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“Ma voix se dégagea”: Music, Risk, and the Heroine’s Voice in George Sand’s *Malgrétout*

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“MA VOIX SE DÉGAGEA”:
MUSIC, RISK, AND THE HEROINE’S VOICE IN GEORGE SAND’S
MALGRÉTOUT

Anne Marcoline

In George Sand’s 1870 novel *Malgrétout*, the heroine and narrator, Sarah Owen, invents a little children’s song that surfaces periodically over the course of the narrative. The song, “La Demoiselle,” which begins as a musical exercise for a child, takes on new meanings as it is heard, played, or talked about by others, particularly by violin virtuoso and love interest, Abel, who transforms the song into a celebrated sensation. In its various returns, “La Demoiselle” becomes the fulcrum on which Sarah balances her relationship with Abel, as she measures Abel’s commitment to her through his interpretation, arrangement, and dissemination of her song. Moreover, through the reiterations of Sarah’s song, what is at stake in this late novel of Sand’s is a reconceptualization of the Romantic artist story through the heroine’s narrative of the discovery of the sound of her own voice and soul. Further, this rather belated revision of the Romantic artist story owes its newness to Sand’s privileging of the first-person point of view of a creative and affective, psychologically complex female character, a heroine who writes her story in a way that also includes the voices of others.

Sand’s use of the epistolary form underscores Sarah’s desire to speak and to have someone—herself included—hear her. The novel comprises two letters Sarah writes to her childhood friend, Mary. In the first letter, she writes about her sister Adda’s disastrous marriage and about her own role in sheltering her sister and caring for Adda’s children. In this letter, moreover, she also tells of her encounter and engagement with Abel, and, finally, of her imposition of a year-long separation before they marry. In the second letter, Sarah tells of her path to overcoming the obstacles, many self-imposed, that delay her transition from her self-characterized role of spinster-caregiver to the more vulnerable role of an equal, emotional and artistic partner in a loving marriage. As a musical character, Sarah is gifted with the ability to sing, play piano, compose, and improvise. Sarah’s sister, however, frequently silences her to prevent the intimacy that her music engenders. Adda, fearful of losing—or being outshone by—her older sister and mother figure, teases Sarah and outright tells her not to sing in front of company. Sensitive to Adda’s jealousy, Sarah writes: “à propos de musique, [Adda] me témoignait du dépit . . . et j’avais toujours évité de me prévaloir . . . de ce mince avantage que j’avais sur elle” (93–94). Sarah’s father also pays close attention when she sings and, unlike Adda, encourages her to sing more. However, ordinarily, even he does not hear the full extent of Sarah’s voice, much as he no

longer hears the artist within himself, “aujourd’hui éteint, [même s’il avait] vibré fortement et longtemps en [lui]” (103). That he transcribes her songs shows his appreciation for Sarah’s music, but that he does so in secret and hides the transcriptions effectively consigns them to silence. Finally, if her three-year-old niece and namesake, little Sarah, is her most attentive auditor, the child sometimes hears—if not incorrectly—*otherly*, as her holistic and mythical understanding of music and nature twice leads her to attribute the sounds of a violin to the trees or the river. Given this reception, Sarah’s letters trace her desire to be heard clearly, persistently, in her words, and for what she has to say.

It is precisely to be better heard by her most captivated listener that Sarah takes her niece on an outing, away from Adda and the house, to a quiet and nearly uninhabited park near the river. There, the child not only pays attention to her aunt’s responses to her many questions but listens closely during the little music lesson that Sarah improvises as a way to get her to rest. In this sense, Sarah’s song, “La Demoiselle,” and her singing are both disciplinary and educational, and her methodology is adapted to the strengths of the child: “je m’efforçais d’adapter l’air et l’idée à son progrès intellectuel et musical. . . . La mélodie, aussi enfantine que les paroles, plut à mon enfant, qui me la fit répéter plusieurs fois, et qui eut quelque peine à le dire à son tour, car j’avais composé en mineur pour l’exercer à poser sa voix dans ce mode nouveau pour elle” (85). A good teacher, Sarah invents challenging but age- and skill-appropriate lessons, and she teaches through play and repetition. She is also modest and self-deprecating, dismissing her song as naïve and “pas plus digne que les autres d’être retenue et transcrite” (84). However, the childish song Sarah refers to in hindsight as “fatalement destinée à amener dans ma vie une perturbation funeste” is nothing short of a hermeneutic key to her struggle against invisibility and voicelessness:

