leads her onto a slippery slope towards disaster. As the story progresses and the relationship among the three friends grows tenuous, their use of magic starts edging into questions of life and death. When Meche causes Sebastián to have an accident on his motorbike, her grandmother is forced to step in to avoid disaster and subsequently suffers a heart attack from the strain. This drives home the dangers that run hand in hand with increased power and increased agency – one can also ruin both one’s own and others’ lives through using one’s agency in ill-thought-out ways.

In both *Who Fears Death* and *Signal to Noise*, the increased agency brought by music requires a price, but only once the scope is extended far beyond self-expression. Onyesonwu dies and sacrifices her unborn child to achieve her goal of bringing freedom and agency to her oppressed people, particularly the women. The power to change the Great Book and bestow supernatural abilities onto all Nuru and Okeke women cannot be sustained by her singing alone; it also draws from her unborn child’s life force. While she has the chance to escape afterwards, she chooses to die a martyr to her cause instead, fulfilling her foreknowledge of her death. None of this demeans the efforts she has made, but it does highlight the cost of power, which applies to music-derived power just as much as any other. The cost only appears once Onyesonwu uses her singing to intentionally affect not only the book that has aided in her people’s oppression, but also every woman in the region. This

large-scale impact is as far as it could be from her private singing to the desert, which heals her and delights a small audience, and it thus requires a greater price.

The price that magical musicking exacts in *Signal to Noise* is at first physical and then moves into a more symbolic breakdown of relationships. As mentioned in a previous section, physically, Meche and her friends feel ill, cold, and weak when attempting to cast magic alone (149-50), highlighting the necessity of working together and leaning on each other to mitigate the negative effects. The eventual breakdown of her relationship with Sebastián, and to a lesser degree Daniela, is not as immediately an effect of the magical musicking, but is nonetheless dependent on it. The power magical musicking brings is characterised as addictive, described as “a rush of power as the music played, the intensity of it coursing through [...] veins” (262). Meche, the most involved in the magic, admits to liking the power (262), while the others do not enjoy it as much and are worried by it. Sebastián and Daniela’s reluctance to use magic is what drives them apart from Meche; Meche’s increased agency and ability to affect her life through magical music also robs her of her closest connections and leads to her leaving the country altogether. Having agency does not guarantee making good or healthy choices; contrary to the previous section’s highlighting of the connections forged through music, these sequences foreground the equal potential for *disconnection*. Not only does Meche disconnect from her friends, her friends then disconnect her from the magic and the music, as Sebastián finally destroys the record she uses as an anchor, with dramatic effects: “[H]e snapped the Duncan Dhu record in two. It made a sound like bones breaking. She screamed as an invisible fissure traveled up her feet, up her legs and through her chest until it reached her heart. There came the sensation of being ripped apart. Her heart was squeezed ferociously and she could not breathe” (353). The near physical connection between Meche and the record causes her sympathetic pain when it breaks, in much greater and sharper quantities than the fatigue caused by working magic alone. The breaking of the record

mirrors the disappearance of the magic thereafter; the final price is that Meche no longer has the capacity to musick magically, robbing her of the agency that ability had brought and she had misused. The immediacy of her knowledge that the magic is “gone” (353) once again emphasises the importance of the embodied connection to the record and the embodied nature of magical musicking. The physical breaking of the record mirrors the metaphysical breaking of the magic – and, if we associate the magic with her childhood and struggle to grow up and assert herself outside the strictures of life placed on children by parents and society, with the death of her childhood. As soon as it is broken, a new phase of her life begins, the record and its associated magic proving to have been her last anchor to her home: she leaves the town and her family behind to finish school elsewhere, and then moves halfway across the world after that. The broken record stands as symbol for her splintered life, which magic had only been able to superficially repair, and the painful end point of her coming of age.

Where Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death* becomes increasingly connected to everyone around her through her music and the final price of that connection and her agency in exercising it is her death, which benefits all her people, Meche’s storyline ends in disconnection, her increased power and agency leading her away from her friends, and the final outcome is a permanent disconnection between her and the magic in the music. While mundane music remains, and she has the chance to rebuild her friendships later in life, the magic is gone forever.

A key difference between these two texts lies in the effects of the increased personal agency of the main characters on the people around them. While Onyesonwu is truly accepted through the help of her music, Meche’s music-derived agency forces the world around her to bend to her will, which is neither sustainable nor creates lasting positive connections. Unlike Onyesonwu’s use of musicking, Meche’s shows some parallels to the treatment of the dead in the text from Chapter 2; a taking away of agency that she, being a hot-headed teenage girl,

never quite considers – her own enfranchisement is too heady. Agency is always contingent once other people are involved, as they have their own agency when not magically controlled. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, in *Who Fears Death* music's expression of agency fosters real acceptance and connection for Onyesonwu. The music itself is never connected to negative implications in the story; rather, it helps her to express herself, make connections, heal and strengthen herself and through all this find agency in a world built to deny her it. We also see no indication that the music-driven acceptance of her by the people around her, be it the girls from her village who accompany her and with whom she eventually becomes friends, or the strangers they meet on their travels, is in any way forced. They all appear genuinely delighted by the beauty of her music and the animals the music calls to them, finding a comfort in the music that engenders gratitude and acceptance towards Onyesonwu. Her music does not impinge on them nor obviously alter their mental states or opinions through a form of mind control, it merely enhances and speeds up the organic way of making connections with other people through shared time and experiences. In Onyesonwu's hands, music acts as a facilitator, not an enforcer, and the magical dimension only helps insofar as it lends the music greater potency through the animals it calls and the nature it evokes.

In contrast, the acceptance by her peers at school that Meche attempts to engineer through magical music in *Signal to Noise* is forced and thus neither long-lasting nor fulfilling. We see no indication that Meche, Sebastián, and Daniela's lives at school grow more comfortable after they start to use magic to influence their peers. While Sebastián does catch the attention of his crush, Isadora, after a spell meant to entice her, this relationship has broken down by the time Meche returns to Mexico City for her father's funeral in the later timeline. At the same time, it strains his relationship with Meche and contributes to the breaking of the connection between the three friends. Meche's increased agency through her magical musicking does give her an advantage over others, showing the potential of music to

manipulate and control as well as heal and connect,¹⁰¹ but it does not erase the agency of the people around her and thus creates no lasting connections.

The final magical and musical disconnection that caps Meche's coming of age story does not invalidate the sense of identity and agency music has given her throughout the narrative, and her identity accompanies her into the rest of her life, unlike her friends and the magic. It merely portrays the potential dangers of agency, musically driven or otherwise. Onyesonwu's story does likewise, leading as it does to the sacrifice of her life, but in her case her connections and expression of self through music make this willing sacrifice possible in the first place and are a comfort to her. For both women, the ability to tell the outside world who they are through their song or song choices is crucial to their development and sense of self. The following chapter will focus in more detail on gender as a narratively crucial part of identity.

¹⁰¹ The temptation of power to which she gives in echoes the use of music to tempt that is the focus of Chapter 3.

Chapter 5:

Gendered Music?

“Everyone looks to an artist for something more than just the music, and that message of being comfortable in my own skin is number one for me.”

— Lizzo

As a subset of identity expression, the raising of issues of gender through music is closely related to the previous chapter’s explorations of self-expression in *Who Fears Death* and *Signal to Noise*. This last full-length chapter will feature as its main text Ryka Aoki’s *Light from Uncommon Stars* (2021) but contains comparison with all the other eight novels discussed in this dissertation so far. Over half the texts in this dissertation – all with female protagonists – are notably concerned with the gender of their protagonists and its impact on their choices and agency. This chapter shows how music in these texts, while itself is not gendered, can reflect the gender identity of the musician in performance, utilising musical voice and magic to make their identity understood beyond all doubt.

Scholars have been concerned with gender and music as a topic of academic interest for a few decades now. Though they build on pioneering scholars in the field such as the musicologist Susan McClary and the ethnomusicologist Ellen Koskoff, who lean heavily into second-wave feminist theory, current discussions are less exclusively focused by the feminist theory lens, and are more concerned with such topics as the realities of the gender gap in the

music industry and music education,¹⁰² queering musical studies,¹⁰³ gender constructions of pop stars,¹⁰⁴ and the entanglements of music, gender, and technological progress.¹⁰⁵ As to the significance of gender in relation to music, Koskoff contends that the “performance and creation of music, as well as all other human social and expressive activities, are fundamentally dependent upon a society’s understandings of men and women and the interactions between them” (89), noting in particular that questions of power and control between genders are embodied and highlighted by music. This is an aspect of the now popular argument, championed by McClary, that all music creation is contextualised by the social, cultural, and historical complexities surrounding it; according to this argument, looking solely at the music itself as, for example, music theorists are wont to do, misses important aspects of the work and how it relates to the world. As Julia Eckhardt (2018) notes, however abstract music may be, it “represents and possibly even designs constructions of reality” (10) – nothing exists in a vacuum, and thus gender, too, becomes a factor for a work’s interpretation. For anyone interested in the effects and impacts of music, and certainly in the context of this dissertation, gender dimensions are a fairly obvious aspect of the cultural context to study.

When engaging in analysis of gender and music, some attention needs to be paid to what exactly is meant by ‘gender’. As Werner et al. (2020) point out, while “some studies

¹⁰² i.e. *Towards Gender Equality in the Music Industry* (Raine and Strong 2019), *Honoring Trans and Gender-expansive Students in Music Education* (Garret and Palkki 2021) and the *Gender, Education, Music, and Society* journal

¹⁰³ Several large anthologies have been published in this area in recent years, including *Queering the Pitch* (Brett et al. 2013), *Queering the Field: Sounding Out Ethnomusicology* (Barz and Cheng 2020) and *Queer Ear: Remaking Music Theory* (Lee G. 2023). More specific monographs include Lauron J. Kehrer (2022)’s look at queer voices in hip hop, Bettina Papenburg’s research into queer aesthetics in music (2024), and Jon Savage’s analysis of how music has helped make queer culture mainstream (2025). There is also a thriving subset of research into queer music therapy (i.e. Whitehead-Pleaux et al. 2012, Lee C. 2024).

¹⁰⁴ i.e. *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars* (Lieb 2018), “Sexy shapes: girls negotiating gender through popular music” (Werner 2013), and “Global femininities: consumption, culture and the significance of place” (Kehily and Nahak 2008)

¹⁰⁵ i.e. “Sounding the Arcane: Contemporary Music, Gender and Reproduction” (Thompson 2020), as well as various case studies, from music technology and social change in Britain (Born and Devine 2015) to music technology education in New Zealand (Hoad et al. 2025)

seem to take for granted the category ‘woman’, most conceptualise gender as performative” (643). Thus, most studies are actually concerned with the musical *display* or *construction* of masculinity and femininity, and the way society and institutions impact these displays and constructions by insisting on these binaries to begin with (643). Given the inherent performativity of the acts of musicking analysed in these novels – as opposed to looking at sheet music without reference to performance – it makes sense for me to likewise adopt this approach to gender as a performative construction in music. This construction through performance, is in fact, a core theme in this chapter’s main text, Ryka Aoki’s *Light from Uncommon Stars*, whose protagonist – Katrina – is a transgender woman coming to grips with her identity through musicking.

Research specifically on transgender music seems largely focused on the following areas: music education and music therapy (i.e. Garrett and Palkki 2021, Whitehead-Pleaux et al. 2012, Hardy 2024), practical concerns about the effects of transitioning on the vocal apparatus and range (i.e. Cozart Steele 2019, Palkki 2020, Mills et al. 2017, Bos 2017), and ethnographic field research about trans music events and musicians (i.e. Pearce and Lohman (2019) on the UK trans music scene). All are, in some way, concerned with trans people’s access to music, inclusion in music spaces, and unique expression of music. This question of access underpins much of queer music studies, in fact, as Werner et al. (2020) note in their discussion on broadening research in gender and music practice. They point out that while the “elevation of music’s agency to transform inequalities is prevalent across scholarship ranging from the ‘harder’ music sciences to cultural theory and philosophy, as well as in popular writing and media” (645) – as also evidenced by the topic of this very dissertation – this elevation underemphasises the lack of access to musical cultures and spaces that many queer people face. This point is addressed later in this chapter, when discussing Katrina’s experience with discrimination.

