

## DANCES IN THE DRAWING-ROOM: MUSICAL ELEMENTS IN IBSEN'S DRAMAS

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At the start of my article, I would like to remind the reader of a rather early admirer and influential commentator of Ibsen's work in Great Britain, Arthur Symons (1865-1945). Symons wrote several critical essays analyzing Ibsen dramatic oeuvre, but he also drew poetic inspiration from Ibsen. In one of his poems, indicatively entitled *Nora on the Pavement*, published in 1896, and written some years earlier, Symons takes up the first few moments after Nora's famous slamming of the door:

Nora on the pavement  
Dances, and she entrances the grey hour  
Into the laughing circle of her power.  
The magic circle of her glances,  
As Nora dances on the midnight pavement. (Symons, 1924, 173)

Like many other writers and poets from Ibsen's time until today, Symons felt the need to give an epilogue, a sequel to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Upon leaving Helmer's house, Symons' Nora finds herself in the street, bravely and heroically facing the world, the society that seems not to impose any boundaries upon her as a human being. As a celebration of the triumph of freedom, Nora *dances*, thus continuing, in the minds of the readers, her two previous tarantellas performed in her living-room and in the living-room of her upstairs neighbours.

In one of his essays written some time after *Nora on the Pavement*, Symons will return to the concept of dance within the bourgeois culture, finding it to be possibly the ultimate act of liberation, as it

takes us suddenly out of all that convention, away from those guardians of our order who sit around the walls, approvingly, unconsciously; in its winding motion it raises an invisible wall about us, shutting us off from the whole world, in with ourselves; in its fatal rhythm, never either beginning or ending [...] gathering impetus which must be held back, which must rise into the blood (Symons, 1907, 388-89).

Symons, thus, inextricably connects dances in the bourgeois living-rooms with vitality, with the physical expression of "lust for life", with our subconscious forces of nature, with the body's unleashed urge for self-expression. This dance is in direct contrast with "the guardians of our order", with the human laws, artificial moral codes, socially imposed mores and restraining manners. This idea that music and dance are the two art forms most liberated from the influence of consciousness and the most direct manifestations of will existed in Ibsen's time, but it may be said to persist until today as well. The notion is certainly visible in the short extracts from Symons' essay and poem,

but also in the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. But does Ibsen rely uniquely on this particular notion of the dance? Are the dances in Ibsen's oeuvre representing an equally unbound and liberating act during which his characters gain freedom and express vitality?

Ibsen might not seem to be personally overly enthusiastic about music and dancing, which is an image further fostered by his biographers (Koht, 1954, 272). However, as it was recently pointed out (Todić, 2011, Kittang, 2006, Sandberg, 2006, Jakovljević, 2002, Sæther, 2001), Ibsen showed great sensitivity for the effects music could have in the dramas. One can identify a wide array of functions that sounds, music and dance have within the dramatic structure, and in shaping the overall meaning of the dramas. Therefore, if we look closer into his dramatic oeuvre, we will realize that it abounds with musical elements and dances in particular.

In *Love's Comedy* from 1862 the dialogues are intertwined with music, and the epilogue of the drama is, ultimately, represented by a collective dance and a students' song. *Peer Gynt*, from 1867, abounds with singing and dancing again, to the point that even Ibsen found that the text needed music, asking Edvard Grieg to perform the task of composing the required music for the piece: "Vil De komponere den dertil fornødne musik?" (Henrik Ibsens Skrifter, 2008, 175). Even his mature plays, from 1877 on, have many "musical" passages. *A Doll's House* from 1879 accounts for two dances, Nora's two tarantellas, one onstage and the other off-stage; in *The Wild Duck* (1884) some characters are amused by the piano waltzes at a party, whereas others find pleasure in a simple flute melody. Hedda Gabler (1890) plays "a wild dance melody" on the piano (Ibsen, 1978, 777), and another dance melody is heard in *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), the *Dance Macabre* – the dance of the dead. Finally, the last of the Ibsen's musical elements that I will mention here is Maya's song of freedom from the drama *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), very reminiscent to the students' song from *Love's Comedy*, and a beautiful epilogue to Ibsen's dramatic work in general.