Demoiselle,
 Arrête un peu!
 Sur ton aile
 De dentelle
 Je vois du feu.
 —Non, dit-elle,
 Je ne peux.
 Si mon aile
 Étincelle,
 Ferme tes yeux. (85)

Whether about an insect or a girl, this is a song of rejected projection that unsettles sanctions on women’s and girls’ voice and visibility, wherein the *demoiselle*—damsel or damsel—refuses to accept the cautious observer’s fear. With a resounding “Non,” the *demoiselle* instead chooses to fly and openly embraces her own iridescence. As a children’s song, “La Demoiselle” thus stages a youthful rebellion against an anxious parent’s prohibition, encouraging the child auditor to speak and shine. With little Sarah’s marvelous memory and pitch, and her aunt for a teacher, the reader is reminded here of another precocious niece, Juliette in Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne ou l’Italie*, and led to question whether Aunt Sarah,

“grande artiste sans le savoir” (94), will, unlike Aunt Corinne, find love and longevity as an artist. Monia Kallel argues that “la voix chez George Sand . . . est menacée d’étranglement, de suspension et de perte définitive, moins parce qu’elle manque de présence ou d’originalité que parce qu’elle ne trouve pas le cadre (social et linguistique) propice à son éclosion” (28). Sixty-three years after the publication of *Corinne*, and twenty-six years after Sand’s completion of *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, *Malgrétout* offers a scenario in which the heroine with the resplendent voice has the potential to be seen and heard and still to survive—and not merely so through the sounds of a child prodigy. First, however, Sarah Owen needs to overcome her fear of the fires she constantly tries to extinguish in others and in herself.

The most threatening fire, the deadly perturbation Sarah describes as fatally sparked by her childish song, owes its appearance to the dramatically ironic, if not overdetermined, ambivalence in her decision to sing in a place she might be overheard. In this way, this scene opens up the space to explore thematic and structural connections Sarah herself, not to mention Sand, draws between music, desire, and risk. Presumably, in an effort to escape the suffocating effects of a sister who neither wants to listen nor listens well, Sarah takes her niece on an open-air excursion to a not entirely uninhabited park. By doing so, Sarah positions herself in a space of vulnerability, even if only “quelques rares voyageurs viennent encore” (83). Sarah thus flees certain ears but only, or perhaps in order, to be heard by other, better, listeners—specifically by one who could change the course of her life story in ways she both fears and desires.

Effectively, as readers of Sand’s *œuvre* might expect and as Adda fears, music in the world of *Malgrétout* draws together sympathetic beings as it resonates between and acts upon them. Abel, traveling alone through the region, is first drawn to Sarah sight unseen when he overhears her singing to the child. He later explains this attraction to her: “quand vous chantiez à demi-voix pour votre fillette, cette voix et cet air m’ont fait frissonner de la tête aux pieds. . . . j’étais résolu à vous connaître et vous retrouver” (134). Sarah’s voice, then, has the double effect of thrilling Abel, sending shivers through his body, and of drawing him increasingly and repeatedly closer to her; *résolu à [la] connaître et [la] retrouver*, Abel is steadfastly drawn to learn about her, to know her, to find her, to return to her, to rediscover her. Veit Erlmann writes that, “where reason requires separation and autonomy, resonance entails adjacency, sympathy, and the collapse of the boundary between perceiver and perceived” (10). This boundary collapses further when Abel, heard before seen, contributes to the music lesson with his violin. While little Sarah believes this “écho mystérieux” to have been produced by the trees or by the river, Abel produces a sound that is even more marvelous than the child imagines: “tout près de nous un admirable violon . . . chantait admirablement mon petit air, et . . . répétait la fin comme je venais de le faire en donnant ma leçon à l’enfant . . . [L]es phrases de ma chanson qu’il avait interprétées . . . étaient comme une traduction idéalisée” (*Malgrétout* 85, 87). What astonishes Sarah in the violinist’s mastery of the lesson is not the possibility of a natural or even supernatural origin to the sound but the possibility that someone has heard her in the way she wants to be heard. Abel’s translation

of her music is ideal to the degree that no one in Sarah's life has ever seemed to hear her so completely, but this ideality is precarious, given that musical performances function in the novel (indeed across Sand's writings) as a form of exchange that wants a response in kind.