Yet, at the same time, Sasha Geffen contends in *Glitter up the Dark: How Pop Music Broke the Binary* (2020) that music is inherently queer, arguing that it highlights the artificiality of social constructs, incubates androgyny, queerness and other taboos in plain sight (2), and that many “disruptive” gender identities have deep ties to music (3). Geffen finds that music “offers a more detailed, nuanced form of expression than even spoken language, and far more nuanced than the sex and gender binaries imposed from on high” (9); thus, it is perfectly placed to reckon with social constructs and allow those who wish to break free of delineated expressional spaces to do so. Lee (2023), in *Queer Ear: Remaking Music Theory*, rephrases this idea as the non-normativity of queer theory as applied to musicology. Queerness questions objective truth, and consists of whatever is not the norm, legitimate, or dominant. The “production of always differentiating meanings, contexts, identities, and perspectives” (5) is both the core of queer theory and challenges normative, hegemonic knowledge structures such as gender and sexuality binaries. Queer questioning pushes for a revision of the “normative understanding of the world around us” (7). It is exactly this reframing of normative understanding that *Light from Uncommon Stars* offers us and its comparison with other fantasy novels underscores.

This chapter revolves around the entanglement of music and gender, including gender presentation, gender discrimination, and music’s gender neutrality, in all of the novels from previous chapters – though more space is given to *Sing the Four Quarters*, *The Whale Rider*, *Who Fears Death*, and *Signal to Noise* due to greater relevancy – as well as in Ryka Aoki’s *Light from Uncommon Stars*, whose plot is most clearly inflected by gender considerations. Sections on magical music communicating gender, gendered musical expectations in (grand)father and (grand)daughter relationships, and conceptions of music (as) beyond gender show how these authors use magical music to highlight gender as either contextually influenced by musicking but not part of it, or as part of the very act of magical musicking,

which every performer mediates with their own experience. Between context and personal experience, the musical experiences of gender in these narratives are depicted as entirely unique to each character, while at the same time being communicated to their audiences and the world at large with near-homogenous impact. The private inner world with its intimate connection to gender is made public and given a voice that magically touches the audience. Music, magical or otherwise, can thus function as a mouthpiece to convey gendered experiences and gender identity.

Music communicating gender

Japanese-American writer Ryka Aoki's novel *Light from Uncommon Stars* was published in 2021 and lies at the intersection of science fiction and fantasy. The story, set in contemporary California, follows Katrina Nguyen, a young trans woman who runs away from her abusive family with little more than a bag and her violin. While living rough, she meets Shizuka Satomi, also known as the 'Queen of Hell', as Shizuka is notorious for having trained six violin prodigies who all became blazing stars in the classical music world and then died prematurely. In fact, Shizuka has signed a deal with a demon which requires her to deliver seven souls to Hell in order for her own music to be returned to her. Finding something spellbinding in Katrina's playing, Shizuka decides to take Katrina on as her seventh and last student, despite Katrina's lack of formal musical training. To achieve success in life and music, Katrina needs to come to terms with her gender identity and the discrimination that it regularly leads to. As they work together and Shizuka begins to understand just how hard Katrina's life has been, she becomes attached to Katrina, wavering in her decision to deliver Katrina's soul to Hell. They also encounter the Tran family, who run a doughnut shop in the area but are actually aliens hiding on Earth from the 'Endplague' (the inevitable self destruction of advanced societies once they have understood all the secrets of the universe); the Trans are building a stargate in the back of their shop. Shizuka and Lan

Tran, the captain of the aliens, fall in love, further softening Shizuka's notoriously hard heart. The novel culminates in a triumphant public violin performance by Katrina, who has learned to channel all of herself into her music and is ready to start her own musical career; no soul is delivered to Hell, as Shizuka defaults on her deal and leaves the Earth with Lan to escape Hell's retribution and bring Earth music to planets afflicted by the Endplague.

While *Light from Uncommon Stars* blends fantasy and science fiction, the musical aspects of the story are firmly situated in the fantastical realm. On the one hand, it is made clear that the alien Lan Tran does not understand music at all and that bringing Earth music to the stars is a change of the status quo out in the universe. On the other hand, while the magic in this book is generally subtle and ill-defined, the starting point of the narrative is a deal with a demon about music, involving a cursed violin bow and the promise of everlasting musical fame. Descriptions of music throughout the book hover between realistic and magical, exaggerating common perceptions of music such as its transporting qualities, ability to evoke particular memories, and tendency to draw listeners into particular emotions in an organic way; the reader is left to decide whether these are rhetorical flourishes or the workings of magic. This ambiguity of music and magic, never quite outright identifying one as the other, is similar to the depictions in *Who Fears Death*, *The Whale Rider*, and *Der Rattenfänger*, highlighting these narratives' refusal to outright define what would be considered a 'realistic' effect of music. Interestingly, *Light from Uncommon Stars* at times employs its genre mixture to highlight this confusion: in one scene, Shirley, an AI who goes through her own journey of discovery of selfhood, witnesses Katrina playing her violin and first believes that she is using sophisticated programming as an 'illusion', leading to much confusion on her part when she realises that Katrina is employing no technology at all to achieve the music's emotional effect on Shirley (163). Throughout the narrative, while technology occasionally *enhances* music, this enhancement is never necessary or relied upon. As the novel is set in the real world, it

features recognisable music pieces that exist in the real world (which a reader can listen to while reading the corresponding scenes) and, like *Signal to Noise*, has some engagement with modern technology and the changes it is bringing to music. However, unlike Meche's pure reproduction of music through records, cassettes, and CDs in *Signal to Noise*, the focus is still on musical performance without technological aid: Katrina and her violin, and her struggle to express herself through her own music.

Another aspect that is firmly fantasy-aligned is the bargain with a demon for musical ends. *Light from Uncommon Stars* echoes the famous¹⁰⁶ story of Niccolò Paganini, the Italian violin virtuoso whose caprices are still standard – and technically difficult – repertoire for violinists today. Paganini was so far beyond his peers at the time that rumours abounded that he had made a pact with the devil for his musical abilities, or that his mother had sold his soul to the devil so he that would become a great virtuoso. Nor is Paganini the only example of a gifted musician who became the target of Faustian rumours. The story of Robert Johnson, the blues musician/guitarist who supposedly met the devil at a crossroads and made a deal to become the world's greatest guitar player, exchanging his soul for extraordinary talent, is equally well-known, inspiring the song 'The Devil Went Down to Georgia' (by The Charlie Daniels Band) and its story of a fiddler's duel with the devil over a fiddle of gold, at the risk of losing his soul. *Light from Uncommon Stars* draws obvious parallels to Paganini's story, due to the focus on the violin, as the very first lines show:

People think selling one's soul for music is s simple as “Sign this contract and
– poof! – you're a genius!”

Were it that easy, the world would be awash in transcendent song.

Obviously this is not so.

¹⁰⁶ For example, the basis for the 2023 film *The Devil's Violinist*, directed by Bernard Rose, starring violinist David Garrett

Souls are cheap.

The trick is finding the *right* soul. (Aoki 1)

From the first lines, this opening signals the importance of identity and experience throughout the narrative. Deals with Hell are not available to just any soul, and it turns out to be Katrina's unique experiences, particularly the pain she goes through because of her gender identity's lack of acceptance in mainstream society, that shape her soul into something 'worthy' of sacrifice to Hell. She is a talented violinist as well, of course, but although the story is populated by many talented violin students, only Katrina's music attracts Shizuka to the point of wanting to train her.

As in the previous chapter, music here serves as a medium of self-expression that both communicates across rifts within Katrina's self and communicates identity to the outside world. Katrina's identity in general is greatly influenced by her gender identity, which also poses the greatest struggle for her, meaning that both the narrative and the music she plays focus on this aspect. Aoki is unflinching – even blunt – about the kind of discrimination Katrina faces due to her gender identity: from verbal and physical abuse perpetrated by her father (and, to some extent, her mother) to sexual abuse by a supposed queer ally as well as constant insults, side-eyes, disdain, and whispered comments while she is out in public, she goes through many horrible yet not unrealistic¹⁰⁷ experiences – which leave behind trauma to which her music gives voice. Yet, this process of beginning to 'speak' (more on this choice of words later) about her identity through music is not an easy or straightforward one for Katrina. As Werner et al. (2020) point out, the prevalent notion of music's agency to

¹⁰⁷ See for example Statistics Canada noting in their 2018 report that transgender Canadians are "more likely to have experienced violence since age 15, and are also more likely to experience inappropriate behaviours in public, online, and at work than cisgender Canadians" ("Experiences of violent victimization"), the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's report titled "The Epidemic of Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in the United States" (2023), and Flores et al.'s (2021) study based on the US National Crime Victimization Survey of 2017-2018 which found that transgender people are four times more likely to be victims of violent crime than cisgender people.

“transform inequalities” is not as universal as often stated in both scholarly and popular writing, as it is subject to “intersecting power asymmetries” and the focus on transforming inequalities underemphasises the lack of access to music for those less privileged (645) – for example, because of non-normative gender identities. For Katrina, this is both physically true, as her father prevented her from taking further violin lessons due to his view that the instrument feminised ‘his son’, and spiritually true. A complicated question that haunts the narrative from the start is how entwined with her music she actually wants her trans identity to be. Can’t music just be music, without addressing or drawing on inequalities? Does the performer’s identity always have to be implicated by default? In fact, at first Katrina wants the music itself to be the focus, not her identity: “She said she wanted her music to be front and center and that seeing who was actually making the music would only get in the way” (Aoki 267).¹⁰⁸ Shizuka agrees with that point of view and tries to ensure that Katrina’s music can be separate from her identity so that she can compete and win as, simply, a musician (298). This sounds straightforward in principle, but the reality complicates the argument drastically. For Katrina, her decision comes from a place of discomfort with her own gender identity and fear of the reception her music would garner if this identity was known, for she knows “how cruel and hurtful people could be” (267). While she may also believe that music should be judged solely on its own merits, it is impossible for her to disentangle her fear and feelings of inadequacy from the question; if she were cisgender, the question would not be this pertinent because, as in Shizuka’s case, no one would expect her gender identity to be so significant. At the same time, the musicological argument is clearly that a performance is *always* contextualised and cannot be divorced from its time, place, performer, or even audience. Wishing things were different is an understandable but ultimately doomed endeavour – as the narrative bears out. The demon Tremon, in a bid for Katrina’s soul,

¹⁰⁸ See also footnote 11 on orchestra hiring practices later in the chapter.

publicises her trans identity before the competition, thus making sure that Katrina's music "would never be separate from her identity again" (298). This forces Katrina to publicly own her gender identity, whether she was prepared to do so or not.

Furthermore, it is a fact that, whether the audience knows it or not, her trans identity has shaped Katrina's playing from the start. It has done so physically, her fingerings "liquid, born of years of not wanting her hands to make ugly motions" (316), as well as the size of her hands making some fingerings easier, and a "lifetime of being concerned with her voice" (316) affecting her tonality. Her musical learning style is equally influenced, as Katrina plays in accordance with Shizuka's teachings rather than attempting to break free from them as her previous students had done (128); what Katrina wants, instead, is acceptance, and thus she shapes her playing to her teacher's until she learns to be more confident in herself. She has also trained herself to be sensitive to everything around her, for her own safety. According to Hankins (2014), part of the queer experience with music is that "queer ears are always picking out music's ever present sociopolitical resonances", always hearing the "spaces around" (103). A life at the margins forces awareness of context, surroundings, and circumstances, both by dint of one's own non-normativeness and for self-protection. That is not something Katrina can easily unlearn. Finally, and deemed most important by the narrative, the music itself and the impact it has on the audience gain "life" from the spaces inside the performer, dependent on experiences and emotions found inside the performer's body (Aoki 174). Katrina's experiences and body are inextricable from her trans identity, and thus so is her music.

