MADELINE USHER: 
AN OPERA IN ONE ACT

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ABSTRACT

Christopher Dietz, Advisor

Due to its longstanding place in literature, Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* lends itself to many renewed interpretations. In my setting, I have provided a new perspective on the story by casting it through the lens of Madeline and writing music that evokes the gloomy atmosphere inherent in Poe’s writing.

“The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,” said Poe of his inspiration (Kulewatz 2009). He explored this theme throughout his career, always painting the dying or deceased female as a silent entity. In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Madeline is physically seen only once before her death and again as an apparition. In my setting, Poe’s narrative is revealed through the point of view of Madeline, giving emphasis to her untold side of the story. This brings a new perspective to a familiar tale, while still enabling the preservation of the 1800s New England setting and the gloomy atmosphere.

In classic horror films, every element of the set, acting and cinematography lends itself to the creation of a melancholic mood. Roger Corman’s films of several Poe stories are highly respected by other directors because of their gloomy aura and economy of material. To do justice to Poe’s work, I have relied heavily on mood. This morose mood is achieved by basing the work on a ten-note row that is both stable and unstable. The row represents the House of the Ushers, and the stability thereof through its use of fourths and seconds. The instability comes in the lack of consistent tonal centers the row necessitates. The use of special orchestration techniques also serves the mood of the piece. For example, Madeline’s screams when she awakens to find herself in a coffin are paired with cluster chords. The row and these techniques work together to give the opera a single, unified atmosphere.

*Madeline Usher* is important to my growth as a composer. The methods of pitch organization and orchestration employed not only support the mood of the piece, but have become part of my compositional language.
INSTRUMENTATION

Madeline Usher- Soprano
Arthur- Tenor
Roderick Usher- Baritone

Clarinet in B♭
Horn in F
Violin
Cello
Piano

STAGE SETUP

*Character placement in this diagram refers to starting places only. Vocalists may move around as appropriate and as indicated in the score.
Madeline Usher - Part I

Edgar Allan Poe

**Passacaglia** \( \text{\( \frac{d}{40} \)} \)

Arthur makes his way through the mire to the House of Usher.

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**Passacaglia** \( \text{\( \frac{d}{40} \)} \)

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Madeline

Arthur

Roderick

Clarinet in Bb

Horn in F

Violin

Violoncello

Piano

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9

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Cl.

Hn.

Vln.

Vc.

Pno.

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\text{\( \text{\( \frac{d}{40} \)} \)}
Mad.  

Rdr.  

Cl.  

Hn.  

Vln.  

Vc.  

Pno.  

\[ \text{una corda} \]
stones; this falling house does little good to cure this malady.
*Quarter-notes serves as reciting-tones. Once Madeline has finished singing all words on a pitch, instrumentalists may play their flourish.
why do you now shun?

My sister is ill. No visitors she will,

Mad.

Rod’rick! What can he not see? Two sickly souls? Let him come save for me.

dim. e rit.

wide vibrato

sul C

harmonic gliss.

harmonic gliss.

p
*Keep sustain pedal depressed through all descending chromatic scales to create murky sound.*
I heard of your affliction late and came forth-with to Plymouth. What is this ail-ment that you fear? Frequent af-fections of a cata-leptic
Rodrick, don't frighten him!
character!

Rodrick and I have such a disease, baffling physicians; all of them skilled.

*Keep sustain pedal depressed for the duration of the fermatas, prolonging all chromatic scale notes.
Morbid acuteness of senses, sensitivity to light, sharpened awareness of sound.

In this unnerved pitiful state, I feel that I must...

with increasing hysteria
Mad. 106

soon a-ban-don life.

Rdr.

My dear you are not well now rest my dear.

Cl. 112

coughing up blood and seizing violently

Hn. 112

defeatedly

Vln. 112

Madeline falls into a cataleptic state.

Vc. 112

life!

Ar. 112

Your sister is not well I pray you call a doc-tor.

Pno. 112

defeatedly
I fear it is the worst.

She's
*Continue sustaining pedal, allowing all notes of chromatic scale to sound until they fade away.
Yet in death, Madeline she sleeps so peacefully.

