

Chris Gureski

Dr. Clawson

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From the Ashes of the House of Usher

Adaptations of literature typically tend to find a home within the medium of visual arts. Especially for Edgar Allan Poe, many of his works have been translated into film and television to varying degrees of success, but one of the more unexplored mediums of adaptations is music. Exploring musical adaptations of Poe, outside of his popular poem “The Raven”, much of his work is largely ignored. Not to say that there are no great adaptations, however many of the present adaptations fail to carry the same status that Poe has garnered. In the context of my personal project, I use music as a medium to explore Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”. My project aims to cater to what defines the tone of the story. Ultimately the story’s tone is best conveyed through a combination of setting and characters. Poe utilizes setting to build dread throughout the characters, dividing the audience from the logic of the characters. In my adaptation I will hone in on the tension between the characters and setting to exemplify in an instrumental piece.

To better understand the necessities of an adaptation, it is important to observe the necessary guidelines that help transfer it from across mediums. An example of these guidelines are found in Stephen Hutchings and Anat Vernitskaia’s book, *Russian and Soviet Film Adaptations of Literature, 1900-2001 : Screening the Word*. In the introduction the authors raise theological approaches to answer the question of how to adapt a work of literature. Hutchings and Vernitskaia mention André Bazin who, “suggests that the successful adaptation utilizes the full array of cinematic technique (soft-focus and ‘dissolve’ shots, montage, flashback, etc.) to

create an ‘equivalence in meaning of the forms’ (ibid.: 20)” (Hutchings and Vernitskaia 16).

Bazin highlights a focus on catering to the assets and abilities of a medium over the limits of its original medium. In Bazin’s example he mentions film in particular and how a successful adaptation experiments within its medium of interpretation. It is important to note that the particular assets that help film stand out for its storytelling are not shared among other mediums like music. Honing in on these techniques gives an adaptation a more stylized approach rather than a direct retelling, also giving creators to reiterate particular motifs with their medium of choice. Bazin argues that the atmosphere of film can surpass the original work it was derived from. What was implied in literature can visually and audibly be shared to heightened levels, depending on the creator’s intention.

Hutchings and Vernitskaia connect Bazin’s perspective alongside many others, notably Dudley Andrew, an American critic. Hutchings and Vernitskaia state that, “Andrew’s definition is useful, as is his typology dividing adaptations into three basic modes: borrowing, intersection and fidelity of transformation (ibid.: 29)... ‘the artist employs... the material, idea or form of an earlier... successful text’, covers films in which ‘the audience is expected to enjoy basking in a certain pre-established presence and to call up new or especially powerful aspects of this cherished work’” (ibid.: 30). (Hutchings and Vernitskaia 17). Andrew’s approach to adaptations acknowledges the importance of an audience when conveying a story that may already be held in high regard. Applying Andrew’s method to my instrumental adaptation, the borrowing and intersection of elements is very relevant to the impact the instrumental may leave with listeners.

Observing where the song may intersect Poe’s story, there is already an abundance of content and methods of connecting one to the other. For example, one musical adaptation of Poe comes from the same story, written by Nikita Koshkin titled, “Usher Waltz, Op. 29”. This song

was popularized by a 1993 performance by the popular classical guitarist John Williams. His cover of the piece portrays the dissonance of Roderic's sensitive ears as he plays piano. The song speeds up and slows down, holding a frenetic quality that seems unresolved. The progression of the melody overall holds a bittersweetness, with small snippets of sweetness contrasted by a heavy sourness or unresolved feeling. Williams' performance captures the conflict found between the House of Usher and the character's that inhabit the house. One element of the song that stood out to me in particular was the harmonic section, where there is levity from the lower frequencies of the plucked strings. This adaptation uses intense dynamics and different speeds to relate the maddening impact that the House of Usher has on the character's. His cover of Koshkin's work not only exhibits a balance of borrowed inspiration and intersection, it also further exemplifies how one can continue to adapt a work in the same medium.

To fully understand what requirements are needed of my adaptation, I turned towards the source material to outline the heart of the story. Poe highlights the setting through the unnamed narrator. When the narrator looks upon the building, "a sense of heavy sadness filled my spirit. I looked at the scene before me — at the house itself — at the ground around it — at the cold stone walls of the building — at its empty eye-like windows — and at a few dead trees — I looked at this scene, I say, with a complete sadness of soul which was no healthy, earthly feeling. There was a coldness, a sickening of the heart, in which I could discover nothing to lighten the weight I felt." (Poe 22). The introduction of the house is characterized with pessimistic connotations and many dashes, associating space within this barren description. The structure of the wording matches the emotions Poe looks to elicit from the reader.

Poe uses cold as a motif of the story, it's used in many of the descriptions throughout the story. The setting portrayed is bleak, with the character fighting this sadness the instant they

enter the premise. Poe's narrator continues to reiterate this heaviness of the setting as he reflects, "I was now going to spend several weeks in this house of sadness — this house of gloom. Its owner was named Roderick Usher. We had been friends when we were boys; but many years had passed since our last meeting" (Poe 23). Poe elicits an idea of nostalgia in this relationship between the narrator and Roderic. There's a great passage of time and a fall from grace that occurred since then. The story states that the narrator intends to spend several weeks structuring the story to build its intensity as the characters linger inside this decrepit house.

