

“The Fall of the House of Usher”
Making the Musical

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Music from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for _____

(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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April 30, 2009

Origins- The Original, New Ideas, Lyrics, and Characters

The Original

As a short story, “The Fall of the House of Usher” is filled with so much epic drama, sound, and music that it begs to be made into a musical. The plot centers on a troubled man, the eponymous Roderick Usher, who happens to be a musician dying of sensitivity to sound. We are told the tale through the eyes of an unnamed Narrator who plays the audience-connecting everyman and allows us to experience every unsettling moment in Usher’s magnificent, decaying house. This Narrator listens as Roderick plays disturbing improvisations on the guitar while describing his sickness. He watches as Roderick’s sister, Madeline, becomes sick and dies. A terrible storm arises, and he tells a story about knights and dragons in order to distract Roderick from his path towards insanity. With bizarre synchronicity, each sound in the story is echoed by a noise in the house. Roderick finally cracks and admits that he buried his sister alive, and at that very moment the door bursts open and Madeline, having clawed her way out of the tomb, falls on Roderick with her last breath. Usher dies dramatically as the Narrator, our eyes and ears, rushes out of the house just in time to turn and see it crack and crumble into the tarn below.

New Ideas

The idea of turning “Usher” into a musical was initially proposed to me while I was studying abroad in China. Earlier, in September of 2007, I had written twelve minutes of incidental music for a production of *Hamlet* that Brent Cirves, a former teacher of mine was directing. I loved the process of fitting the music to specific characters, which is something that I had not done for my Freshman-year satire/farce musical based on Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, and I thought that this might be a good chance to go through a similar creative

process. Brent, an English and drama teacher at Woodberry Forest, gave me several different stories to read. After reading “The Fall of the House of Usher,” we both agreed that it suited our interests at the time. I wanted to write a dark period piece and he was reading everything that he could about Poe at the time, so the partnership was very natural. Before we started with our adaptation, we decided to take the skeleton of the story that Poe had written and fill in more to remove a few inherent ambiguities that might make the piece too difficult to understand on stage.

The story as it exists is clearly meant to be read and imagined. Dialogue is minimal and we have very little concept of what goes on in the minds of Madeline and Roderick. We have a very clear picture of events from the Narrator, but even in all of his descriptions we fail to get a clear picture of who he is, what he does, and why he is really friends with Roderick Usher. In order to make a musical which contained fully fleshed-out characters and a plot long enough to sustain interest, we decided to make up back stories for each of the characters and have those stories interrelate in Act 1.

We gave the Narrator a name, William, after Poe’s own older brother. The story as it exists became the basic outline of Act 2, and Act 1 became a chance to inject a happier time into Usher’s life. Perhaps most importantly, we added the character of Annabel Lee and made her Roderick’s lover and the one thing standing between him and an ego-fueled breakdown. We did this in order to have another vocal part, inject a heightened tension into the relationships of the story, and give Roderick a love interest. Her death at the end of Act 1 is the catalyst for the familiar and expected events of Act 2 and adds another layer of tragedy to the piece.

Lyrics

The Poe poem from which we took Annabel supplied so many parallels between it and “Usher” that we were inspired to find more poems by Poe to use as song lyrics and dialogue in order to make the show a reflection of a critical mass of Poe works. The songs “Radiant Palace,” and “Lonely Palace,” have lyrics derived from the song, “The Haunted Palace,” that Usher sings to the narrator in the original story. “Alone,” “Silence,” and “The Ballad of Annabel Lee,” contain complete or slightly-edited versions of Poe’s poetry. The more ambiguous pieces, “I Cannot Love You” and “Rat Ratiocination” are content simply to hint at other works by Poe. The remaining songs were all given original lyrics with the exception of two whose words come from other pre-19th century sources. Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* and Robert Burns’s *Red Red Rose* appear in “A Vision” and “My Love,” respectively.

Characters

The characters are generally more complex than characters in a musical typically are. We are never quite sure of Madeline’s true nature, though we see more and more of it as the show progresses. Did she kill her father? If she did, was it justified? Is she a threat to William? Are her experiments brilliant or worthless? How much of her insanity is true and how much is a show in itself? Some of these questions are meant to be answered by the end of the show, but others are left to be more ambiguous. She embodies traits of both villain and hero, and as such leaves tremendous room for an actress to justify almost any action.