Yet in death, her pallid features seem a

Yet in death, her pal-lid fea-tures seem a

Yet in death, her pal-lid fea-tures seem a
Stark walls; damp stones; this solemn crypt casts
Blushing faintly smiling sweetly, little light up on her countenance,

mf softly

mf tenderly
Blushing faintly smiling sweetly,

Blushing faintly smiling sweetly,

Blushing faintly smiling sweetly,

Blushing faintly smiling sweetly,
Madeline Usher - Part II

Madeline

Arthur

Roderick

Freely, quasi recit $= 70$

Clarinet in Bb

Horn in F

Violin

Violoncello

Piano

And have you not seen the storm? The im-

per - tuous fur - y of the wind? The den - si - ty of the clouds, and how they

Harmonic gliss.

sul G

ord.

pp

And

The den - si - ty of

Par - t II
Stop! You must not behold the storm, but let me read from one of your favorite romances.
Waltz $\frac{3}{4} = 96$

Brave Ethelred lifted up his mace and struck the dragon down which fell be-

p delicately

gasping for air*

Mad.

fore him, with a shriek sohorid harsh and piercing Ethelred had fain to close his ears,"

sub, $f$

sul C arco

gliss. black keys only

sub, $f$

*effect may be achieved by inhaling or exhaling loudly
Ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah!

Ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!

Ah, ah!
bravely

25 cap-ing from the crum-bling ca-stle walls, came a hea-vy so-lid door made of

Rdr.

28 wood. Crack-ing, rip-ping, tore as un-der he the door. Such a

Pno.
Breaking coffin into pieces

Rodrick!

f jeeringly

zeichnet aus

Jeeringly

sul A

sul C

f jeeringly

exit stage; making way from crypt to bedroom

Exiting stage; making way from crypt to bedroom

f f f

mf gasping for air

Breaking coffin into pieces

Rodrick!

noise dry and hollow did it give.

Casting off any remaining coffin pieces

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff
Then Ethel-red from the cas-tle Hades-caped and sought to claim his prize. On a

Ped-es-tal there be fore him hung a bra-zen shield made of brass. He be-thought him-self of the to-ken of his

Gradually more detache
Footsteps getting nearer

Open bedroom door with creaky sound

squeaking, creaking sound of rusted hinges on crooked frame...

Mad! Mad! I tell you that she now stands without the door!

Create creaky sound with a music stand

Mad

Ar.

Rdr.

Cl.

Hn.

Vln.

Vc.

Pno.
Freely but Intensely $\dot{=}$ 70

Freely but Intensely $\dot{=}$ 70


Roderick! Forsaker of kin; your natal twin! An Usher by name!


an Usher for shame! A name you defile; your sister beguile;

Pno.

*Quarter-notes serves as reciting-tones. Once Madeline has finished singing all words on a pitch, instrumentalists may play their flourish.*
Whatever you will, that I bring death is certain.

Mad.:
your family blaspheme!

Rdr.:

What are you? Is this a dream? An apparition?

Cl.:

Harmonic gliss.
Tempestuously $\frac{\text{bass}}{\text{bass}} = 80$

When I moved not you in-terred me,
when I drew no breath you im-mured me,
When my eyes did not open you entombed me.

*Frequent affections of a cata-
lep - tic char - ac - ter," you said; you knew. Oh, to be bur - ried a -

live!

A
monarch, porphyro-gene, in state-
ly glory is seen

in a palace of radiant beauty and light.
Change begins occurring to the House; books fall off shelves, rocks tumble.

But in robes of sorrow evil things now assail his estate; desolate.
Oh, Rodrick; oh, to be buried alive!

Buried alive!

live!
Rodrick your death is impending.

Race of the Ushers is ending!

Molto Rit.

Molto Rit.
Come Rod' rick leave here, make haste, let's away!

My fate is here I must stay!

Come Rod'rick leave here, make haste, away!

I leave with you dear, away!

Arthur flees as the House of Usher begins to crumble.
Madeline begins to strangle Roderick. Rod'rick!

Madeline kills Roderick and herself expires shortly thereafter.
*Continue sustaining pedal, allowing all notes of chromatic scale to sound until they fade away.