Despite this performance of recognition, however, when Abel further introduces himself into Sarah's life, he does so through improvisations that enable her to hear her song as *he* does, even while retaining the thread of her song. On the sounds of Abel's second reproduction of "La Demoiselle," Sarah writes:

nous ne vîmes rien sur la Meuse ni sur le rivage; mais nous entendîmes le violon qui redisait ma chanson, mêlée à une improvisation vraiment admirable, tantôt semée de difficultés inouïes surmontées par une main prodigieusement habile, tantôt noyée dans de suaves mélodies qui variaient et reprenaient le thème sous l'inspiration la plus touchante et la plus élevée. (88–89)

Further collapsing the boundaries between himself and Sarah, Abel floods Sarah's melody with his own inspiration, threatening to drown her song as he sows it with unimaginable—unheard of and, for the reader, inaudible—difficulties. Moreover, even as Abel returns over and over again to Sarah's melody, elevating it admirably, he changes it into something new. The consummate arranger of a piece of music, as Peter Szendy understands it, "commencerai[t] sans doute à réécrire [la musique]" so that they play "l'inflexion exacte de ce moment . . . tel qu'il résonne précisément à [s]on oreille[, et il] se ferai[t] . . . *arrangeur* pour signer et consigner [*son*] écoute dans l'œuvre d'un autre" (22, emphasis in original). Further, beyond translating or rearranging Sarah's melody, Abel abruptly translates his musical inspiration into verbal insistence that he knows and adores Sarah: "vous êtes ce que vous me paraissez . . . Vous êtes belle comme un ange et artiste plus inspirée que moi. Ma vénération est devenue enthousiaste, mon dévouement est maintenant passionné" (98). Abel's incomparable artistry as an arranger can also thus be read as an imposition, in the sense of his hasty insistence on being heard by Sarah.

Too often silenced to allow herself to take credit as an artist, Sarah can only hear such an outpouring of veneration as mockery, even when sustained by her father's praise for her talent. For this reason, Sarah has reduced herself to such silence that even she cannot recognize her own voice:

[J]e fus tout à coup prise du besoin de bien exprimer ma pensée musicale et de ramener à moi l'attention que j'eusse dû détourner. Je chantai comme je crois n'avoir jamais su chanter avant ce jour-là. Ma voix se dégagea, et . . . elle sortit pure, veloutée et attendrie au point que je ne la reconnaissais plus et croyais entendre quelqu'un qui chantait à ma place. (99)

Sand makes this moment at once about an overdue demonstration of Sarah's talent and about Sarah's own exaltation and self-(re)discovery through her performance. As Sarah tells Mary, music was the one pleasure that she had ever cultivated for herself (52). Further, giving in to her need to sing, Sarah joins ranks with all of Sand's musical characters (e.g. Hélène, Consuelo, Albert, Joseph, and Félicie)

whose self-expression begins through music, even if she cannot yet fully recognize this expression as her own.¹ She also, against her judgment, draws herself closer to Abel who, moved to tears by Sarah's singing, takes his violin and responds in a way that likewise recalls Albert, Joseph, and Félicie: "[J]'ai là une voix qui exprime mieux mon émotion que toutes les paroles humaines, et je vais vous répondre comme vous m'avez parlé: en musique" (100). From the discovery of his talent at an early age, Abel's existence has been for and through his art. Not just the consummate musician, but the consummate Hoffmannian musician, he has lived by the credo that "[o]n n'arrive à la plénitude du talent qu'à la condition de sacrifier sa vie" (112). Perhaps even a *heimlich* reincarnation of Hoffmann's *unheimlich* Ritter Gluck, Abel can speak only using the language of the Romantic musical genius who, upon achieving such a level of plenitude "qui ne peut plus être dépassé[.]. . . verrai[t] le soleil en face, tout près, tout en feu, comme [il] croi[t] quelquefois le voir dans des accès de vertige" (112).² Even Sarah's father credits Abel with the capacity to elevate his listeners' souls and to bring them into "la région du sublime" (104). Yet such vertiginous activity comes with a price, as Abel, with every expression of his "aspirations sublimes," runs the risk of exhausting himself, of burning up or out (100).