Despite her forcible labelling as a 'trans musician' rather than just a 'musician', music plays a focal role in allowing Katrina to come to terms with her own gender identity and the trauma it has caused her. Over the course of the narrative, music develops from a pure mental escape from her situation (90) into an affirmation of her identity. At the same time, it moves

from *private* escape and reassurance to *public* affirmation. When playing music to herself, she feels ‘normal’ – her identity does not matter because the music does not care about it (172). She also uses music to combat the insults she has internalised to the point where they repeat in her head, mentally playing music to drown them out (217). A first step into more external affirmation comes in the shape of body affirmation in relation to music playing, as a large part of her trauma stems from others judging her body to be masculine rather than feminine. While Katrina dislikes her hands for not being beautiful, Shizuka maintains that the fact that they have greater reach than smaller hands and know where to go, thus enabling her musical style and skill, is beautiful in itself (132). The embodiedness of musicking is emphasised again and again, Katrina slowly growing used to Shizuka’s instructions to “[j]ust be there, in your body” (156) until Katrina is comfortable enough to decide that even though Shirley offers her a high-tech solution that would physically change her body according to her wishes, for the time being she wants to stay in her body as it is because otherwise she would need to relearn the violin (310). Music performance is so deeply embodied and intertwined with the body that changes in the body have large consequences; yet, at the start of the story, Katrina would not have hesitated to pay that price in order to get rid of the body shape she hates. That she now decides to stay in her body as it is speaks of an acceptance of self that was previously lacking, reached through the constant practice of music that has slowly made her more comfortable in her body. While this is still largely an internal process, her outer appearance is presented to the outside world, thus forming a bridge to the later steps of acceptance: performing for an audience while fully herself. She has moved from despair at being trans to acceptance and willingness to demand that same acceptance from her audience:

The audience wanted transgender? They would get transgender. Or queer, or whatever else they wanted. But they would also get *her*.

And she was *beautiful*.

Listen to me. Listen to me *now*. (336)

Katrina's affirmation of herself as beautiful is an enormous step, as she has consistently belittled herself in the name of beauty from page one. Equally importantly, she does not link this beauty solely to music. Music is involved and is about to be used to convey that beauty, but for the first time she acknowledges her worth outside her art as well.

A recurrent theme of *Light from Uncommon Stars* is that music is personal – and a personal voice that is used to speak out. This is also where magic more clearly enters the narrative, though never discussed in so many words. The importance of music as a carrier of self and voice becomes immediately apparent when considering that Shizuka's deal with Hell includes the erasure of her music recordings from all accessible platforms as well as her ability to play in public outside of a training context until she delivers the promised seven souls (67). The greatest punishment for her is not so much to be unable to play, but to be unable to *share* her playing with others – the loss of her “voice” (305). Her personal music is silenced and thus, on an intrinsic level, she herself is silenced.

The concept of a personal music is also explored in relation to Katrina; it is not her first entry into the narrative, but it is the reason she meets Shizuka and thus the pivotal factor in kickstarting the plot. Shizuka, who has been searching for her seventh and final student for years, is called back to her childhood home in California because she finally pinpoints a music “playing just beyond hearing – maddeningly familiar, yet always beyond her grasp” (11) which she can feel physically pulling her towards that destination (12). This is Katrina's music, a music to which Shizuka is so attuned after hearing her play once that she immediately senses it when Katrina plays again (53). The narrative never makes it quite clear why Shizuka is so (magically) sensitive to Katrina's music, aside from the potential for

genius in it that Shizuka wants to nurture – it seems to be an ineffable quality of soul. One plot through-line is the continued mutual resonance of Shizuka’s and Katrina’s music. Shizuka, who has realised after her deal with the demon Tremon that “*your music, the music you would die for – even give your soul for – is a music that not even Hell can hear*” (277), has nearly given up hope that her music is real enough to be found in anyone else. In her view, while everyone has a unique music, it only truly means something when shared with others who understand that music, rather than those who might listen but then impose their own thoughts and prejudices. In Katrina’s music, Shizuka finds the “same magic” as in her own music, proving that it is not, after all, a “lonely, pathetic dream” (280). Katrina’s music affirms Shizuka’s; this is made explicit when Shirley finally finds (despite Hell’s ban) a recording of Shizuka playing the Bartók piece Katrina is currently practicing. Listening to the recording touches her viscerally, and she realises that Shizuka “is not just playing the music of Bartók. She’s playing the music of *us*.” (285). Many years after that performance, Katrina finds her own music in younger Shizuka’s performance. Music, thus, is both personal and able to magically create connections between like minds. The scene of Shizuka finding her own magic in Katrina’s playing is, in fact, one of the few outright uses of the word ‘magic’ in the narrative. The magic in *Light from Uncommon Stars* is one of expressiveness; the purest, most genuine expression of self, regardless of audience and their interpretations, is the most magical.

The personal nature of music, even when playing someone else’s composition, is stressed again and again throughout the narrative. Katrina finds that she resonates with particular instruments; she prefers her own violin, but when using one of Shizuka’s for training purposes, she wants to try the one that has “been singing to me all night. It seems to cheer every time I hit a sweet note” (100). While playing, Katrina can create her own reality, as she says herself: “With the violin, I can sing, speak, be beautiful...I’m not worrying about

what bathroom is safe, or if the store is empty enough to go shopping” (271). Once again we see that her personal experiences inflect what she plays, and for what reason. No one else will have identical motivation and experiences underlying their music, contributing to the personal dimension of the sound that eventually emerges. As early as the first chapter, Katrina transforms pain into music (7) to cope with it. In her final performance in the story, Katrina explicitly plays “from her own emptiness, her own hollows...the music that she knew for herself was *right*” (341); she has learned not only to actively imbue her performance with her experiences, but also how to share them with a large audience. She plays from her inner self, the self denigrated and hated by others because of her gender identity. Consequently, the inner self is not a comfortable space for her to dwell in. ‘Emptiness’ and ‘hollows’ bring to mind all the absences in her life, from her parents’ love to the acceptance of the general public. The power of music in *Light from Uncommon Stars* is its ability to transform these absences into art that can speak across the emptiness to other people’s hearts.

Music is explicitly described as a voice many times, and this voice is inflected by gender identity. While music itself is already communicative in these narratives, ‘voice’ has much more explicit connotations to that end. If music’s magic lies in the purest expression of one’s inner self, then the voice carries that magic outward. Shizuka tells Katrina that “everyone possesses two voices: the physical voice that people hear, and their actual voice, inside. The great musicians bring them together” (153). That only ‘great’ musicians are able to do this implies that externalising that inner voice through music is not an easy process – the very magic Shizuka is attracted to in Katrina’s playing to begin with. In Katrina’s case, her musical voice almost supersedes her physical voice; due to being trans and not liking the sound and range of her physical voice, she is reluctant to use it to sing (154), finding it easier to speak through her violin music. Nonetheless, the process of learning to speak with her violin voice is not without difficulties; Shizuka identifies Katrina’s newfound voice as

“pushing her, urging Katrina to *speak*” (173). Katrina is used to protecting herself through silence and not being noticed, so speaking out, even through music, requires her to overcome her fears as well as reconcile with her own identity. At the same time, her gender identity has also taught her how to speak with a voice not her own; this is why she is so good at following, at taking another musician’s interpretation and replicating it recognisably. Between the silence and the imitation, it takes her time to find the will to let her musical voice speak out as merely herself.

In a performance setting, Katrina’s musical voice reaches out to communicate to the audience everything that Katrina wants to convey – including her gender. For Shizuka, sharing her musical voice is an intrinsic part of her musical experience, and she is pained by not being able to do so (123). Katrina comes from the other end of the spectrum: for her, sharing her music has always ended in pain, and she starts out with music as a purely private escape. However, once Katrina finds steadiness in herself, she is able to perform twice in public, both times with large – and ambiguously magical – impact. Music performance in *Light from Uncommon Stars* embodies what Sasha Geffen calls the “sensual exchange” of listening to music, which “inspires identification” in the active participant, the listener: “The listener joins the singer in the song’s ambiguous and ephemeral space, and is changed by the act of attentive, emotional listening” (9). Shizuka stresses the transformative nature of live performances for both audience and musician (Aoki 195); despite Katrina’s fear of appearing in public, Shizuka insists that it will ultimately do her good as a musician, and is proven right. The fantasy aspects of the novel allow the narrative to extend this musical exchange into very tangible changes and transformation in the listeners. It starts on a small scale, with both Katrina’s and Shizuka’s performances for each other directly recalling memories in the listener; the writing style makes this intrusion of the past into the present moment very clear, italicising the memories, which are described in detail rather than glossed over (i.e. 38, 41,

281). This effect of eliciting a particular response in the listener is then broadened to larger audiences in public performances. It is part of the performer's ability to "read a concert hall without thinking" (58) – and then to influence it. When Katrina plays live, her audience is "taken by this music" (212), swaying in time, listening, feeling. It is outright stated several times that the violin music builds or creates a whole world for the listeners (213, 347); it remains unclear how tangible this world is, and how much of it is under the musician's control beyond the feelings imparted through the music. Several aspects, however, are made clear: that Katrina's music is particularly affective and connective, that it elicits unexpected emotional responses from her audience, and that it gives the audiences access to their 'own music' far past the end of the performance.

I have already discussed how Katrina's personal experiences inflect her music and increase its potency in both magical and mundane ways. The live performance reaffirms this, as Shizuka herself notes that none of her previous prodigy students "had connected with their listeners like that" (218) and even doubts whether she herself ever had. She feels that Katrina's music has changed something in the audience permanently, and that the music will continue to accompany them (218). Certainly, the emotional responses are potent, from people who feel compelled to share their love of the violin to those who want to hear more of her music. Most importantly, there are some who "with quavering voices and watery eyes, wanted to talk about what they felt when Katrina played, the pain in their lives, and how they felt no one had spoken to them like that before" (214). This is the effect unique to Katrina's performance – the way she funnels her own pain stemming from gender discrimination into her music. Her experience makes it possible to touch the audience on this private, painful level and to achieve a unique sense of catharsis. The other uniquely magical aspect appears fully in Katrina's second performance, when she awakens her audience's music, once again through infusing her own experience and emotions into the music:

This is the song of a queer kid who escapes from a window to a sidewalk in the middle of a night. This is the song of a trans girl just wanting a fucking bathroom in the middle of the day.

So what if you don't understand? So what if you think I'm a half-woman freak.

This is my song. My voice. My voice leads.

Katrina glared up from [her violin] Aubergine at an audience she could not see.

But then, she sensed something completely unexpected. Some of them seemed to be singing too.

Fuga – a theme, introduced by one part and successively taken up by others.

Somehow other voices, other musics, began to interweave with her own. The notes, the harmonies wrapped her gently, like a blanket of night in a field of stars. She wanted to reach out, tell them she didn't know, she had no idea they were with her, tell them now they would never again be alone. (338)

And then, once the performance is over:

Applause fell like waves of daybreak, like torrents of song. It continued unabated until the audience realized the music was coming from themselves, and it would be there tomorrow, and the sun would be high overhead. (342)

I reproduce these passages in full because they encapsulate the sheer transformative musical hope on which *Light from Uncommon Stars* is built. Music has transformed both Katrina, the musician, and her audience. Katrina's personal journey is underlined by the changes between her first public performance and this second one. After the first performance, she stresses the feeling of safety she experienced during the performance, reflecting her predominant feeling of fear at the time. While it also makes her feel "powerful" (222), she only appears to think of that power as something that can ensure safety – not only for herself, but also for everyone

listening. Katrina's overriding concern is that no one be hurt; that is what she most wants to use music's power for at this stage in the narrative. In the second performance, quoted above, she is surer in herself and in who she is, regardless of public criticism. She is *defiant*, and finds that, as a result of her bravery in sharing herself in her music, she is not as alone as her experiences with gender discrimination had led her to believe. While the audience had praised her after her first performance, and some even shared their pain and feelings with her afterwards, this effect of shared music, of eliciting a musical response (albeit on another level than the audible) is new. It is both an act of self-affirmation – gender affirmation in particular – and an act of bidirectional communication, which lasts beyond the performance itself. While not outright called magical, it feels like the most potent act of magical musicking in the novel. It does not matter whether the audience's music is conventionally audible, during the performance or after; it is audible to Katrina, capping her journey, affirming her found voice, and softening the tone of brutality towards her gender with a final acceptance. So, while the magic in *Light from Uncommon Stars*' music is not as overt as in, for example, *Sing the Four Quarters* or *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and a lot of what music accomplishes in this novel could be argued to be realistic – or at least in the realm of slightly florid personal reactions to music – it nonetheless allows the exaggeration of these traits of music in an organic way that melds with the style of the novel. The way personal experience, feelings, and gender change and reverberate in the music evoke a sense of magic, and so does the clarity of the communicative musical voice that results. Katrina's trans identity and painful experiences therewith are crucial to both aspects, and brought out starkly by the magical music in this novel.