Why do so many texts mention specifically *dance* music? What are its functions in Ibsen's works? To which purposes and in what ways does Ibsen integrate music in his dramas without making their contents trivial or melodramatic? These are the questions I will address in my article, and by doing so, I hope to give new possibilities for more interdisciplinary interpretations of his individual works, but also to bring attention to a recurring motif in his works that has already been perceived by some critics (most notably Sæther, 2002 and Kittang, 2006), namely the repeated interplay between vitality and death evoked in the plays' musical elements. This will, finally, bring this aspect of Ibsen's oeuvre into a larger cultural context, as it will point to other writers of his time, such as Symons, Wilde and Tolstoy, who have taken up this motif in their works in a more, or less, similar way as Ibsen.

The title of my article implies that its focus will primarily lie on Ibsen's contemporary dramas, as the dramas from the period from 1877 are often called. These dramas are, of course, famous for the "effect of the fourth wall", the particular technique that gave the readers, and the audience alike, impression that the dramas were giving a realistic (or, as some will have it, naturalistic) representation of their everyday reality

and society. The parlor, or the living-room proved to be very well-suited as the interior for the unfolding of the dramas of the individuals within society, as it was, as Habermas pointed out, more a social than a private realm in the strict division of the nineteenth-century bourgeois living spaces (Habermas, 1989, 45). Ibsen gave meticulous accounts of the living-rooms of his characters, and as a consequence, very many of his fictive living-rooms are equipped with a piano, which Arthur Loesser in his social study of the piano has called: the symbol of the prosperous bourgeoisie (Loesser, 1985, 248). However, when this object, already burdened with symbolic meanings, was included in the dramas as a piece of the stage decoration, Ibsen's texts gained an important cultural signifier which was emitting subtle, yet valuable metaphoric meanings. For instance, the piano is a powerful marker of the characters' economic status. In *The Wild Duck*, the contrast between the rich Wholesaler Werle and the photographer Hjalmar Ekdal is strengthened by the instrument that they have at their disposal. The party at Werle's, lighted with many candles, is amused by piano music, whereas Ekdal's humble family finds joy in simple flute melodies.

One play written prior to *The Pillars of Society* will be, however, observed here in more detail, i.e. *Love's Comedy*. This play stands out among other Ibsen's plays written some time before and after it, most importantly by its tragicomic, or satirical, treatment of contemporary subject-matter. Many motifs taken up in this play will be later elaborated, as some critics have suggested (Reinert, 2011, 220). One of them is certainly the motif of piano and the motif of dance as an integral part of the bourgeois culture. Dances in *Love's Comedy* have a very important role as markers of a character's relation to the society and his or her incorporation in it. Piano, as a bourgeois instrument is contrasted to the human voice, waltzes to the open-air songs of the choir. The dichotomies and conflicts between nature and culture, passion and rationality, youthful rebellion and conformity of the older generation are transposed onto the dichotomies of the play's musical level. On the one hand, the socially approved, bourgeois communion is represented by the piano tune, for instance, "Ack, du lieber Augustin" and by the collective waltzes under the candlelight. On the other hand, Falk's and Svanhild's love and their secret engagement in the garden are expressed by the song of birds, in solitude, under the starlight. Finally, when Svanhild decides to accept Guldstad and the bourgeois marriage rather than the union outside of the society with Falk, this reintegration of Svanhild into the society is marked by her reluctant, yet resolute joining in into the collective waltz at the end of the play. Meanwhile, Falk's self-chosen ostracism is marked by his joining in the male students' choir which is heard up in the hills competing with the music of the Svanhild's waltz. Therefore, we can conclude that in *Love's Comedy*, the motif of waltz figures as an epitome of conformity to the bourgeois mores and manners, and of the (re)integration into social, not natural, institutions.

As in *Love's Comedy*, the piano, as part of the scenography, seems only to be present in the living rooms of the Ibsen's characters that are of a higher social class, as for instance in *Lady from the sea*. The piano can therefore be regarded as a clue in the text if one should ever doubt which class certain Ibsen characters belong to, or wish to belong to. A symptomatic example could be taken from *Hedda Gabler*. As we know,

one of the main tensions in this drama is the conflict between the spouses' unequal social positions at the beginning of the drama. Hedda's social and cultural superiority is strongly emphasized by the props she is using. Tesman is exalted by embroidered slippers, and old books about medieval handicrafts. Hedda, on the other hand, is amused by guns, thrilled at hearing news of noble deeds and disinterested sportsmanship. Just as crucial as her attachment to her father's guns is Hedda's dependency on the piano. She cannot stand to see it stranded in the living-room furnished by Tesman's aunt, let alone witness it turned into a flower-stand. She insists on moving "her old piano" (Ibsen, 1978, 706) to the backroom which already contains most of her belongings, and placing a new piano in its place.