Roderick, Madeline’s twin brother, displays many of the same brilliant and disturbing qualities that his sister possesses. The difference between the two of them is that Usher channels his inner-torment into a gargantuan arrogance that both allows for his befriending of William and

also assures the loss of that friendship at the end of the first act. As both a musician and a character the inspiration for Roderick was found in the early 20th century composer Alexander Scriabin, a man whose grand symphony was literally intended to end the world. World War I was his prelude. While Roderick's goals are more in line with bringing the world to peace than with ending it, the sheer force of will required to believe in one's own capability to write such a piece of music ensured that Roderick would be a strong-minded character. With such a heavy and potentially unlikable personality due to his ego, we decided to temper Roderick's character with a quick wit, a good sense of humor, and a soul earnestly seeking a true friend.

William, the narrator, has the cleanest slate of any of the characters because he needs to function as the audience's proxy into the action on stage. He is a seeker on a quest for knowledge and truth, and what he finds in the house of Usher challenges him and shapes him into the man that he becomes, for better or worse. We frame the entire musical as his recollection of the events, relating the story ten years after the house falls to a listener at a pub. As he is our only source, we have only his word to take that the events which he describes transpired exactly as he describes them. Fortunately, his excruciating honesty as a person should lead the audience to easily accept his tale as the truth. The overarching theme which returns over and over again in the show is that of how the other three characters influenced William over the time that he knew them.

The challenge with Annabel, the final character, was giving her a personality that would add to the show and seem natural within the context of the original story. She should never seem "tacked on" due to the convenience of having a fourth character or an *Annabel Lee* poem-inspired song. Ultimately, we gave her a similar background to the William character in order to give them something in common which could lead to something more than a platonic friendship

developing between the two of them. Her kind and loving treatment of Madeline, in spite of Madeline's occasional animosity, is countered in mood by her increasing discomfort of staying in the house. Hers is a quest, cut short, to gain acceptance.

Music- Concept, Inspiration, Creation, and Performance Possibilities

Concept

The concept behind the entire musical structure of the show was developed alongside and in support of the character development. While the issues with plot and lyrics were more collaborative efforts between me and my co-writer, in the area of music I was much more on my own. Of the decisions made about the music, the first two were probably the most important in shaping the conceptual direction. Right when the idea of writing a musical was presented, my first reaction was to say that I did not want to write a musical where characters randomly burst into song. I have no problem with that technique and think it works very well for American musical theater, but I had already written an entire previous musical doing just that and wanted to try something different. After reading "The Fall of the House of Usher" short story, my feelings were solidified. Poe writes a naturally occurring song into the story anyway, and his characterization of Usher as a musician makes it easy to suggest that those with whom he associates could be musicians as well.

The decision to make the songs seem as natural as possible led directly into the second important choice that was made, which was to have the characters compose and play their own pieces. With the exception of three songs which can be categorized as dream sequences from William's memory, every piece in the show is "written" by some combination of the characters

on stage. This offered me the wonderful opportunity to both compose in several distinct styles and also to further differentiate the characters from one another.

William, the street musician, would be the sensitive balladeer influenced by emotional folk songs of the early 1800's. He, rather than Roderick, would play the guitar. This decision, rather than being in any way a deep character issue, had to do with the more practical idea that William needed something that he could play as a street musician. As the writing process began, though, I realized that the sound of the guitar, and especially a guitar played in an older style, can project a certain contemplative feeling that works very well with the nostalgia and the complex feelings which William has about his experience. William and his guitar had to start and end the story. As such, we developed the idea that William would synthesize the things which he learned from his friends over the course of the play. The resulting sound retains the core essence of the William character while still allowing for musical themes developed by the others to weave in and out.