In none of the other texts analysed in this dissertation does gender play such a crucial role in terms of musical context (as opposed to the social context, such as Kahu's struggles in *The Whale Rider*, which are predicated on gender discrimination) as in *Light from*

Uncommon Stars, but whenever the musician is female, gender is in many ways inextricable from the musical narrative. The following section focuses on music affirming gender in *Who Fears Death* and music communicating biological sex in *Sing the Four Quarters*.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Onyesonwu expresses her identity at its most unvarnished through music in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*. While gender is not quite so identity-defining for her as for Katrina in *Light From Uncommon Stars*, it is nonetheless an important aspect of her identity – not least because the major antagonist of the novel, her father, explicitly hoped to sire a boy to take up his legacy when he raped her mother. Her gender makes Onyesonwu's already hard life as an outcast harder; a large subset of the violence in the narrative is gendered and perpetrated against women. Her talent in juju is also almost ignored because the local sorcerer does not want to take on a woman as an apprentice. Music offers her an outlet for her feelings and an affirmation of identity that is not touched by societal expectations of her gender. Her singing emphasises freedom, originally learned while in the deep desert, standing “facing the wide open land” and singing to it (Okorafor 29). The land, whether sentient or not, has no gendered expectations of her, and neither do the owl and other birds which come at her singing. Onyesonwu exclusively makes music with her voice; unlike other instruments which are separate from the body, the pitch, timbre, and quality of a voice do generate gender assumptions. Vocal embodiment does relate to one's biological sex, which, while it does not define gender in contemporary queer theory, does affect it and how others view one's gender identity (as I will discuss below). Unlike Katrina in *Light from Uncommon Stars*, who hates her voice for being apparently unfeminine and thus refuses to sing, Onyesonwu is at her freest and most contented when using her voice to sing; she draws solace and increasing self-respect from her audience's appreciation. She also explicitly becomes closer to the girls who accompany her on her journey through her singing: Luyu, Diti, and Binta never truly accepted her while they were living in the village, finding her

incompatible with their lives as girls and what was expected of them in life. Her singing, however, amazes them (142) and breaks the ice between them. While their prior disdain was built upon gendered and racial expectations of what Onyesonwu's place in life should be, her music moves them beyond those considerations. Through her music Onyesonwu can communicate her whole identity, including the femininity whose societal expectations she is breaking.

Sing the Four Quarters was published in 1994, nearly thirty years before *Light from Uncommon Stars* and prior to many of the recent and increasingly mainstream developments in queer theory. Yet, this time gap is hardly noticeable, Huff being one of the genre's earlier queer, female writers ("Writing Queerly"). The text treats men and women¹⁰⁹ the same way when it comes to being bards and making music: all bards are treated equally and expected to do essentially the same jobs regardless of gender. There also is no visible discrimination toward Annice and Stasya's queer relationship, which seems to be accepted as natural and unproblematic, at least by all the other bards. Annice's life course is more impacted by her royal blood than by her gender, as she is driven to insisting on becoming a bard by her older brother's intention to broker a marriage alliance with a neighbouring kingdom. While this is to some extent a gendered danger for Annice, as she would be the subordinate princess to the foreign prince in a marriage, the concept of a marriage alliance itself would also threaten her were she male, as it goes hand in hand with being part of the royal family. However, there is one aspect of the story in which biological sex is a focus: Annice's pregnancy, and its effects on her musical communication with the kigh and the world around her. While originally able to sing all the four quarters (air, water, fire, earth), as her pregnancy progresses, Annice becomes more and more exclusively attuned to earth until she cannot call any kigh who are not earth-affiliated at all. She herself does not expect the effects to be as wide-ranging as they

¹⁰⁹ There is no mention of any other gender identities.

are: when she sings in a valley with struggling vegetation, not only does she reinvigorate all the plants, from suddenly lush grass to trees flowering, she also induces milk to flow from a nursing woman's breasts as well as a goat's, and the men sprout erections in response (Huff 224). These effects are unintended, but her pregnancy forces itself into the music. This goes even further during the actual childbirth, when she literally "is" earth in a physical way that does not happen under normal circumstances (311). Where previously Annice's musicking carried her "emotional signature" (224) and focused on either emotional transmission or doing her duties as a bard, now it is taken over by a single part of her identity: biological sex, and the pregnancy that is possible thereby. Her musical communication is entirely – and intrusively – subsumed by this one aspect of herself. Annice does not see this as gender-affirming in any sense, though she is at peace with her pregnancy and wants to carry the child to term rather than aborting it; when the non-earth kigh first stop listening to her, she is distressed by the change forced on her. While I would not go so far as to assert that the author must have intended this as a parallel to being defined by biological sex as opposed to personal identity, it can easily be read thus. Annice is free from the struggles with her gender identity experienced by Katrina in *Light from Uncommon Stars*, so this change due to pregnancy does not cause body or gender dysphoria for her; however, she still finds her musical voice, and thus her musical communication and network, subsumed by her biological sex against her will, suffering from a certain sense of 'music dysphoria' as a result. Instead of reflecting her whole self, during the pregnancy her music reflects a particular part of herself more than any other, eventually to the point of pushing everything else aside. Music is thus reflective of her biological sex and pregnancy, for a time, usurping her agency to some degree, and mediating her relationship with the world around her in ways she has no control over.

All three texts feature music as a gender-inflected voice that makes private gender identity public, but they differ in the motivations of the characters as they musick their gender identities. Katrina learns to be defiantly proud of herself and her trans identity, and to forcibly share it with others during public performances. Onyesonwu, whose concern with her gender is entirely mediated by outside social and fatherly expectations, uses her voice as a way to reinforce her own world, experience, and identity to everyone else, as the representation of her own clarity towards who she is. By contrast, Annice, who has the fewest issues with gender of the three, finds her musicking invaded by her biological sex (via pregnancy) against her explicit will; this changes the status quo of her communication of identity for the duration of the pregnancy, rather than proving an escape from it. In all three cases, the audience is deeply aware of the gender and identity communicated through the music – this effect of gender understanding is shown to be universal for all listeners in the narratives, unlike the musicians’ motivations and relationships to their genders.

Gendered expectations of music: (grand)father-daughter relationships

There are certain long-standing gendered assumptions and expectations attached to music performance in the west. The gendered expectations of human voices have been mentioned above; when hearing someone sing, most people will unconsciously categorise higher-ranged voices as ‘female’ and lower-ranged voices as ‘male’ due to the biological factors involved in voice production. This binary, of course, fails to take into account the large variety of diversity in human voices – there are women with low voices, men with high voices (common enough to have a standard designation as ‘countertenor’), and trans people who may develop a very large range¹¹⁰ or largely retain their previous range at ‘odds’ with

¹¹⁰ One of the reasons there is so much academic literature on voice work while transitioning is that while the range and timbre of voices will change during the process, a professional singer may retain their old range while adding further range if done gradually enough.

their gender, not to mention historical cases like castrati whose range was physically restrained to that of boyhood. Despite this apparent diversity, the binary still holds sway for many listeners, if only unconsciously, and we might recall Katrina refusing to sing because she hates her voice for being too masculine in *Light from Uncommon Stars*. Beyond voices, there are also assumptions when it comes to instrument playing (Werner et al. 2020).

Historically, the only women allowed in western orchestras were harpists. Generally, brass players are more likely to be male and woodwind players more likely to be female, while female percussionists are still comparatively rare. While these trends are slowly changing, there are many orchestras where one can still observe such gender bias,¹¹¹ and equal access and encouragement towards all instrument types remains a hotly debated topic in music education. In fictional fantasy contexts, gendered musical expectations may look slightly different, but the (grand)father/(grand)daughter relationships in *Light from Uncommon Stars*, *Signal to Noise*, *Who Fears Death*, and *The Whale Rider* are all to some degree inflected by the expectations of male relatives towards their female descendants in terms of how they should or should not use music.

Katrina's situation in *Light from Uncommon Stars*, which is set in the real world, reflects real attitudes towards gender and music in Katrina's father's disposition against music as a 'feminising' force. In her own words, her father stopped her violin lessons when she was young because he "said it was making me a faggot" (40) and eventually even smashed her beloved first violin (347). Shizuka, as a musician who cares about musical talent and ability and nothing about the performer beyond that, is very confused by this. Shizuka cannot fathom why someone would stop a talent from developing just because of gender, but

¹¹¹ These days, it is common for orchestras to hold blind auditions (though the famous Goldin and Rouse (2000) Harvard study claiming that blind auditions reduced sexism which got this ball rolling has since been called into statistical question by, among others, Columbia University statistician Andrew Gelman ("Blind orchestra auditions") to avoid the examiners' unconscious biases.

for Katrina this is the reality she has had to live with. Katrina's father is an extreme case, completely banning music and becoming physically violent in an attempt to make her be 'his son Michael' rather than who she knows she is instead, but it is telling that he equates violin playing with not being masculine – and that he appears to believe that music can exacerbate that non-masculinity, “making her”, rather than just expressing it¹¹². This assigns music a certain amount of agency, if one the father is not happy to see; music (or at least violin playing; we do not get the father's opinions on, say, heavy metal) may not be masculine enough for him, but he does appear to believe that there is power in it to change its practitioners and listeners. This gendered expectation of what music does and achieves colours Katrina's enjoyment of playing and restricts her access to lessons for the first part of her life. The plot offers no magical solution to this, either; Katrina remains unreconciled with her family at the end, and her father does not come to accept her musicality. It takes a long time for Katrina to grow past the fear her father instilled; it is in the run-up to her second public performance that she articulates that while her father might have broken her first violin, he “could not erase the music. Nothing could” (347). The father-daughter relationship remains broken, not least because of her father's stance towards music, but musicking helps Katrina move past it.

Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Signal to Noise*, another novel set in the real world, also features a father-daughter relationship in which music is an important factor, but in this case music is not used to discriminate but to share. The relationship between Meche's father and her mother, as well as the rest of the family, is strained because he drinks and steals their money; eventually, they divorce because he has found another woman. Meche's relationship with her father, however, is built on mutual appreciation of music; whenever they meet, he asks her what she is listening to and discusses music with her. What strains their relationship

¹¹² It is of course an obvious, and bigoted, fallacy to equate being gay with not being masculine.

is that he does *not* have any expectations of her – or of her relationship with music. She is the only one in their family who shares his interest, yet beyond talking about music, he does not foster her interest, nor is it enough to keep him at her side. He does not attempt to pass his singing or radio work on to her. There is no obvious gender dimension to this – the text does not clarify whether he would have made more of an effort if Meche had been a boy. Yet the reader is left to wonder whether Meche being a girl, as well as young and thus easily considered to be less ‘musically mature’ in taste, made it easier for her father to decouple himself from his family and leave their shared hobby behind.

Who Fears Death’s postapocalyptic setting does not lend itself to highlighting contemporary gendered expectations, but music is nonetheless embedded in the relationship between Onyesonwu and her father. The one thing she explicitly has in common with her father is the juju he bequeathed her, and they both, at least on occasion, use music to make magical things happen. His singing calls beetles and lizards, and he sings while beating Onyesonwu’s future lover, Mwita (Okorafor 185). Her singing calls birds (i.e. 182) instead, which have generally more positive connotations – and an association with freedom: freedom from her father, who wanted a son to continue his tyrannical legacy, and her father’s choices for her. Her existence as a daughter rather than a son is already a defiance of his wishes (if not one she has control over), and when finally confronted with him and his subjugation of others, she continues this path of non-conformity. Where his singing accompanies beatings, hers sets all women free, at great cost to herself. It is also notable that she feels that her voice, as a physical characteristic, is the one thing most actively given to her by her father; this is an uncomfortable thought for her, but also marks another site of non-conformity. Her usage of her voice in ways counter to her father’s wishes and expectations – her *female* use of it, in fact, as she sings away the book’s subjugating influence at the cost of the unborn child in her womb – actively denies that origin of her voice.

Finally, Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* offers a narrative in which music is the key to soothing a fraught relationship between grandfather and granddaughter. The character tension in the novel stems from the unwillingness of Koro Apirana, Kahu's grandfather, to accept her as a worthy successor to his cultural and spiritual leadership of the tribe despite her clear aptitude, solely because she is a girl. Kahu tries to make him acknowledge her in many different ways, with the support of others in the family, but only manages to convince her grandfather that her gender is no impediment to filling his role as tribe leader in the future when she creates a connection to the whale herd by singing. Kahu's singing is not *for* her grandfather, it is for the sea and the whales, who do not care what her gender is; her grandfather is merely a witness to some of it, and driven to reconsider his misogynistic position through the force of Kahu's agency as revealed by her singing.