While being, thus, an important indicator of the cultural, as well as economic discrepancy between the spouses Tesman, the piano functions as a rare object towards which Hedda is nurturing affection. I would, here, like to point out to some clues that Hedda's bond with the piano may indicate. After all, it is one of Hedda's very few personal belongings that are brought in into the newlywed's home.

Ibsen's text accounts of Hedda playing the piano on two occasions. The first time, it consists of only a couple of nervous chords heard from the inner room. The second time, however, it is heard in much more dramatic circumstances. After realizing that all of her endeavours have backfired, and that her dream of the possibility for a noble and beautiful deed was crushed by "the ridiculous and vile" world which "she has stumbled into" (Ibsen, 1978, 772 and 730) and from which she can no longer see a way out, Hedda is determined to perform a heroic deed herself. Before shooting herself in the temple with her father's gun, Hedda plays a "wild dance melody". Tesman and the other characters on stage react strongly to Hedda's dance tune heard off-stage largely because of the fact that Hedda is disrespecting the custom that there should be no music, especially merry dance music, in the house which was recently affected by news of two deaths.

Of course, it is not a mere accident that Hedda should play a dance melody on that particular occasion. It is a token of her rebellion against the petty bourgeois mores and ways of life. Also, it is the first stage in her superbly arranged (anti-) theatrical farewell. From behind the closed curtains Hedda "plays a wild dance melody", her at once expressive, defiant, and helpless "swansong" whose dramatic notes have little notion of joy and vivacity which the "Tesman group" is attributing to it. Rather than articulating joy or free spirit, Hedda's "wild dance tune" can be interpreted more like a ritualistic dance which is part of, or which is setting up for a self-annihilating ritual.

Hedda's "swansong" is, thus, inextricably linked to death. Symons' idea of dance as the most jubilant and liberating act from the oppression from the "invisible guardians of order" built-in in the living room walls is hardly recognizable in *Hedda Gabler*. What about other Ibsen's dramas?

One of the most memorable dance performances in all of Ibsen's oeuvre is undoubtedly Nora Helmer's performance of the tarantella in *A Doll's House*:

The most archaic of rituals – the Dionysian dithyramb or the choral dance – re-enter the domestic world of the doll's house and without anachronism, reveal the contours of the universal amphitheater within the boxed-in, trapped existence of the nineteenth-century set (Durbach, 1991, 42).

A lot has been said about the tarantella dance in *A Doll's House*. It has been interpreted as a key metaphor in the drama (Haakonsen, 1948; Nordland, 2006) and its nature of a play within the play has given way to new interpretations (Helland, 1994). Critics disagree, however, whether it is a liberating act (most notably Langås, 2005 and Rekdal, 2000) or Nora's final capitulation before the bourgeois rules of proper behaviour for a woman (Durbach, 1991, 53 and Moi, 2006). In short, the problem consists of determining whether or not Nora's tarantella dance is a liberating act, as Symons would see it.

There are, indeed, many clues in the text that would suggest that by dancing the tarantella, "Nora liberates herself from Helmer's inflexible choreography [...] signifying a break with the rigidly directed way of living that has been hers" (Langås, 2005, 164). Nora seemingly ceases to obey Torvald's instructions, and with it the bourgeois manners, as she dances the tarantella preparing for the masked ball. Her hair loosens as she dances more and more wildly and feverishly. Nora's onstage tarantella resembles, in many of its aspects, to the "liminal occasions" defined by the anthropologists Turner and van Gennep (Turner, 1986). Those are ceremonial performances during which an entranced performer, mostly with the help of music and rhythmic dance movements, undergoes a transformation, bringing to a reestablishment of a redefined social or psychological balance. Anne Marie Rekdal has, therefore, interpreted this dance as the moment when Nora undergoes "full transformation" (Rekdal, 2000, 44).

Ibsen's texts, however, rarely allow us to make straightforward conclusions. Nora's tarantella dance is, admittedly, the moment when she seems to disregard Helmer's instructions and step out from her character of a twittering little lark. One must, however, never disregard the fact that it is Helmer who ultimately directs her dance: it is he who cuts off her dance, and ultimately, he was the one who allowed her to dance the tarantella in the first place. The tarantella dance could be a momentary liberation from Helmer's inflexible choreography, but hardly the moment when Nora gains full insight in the falseness of her puppet-like marriage. After all, Nora does go back to her mask of the little lark as soon as Helmer calls out for her at the end of her performance.