A key characteristic of a William song is a simple, repetitive melody with occasional vocal ornamentation and a generally rubato delivery. When I describe his guitar as being played in an "older style" I am referencing a very basic single-note guitar line which is common in folk songs of the 1800's. Chords are very rare and more complex counterpoint is equally ignored in his personal style. It is up to the performer of the part to play up the meandering and innately storytelling nature of William's pieces in order to differentiate his compositions from that of the very similar Annabel Lee.

Roderick Usher, the intellectual, would of course play and compose with progressive Romantic flair. As mentioned before, his character inspiration was the composer Alexander

Scriabin. The exact nature of Scriabin's compositions, with all of their stacked fourths and fifths, was a little too progressive for the sake of an 1830's composer like Roderick Usher. However, the mood and the intent behind his pieces was something easily transferrable to Roderick's musical creations. Perhaps the most obvious example of this "mood and intent" can be found in Usher's piece "Mysterium." If the name seems familiar, that is because it is the same name of the unfinished piece with which Scriabin intended to end the world.

In the second act, we even put Scriabin's exact words into Usher's mouth as he explains that his music does not "merely to accompany thought as most music does, but to reveal what is, in essence, beyond thought, beyond words, beyond the mind of man even to conceptualize...." This concept is shown in Roderick's music through two different lenses: before and after the death of his Annabel Lee. Before, Roderick's ego inspires him to meld together everything which has ever come before him in order to create the largest and most manipulatively inspiring symphony ever attempted. Ten years after, he believes that true art can only be created by producing something that has never been heard or conceptualized by the mind of man. These two trains of thought, though seemingly discordant, fit very well into the personality of a man who is always striving in vain to create something impossible through music. In order to allow Usher the greatest possible range of expression for his music, he plays the piano. However, as we see in the first act, even this is not enough for Roderick, and we are treated to an invisible orchestra inside his head: Roderick's true instrument.

Since Scriabin's style doesn't feed directly into Roderick's, what does? Well, in Act 1 Roderick's music is all about Romanticism. It has no express form and relies on a single theme which is developed and modulated run through various background consonances and dissonances before exploding in an epic finale. While composing for Roderick, I did not pay

strict attention to exactly which chords and modulations I used because I don't feel as though that's something the character, who left the university because he felt there was nothing more that he could learn, would do. "Mysterium," consequently, is one of the few songs in the musical that neither contains a theme from any other song nor lends its theme to another (except to its own reprise). In terms of an actual composer model who influenced the shape of the song, the closest that exists is George Enescu, the early 20th century Romanian composer. His "Imn Jubiliar," an epic piece which builds much like "Mysterium" and ends with cannons and a full choir, inspired the similar moments in "Mysterium." In Act 2, Roderick's only composition was simply an exercise in composing a song as different as possible from "Mysterium" without being atonal. That composition decision stemmed from Roderick's own derision of composers who create "variations on convention," and his desire to create something completely new.

Annabel Lee, the southern belle, would be trained in the classical style but long simply to perform beautiful music in any genre. Adaptation, rather than original composition, would be her strong suit. Though her primary instrument is her own soprano voice, Annabel also plays the flute as an instrumental equivalent. Of all the characters' music, hers is the most simple and open. The song "My Love," allows her the only extended solo A Cappella line of the entire show. Ultimately, Annabel doesn't need to express herself through complex orchestrations and innovative techniques. She is content simply to be happy and find the pleasure of pure music in each of her songs.

I tend in all my compositions, and especially with Annabel's, to apply a generous amount of word painting. With this musical I did not write the music to any songs without having the lyrics in front of me because I wanted the song to compliment the meaning of the words as much as possible. Technically, this means that the phrasing of the music corresponds to my phrasing

of the lyrics or poetry in my head. The specific notes were not meant to highlight individual words, but instead they were intended to work together to convey a general mood.