Even in these few narratives alone, the potential impact of music on the relationships between (grand)fathers and (grand)daughters is extremely varied. Katrina's father thinks that learning the violin is an effeminising influence on his child, and they never move past this fundamental disagreement. Onyesonwu regards her voice as a physical inheritance from her father, but refuses to conform to his wishes of what he wanted a son to do with this inheritance, even when he settles for his daughter instead. For Meche and her father, talking about music is a mutual bonding activity, which nonetheless is not strong enough to keep their relationship intact when her parents divorce. In contrast, Kahu wins the approval of her grandfather through her singing to the whales, leading to a reconciliation and hope for the future. In these cases, gender intersects with youth and all its implications of still being impressionable while building and settling into one's own identity in a distinctly mythic pattern to cause strife between a male older generation embodying established power and a resistant female younger generation – mothers and grandmothers are present only tangentially. All the (grand)fathers have expectations of their offspring based, in some part,

on their gender, and their offspring use music to confound those expectations – not least because music itself confounds any attempts to gender it.

Music beyond gender

In all these stories, the music *itself* is not gendered. The cultural context, character expectations, and communicational aims that construct a particular gender identity are what make gender matter. In the novels discussed here, magic systems are not based on gender; fantasy novels in which gender is a crucial determinant in the performance of magic do exist, perhaps most famously Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series,¹¹³ but are not very common. In the fantasy genre, more often the magic is neutral and it is society that has rules about which gender is allowed to learn magic, or designates what part of magic is 'male' or 'female'. This parallels the shift in musicology towards considering the social and cultural context of a piece of music or a music performance in any analysis thereof. There is some hope that in the future gender will no longer be so relevant a context for music analysis due to the elimination of gender inequalities and discrimination based on gender. This is, of course, not currently the case, nor is it likely to happen anytime soon, but this kind of speculation is also the purview of fantasy literature, and several of the novels discussed in this dissertation take this utopian view in dealing with music without relating it to any questions of gender.

Even *Light from Uncommon Stars*, which shows, as we have seen in this chapter, that music is a great tool to explore, voice, and become comfortable with one's gender, also shows aspects of music that treat gender as an extraneous concern which would, in an ideal world, not figure at all. This viewpoint appears from two angles: Shizuka and music itself. In many ways, Shizuka is set up as the prototypical ideal of a classical musician: she is a great teacher,

¹¹³ The magic system in the series is complicated but includes gender division in elemental affinities (earth and fire for men, water and air for women) and the True Source (i.e. magic) is explicitly made up of a male half and a female half.

famous in classical circles, her own music is transcendently inspiring and communicative, and she is unconcerned with any aspects of life that are not related to music. When Katrina, fearful of her reaction, comes out as trans to Shizuka, Shizuka is only worried that she may have concealed a prior violin teacher:

“Then what do you mean about you not being really who I think you are?”

“I’m trans.”

There. She’d said it.

“What?”

“Transgender.”

Miss Satomi paused. “Yes, of course, but you’re *really* someone else’s student...”

“N-no.”

“Good. It’s not a deal breaker, but I’d rather not take you from another instructor without permission. The ensuing drama can be troublesome, even for me.”

“Miss Satomi, I said I am transgender.”

[...]

“Transgender. Yes, Katrina. I heard you the first time. Shall we fix your violin?” (77-8)

Shizuka is not only entirely matter-of-fact about Katrina’s gender identity, but she has clearly already figured it out and does not care. Both times Katrina insists on mentioning it, she turns the conversation to something music-related: first Katrina’s instructor, and then getting her violin fixed. As the purest embodiment of the ideal, successful classical musician, Shizuka has both a narrow focus on music and the privilege not to consider gender a relevant factor for musicking. Over the course of the narrative, she does come to understand how much it

affects Katrina, but clearly continues to feel that if the world were as she wants and expects it to be, gender would not be a concern. In her pursuit of musical expression, Shizuka is as close to gender blind as it is possible to come.

While music is not obviously personified in *Light from Uncommon Stars*, we do see instances of instruments being ascribed agency and opinions by their players; Katrina's sense of her instruments is that they are separate from all the conflict around her gender identity. When asked why she plays the violin, she puts it like this: "*Because when I play, I feel like I can be normal. The music doesn't care who I am. My violin is just happy to be played*" (172). Music, too, is gender-blind – as long as there is no audience involved, the gender – or other circumstances – of the person musicking is irrelevant. This matches Shizuka's belief and shows that while Katrina cannot fully extricate her gender identity from her playing (nor, arguably, should she), she is aware that on the pure level of music it does not matter. It is simply that the world does not allow her to forget it the way she can when she is only playing for herself – the contextualisation is always there.

Primary sources first discussed in chapters across this dissertation offer further examples of musicking beyond gender constraints. *The Abhorsen Chronicles* (Garth Nix) is perhaps the most straightforward, with simply no mention at any point that the bells used by the Abhorsen have anything to do with gender whatsoever. Both Sabriel and Lirael are female, and it never impacts their use of the bells, which is entirely based on will. In this secondary world, Nix has chosen to avoid replicating the context of social gender expectations and discrimination in the real world, thus removing gender from music's context as well.

Der Rattenfänger (Michael Ende), *Soul Music* (Terry Pratchett), and *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (Mo Xiang Tong Xiu) are more ambivalently relevant to questions of

gender. All feature solely male musicians¹¹⁴ in plot-relevant roles and thus dodge questions about music and gender through lack of representation of more than one gender to begin with. However, none of the three texts make a point of the male gender or explicitly restrict music performance to males. *Der Rattenfänger* only features one musician to begin with and is constrained by its reference to the pied piper story and vague historical setting; choosing to make the player female would, of course, have been possible, but would have drastically changed the implications of the story Ende was writing – including by playing into stereotypes of siren-like female musical temptation and queering the mayor’s wife’s sexual interest in the player. Similarly, while *Soul Music* is set in a fictional secondary world, it clearly references and parodies real-world rock’n’roll bands such as the Rolling Stones – which do happen to be overwhelmingly male. At the same time, the other main character is Susan, who slides into the role of encouraging Buddy to resist the temptation music offers him in order to avoid the end of the world. While she herself is largely resistant to musical temptation and able to keep a cool head, this cannot clearly be linked to her gender due to her identity as the granddaughter of the personification of Death, endowed with Death’s powers throughout the narrative. Nonetheless, as she is the only major female character, that she is also one of the few able to disregard the lure of the magical music stands out. *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* is a danmei¹¹⁵ novel, consequently featuring mainly male characters. Nonetheless, musical cultivation is clearly not restricted by gender nor ever portrayed as influenced by it. The text offers the example of Lan Wangji’s distant female ancestor, Lan Yi, who uses the same style of musical cultivation as he does, and even invented the ‘Killing Chord’, a violent and effective musical technique that slices through opponents. All three texts, thus, do not engage with gender largely due to the absence of female musicians in the

¹¹⁴ Though *Soul Music*’s inclusion of a dwarf in the band complicates this matter slightly, as other Discworld novels show that dwarf gender, at least, does not necessarily map onto human gender one-to-one.

¹¹⁵ A Chinese genre of fiction that features romantic relationships between male characters

narratives; at the same time, music and musicking is not gendered, either, leaving music to be neutral to gender identities.

While both *Signal to Noise* and *The Whale Rider* are discussed above as narratives in which the gender context is relevant, in the form of the main female characters' relationships to their fathers and grandfathers, at the same time both show music itself as unaffected by these dynamics. *Signal to Noise*'s musicking consists of song/playlist curation and technological reproduction. Pressing play on a Walkman or setting up a record to play is hard to imagine as in any way gendered – (accessible) technology in many ways evens the playing field of music production.¹¹⁶ Geffen makes the point that “[r]ecorded music... severed the voice from the gendered body”, the gramophone having no “perceptible gender” (5). Without the context provided by live performance, visual and otherwise, recorded music itself is one step further removed from gender assumptions made by the listeners; the gender of recorded instrumentalists' is impossible to guess, and the gendering of singing voices is, as previously mentioned, not as straightforward as popular opinion might have it.¹¹⁷ Meche's use of technology to produce music thus puts her further outside the gender divides that contextualise live music performance, both in terms of her own involvement and in terms of the music she is listening to. Music taste, on the other hand, comes with many, often gendered and culture-specific, associations. There are whole genres of music which are more associated with male or female listeners,¹¹⁸ as well as artists known for a particular gender of fanbase.¹¹⁹ Yet we do not see this play out with Meche's music choices; she plays anything

¹¹⁶ Which is not to say that there are no gendered hurdles in acquiring more advanced technological knowledge (in terms of music, DJing comes to mind), as technology overall is still male dominated. This section refers simply to consumer products that are easy to operate.

¹¹⁷ Chinese popular singer Zhou Shen is a perfect example of this; as a countertenor with a very impressive high range, he is consistently misgendered by people listening to his performance without being aware of who he is. When making his on-screen debut on the show *The Voice of China* (2014), the judges' blind reactions to his first performance included disbelief that he is male rather than female.

¹¹⁸ Consider heavy metal (stereotypically male) or Kpop (stereotypically female)

¹¹⁹ Taylor Swift is a currently prominent example.

from The Doors to Bob Dylan, Miguel Bosé, Duncan Dhu, and Nena, and at no point comments on liking or disliking something based on gendered expectations. She does judge her friend Daniela for liking “Lucerito, the most saccharine, inane teenager singer on the market” (99), but seems to only object to the content and style of the music, without bringing in gender as a dimension of judgment.

Finally, Kahu’s gender in *The Whale Rider* does not figure into the actual process of singing and musicking at all. Her primary audience is made up of whales, who neither care about nor are good at recognising human gender, to the point that the ancient bull whale mistakes Kahu for her male ancestor. Yet when he finds out that this is not the case and Kahu is a girl, it of no consequence to him. The whales are a completely different species and seem to have no preconceptions about human gender; music communicates with them and touches them emotionally on a level entirely divorced from the human context. This act of musicking with the whales on Kahu’s part causes various consequences which do touch on gender, but the act itself is untouched by it.

All these novels demonstrate that while communication of gender identity can impact what and how a character musicks – whether enhanced by magic or not – the strong emphasis on gender in the music industry and music performance is created by society, not inherent in the music itself. For fantasy authors, the question thus becomes which dynamics they choose to replicate. Those who set their stories in the real world are more constrained in whether they can ignore large societal concerns such as gender without seeming to have overlooked something, but the different approaches in *Light from Uncommon Stars*, which focuses heavily on gender and its influence on musicking, and *Signal to Noise*, which largely renders gender irrelevant through the use of recorded music, show that there are no hard and fast rules even in more realistic settings. In secondary worlds, authors can choose to completely skirt the topic, as Garth Nix does in the musical set-up of *The Abhorsen Chronicles*. Music as

a tool of gender exploration is fluid and easily non-conforming, queer in its aspect. In these stories, its only shared aspect is its heightened ability to convey gender identity to the audience; yet the ways this is done are unique to each musician. *Light from Uncommon Stars* best illustrates this tension between the universal and the individual: music in this narrative is both incredibly specific, driven by personal experiences and the identity of performers which are unique – and whose affective power lies exactly in their uniqueness – and yet universal in their performed impact: everyone listening to Katrina’s music is touched, transported, stimulated, and seems to understand exactly what of herself she is putting into the music. Music’s voice makes private concerns of identity and gender as public as can be.

Coda

Methods of communication: music, fantasy, and medium

Every song is like a painting.

- Dick Dale

Art is how we decorate space, music is how we decorate time.

- Jean-Michel Basquiat

Questions of medium arose throughout this discussion of music in fantasy literature, from different instruments representing and conveying music within the narrative to the insertion of music into the text-based medium of long-form fiction. Both aspects are further mediated by the lens of fantasy, which changes both the possible conditions for music in the text and the range and effect of media which carry music within the narrative. This chapter considers several aspects of medium. First, I look at the method of the production of music in all texts discussed in this dissertation, be it voice, instrument, or technology, as well as the impact of the fantasy story setting and degree of relation to the real world on how music anchors the reader in the story world. Then I take music as a medium itself – in this written setting – and its capabilities of expression through two particular aspects: music's relation to and impact on time, as highlighted in *The Whale Rider*, and fantasy literature's transmutation of music into a potentially sentient medium, as seen in *Der Rattenfänger* and *Soul Music*. Each of these aspects impacts music's communicational capabilities in these texts, aiding communication between past and present (tradition and progress) and complicating the originator of communication through the medium's active involvement.