Nora's dance is, however, very much in line with other dances in Ibsen's texts, in that the tarantella, like Hedda's dance tune, has a dual nature. It inextricably connects the notions of vitality and death. Nora's dance is, however, much more subversive than Hedda's. While Hedda's "wild dance tune" represents a kind of "shot in the air", a fruitless expression of defiance towards the established culture and way of life, Nora's tarantella from Act Two is an elegantly staged performance that does not aim at transgressing any socially established rules of fine manners, it rather relies on them and uses them for the dancer's subversive cause.



In her patriarchal home, Nora's principal way of exerting influence is by using her female attributes, her sexual appeal, as many critics have already noted (Durbach, 1991, 52; Rønning, 2005, 315). The tarantella is, maybe, Nora's most powerful resource. She relies on Helmer's lustful gaze which will enable her to have her way later on. She dances the tarantella twice, first onstage, then offstage, and Helmer's enthralled comment of her second performance indicates just how sensual and erotic her first performance was promising to be. For Helmer, both of Nora's tarantellas are enticing, they are giving him aesthetic or erotic pleasure, as they express Nora's "trembling young beauty" (Ibsen, 1978, 183). For Nora, however, the dances have completely different meanings and purposes. Rather than releasing energy or taking delight in expressing her unbound sexuality and sensuality, the two tarantellas are expressions of her inner despair, fear of death and thoughts of self-destruction, while being subversively offered to Helmer as "customary sexual titillation that [he] has come to expect of Nora's performance" (Durbach, 1991, 52). In other words, in her performance, Nora, just like Hedda, "speaks" of her inner state. Dance is her sole possible "voice" by which she would allegorically "tell" of her inner fears and overhanging prospect of impending suicide.

Another Ibsen's dance, which also allegorically refers to death is, of course, the *Danse Macabre*, from *John Gabriel Borkman*. Like in *Hedda Gabler*, the piano melody in Ibsen's penultimate play is heard off-stage, and it also induces heated reactions by the characters in the onstage living room. However, during the change of the acts, the music never ceases. It continues as the offstage becomes onstage, so that Frida Foldal, the performer of the *Danse macabre* and her devoted listener, John Gabriel Borkman, come into the spectators' field of vision. This amazing technical twist, which will be later compared to cinematic techniques (Sandberg, 2006), presented, no doubt, considerable demands to Ibsen's contemporary theatre directors. What is equally important is that it represents not only Ibsen's innovativeness in the technical domain of dramaturgy. Its particular staging gave the *Danse Macabre* great semantic importance. Namely, the piano interpretation of the *Danse Macabre* is played throughout the entire break during the change of the scenography, leaving the spectators immersed in the sounds of the bone-chilling melody. The important position that Ibsen gave to music and dance in his *John Gabriel Borkman* may indicate that this musical piece with its underlying allegorical meanings, could very well be seen as a metaphor of the entire drama, an idea pursued by many Ibsen scholars (Helland, 2000; Aarseth, 1999; Holtan, 1970).

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in the larger context of Ibsen's use of the motif of the dance the *Danse macabre* stands out as a particularly poignant example, as it incorporates as its basic premise the idea of the dual nature of the dance which was suggested in the dramas mentioned earlier. The musical composition *Danse macabre* is based on the French medieval myth of a night when the dead rise from their graves and dance for an hour before returning to their resting places. The basic premise of this myth, which is, of course, transposed to its musical interpretations, consists of the indissoluble fusion of dance, joy and vitality and its antipodes: death, lifelessness and decay.

ERHART. There are so many shimmering lights down there. And young, happy faces. And there's music there, Mother!

MRS. BORKMAN (*pointing up toward the ceiling*). Upstairs there's also music, Erhart

ERHART. Yes, it's that music there – that's what's hounding me out of this house. (Ibsen, 1978, 965-66)