In the context of my adaptation, the space given by the dashes and the repetition of words like cold give me the opportunity to structure my song in a way that caters these qualities. The hook of the song starts slow, allowing space between the notes of the progression. The instrumental repeats certain sections more than others intentionally, cementing the tension of the House of Usher. Reflecting on what's borrowed and how that may intersect, the song takes inspiration from a mixture of grunge rock, 1970's rock and classical guitar music. Implementing these stylized musical elements into Poe's work, the two mediums share a tone that touches on philosophical ideas like apathy and nihilism. This darker style of music contributes to the darkness of the setting and also more realistically frames itself to delve into chaos, even if that chaos is musical rather than mental. Tonally I think this mixture of styles blends into the intensity needed to capture the House of Usher. I decided to title it "From the Ashes of the House of Usher" to better reflect on the nostalgia that the narrator and Roderic portrayed at moments. Taking this liberty with the work gives the song more dynamics and a better progression to reiterate the more tense moments, without that levity that tension can risk coming across as dull. Building off that dynamic in melody I wrote the instrumental to speed up and slow down, portraying the madness of the house as something that lingers but gives one false expectations.

Being able to play with the expectations of the audience allows the song to have originality and surprise listeners while also fulfilling other expectations like an overarching general darkness that matches the tone of its source material.

Another important aspect of my adaptation is the process of recording it. For many of the inspirations every little detail was intentional; the choice of microphones, space from the player, the volume they choose to play and record at, even down to the room it's recorded in. Many times the production process is a blend between one's limitations and opportunities from their gear and surroundings. Some of my limitations in recording this is my instrumental choice, I'm primarily a guitar player but I had to decide the scope of the project and the instrumentation like whether to include other instruments like piano or bass. I chose to record an acoustic guitar and a 12 string guitar to give a full but lush texture to the piece. In doubling my instruments I'm able to emphasise the dissonance of the song while making the song feel full and not bare bones.

Another choice I made was to record the guitars with condenser microphones. One limitation of that microphone is the chance of picking up background noise which was a challenge when I recorded on campus. The condenser microphone typically picks up a wider range of frequencies, giving more low and high end to the instrument, but the microphone also picks up noise behind it, meaning if I breathed too loud or if I slid on my guitar wrong it would be very audible in the composition. I spent time practicing the part to try and perfect the performance, rerecording one of the guitars. On the topic of microphones, another idea and limitation that was passed around was in deciding whether to include vocals. I didn't think I could record a great take so I decided to toy with whispered vocals that can be layered. I'd repeat words from the text like coldness or decay that reappeared in the text to certify the madness the characters feel. If the two guitars represent Roderic and Madeline Usher, then the whispered vocals can represent the descent into

madness the narrator watches. This audible representation helps portray the intensity of the madness while sharing a similar eeriness to the setting. I intentionally used a dynamic microphone that hones middle frequencies to make the voice stand out but also feel filtered, like hearing something through a phone or from afar.

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" conveys an intensity in its setting that suggests that one's home can contribute to one's self destruction. Taking this balance of tension and madness into an instrumental adaptation gives audiences an opportunity to explore the depth of the madness characters experience. One's imagination is powerful, but having a medium that attains directly to one's senses like sound can change the level of tension they hold, similar to many horror movies that are defined by the audio just as much as their visuals. Reflecting on film adaptations, there are present standards that guide one's process of adapting a work of literature. It's necessary to acknowledge what is borrowed and how that connects to the source material. Any liberties taken with the piece should elevate or stylize it rather than drag its impact. By adapting Poe's story into an instrumental adaptation, the atmosphere and character's emotions will be heightened to function as a representation of the shared but controlled madness that sits at the core of the House of Usher.

Works Cited and Annotated Bibliography

Koshkin, Nikita. *Usher Waltz, Op. 29*. Performed by John Williams, *YouTube*, 26 Dec. 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD0MlcrVFgU>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2024.

This song outlined the expectations of an instrumental adaptation. John William's cover of Koshkin allowed a reflection of the importance of adaptation while the song itself exemplified how musical elements like structure, dynamics, and speed all build into the expectations of the audience. Koshkin's piece helped establish the guidelines of the medium while portraying its effectiveness in relation to the source material. The song reveals the liberties an author can take when striving for originality. Using the song as a source I was given both inspiration and rough guidelines to reach for when adapting Poe.

Hutchings, Stephen, and Vernitskaia, Anat. *Russian and Soviet Film Adaptations of Literature, 1900-2001 : Screening the Word*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/snorcol-ebooks/detail.action?docID=178191>.

This book was helpful in establishing the guidelines for adaptations of literature. Exploring it through Russian cinema of the early 1900s gave the rules of adaptation strictness and wiggle room to explore. Reviewing how a film can be adapted helped me brainstorm what's necessary in any adaptation. From this source I was able to have a set of rules that helped dictate which direction would be beneficial in adapting literature. Using film also showed the importance of not copying and pasting across mediums. Realizing these differences between mediums of adaptations gave me a sense of freedom in what possibilities the song can explore and what shouldn't be changed when comparing an adaptation to the original source.