Mediated Music: Voice, Instrument, Technology, Setting

Music can be performed in many ways, and the associations and implications correspondingly differ. Two texts which clearly illustrate the differences in plot impact and audience reception based on medium are Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and Moreno-Garcia's *Signal to Noise*. In *Who Fears Death*, the only medium of music we see is the voice: Onyesonwu sings, using nothing but her own body to create music that resonates with natural power; it is a clear metaphor for individual self-expression and agency in the form of voice. In *Signal To Noise*, conversely, music appears through devices: record players, Walkmans, and cassette players. Meche does not sing or play an instrument – does not, in the strictest sense, create the music herself at all. Her part in the musicking is one of curation, of choosing the songs and albums to use in magic rituals. The processes of musicking are very different across the two stories and echo the role of music in the overall narrative. For Onyesonwu, music is an organic expression of herself, entirely unrelated to her external circumstances and deeply connected to the nature around her and her solitary upbringing in the desert. In the end, passing her song on to the world around her literally changes the structure of society to enfranchise those previously oppressed. Using solely her voice for music also echoes *Who Fears Death*'s barebones postapocalyptic setting; people have few possessions and electronics are largely a thing of the past. By contrast, *Signal To Noise* is set in the contemporary real world and features all the gadgets and conveniences to be expected in a city in 1980s Mexico. Using devices to play music grounds Meche in the setting and brings her close to the audience – anyone can play a record if they have the equipment, just as she does. Readers of a certain age may also experience the nostalgia of creating mixtapes, browsing through record stores for hours, or engaging with fiction that places emphasis on these kinds of music media.¹²⁰ Unlike Onyesonwu's internality, Meche's musicking appears

¹²⁰ Think films such as *High Fidelity* (2000), *Human Traffic* (1999) or *Empire Records* (1995)

always connected to her external reality. She does not create music from deep within herself or use her body as an instrument but relies on recordings to fulfil music's role in her life. Yet her choice of music is still deeply personal to her, and her reliance on music as an escape and emotional support is rooted in her experiences with her father and her own predilections. However, there remains a layer of distance between her and the music; it can be set aside, and it does not physically heal her as it does Onyesonwu. After the breaking of her friendship with Sebastián and Daniela, her passion for music also seems to fade, the magic leeches from her relationship with it. In the sections of the book set decades later, music occupies much less of her mind. It is also interesting to note that, as far as the narrative tells us, Meche never considers learning to make music herself; her relationship to music is solely one of listening and appreciating. It is a different kind of embodiment of music and a different kind of musicking, evidenced by the medium of choice.

Across all the texts discussed in this dissertation, some overlaps and some outliers of medium can be seen.



Figure 2: Music media across sources

The human voice is by far the most used musical medium, appearing significantly in six out of the nine texts, as well as being the only medium in *Who Fears Death* and the crucial one in *The Whale Rider* and *Sing the Four Quarters*. This is unsurprising, as the voice has the clear advantages of being always accessible without external materials and requiring less practice to produce sounds with than most instruments.¹²¹ Much as the harp is associated with Celtic music and the guqin with Chinese music, the voice is also often associated with fantasy as a genre. Inspecting any of the popular fantasy films in the last few decades yields a surfeit of scores featuring soaring soprano, rumbling bass or multi-voiced chanting to aid in creating a

¹²¹ Of course, being a skilled singer also requires learning, experience, and practice, but almost everyone can sing a melody, even if they do not sound as clear or in tune as a professional. Compared to, for example, a flute, which a complete amateur may not even be able to produce a musical sound with on the first try, access to the voice is less difficult for most.

‘fantasy atmosphere’.¹²² Even in texts that prominently feature other instruments, singing often appears as a musical technique as well – among humans, using the voice to make music is as universal as it gets. Several of the instruments also appear across sources, most notably varieties of flute: different versions of the flute appear in *The Whale Rider*, *Sing the Four Quarters*, and *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, reflecting the wide use of this wind instrument type across the world.

While the setting has an impact on the kinds of instruments used to make music in a given text, there is no one-to-one overlap between the degree of realism of the setting and the imaginativeness of the music.

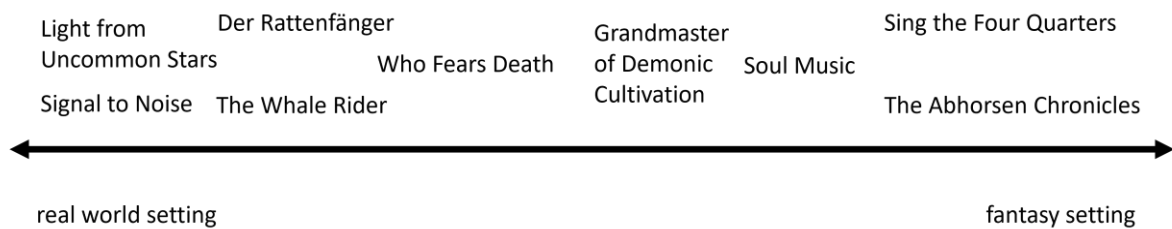


Figure 3: Settings

In terms of setting, *Signal To Noise* and *Light from Uncommon Stars* are most clearly set in the real world, with only minor intrusions of the supernatural into an otherwise completely recognisable world. Similarly, *Der Rattenfänger* and *The Whale Rider* are both set in specific and recognisable places in the real world, but with added mythic dimensions¹²³ while *Who Fears Death* is set in a postapocalyptic version of Africa that still retains an edge of familiarity. *Soul Music* and *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* are set in referential

¹²² To name only a few, consider Howard Shore’s *The Lord of the Rings*, James Horner’s *Avatar*, Harry Gregson-Williams’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or Javier Navarrete’s *Pan’s Labyrinth*.

¹²³ I do not comment on how realistic or otherwise these settings are; the cultural veracity of myth is not mine to judge.

secondary worlds, in that locations in the stories broadly map onto locations in the real world but are not quite the same. At the other end of the spectrum, *Sing the Four Quarters* and *The Abhorsen Chronicles* are both set in secondary worlds which have no clear real-world reference. Yet, looking at Figure 4 one can see that the degree to which the music in each book appears to be influenced by the real world does not accord with this scale.

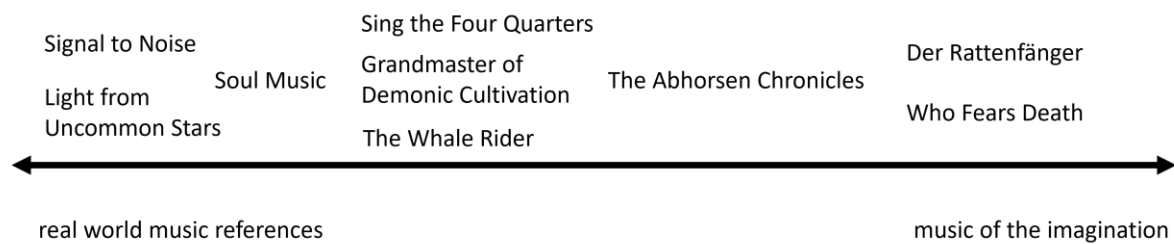


Figure 4: Music references

While *Signal To Noise* – the only text to consistently use real-world technology to play music – and *Light from Uncommon Stars* remain at one end of the spectrum, the other sources have shifted. *Soul Music*, despite its secondary world setting, features many references to real-world music – in this case rock music.¹²⁴ In both these texts, the real-world analogue is absolutely clear, and the reader can easily imagine what the music described in the text sounds like. In the case of *Signal To Noise* and *Light from Uncommon Stars* in particular, one could easily create a playlist of all the songs and violin pieces mentioned in the texts, while *Soul Music* mostly makes reference to music genres and some specific bands. While not every reader may be familiar with the referents, their presence nonetheless allows the authors to invest the music with an overt level of narrative meaning¹²⁵ that is accessible to the audience, anchoring the story for the reader even as music in both texts functions as an access

¹²⁴ Or “music with rocks in”, as they call it in *Soul Music*

¹²⁵ See, i.e., the prior discussion of Meche’s song track choices in Chapter 4.

point for magic into the story. Using real music references in fantasy settings creates an additional layer of connectivity with the audience, drawing them into the web of musicking through shared recognition. This functions differently from the kind of reader ‘participation’ found in texts at the other end of the scale, *Who Fears Death* and *Der Rattenfänger*. The music in these texts is never clearly described, and is more symbolic in its presence and laden with abstract signification; the specific nature of the music matters much less than what the music stands for narratively, and its narrative effects. While this does not provide the reader with a solid anchor into the story the way specific references would, there does remain an idea of what the music should sound like based on the cultural context of the settings in Africa and mediaeval central Europe. While *The Abhorsen Chronicles* lacks this cultural context as well as the clear real-world references, there is only one main instrument – bells – whose sound readers will know and thus be able to imagine. Lastly, I have grouped *Sing the Four Quarters*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *The Whale Rider* together, as these texts do not have clear references to real world music but feature extensive descriptions of the music used in the story, as well as having strong cultural context (Celtic, Chinese, and Māori respectively). Cultural references aside, it is also notable that none of these texts invent instruments from scratch; even when the music is supposed to be otherworldly and entirely without real world context, the authors still draw on mundane instruments that the readers have a sound template for. This allows a degree of recognition and a shared starting point for each reader’s musical imagination as they read the text.¹²⁶ This tallies with the general aim of fantasy fiction: pushing the boundaries and imagining an other, yes, but nonetheless remaining close enough to the real world to comment on it.

Music as medium: Time

¹²⁶ I would also argue that, given the large variety of different instruments in the world, it would be very hard indeed to come up with something entirely novel, or, having done so, to describe it adequately.

Music is a temporal medium; its connection to time is both intrinsic and essential.¹²⁷ While music's relationship to time has distinct features compared to other art forms, on the broader scale its temporality is something it has in common with literature; while performance-based artforms may be more intuitively related to time, the relationship is likewise crucial for long-form literature, which is also included in Jeanette Bicknell's list of "arts of time" (1077).¹²⁸ Steven Paul Scher notes that in traditional classifications of fine arts, literature and music are viewed as "closely akin", as they are both "auditory, temporal, and dynamic art forms" (Bernhart and Wolf 182). Novels may not always be read out loud, but time is still required to read through them, not to mention the existence of audiobooks which constitute as much of a performance of the novel as a poetry recital is of poetry. Thus, depicting music in the written word creates a kind of 'double temporality'; the reader spends time reading the words on the page, while behind those words sits another artform through which time passes. In extreme cases, reading (literature's passing time) may be arrested while music takes over the reader's temporal attention¹²⁹ – another facet of music's enchantment. Otherwise, the two run in parallel: both in the sense that time is passing in-story while it passes as the reader reads and in the sense of the musical artform described unfolding through time. Music's connection to time is so strong, in fact, that some fantasy narratives ascribe it magical properties and link music so closely to time that it affects the 'normal' flow of it, whether through forms of time travel, of eliding time, or of calling memories into the present time more vividly than is otherwise possible. Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, as discussed

¹²⁷ This concept was made popular in Western philosophy by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), who is also remembered for his insistence that music is the purest form of art.

¹²⁸ Incidentally, also one of the parallels Claude Levi-Strauss draws between music and myth: their requirement of a temporal dimension in which to unfold (15).

¹²⁹ One of the starting points of my research, in fact, was a conversation with a friend about the songs in *The Lord of the Rings*, over the course of which I realised that my experience of 'hearing' music playing in my head when I read – even made-up – song lyrics on a page is not actually something everyone experiences. It seems somewhat silly, in retrospect, to have thought my perspective to be universal, and yet to this day I have trouble imagining not hearing music in my head when reading descriptions thereof – despite being fully aware that whatever I imagine cannot be exactly what the author intended (if they even intended anything in particular), unless they invoke pieces of music that exist in the real world.

in Chapter 1, is one such example, giving music a timelessness that confuses time's linearity in the story, as well as the ability to invoke a mythic time that intertwines with the present.