The “dance” in the Borkman mansion has all the resemblances to the mythic dance of the dead, which is further emphasized by the meticulously structured arrangement of auditory devices (bells of the passing sleigh), and by the inclusion of another motif of a dance in the play: the dance at Hinkel's, personalized by the character of Mrs. Fanny Wilton. This dance happens off-stage, and is only being referred to by the characters throughout the play. A very important function of this dance is to serve as a counter-part of the *Dance Macabre* at the Borkmans'. The dance at Hinkel's, or Fanny Wilton's dance represents the world outside of the Borkman mansion, the world of joy, carelessness, youth and bodily pleasures. If we agree that the metaphorical epitome of the Borkman family and way of life is the Dance of the dead, then Fanny Wilton's dance can be interpreted as the dance of life. It is summarized in Erhart's vision of his future in the company of Fanny Wilton. It would consist of grandiose balls “teeming with young ladies” lighted by “many shimmering lights” and “young, happy faces”, with music and “gay, amusing, hospitable people” (Ibsen, 1978, 961 and 965). Therefore, breaking off from the Borkman macabre dance of the dead, Erhart cries out “(*in a blaze of emotion*) I'm young! I want my chance to live, for once! [...] Just live, live, live!” (Ibsen, 1978, 1004). This intense desire to participate in what is called here the dance of life, shows no regards to the costs, consequences, or the possible casualties that appeasing it is bound to bring along the way, of which the running over of the old Foldal is just a symbolic act.

Ibsen's text suggests, however, that Fanny Wilton's dance might not be an entirely positive alternative to the death-bringing dance of the Borkman family. For, as the pianist Frida Foldal and Erhart Borkman abruptly break-free from the eerie Borkman Dance Macabre, they only seem to be entering another, equally death-bound dance. Fanny Wilton's dance promises to satisfy the unappeased lust for life of its participants. Yet, there seems to exist an underlying doubt of the duration of this magical dance formula. The lustful dance of life will not be eternal. From its very beginning it is destined to slow down, for it bears the mark of destruction, fleeting thrill and death.

Ibsen does not seem to share the same optimism as his English admirer Arthur Symons when it comes to the liberating potential of the dance in bourgeois living-rooms. Although this notion of the nature of the dance is, indeed, recognizable in Ibsen's use of this motif, the living-room dances in Ibsen's oeuvre are multi-layered and complex, and usually serve more than one function in the dramas. Dances in Ibsen often serve as a specific “memento mori”, as the inbuilt vitalism of dance along with the aesthetic pleasure in the movement of the body, are coupled with their opposite: death.

The dance in *A Doll's House* is almost a medicinal dance which aims at curing the dancer from the lethal tarantula poison, or metaphorically, the wrongs of the society; in *Hedda Gabler*, the dance tune serves as a prelude for the ritualistic suicide of the performer, and in *Love's Comedy*, the piano waltz brilliantly marks the triumph of conventions, and the downfall of passion, as Svanhild's autumn is approaching. Never is dance, however, as closely related to death as in *John Gabriel Borkman*, representing a grotesque travesty of the basic notion of the dance, as the Danse macabre extends its death-bringing paradigm on its participants. Ibsen's use of the motif of the dance is, on the one hand, tied to the expression of the characters' hidden, otherwise inexpressible inner states, but on the other hand, it is a distinctly social phenomenon, by which Ibsen marks his characters' loyalty to a group and its ideologies, or their rebellion against conformism. Lastly, Ibsen uses piano music and dance as important dramatic tools, which serve to connect disparate acts and spaces, mark dramatic climaxes, and so on. It is this polysemic quality of the elements of music and dance in Ibsen's contemporary dramas that makes them so apt for an interdisciplinary analysis, and that can make Ibsen's dramas interesting not only for literary and performance studies, but also for musicological studies and the cultural studies of dance.

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### Summary

In Ibsen's time, the piano was a powerful cultural signifier. Common ideologies, socio-cultural codes, beliefs and myths of the bourgeoisie were interwoven in the network of the piano's metaphoric meanings. Having indeed great sensitivity for the spirit of his time, Ibsen relied on the bulk of piano's cultural intertexts to give further depth and richness to his dramatic works. In the literature of the age the piano figured as the epicenter of social conflicts, repressed needs and emotions, as well as a distinctive marker of gender and class divisions. For Ibsen's female protagonists music figures both as an oppressive cultural force and an expressive, creative outlet, however, the piano dances seem almost self-contradictory, having little or no notion of vitality. Although this idea of dance as the utmost life-affirming activity in the bourgeois way of life is also recognizable in Ibsen's use of this motif, the living-room dances in Ibsen's oeuvre are multi-layered and complex, and usually serve more than one function in the dramas. With focus on dances in *Love's Comedy*, *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler* and *John Gabriel Borkman* the article concludes that the motif of dance in Ibsen's dramas often serves as a specific "memento mori", as the inbuilt vital principle of dance along with the aesthetic pleasure in the movement of the body, are coupled with their opposite: death.

**Keywords**

*Love's Comedy, A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler, John Gabriel Borkman, Dance macabre, tarantella, dance, music, piano*