The last of the characters, Madeline Usher, is not very content with anything. She is not primarily a composer, which makes her compositions all the more noteworthy. The original concept for her music was to have it be pure, precise, and mathematical. What it ended up developing into, though, was an outlet for her various scientific experiments. Her pieces, then, are not so much precise as they are innovative. They are not quite as mathematical as they are intentionally difficult and limit-stretching. To suit this style, we decided that Madeline, like her brother, had to play the piano. Though this practically eliminated the possibility of having all four characters playing all four of their instruments at the same time, it did allow for both some sibling rivalry and also sibling cooperation. When William is forced to leave the house at the end of act one, he does so while hearing the strains of a piece played on a piano with the four hands of the Usher twins. In the second act, Madeline's style change mirrors that of her brother's. While he moves from the familiar to the insane, she changes from the fiendishly complex to a more honest, Annabel-inspired sound.

The technical aspects of Madeline's music have to do with using rhythm and modulation to turn otherwise typically Romantic songs into something recognizable but unsettling. Incessant repetition of thematic material coupled with unexpected off-beats is a hallmark of Madeline's work. These methods allow her song "I Cannot Love You" to be both creepy and happy at the same time. It is the only song in the musical to have an identical refrain three times, and this decision was made so that the actress could make it very clear how her moods were changing from verse to verse.

The major challenge with having the characters all write and perform their own music is that my ability to insert plot-furthering songs was severely hampered. There could be no songs about how wonderful William felt to be invited to Usher's house, how Roderick and Annabel were so deep in love, or how Roderick is dying of sensitivity to sound. While these would have all been excellent songs to put into a typical musical, our concept shuts them out. Instead, the songs performed in the show would have to give us a very subtle window into the general soul of the character. It is not necessarily about what they are singing, but rather why they are singing. The music, even more so than the lyrics, would be our indication of their current mental state. The challenge for the audience is to filter and interpret the songs knowing that the characters did not necessarily intend for the songs to be revealing. The challenge for me, as the composer, was making it easy enough for the audience to understand what was going on inside the character's heads without being patronizing.

I ultimately settled on a three-part balance between the composition styles of the characters, a composition style more familiar to a standard musical, and my own personal style. This makes the music neither 19th century nor 21st, but instead a neo-romantic blend... the music of a time out of time. Usher's house is very secluded, and the people making music there are anything but ordinary for their own time, so I hope that as a result the music is easy to believe as being written by them while still being able to be enjoyed in a 21st century musical context.

Inspiration and Creation

Between February and June of '08, after having agreed to the basic premise of the musical, I sat down and wrote about five short songs which aren't even remotely reflected in the music as it currently exists. The songs were boring, harmonically uninteresting, and caricatures

of 1800's music. Each one, however, gave me a new idea for something that I wanted to do when I wrote the actual music. It was during this time that the musical style of the different characters developed and that the thematic similarity of the different pieces was decided upon.

In June, while the first draft of the script was being written, I was listening to various pieces of period music for inspiration. "John Barleycorn," "The Devil and Bailiff McGyee," "The Water is Wide," and "Who is At My Window Weeping" played on repeat as I tried to get a feel for the general style of the music that Usher and his friends may have been familiar with. I started with the largest pieces first: "Mysterium," the symphony to end the world; "Nothing Beautiful is Simple," an original song improvised by the four characters; and "The Ballad of Annabel Lee," the dream-sequence song which ends in Annabel's death. Though "Nothing Beautiful is Simple" was very easy to write and only took about one afternoon to draft the basic skeleton, the other two proved to be much more difficult.

The breakthrough in the composition process involved stealing. "Who is At My Window Weeping" is a melancholy folk ballad written in the mid to late 1800's about a man who's love can't get her parents approval to marry. Naturally, the song's solution to this problem is to have the two lovers commit suicide. The song has a very simple, repetitive, pulsing sound that I liked and wanted to replicate in some way for "The Ballad of Annabel Lee," which, with six stanzas in the original poem, also needed to pulse and move along. I ended up using the first fifteen seconds of "Who is At My Window Weeping" as the main instrumental backing in the song. The melody is completely different and beyond those fifteen seconds the two songs sound nothing alike, but it was enough to give the song the authentic feel that I had been wanting since the start of the writing process. Having written the ballad, my goal in writing the rest of the folk-y songs hinged on keeping things compatible with that sound in order to maintain the

authenticity of the whole musical. As a result, most of William's songs have "The Ballad of Annabel Lee" as their thematic underpinning.