The Whale Rider's narrative structure of interweaving two strands of events, past and present, both structurally and through the echoes of past events at crucial moments in the present story despite the overall less mythical atmosphere of modern times, is supplemented by descriptions of music as bending time, or even entirely timeless. There are repeated uses of phrases such as "a song with eternity in it" (Ihimaera 5, 95) and "ageless music" (6, 141) when referring to whale song, conveying the sense that their music is both outside of time and references timelessness. Most of these descriptions appear in the strand of mythic time and the first whale rider in the ancient past, affirming this part of the story's relevance to Kahu's story in the present. However, whale song in Kahu's time is still possessed of this agelessness (141), so the whales have not lost this attribute though it is less highlighted. While the narrative remains mostly vague on the exact circumstances and ages of the whale herd that Kahu interacts with, it is made explicit, at least, that the bull whale is "ancient" (149) and the same one who once had the friendship with the first whale rider, the ancestor of Kahu's people (140-2). His mate, the old mother whale, is described as equally old; her speaking at the very end of the novel, invoking the old story, is phrased as "from the backwash of Time came the voice of the old mother whale" (150). Time is invoked as something not running quite linearly around these whales, allowing some musical communication across it. The capitalisation of Time brings to mind 'time' as an entity or force in itself, an active player in this story that stretches from the ancient mythic past to the present. Music, and especially music in conjunction with the force of nature and the sea represented by the whales, is seen to facilitate this interruption of the expected flow of time, positioning the past/myth to overlap with the present/reality.

This echoes the general acknowledgement in modern musicology of music as a temporal artform. The question of the interaction of music and time and the concept of musical time has been discussed in depth by a variety of scholars. In the introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Time in Music*, it is noted that while music by necessity comments on the “temporal space in which it exists”, it also creates its own time, generating “particular temporalities outside of the physically measurable time with the potential to shape or even suspend time for the performer or audience” (2). While performing and listening to music, time can become malleable to the point of seeming to stop entirely. In the *Oxford Handbook of Time in Music*, Kristina Knowles, arguing for music’s ability to stop time, points to how concepts such as “time stops, time suspended, endless present, or timelessness”, which seem less grounded in science, are cultural and conceptual constructs which aim to “capture an experience, a feeling, the colour and quality of a particular moment” (66). In line with Small’s concept of musicking, Susan McClary focuses on the collective activity of music and how it suppresses the “perception of individual boundaries in favour of a timeless, interpersonal, cooperative continuum” (1066), harkening back to earlier arguments about the collective, communal nature of music. *The Whale Rider* extends this continuum to whales and this feeling of timelessness to a narrative exchange with the deep past.

Very relevant also in the context of myth and fantasy is Scott Burnham and Gordon Graham’s theory of musical enchantment. They posit that music has the ability to draw the participants into “an alternative world of experience” with “distinctively different spatial and temporal dimensions” (985). They do not equate music with fantasy, because music is “as real as scent or colour” (984), yet the enchantment consists of being mentally taken somewhere beyond mundane existence. Pointing to the abundance of temporal (and spatial) terms used in musicological analysis such as ‘eternity’ and ‘moment’, Burnham and Graham also note that while some of the descriptions adopt ambitiously large-scale terms (eternity

being a good example), they nonetheless are used often and easily by those discussing music (989-90). Lastly, they note that another characteristic of musical enchantment is its instantaneousness, its immediate transport into the “world of the piece” (992). They link this also to music’s strong power to recall the full emotional impact of a memory of real-world experience (992). Given *The Whale Rider*’s themes of past and present intertwining, the bull whales’ memory of the first whale rider blending into Kahu, recalled by her singing, and the mythic aspect evoked by this musical connection between humans and whales, Burnham and Graham’s concept of a sense of enchantment created by music becomes surprisingly applicable. They comment on ‘real’ listening to music, rather than music descriptions in a book, but I argue that the kind of prose lingering on musicking and its connective properties in the story also brings – or enchants, as the case may be – the reader into a literary-musical world, inflected by each individual’s degree of ‘hearing’ music while reading. Helen Dell, looking at mediaeval fantasy, points out that discussion of fantasy fiction that involves music should “take into account musical ecstasy, where the listener is taken, rapt away out of time” (180), once again emphasising the taking out of time that music facilitates in fantastic contexts. Returning to the Orpheus myth, Vladimir Marchenkov’s analysis thereof also includes the idea of music as a manipulation of time, highlighting Orpheus’ music and its effects as a transfiguration of time which allows for a “breaking out of this current of time into eternity” (27).¹³⁰ Eternity, in this Orphean view, is something that disrupts the normal rhythms of life (encapsulated also in the process of returning from death), yet for the whales of *The Whale Rider*, whose agelessness is accepted so easily and calmly by the narrative that it barely registers as unusual, this being out of time comes naturally.

¹³⁰ According to Marchenkov, this is demonstrated not only by the effect of his music, but also in his role as prophet and hierophant in some versions of the myth (27).

Even if we cannot agree exactly what music does to time and our perception of it, music clearly bears some relation to time due to its undisputed character as a temporal artform. Emerging theories of musical timelessness, halting time during moments of musicking as well as pulling musicians and audiences into a space of alternate time, complement the concept of eternal music in *The Whale Rider*. Whale song is characterised as ageless and carrying eternity within it throughout the story, highlighting the appearance of the mythic as preserved in Māori cultural traditions into a time when these traditions are fading from the world. An intrinsic part of Kahu's character arc is her use of music to revive expressions of culture that Ihimaera makes it clear he considers to be crucial to the healthy survival of a community. Music is already shown to be an intrinsic part of the traditions that do survive. We see a hula accompanied by guitar and singing (Ihimaera 80) and Kahu performing at a school ceremony, singing with the school cultural group (85). These events are shown as commonplace cultural activities; however, it is Kahu's singing to the whale and the connection established thereby that is shown to have the greatest impact. It resurrects ancient custom straight out of myth, which the narrator, her uncle, would have declared an impossibility. It also represents an act of personal agency that finally earns Kahu the approval of her misogynistic grandfather.

Music as medium: Sentience

Among the most impactful changes a fantasy setting can bring to music as a medium is the potential for sentience – an extension of the concept of medium into intentionality of itself rather than the artist. In the western academic tradition, medium and sentience are not two related considerations; seeing music or art or literature as alive, beyond its creator's will and intention does not come naturally outside of metaphors.¹³¹ Metaphors, however, can be

¹³¹ Though it does also call to mind mythological concepts like the ancient Greek Muses, which stood for concepts such as hymns, epic poetry, lyric poetry, and mime; not mediums quite in the way of the mediums of

telling about the way we like to see art and engage with it, even if we do not believe in the literal truth of such statements. Paintings can have ‘something to tell us’, writers complain or exult that ‘their stories have a mind of their own’, and if music enchants us, the step from passive medium through which we are reached to intentional ensnaring is, metaphorically, a small one. This breach between words about medium and the reality of medium is one that fantasy slots into perfectly.¹³² In a fantasy narrative, no reader will question music being personified, given its own agency, and developing from ‘medium’ into a ‘character’ who might appear in a *dramatis personae* list. Yet, at the same time, the character ‘Music’ remains a medium: it is still being used by musicians as a means and a transmitter. *Der Rattenfänger* and *Soul Music* both investigate what happens when a transmitter develops intentions of its own, featuring music that appears to have aims and the ability to communicate for itself.

Given its wide-reaching effects and magical properties in these fantasy narratives, it is not altogether surprising that texts like *Der Rattenfänger* and *Soul Music* go so far as to ascribe music distinctly human characteristics, such as feelings and goals. According to Isabella van Elferen, music “often has a distinct magical agency” in fantasy (9), which is certainly borne out in the texts studied for this dissertation. The fantasy genre’s capacity to ascribe life, intention, emotions, communicative ability and even humanity to things western thought usually reckons to be inert or on a different level of sentience to humans, is significant; examples range from talking animals who behave as if they were human to whole sentient worlds – or subsets of worlds, either manmade (i.e. countries and realms) or natural (i.e. rivers and forests)) – to music as found in *Der Rattenfänger* and *Soul Music*.

art we talk about most often nowadays, and the muses are less the medium itself than the sources of knowledge embodied in them (though what exactly they are seen as depends on the time period and sources), but they nonetheless exemplify the idea of a personification of a type of art.

¹³² It is, however, not the only originator of personification of otherwise abstract concepts. See, for example, ‘Time’ in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* and ‘Revenge’ in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*.

In *Der Rattenfänger*, music is a force that both embodies agency and seems to have its own goals, obscured as they may be – unlike the player through which it acts, who can neither communicate without it nor ever makes clear any wants or needs. In fact, music quite literally gives the ambiguously human¹³³ player life. As soon as he gives his instrument away, the player turns into a stone statue, becoming inert and without any recognisable life. Furthermore, Magdalena, upon returning his stolen instrument to him, calls the shawm “your soul, your life” (Ende 57). This may be taken as either metaphorical or literal, given also that Magdalena does not know that he will eventually turn to stone without it, but does highlight that the instrument, and through the instrument music, is crucial to the player as a character. That it then also has a will of its own becomes clear when Atela tries to play the stolen shawm before Magdalena returns it: “*She tries to play on the shawm, but no note comes out. Suddenly, she screams in pain and casts it away. She stares at her hands, from which smoke is rising*” (49). The instrument’s ‘self-defence’ against being played by someone other than the player is comprehensive, both in its refusal to produce sound – thus eliminating the main worth of itself as a musical instrument – and in causing the person who attempts it enough pain to discourage further attempts. While it is unclear how the instrument decides whether someone is allowed to play it, it is certain that Atela, who is the main villain in the libretto and bears responsibility for the rat plague due to her greed, is positioned opposite the player who saves the town from the rat king. Aside from its apparent ability to choose its player, the other indication that music, or at least the shawm, is in some way sentient is that it can make music on its own. At the very end of the story, when the player has relinquished the instrument and is turning to stone, a child carries the shawm into the mountain, reverent, and “the shawm continues to play on alone” (64). *Der Rattenfänger* leaves the extent of music’s

¹³³ While the player is never described as anything other than human, he is a mysterious figure with magical powers and somewhat unusual looks; whether he is fully human is left to the reader’s imagination.

sentience and agency open to interpretation, allowing the reader to ascribe the bulk of the supernatural intent to the player or the instrument itself. However, the way music gives the player life and soul, the fact that it is the player's singular way of communicating throughout, and the instrument itself choosing who plays it and being capable of simply playing on its own certainly intimates that music is an active force that can make decisions like a human might.

Soul Music takes the personification of music a step further. Music is directly depicted as a primordial force that can talk and quite clearly has desires and goals. The narrative leads up to this realisation, which is only fully uncovered during the climax: first, there is the instrument's communication with Buddy, picking him as its player from the moment it hears him speak in the store (Pratchett 34-5), and then not letting anyone else even touch it, much less play on it (108); second, there is the guitar's ability to play by itself (109), and people's slow realisation that instead of them playing the music they are being played by it (160). Then there is the world-building set-up of instruments having a soul, which is mentioned early on by Buddy as one of his teachings (31), and repeated mentions of music having started the universe. Finally, there is the fact that the wizards recognise the music as "alive" (156, 243). It becomes clear as the story progresses that the music is pursuing the goal of perpetuating itself, including by attempting to preserve itself in the form of recordings (a new concept in this setting) on top of ensnaring ever more audiences. The primordial music force then appears as a culmination of all these aspects during the climax of the story. It speaks straight into Susan's mind, conveying its pride and desire that it never die (345), and its sound outside her mind is described as "like the roar of millions of voices" (343). It is not described as human, and has no body or form, but it is ascribed personality and thought. This is where the distinction between music and magic in *Soul Music* comes back into play: music is more powerful, more personified, than magic in this world, and given a layer of separation from the

other fantasy elements. This helps call the reader back to the music's real-world antecedent, the rock'n'roll revolution and its influence on musicians and audiences, its capacity to change and affect individuals and society. This personification of music as a primordial force, paradoxically, appears more believable than music as a mere aspect of magic.

Music as communication: Medium

All these aspects – setting, the method of producing music, temporality, and sentience – mediate how music does or does not communicate in fantasy texts. Some communication actively takes place with the reader, as in the case of references to existing music in real life; even the narratives set fully in secondary worlds tend to use existing instruments to convey a sense of what the fictional music might sound like to the reader. How the reader reacts to this attempt at communication – whether they know the song, seek out music they do not know, start playing melodies in their heads, or merely keep reading without much attention to the aural quality of what the words suggest – is, of course, highly individual and would make for an interesting and rewarding future research project. However, the focus of this dissertation has mainly lain in music's communication *within* the narrative. There, the mediation of time and sentience becomes more pertinent.