Sarah, due to her self-imposed maturity, pragmatism, and sensibility, rejects the idea of needing to chase or become a brilliant star that exhausts itself at some pinnacle of glory:

N'était-ce pas son habitude de dépasser le réel et de mépriser le sens pratique dans toutes ses manifestations? Il dépensait toutes ses idées sous forme de variations, et, dans cette manière d'épuiser un thème, il y avait nécessairement, après l'*andante* affectueux et doux, l'*agitato* échevelé, les nerfs après le sentiment. Voilà pourquoi, après m'avoir offert son estime et son amitié, il avait osé me réciter le couplet de l'amour et le finale de la passion. (107)

For years, not only has Sarah silenced her voice; she has steeled her body against the voice of passion, deeming it "déraisonnable, même injuste, de se laisser charmer jusqu'au frisson, jusqu'aux larmes" (105). In part, what Sarah seems to recognize here is, according to Béatrice Didier, a thematic golden thread in eighteenth- to nineteenth-century artist stories, one, certainly, that runs through Sand's fiction: "il y a dans l'inspiration musicale quelque chose qui échappe à toute rationalité, une pulsion sinon diabolique, du moins surnaturelle. La dimension initiatique de la musique peut être plus ou moins figurée dans le roman, mais elle est toujours sous-entendue" (81). Further, such affected and affective movements of voices, bodies, and souls has grounding in the nineteenth century in continued interest in the physical phenomenon and sonic metaphor of sympathetic resonance.³ Indeed, if Abel initially misidentifies Sarah as Adda, he startles her by explaining his attraction to and instinctive recognition of her not as "un hasard de l'inspiration" but as a matter of a "sympathie" that is anything but random (92).

In each other, Sarah and Abel finally discover a sympathetic soul with whom they can communicate through music. Indeed, if Abel's "*agitato* échevelé" frightens Sarah, it also reminds her what it is to hear her voice and feel her body

at the same time as it connects her to other artistic beings. However, Sarah must first find her footing on the precarious threshold between, on the one hand, rationality and her control over herself and surroundings and, on the other hand, irrationality and the *fatalité* of their encounter. Sarah's body trembles, following Abel's response in music to her singing and again, later, in fearful hope that he will return to see her (101, 144); likewise, her voice trembles in response to Abel's declarations of love, a trembling that Adda notices, even if she mishears Sarah and Abel's conversation, and that Sarah herself acknowledges (117, 135). Nina Sun Eidsheim writes that "[m]usic arises in the confluence between the materiality we offer up and the vibrational force that is put forth into the world. As a consequence, (1) to participate in music is to offer oneself up to that music; (2) to put music forth into the world is to have an impact on another; and, therefore, . . . [w]hat connects singing, listening, and sound, then is vibration" (180–81). Not incidentally, the frequency with which the words or variations of "vibrer," "trembler," and "ébranler" appear in *Malgrétout* is highest in the first half of the chronological story, when music enters Sarah's life with a force greater than the regulated sounds of musical exercises: "C'est à cette époque que ma vie de courage et de dévouement fut ébranlée par un sentiment que j'espérais ne pas connaître" (80).⁴ Erlmann explains that, a century earlier, during the era of Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, "the shimmering term, *ébranlement*, offered a fertile metaphorical ground for the . . . relentless search for the material 'hinges' between body and soul, ideas and sensory perception" (126). Moreover, with Sand's understanding of sentiment as giving motion to this "hinge," we might accord Eidsheim's and Erlmann's understanding of the vibrational impact of sound with Sara Ahmed's understanding of the "sociality of emotions," whereby "emotions create the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated. The objects of emotion take shape as effects of circulation" (8, 10). Indeed, for Sand, who refuses to reduce the source of music's effects to pure materiality, to offer oneself up to music is to join in the movement both of bodies (*vibrer, trembler, ébranler*) and of feelings and emotions (*douleur, angoisse, peur, courage, dévouement, tendresse, amour*). In *Malgrétout*, then, music incites complex movements of bodies and emotions, giving thick significance to the vibrational energy coursing through, sounding out, and shaping the world of the novel.