As more songs started falling into place the relationships between the songs became important. Since one of the main themes of the piece has to do with influences, I had to make sure that certain song snippets returned in other songs with varying degrees of completeness. To help with this, I created a flow-chart in mid-July that listed all of the songs, both written and unwritten, as they were titled and placed at the time. The songs which were supposed to influence other songs had arrows and lines of different thickness and color to indicate the degree of relation. While the songs on this flowchart did not all make it into the musical or end up with the relationships as indicated at that time, the chart helped organize my thoughts and gives a good indication of how the show is structured musically.¹

In July I attended a ten day music festival with W&M professor Brian Hulse in Pavia, Italy. The musical focus of this event was very modern and very advanced, and as a student composer there I felt extremely intimidated by all of the talented musicians. For that festival I wrote a piece inspired by "The Fall of the House of Usher," called "Ghastly and Inappropriate Splendour." The name of the piece comes from a sentence in Poe's story which describes an eerie painting as having an unseen internal light source that bathes the picture in the aforementioned "ghastly and inappropriate splendour." Written in early April of 2008, this piece again gave me time to develop themes which, while not directly appearing in the musical, would influence the style of some of Roderick's and Madeline's "crazy" songs.

¹ The original chart from mid-July is attached at the end of this paper. Note that there are many songs which are still left to be scored, but these are all "transition" songs that will be spliced out of the other songs shortly before an actual performance of the show.

For the so-called crazy songs especially, I wanted the audience to feel as though the pieces were insane while not being entirely put off by the sounds. They could not be dissonant messes, even if they were suggesting an internal dissonant mess within the characters. The way that I ended up writing these pieces was a much more trial and error process than any of the other genres. I took some influences from pieces of modern music that I had heard in Pavia, and I tried to write things which kept that flavor while still being palatable to an audience coming to see a “musical.” The most important thing, from my perspective, was to make sure that the pieces were believably “written” by their corresponding character-composers. One way that I worked around this believable/palatable difficulty was to keep these more out-there pieces very short. “Symmetry,” “Ode to Truth and Beauty,” and “Rat Ratiocination (Part 1)” each last less than a minute. “Rat Ratiocination (Part 2)” is the longest of this type of song, mostly due to the length of its lyrics. In January 2009 these lyrics were cut by a stanza in the newest draft of the show, but the song is still around three minutes long. This, however, is the least bizarre of the progressive pieces because most of the insanity can be expressed through the lyrics.

The final songs which I wrote for the musical were Annabel’s songs and the one “combination” song. My natural tendency in writing music is to create a song that leads towards an inevitable epic climax, and so the sweet and understated nature of the Annabel Lee character caused me a lot of musical grief. I listened to various settings of the ballad “Black is the Colour” several times and tried to replicate the things which I felt made its melody work. The resultant song, “My Love,” ends up sounding similar to and yet entirely different from the rest of the musical. The other Annabel piece, “Silence,” is sung when she is just a ghost in William’s dreams. For this song I wished to capture the essence of what William thought of Annabel rather than what Annabel actually was, since it is his mind which is creating the song. The song is

sweet, like “My Love,” but has a rougher edge and is a partial reflection of another dream-sequence story-progressing song later sung by William and Roderick called “Close to Death.”

The “combination” song referred to earlier was the last piece that ended up being included in the show. It was originally titled “Serenade” and was meant for William to sing at the ten year anniversary of Annabel’s death. Logistically, though, the second half of the second act was already heavily weighted with songs, and we wanted to have something more in the middle in order to have a balance. The resulting song had mostly the same lyrics but was to be sung by all four characters, rather than just William. Now re-titled “Music of a Dream,” the piece begins with Annabel’s ghost reprising sections of “My Love,” while William plays on his guitar and Roderick plays something different but complimentary on his piano. The three living characters are represented as being in separate places, and yet they all end up singing the same song of grief and longing about Annabel. While the loss affected each of them differently, the song finds the commonality that they do have in their feelings and explores that. The process of writing this song involved splicing together pieces and ideas from other songs to produce one unifying effect. Much like the final piece in the show, “Something Left to Say,” it uses the general sound of “My Love” as the overpowering piece that proves to be stronger than all of the other songs written by William, Roderick, and Madeline. “My Love” wins out because the musical otherwise ends on a very melancholy note, and my personal preference was to have it end with a nostalgic and uplifting take on the events that transpired in the House of Usher. After all, as William says to the listener after telling him about the final tragedy: “not everything was lost...”