The Whale Rider demonstrates how a mythological fantasy narrative can use music's temporal aspect to confuse the linearity of time for characters and allow communication between those who belong to mythic time and those in the present. At the same time, the 'agelessness' of the music in *The Whale Rider* communicates the heart of the story: a recapturing of traditional culture. What makes the story more contemporary is that this recapturing is effected through Kahu, a girl who, through her musical communication with the whales bring mythic time into the present, is able to escape the misogynistic assumptions of her grandfather and position herself as the next cultural leader of her community.

Both *Der Rattenfänger* and *Soul Music* raise questions about how a sentient, anthropomorphised music mediates musical communication by those playing ‘it’, as well as communicating itself. Does what the personification of a medium say through itself take precedence over its performers? Does the medium’s communicative ability increase with a sentient force behind it? *Der Rattenfänger* largely leaves the answer to these questions to the reader’s imagination, much as the ‘sentience’ in music is circumstantial and ambiguous. To what extent the music is communicating through the player versus the player communicating via music remains unclear. In contrast, *Soul Music* shows an advantaged anthropomorphised music, whose voice subsumes Buddy and its other players – while at the same time amplifying them. Throughout the narrative, the performers mostly serve as a channel for music to spread itself and make itself heard on its own terms. Yet, a crucial scene shows Buddy making use of the music’s abilities of enchantment and temptation to convey his own deepest feelings about home and hope, which are not themes the music’s own communication ever touches. In *Soul Music*, music and sentience are inextricable, affecting each other and musical communication at every step.

Communication is always mediated – fantasy literature merely widens the possibilities of how and through what this mediation can take place, with magic able to take aspects of medium and enhance them, or ascribe the medium intentionality. At the same time, the texts’ communication with the readers is altered by the description of music in the predominantly silent medium of literature. References to existing music can be understood, looked up, or missed by readers whose understanding of that level of the storytelling will correspondingly differ. Similarly, descriptions of made up or magical pieces of music engage some readers’ own musical imagination, filling in the silence, or pass them by without consideration to the aural element implicated by the words on the page. What the medium

within the medium communicates, in the end, is contingent, and made only the more so for music's magics in these fantasy narratives.

Conclusion

Music is probably the only real magic I have encountered in my life.

There's not some trick involved with it. It's pure and it's real.

It moves, it heals, it communicates and does all these incredible things.

- Tom Petty

Magical music in fantasy literatures is as tangled a theme as any other, even with the bias of using hand-picked primary sources for analysis which any comparatist needs to acknowledge. The divisions represented by the chapter themes of nature, death, temptation, self-expression, gender, and medium are in fact not so easily distinguished between the texts: there is much crossover between them. Many of the themes are found in more than two of the texts under discussions here, as explicitly acknowledged in the chapters on gender and medium. For further example, nature inflects thoughts on uses of music in all the texts except *Signal to Noise*, if to differing degrees, musical temptation is at least tangentially relevant in all but *Who Fears Death* and *The Whale Rider*, and I could just as easily have written chapters on healing or group musicking, which are each quite relevant in five of the nine texts. The constants across all texts, however, are musical communication and agency, and as I have argued that, in the case of magical musicking, agency largely stems *from* communication, it is communication that constitutes the common through-thread of my argument, upon which my research questions turn.

I will not retread my chapters here to describe how each of the texts portrays magical music differently, but I do want to discuss why this research has led me to believe that music

is particularly suited for inclusion – and active narrative agency – in contemporary fantasy literature.¹³⁴ One aspect is that music, in everyday real-world conversations, is already often described in terms that lend themselves to fantasy, from ‘transcendence’ to ‘magic’, ‘timeless’, and ‘spiritual healing’. The chapter epigraphs drive this point home; they largely come from musicians themselves and give a snapshot of insight into how some practicing musicians think about their art and profession. Whether it is Aretha Franklin saying that music inspires her to change, Jimi Hendrix and Louis Armstrong equating music to life itself, Lizzo talking about the message of self-acceptance she sends to her listeners, or Tom Petty’s deeply earnest statement about music being the only bit of true magic he has ever encountered, all of them ascribe to music a power that science would be hard-pressed to prove or disprove. This is a characteristic of art in general, but the explicitly *performed* aspect of music makes narrative agency in novels an easier proposition than for art forms such as writing and painting.

A second aspect of music’s suitability for the fantasy genre is the effect of adding magic to music through the allowance and expectations of the fantasy genre: manifesting the “real-world” putative spiritual powers of music as explicit physical and mental influence on the fantasy world and audience. Magical music can literally halt an army (*Sing the Four Quarters*), evoke exactly the same emotion in all listeners (*Light from Uncommon Stars*), or speak to the dead (*Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*). What magical music accomplishes in these narratives gives insight into authors’ own beliefs about music and what it either does or should be able to do. This can be culturally rooted, such as in *The Whale Rider*, *Who Fears Death*, or *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, or rooted in personal experience as musicians, such as for Tanya Huff or Michael Ende. As always, fantasy functions as a mirror

¹³⁴ The same goes for older works and their mythological and folk tale forerunners, though I focus on recent work in this project.

of real life, whose distortions and layer of insulation may speak a different language than realism but sound just as loudly.

My second research question concerned the central theme of the dissertation, musical communication: how and why does musical communication fail or succeed in these texts? There are some common reasons why communication does or does not succeed in any given narrative. An important criterium is the narrative expectation and set-up, including both what the worldbuilding and magic system denote music to be and do and a musicking character's aims when bringing magical music to bear. Some of the texts have limits and failures built into the set-up; for example, in *Sing the Four Quarters*, bardic musical powers rely on the presence of the elemental spirits, who can be absent and are not capable of nuanced pseudo-linguistic messaging, thus leading to occasional vagueness of musical transmission. On the other hand, *Light from Uncommon Stars* never defines what exactly magic is and how it works, thus also allowing the absence of in-built limits to magical music. Most of the texts impose some limits to musical power through the listener's own personality and will – while the impact of magical musicking on listeners is often extensive and concrete, some agency remains to them in the form of character inclinations (for example, *Soul Music*'s very catchy music sliding right off a wizard whose personality is very stodgy and straightforward and not at all inclined to flights of fancy) or exertions of will (such as the greater dead in *The Abhorsen Chronicles* being able to resist the bells' music to a degree). *Openness* to music, which musicologists highlight as a factor in music impact and creation of musical communities, also figures in many of these fantasy narratives. Magic can force the point, certainly on the physical level, but where listeners' emotions and appreciation are concerned, openness to being influenced, to being touched by the music, is at the very least implied to make a difference. The ancient bull whale in *The Whale Rider* longs for his long-dead human companion Paikea and immediately attaches himself to Kahu when she sings to him; *Who*

Fears Death's Onyesonwu feels fully accepted by a community for the first time when she meets the Ssolu people who are unbothered by the calming effect of her music and instead thank her for restful sleep; and in *Soul Music*, the beggars are left ungripped by the music with rocks in because their dire living circumstances do not allow for openness to that kind of fanciful dreaming. This is the fallibly human aspect of art and music – in the hands of these authors even the universalising impulse of combining magic with music is tempered by individual agency.

Despite this universalising impulse, it comes as no surprise that comparing nine texts with very different backgrounds, for all that they share their base genre, produces mixed results, but some common strands can nonetheless be observed. One common strand, which informed the structure of this entire project, concerns the explicitly and magically clarified communicative nature of music in these texts. Without exception, magic makes music's transference of emotion or information more direct and clearer than music's lack of linguistic signification allows in the real world. Whether it is a guqin language that can interrogate dead souls, a musician sharing the pain and joy of her trans identity with her audience, or the personification of music offering the musician eternal fame, musical communication is always *understood* by its audience, if often not in anything resembling words and without guarantee that understanding equals agreement or action. Even the explicit rejection of the temptations of music by the beggars in *Soul Music* is predicated on their understanding of what the music is offering them, and that this offer does not fit their circumstances.

The second, related strand is the persistent use of music to express self and identity in ways that create personal agency, related to gender and otherwise. In the most extreme cases, like that of *Soul Music*, this extends to music itself, personifying the art to the point it expresses opinions and aims. Not all texts take musicking as much as the basis of narrative growth of characters as *Who Fears Death*, *Signal to Noise*, and *Light from Uncommon Stars*,

but every single text discussed here has things to say about how art creates and draws from the self. This echoes real-world thoughts about music, creativity, and expression – the addition of magic may cause some potent side-effects and, as per the paragraph above, allow more precise communication, but does not change the inherent nature of art as reflective of the artist. Magic does, however, increase the narrative agency inherent in such acts, whether in the coming-of-age story of *Signal to Noise* or Annice stopping an invasion through singing out her pain and joy during labour in *Sing the Four Quarters*.

Yet it is equally important to remark on the many differences in musical impact presented in these narratives, which steer readers and analysis alike away from exaggerated flights into universalism. I want to highlight three areas distinct from the more obvious points of different cultural backgrounds, worldbuilding, instruments, and magic systems that create differences on the ‘surface’ level. As noted, the occasional failures and pitfalls of musical magicking are figured in drastically different guises in these texts, though the presence of some sort of drawback is universal enough to not make musical all-powerful even in these fantasy contexts.¹³⁵ At the same time, the impact of magical musicking – even beyond communication, though there is much overlap between the two – varies across texts. Some novels, such as *Sing the Four Quarters* strictly retain a one-to-one rule of singing to impact, with human audience helpless to resist bardic commands and high never seen to resist musical commands, but several others make the degree of impact dependent on the mental strength of the musician. Lastly, the texts also differ widely as to the price attached to influencing the world through magical musicking. Some, such as *The Whale Rider*, demand no price at all, whereas *Who Fears Death* ends in a sacrifice of life in exchange for large-scale societal change and *Signal to Noise* ends in splintered friendships and a home lost. Some novels restrict the freedom of action of the musician through rules that keep them from

¹³⁵ which, quite aside from any considerations of music, would make for a boring story

becoming too powerful or breaking societal rules (i.e. *Sing the Four Quarters* and *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*). Music, despite all the romanticisation also found in the fantasy genre, is not portrayed as without perils – at least when augmented by magic.

The final research question, concerning music's suitability as a narrative tool to show both authorial and in-text diversity, operates on two different levels of 'diversity'. First, part of the point of this dissertation project was to consider texts by authors with a variety of backgrounds, including those minoritised by the current publishing industry, as the corpus of fantasy literature studies so far is only slowly shifting to include these voices. Depictions of music correspondingly differ – no author is constrained to only representing their own culture's musical traditions, but lived experience does inflect writing on every level and I have already noted that art is always reflective of the artist. What authors choose to use music for and how they choose to write it in their own art form will always reflect their influences. This can be overt and obvious, such as Ihimaera's Māori cultural background informing music's role in *The Whale Rider* and Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's conception of musical cultivation in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* drawing on the long history of Chinese philosophy – from types of instruments used to situations which call for music to the status afforded a musician within the story, all such worldbuilding considerations become active choices made by the writer in a fantasy setting that, theoretically, allows for new creations, infinite variation, and mixing of influences. The second aspect of diversity is the variety of the cast of characters encountered within the narratives. For it to be noteworthy that magical music communicates between races and species, between human and world, between different states of being, differences need to exist at the outset. Whether it is Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death*, a racial outcast in her own story who asserts herself through musicking and forges connections to nature and humans who had previously spurned her alike, Annice communicating with inhuman embodiments of nature in *Sing the Four Quarters*, Kahu

bringing her cultural tradition to bear through singing to the whales in *The Whale Rider*, or *Light from Uncommon Star*'s Katrina gaining respect and admiration for a gender identity that had made her life hell through sharing her experience and emotions on her violin, musicking allows the artistic – and, through the magic, physically and emotionally impactful – expression of diversity on the individual and the cultural level.

This study of magical music in contemporary fantasy is hardly comprehensive. I am limited by both scope and language competency: there are many more contemporary fantasy novels, in English and beyond, whose addition to the analysis may further complicate, or put into stark relief, any arguments about musical communication universality and the place of music in fantasy narratives. Another tempting avenue of research would be to branch out into other media forms. There is much that could be said about magical music in films, television, and video games, both in terms of story content (i.e. similar thematic studies as this project) and soundtrack studies (i.e. identifying and analysing musical conventions for representing magic and the fantastic in musical form in these media), adding the audible dimension back into analysis while retaining the insulation from the real world that fantasy's commentary allows. The concept of magical musicking has scope which should be expanded and explored beyond these nine contemporary fantasy texts. In the real world, the dream of universal musical communication will likely never become reality, and should be scrutinised carefully when proposed without nuance; in fantasy, we can let music become as powerful as various mythologies have long made it.

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