As the novel continues, a decrease in variants of "vibrer," "trembler," and "ébranler" corresponds to a competitive increase in frequency of the words "briser" and its struggling opposite, "calme," thereby structuring, through Sarah's diction, a shift in the balance of the novel from vibrational movement, to rupture, and, finally, to the sought-after and finally proclaimed calm.⁵ The shift begins with the event that moves Sarah to write to Mary in the first place: "Ma chère Mary, puisque vous l'exigez, . . . vous saurez quelles amertumes ont à jamais brisé mon cœur. . . . À l'idée de ne plus revoir celui que je m'efforçais de dédaigner, je sentis quelque chose qui se brisait en moi" (51–52, 106). It is not just that Sarah's heart aches when Abel departs. What has broken is the connection through the vibrations she felt between them: "je sentis quelque chose qui se brisait en moi, et, par un mystérieux hasard, une corde de piano se rompit et sauta avec bruit" (106). Further on, distraught by

the idea of Abel vibrating with other women, Sarah believes not only that she cannot “renouer une chaîne dont il s’embarrassait si peu” (189); she decides to complete the rupture herself: “ma dignité exige qu’il ne se croie plus enchaîné à moi” (195). Certainly, Sand, even in 1870, employs here two connected ideas prevalent at the start of the century: in addition to the trope of sympathetic resonance, here employed through the broken piano chord, Sand also evokes the idea in German Romanticism, as Erlmann explains, “that matter and mind, nature and technology, are interconnected by an invisible chain and . . . , hence, within this enormous electric circuit” (19–20). This coupled trope of electromagnetic/sympathetic resonance is apparent across Sand’s *œuvre*, starting with one of her earliest texts, *Histoire du rêveur* (1829), in which the dreamer falls unconscious “au même instant que le maestro[,] comme si l’extrémité d’une chaîne magnétique établie entre eux fût venue le frapper d’un coup électrique” (554). In this way, augmented through cultural and intertextual links, the supernatural—while never granted in *Malgrétout*—always subtends the scientific in Sand’s work to accord sensual with spiritual attraction. If *Malgrétout* shows a world tethered to an earlier era, the novel also works to unchain itself and its heroine from the gendered power dynamics that still worked to silence women’s voices. To do so, and to expand the possibilities for the creative expression of the female artist, the novel thus necessitates the upending catastrophe of rupture.

If Sarah recognizes early on that the vibrating connection between herself and Abel is the key to finding the calm she seeks, she—like her father before her—also runs the risk of damping the vibrations of her inner artist. Sarah’s insistence on distance between herself and Abel in order to regain her calm opens the space for her to craft her own narrative of this rupture, but she does not wish to admit the degree to which her life, not to mention her narrative, needs this agitation to shift her out of the status quo—out of a calm stasis in which she is used to silencing her voice for her sister and, in the process, stifling the voice of her soul. Unwilling to take risks, Sarah thus struggles against the intimate connection Abel creates between them through his improvisations. Effectively, Szendy argues that, even as the arranger inserts their hearing into someone else’s composition, improvisation is as proximate to the original as is the original itself:

l’original et l’arrangement sont complémentaires, contigus dans leur incomplétude et leur distance face à l’essence de l’œuvre. . . . C’est dire aussi que cette essence ou idée doit, pour rester à venir, pouvoir ne pas s’assurer, ne pas s’avérer; elle doit se laisser hanter par la menace de sa dissipation. S’il y a œuvre (ce qui doit rester une hypothèse), c’est au risque de l’arrangement. (56, emphasis in original)