Performance Possibilities

This show would be a very interesting one to actually put on. Since it was accepted to the Washington DC Fringe Festival for this July, I will soon have the opportunity to see exactly how interesting. One major advantage of “The Fall of the House of Usher,” is that it requires only four main actors and still manages to be a full length musical. In addition to the four actors, there is also a string quartet that would be sitting on stage at all times with them, watching from the corner. When other incidental characters such as barmaids, doctors, and servants are needed, the members of string quartet will be able to fill those roles.

The concept for the set design is very basic so as to allow for fast scene changes. One or two period appropriate pieces of furniture will be traded out between scenes to provide an anchor-point for the audience, and the rest of the set will be produced by three projectors on three screens behind the actors. This will be difficult to set up initially but provides flexibility and an additional visual punch for the actual performances. Costumes will also be just enough to provide that tangible connection for the audience: basic but 1830’s appropriate.

The real fun of staging this musical lies in the way that the actual music is produced. Each of the characters is a musician and so, ideally, each of the actors playing the characters would be able to play that character’s musical instrument. This would require exceptional performers with the ability to act, sing, and play at the same time. Whereas with many musicals the visual appeal during songs comes from dancing, the visual appeal in “The Fall of the House of Usher” would come from seeing the characters perform the songs with real instruments live on stage. The result would be similar to the revival of “Sweeny Todd” in which the characters played all of the music. The difference between that show and ours rests on the reasoning behind

the characters having the instruments. For “Sweeny Todd” the reasoning was primarily theatrical. For “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the characters would have and play instruments because it will make sense to the audience that these characters can do that. Our reasoning is also theatrical, of course, but it is meant to draw the audience in to the world in which the characters are living and dying. It provides another crucial layer of realism to a show based on a quasi-supernatural story.

After watching the musical, we want the audience to walk away feeling uplifted. The story of Usher that Poe sets down is very dark, and we haven’t changed the basic plot elements, but we have humanized the characters and made them into people that might be familiar to us. We have given them all a love of music and a love of sharing that music, and hopefully the audience will have a positive response to that intention. Reactions more specific than that, such as whether or not the audience will be scared of Madeline or whether they will find Roderick to be evil or just tormented, are openly up for interpretation. Much of the underlying reasoning behind various character actions is hidden beneath the words that they speak, and only the actor playing the part would be able to say what the character’s true thoughts are. As writer and composer, Brent Cirves and I have our own ideas, but we think that differing interpretations only strengthens the allure of a show.

Musically, I am very happy with how the show stands. I know that I will be making minor adjustments before performances, and I’m sure that a song or two might be unceremoniously cut in the name of efficiency, but otherwise the songs are all as I intended. They are all clearly part of the same show, but they are not similar enough to be boring (I hope). Each character is given at least one chance to shine, and I am especially glad that each character has his or her own distinct sound. For my first musical, “Tragedy! (A Musical Comedy)” I threw

together a slew of different genre parodies and ham-fisted musical jokes. That style was appropriate for that musical, but I hope that “The Fall of the House of Usher” reflects a much more mature and deliberate hand on the part of the composer. For me, this project was much more than an honors thesis. It was the sort of project that I have wanted to do since I became involved with writing music at the age of 16. I am very grateful for the opportunity that I was given to complete such a project, and I would like to thank you all for sharing in this experience with me.

Acknowledgements

I could not have written this musical without the help of Brent Cirves, who wrote the book and lyrics, Duncan Neilson, who looked over the first music drafts in the fall of 2008, Sophia Serghi, who did the same in the Spring of 2009 and who has always pushed me to my musical-writing limit as my advisor, and of course the wonderful performers who sang and played the music in order to bring it to life.

Musical Flow Chart for "The Fall of the House of Usher"

July, 2008