However, for Sarah, the risk in this arrangement is high, as this contiguity seems to weaken the more Abel performs “La Demoiselle” for ears outside of her family circle—whether ears of vast public crowds or ears of singularly intimate women. Indeed, the third and fourth occurrences of Abel’s performances of “La Demoiselle” bring a publicity to the song that startles Sarah into struggling to maintain—and eventually attempting to sever—any chains that bind them. This time, it is Sarah who, unseen, overhears Abel satisfy the request of his fans:

J'entendis qu'on lui criait: *La Demoiselle! la Demoiselle! encore la Demoiselle!* . . . La foule attendait sur la place. Abel prit son violon, préluda un instant et joua mon air, *la Demoiselle*, avec un sentiment exquis. Il l'avait mis en variations, il en joua deux, et fut applaudi avec transport. Je crois qu'il y avait là quatre mille personnes au moins, qui se taisaient comme charmées, et ne perdaient pas la plus fine nuance de l'exécution merveilleuse. (188, emphasis in original)

Now, as the itinerant eavesdropper, Sarah has the opportunity to repeat Abel's initial gesture and join Abel in song—a song she still recognizes as “mon air,” but she wavers in uncertainty as to whether a connection between them still exists, only cautiously hopeful that “peut-être, au milieu des plaisirs, ne songeait-il qu'à [elle], comme au milieu de ses triomphes, il ne cherchait d'inspiration que dans le souvenir de *la Demoiselle*” (188). This ephemeral but lingering hope, however, extinguishes as Sarah hears the vibrant and vibrating voice of another woman emanating from Abel's hotel room.

The feeling of suffocation that invades this moment of the text—that impels Sarah out of the hotel and into the streets of Lyon during the middle of the night and then headlong back to Paris and into “une chambre bien muette et bien close” (193)—indicates Sand's awareness of, as Georgina Born phrases it, a “relational understanding of music, sound and space” (19). Indeed, Suzel Esquier notes in her reading of music in Sand's *Lettres d'un voyageur* that “[o]n conçoit donc que George Sand fasse une place de choix aux lieux ouverts, espaces naturels ou urbains” (159). Born unpacks the implications of such a sound-space awareness:

The first is the multiplicity of any human subject's experience of music and sound as s/he inhabits a particular physical or virtual space, performance venue or site: music and sound as mediated by subjectivity and corporeity, as well as by a given location and by (potential) movement through it. The second is the social multiplicity given by the existence in the same performance space, site or event of many (diverse, often previously unrelated) human subjects, whose gathering, however, constitutes a novel set of social relations, and whose experiences of music and sound are variant—mediated, as before, by subjectivities, corporeities, locations and movements. (19)

The link Sand cultivates between musical aesthetics and space thus is evident in *Malgré tout* not only in the idyllic, open-air setting of Sarah's initial, amateur music lesson but also in this populated, urban setting of Abel's virtuosic concert in Lyon. In the city, where the breeze and trees are silent, Sarah is jostled out of sleep by a multitude of busily shifting noises. Compelled to the threshold space of the window she throws open, Sarah, as though teetering on the edge of singularity and obsolescence, is pulled from the enthusiastic (even electric) crowd's noisy confusion of cries to the perfect clarity of Abel's vibrant voice; from his voice to the crowd's newly-charmed silence; from their silence below to Abel's “exécution merveilleuse” of “*La Demoiselle*” out on the hotel balcony one floor above her room. From the noise of the dissipating crowd, she is then drawn to the muffled sounds coming from Abel's room. Finally, having moved out onto her own balcony, Sarah's mind and body are turned from the “rapides fusées de

mots applaudis ou hués” of “autant de voix de femmes que de voix d’hommes . . . [qui] faisaient un bruit formidable” to the jovial sounds of an intimate conversation between Abel and the woman in his room (190). Thus, while the sounds of her song draw Sarah to Abel in Lyon, as they once drew him to her in the park, the exposed intimacy in the very publicness of this half-indoor, half-outdoor scene suffocates her and propels her into silence.

If ever at one point we can truly call the “La Demoiselle” *Sarah’s* song, Abel’s public performances of his arrangements and variations complete the shifts in ownership from her to him to the crowd. Ruth Carver Capasso argues that Abel’s performance of “La Demoiselle” “suggests that[,] with him, her safe domestic sphere may be transformed into a public exhibition, with him in the center instead of her” (36). Moreover, I argue, not only has her “élucubrati[n] musical[e]” become famous through him (*Malgrétout* 94); it has escaped her grasp, not only centering Abel but leaving Sarah feeling vulnerable to exposure as Abel disseminates “La Demoiselle” through performance. Further, because of Abel, the song Sarah invented for her niece is now the one that “tout le monde chante à présent,” as Sarah learns from mademoiselle d’Ortosa—yet another subjectivity and corporeity crowding into the space and sounds of Sarah and Abel (203–04). This new figure, mademoiselle d’Ortosa, is potentially a more insidious interloper than the woman in the hotel room, not merely as another woman within Abel’s soundscape but as one who can spread more than just musical sounds:

— . . . Où étiez-vous, miss Owen, le jour du concert de MM. Abel et Nouville à Mézières, il y a six mois? . . . je le sais, ne rougissez pas; mais où était le virtuose Abel . . . ? Je le sais aussi! . . .

—Vous pouvez donc raconter que vous avez vu M. Abel faire une folie à laquelle je ne m’attendais pas et que je n’avais pas autorisée. . . .

—J’ai entendu, reprit-[mademoiselle d’Ortosa] vivement, qu’il vous appelait sa fiancée, et que vous ne le lui défendiez pas.

—Soit! Dites-le. Je n’ai à rougir de rien Sans doute, c’est une chose blessante, cruelle, odieuse, de voir le public entrer dans les pudeurs de votre âme, fouiller dans votre conscience, vous demander compte de vos pensées et de vos sentiments

—Votre sœur aime Abel, ne le savez-vous pas? . . . (222–25)

The world of gossip frightens Sarah because it displays the risk of allowing oneself to be heard. Moreover, this conversation encapsulates what Sarah fears most about Abel’s stardom: the world of “l’éclat”—“l’état libre, brillant, splendide, suprême” shared by Abel and mademoiselle d’Ortosa—is a noisy world of the public circulation of songs, names, whispers, and women (220). Thus, by silencing herself, Sarah attempts to obviate having her voice taken away—mediated and remediated into a misalignment between the original and the interpretations, modulations, and variations until misalignment turns malignant.

However, at the same time, Dominique Laporte, in his structural analysis of the novel, reads Sarah's written narrative as working to "désamorcer tout effet monologique," with the effect that ". . . les clauses respectives des quatre chapitres de *Malgrétout* . . . jalonnent . . . un récit au cours duquel le point de vue de Sarah sur Abel et les artistes en général change en vertu des conversations qu'elle rapporte" (363). What this means, I would add, is that, if Sarah hears in the sound of Abel's performances or pronouncements an echo of her own cycles of tranquility and agitation, she must keep writing until she is able to hear them as echoes of herself, something she cannot do until she learns to listen to herself.

The moment Sarah learns to breathe again corresponds with the fifth and final mention of "La Demoiselle," one year after her engagement to Abel. This return of the song is substantially distinct in that no one sings or plays the song. Rather, it is the moment when Sarah no longer fears the sparks of fire; no longer closes her eyes; no longer lives solely through the act of sheltering others, though care remains central to her character. Instead, this is the moment when, in the memory of that first encounter and with the return of the fiancé, Sarah hears something new: "Dès lors, j'ai entendu dans mon âme une voix qui me criait: 'Ton époux est là, tu le connais, tu l'aimes. . . En écoutant ce cri de ma conscience, je me suis trouvée très-calme, très-résignée, très-sûre de moi-même'" (300). This *cri de conscience*—the voice of Sarah's soul—is the new sound that enables her to find common ground in a loving relationship. Abel, who has long since recognized that his incessant drive towards the chimerical pinnacle of artistic fulfillment portends his self-destruction, comes to find joy and possibility in the idea of a mutually supportive, but ever vibrating, future with Sarah. Likewise, if inversely, Sarah, who has for so long found comfort in putting her father's and sister's needs before her own, ultimately learns to relinquish her need to control all of her surroundings, takes a chance on letting her wings catch on fire, and allows warmth and exhilaration to reenter her life.

Through the continual movements of "La Demoiselle," from the private interiority of Sarah's cradlesong compositions to the public exteriority of Abel's open-air concerts, through modulations, improvisations, and rearrangements, music—like the epistolary structure of *Malgrétout*—always points toward a future yet to unfold. Further, Sand's narrative of vibrating instrumental chords, shivering bodies, and trembling voices explores the intersubjective and relational nature of both music and love. Eidsheim writes that, "[w]hether we are performing, listening, or engaging in scholarship, what is at stake in music is nothing less than the fundamental human experience of touching and being touched" (183). In this way, the intimate contiguity that music fosters—the gesture of reaching towards, of touching, connecting, responding—that Adda feared might take Sarah away and that Sarah feared might silence her, in the end, is what compels Sarah to assert her voice not only in song but in a story that sounds out a vision and ethics of people as fundamentally, vitally, and vibrationally relational beings.

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Notes

¹ Hélène: *Les Sept Cordes de la lyre* (1840); Consuelo and Albert: *Consuelo; La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* (1842; 1844); Joseph: *Les Maîtres Sonneurs* (1853); Félicie: *Le Dernier Amour* (1866).

² Cf. Hoffmann, “Ritter Gluck”: “Only a few awaken from the dream to rise up and stride through the realm of dreams; they arrive at Truth. The highest moment is at hand, the moment of contact with the Eternal, the Inexpressible! If the sun shines, it is the Triad, from which the Harmonies shoot forth like stars and spin webs around you with threads of fire” (9).

³ In sympathetic resonance, the energy emitted by one vibrating object, such as a piano chord, transfers to and vibrates another moveable object, such as a drum membrane or a movable panel in a piano, causing it to sound (Lewcock, et al. 9): “[t]he vibrations of struck strings travel along the piano bridge to other strings, which can vibrate sympathetically when the sustaining pedal lifts the dampers, producing a stronger choral effect” (81). In 1837, François-Joseph Fétis, in his *Biographie universelle des musiciens*, writes about Johann Christian Dietz fils’s application of sympathetic resonance to invent a grand piano with a resonating movable panel—a piano that “excita l’étonnement et l’admiration par la puissance de ses sons” (310). By 1870, Sand is long familiar with both the phenomenon and the metaphor, one she variably conjoins with such metaphors as heart strings and evident, for example, in such phrases as “la harpe de l’humanité” that Sand uses in 1842 to describe the poetry of Charles Poncey or “ma vieille harpe” in 1866 to describe her own creativity (*Corr.* 5.696; 20.207). Indeed, variations on the trope of sympathetic resonance form the central chord or emotional core of *Histoire du rêveur*, *Les Sept Cordes de la lyre*, *Consuelo*, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, *Adriani* (1854), *Le Dernier Amour*, and *Malgrétout*.

⁴ Together, in various grammatical, syntactical, and contextual forms, the terms *ébranler*, *vibrer*, *nerveux*, and *trembler* appear fourteen times in chapters one and two combined and nine times in chapters three and four combined.

⁵ The term *briser* [“break”], in various forms including the homonym *brise* [“breeze”], occurs twelve times in chapters one and two combined and nineteen times in chapters three and four combined; *calme* and its variants occur nine times in chapters one and two combined and twenty-two times in chapters three and four combined. That is, the frequency of the terms *briser* and *calme* increases significantly from the first half to the second half of the novel, with *calme* ultimately appearing more frequently than *briser*. Structurally, given note 4 above, Sand underscores the novel’s path from agitation to rupture to stability through shifts in diction of vibrational strain: *ébranler*, *vibrer*, *nerveux*, *trembler* to *briser/calme* to *calme*.

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