

# The Paradox of Commodified Music in Decadence

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An Honors Thesis Submitted to the Department of English  
Cornell University  
May 2020

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	2
Introduction	3
Chapter 1 Nineteenth-Century Decadence	8
Chapter 2 The Music of the Future	18
Chapter 3 <i>The Phantom of the Opera</i>	23
Chapter 4 Music as Commodity	31
Conclusion	50
Bibliography	52

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is the product of an ongoing battle with my inner self, who, as a classically trained musician, experienced somewhat of a mental discord when she realized her taste for music of the highly “commodified” sort.

This thesis is also the result of the educational awakening which I received from my brilliant, inspiring professors throughout my four years as an English major. I thank you for changing me.

Last but certainly not least, this thesis is the byproduct of my highly supportive parents Laura and Richard — Laura, who so generously and deliberately introduced me (at the ripe age of eight) to what is my most favorite form of multimedia, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and Richard, who has shown me profuse support throughout the entirety of my college career.

## Introduction

According to George Wilson's *The Five Senses: A Gateway to Knowledge* (1857), "Music thus comes to us we cannot tell whence or how; and the less we are reminded of the mechanical or formal appliances by which an art appeals to our emotions, the most surely and profoundly are they stirred by it" (qtd. in Meredith 274). Wilson articulates the nineteenth-century European belief that the art of music is and should be ineffable, though it derives from something mechanical, physiological, and highly tangible. This assumption, which persisted through the nineteenth century and beyond, will be the backbone of my thesis, as I explore the way in which European Decadence sparked literary conversations about the dichotomous nature of music.

Music, while perceived as a medium that transcends the sensory, has been integrated with all facets of life and even what seems like its antidote: labor. Those parts of the human being which seem airy, ephemeral, and artistic, could not exist by the middle of the nineteenth century without the production, commodification, and labor embedded deeply within the culture. This thesis will explore music as an art form, in the context of the socioeconomic period of industrialization, where all things, including art, were increasingly commodified. This work will be particularly fixed around the 1890s, a moment in which writers, philosophers, and musicians propelled the notion of music as a transcendent art form. In this thesis, I argue that Europe's nineteenth century was a particularly crucial literary moment for evaluating the state of music as an art form. I argue this in order to demonstrate music's paradoxical status in such a time of commodification, production, and industrialized labor. The consequences of this argument include the ongoing evaluation of music as both an art form and

something that is produced, in addition to raising the question of whether or not art and its production are mutually exclusive.

Upon the emergence of aestheticism and Decadence as artistic and critical movements in the 1870s, music, alongside the other arts, was theorized through the notion of “art for art’s sake” (Guérard xiii). The ideology of “art for art’s sake” implied that despite the industrialized society which evolved in this era, art can be its own justification and does not need another; not moral, monetary, or otherwise. Artists would create art for the sake of art; for the sake of its beauty and nothing else. Overall, this movement can be understood as a reaction against the rapidly accelerating industrialization of all arenas of cultural production, which threatened to remodel even the arts that seemed to stand above it (Quereshi 13).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, theorists like Walter Pater and Arthur Schopenhauer considered music the ultimate transcendent form of expression. However, as commodification began to shape the production and circulation of music, that belief was challenged. The relationship between music and labor, which includes commodification and production, is complex and multifaceted. In many ways, labor and its derivatives can be seen as eroding music’s ephemeral nature. However, music has proven crucial to the very spirit of all forms of humanity, including labor. According to George Wilson:

Two carpenters planing the same piece of wood will move their planes alternately; so that, when the one is pushing his forward, the other is drawing his back, thereby securing a recurrence of sounds, which, from their inequality, would be harsh if they were heard simultaneously . . . I need not tell you how sailors, heaving the anchor or hoisting the sails, sing

together in chorus; nor remind you that the most serious of all hard work, fighting, is helped on by the drum and the trumpet. (qtd in Meredith 273)

This excerpt reveals that labor in fact requires music, as music allows laborers to transcend their merely physical experience of work.

Further, the nineteenth century showcased its values through art criticism. As I will demonstrate in the first chapter of this thesis, Decadent thought raised urgent questions regarding whether art can or cannot exist in an industrialized world. The Decadent movement presented the idea that perhaps the varied criticism surrounding a particular work of art was equally or more “artistic” than the art itself. Critics including Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater, who lauded this notion of “criticism” as “art,” heavily contributed to the writing surrounding this movement. Oscar Wilde’s “The Critic As Artist” confirms and brings to light much of Walter Pater’s thought surrounding art criticism, following Pater’s famous piece on Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. The idea that value can move well beyond just the object of monetary value was embedded within the repeatedly propounded Decadent idea of art criticism (Guérard xx). Specifically, value was not deemed to be limited by the tangible, but rather the value of a commodity can be determined by the less concrete, more subjective art criticism. Music was similarly seen by nineteenth-century aesthetes as something airy and fleeting, unable to be produced like other beautiful things and as something which takes over the mind, body, and soul in mysterious ways. Thus, I will explore Walter Pater’s view of music, both by itself and in the context of Oscar Wilde’s works. Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance*, with its premise that “all art aspires toward the condition of music,” confirms the ephemerality of all art, through music, implying that something of effervescent and paradoxically material and immaterial quality can be, and is, something of concrete value (Pater 135). There thus exists a paradox in studying and appreciating music; something

intangible, in the context of the newly, highly tangible world of industrialization. This first chapter will explore true versus tainted art. It explores how Decadent writers posed the question of whether or not art can exist if at all “tainted” by a societal structure of capitalism, or if inevitably, art becomes negated when produced for monetary gain. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Oscar Wilde sheds light on the human being in the context of a production-centered society, claiming that true art cannot exist under anything but pure socialism, as only when individual profit-making is not a concern can a person become an artist.

Music’s paradoxical status in and after Decadence will be explored in greater depth in the second chapter of this thesis, through a discussion of the works of Richard Wagner, who, in pioneering the Musikdrama, attempted to join music with various other art forms. With a goal of creating an all-encompassing performance which would channel all of the senses, he worked to revise opera forms such as Grand Opera and Bel Canto, creating what can be viewed as a precursor of the modern day musical, through its multimediality (Lajosi 43). One example of such intervention is *The Phantom of the Opera*, which encompasses many of the themes and questions relevant in a study of Decadence. *The Phantom of the Opera* will be analyzed through the lense of Pater, Wilde, Wagner, and others, in the third chapter of this thesis. Originally a 1910 French novel by Gaston Leroux and later made into a musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber in 1986, *The Phantom of the Opera* is uniquely centered around the idea of music, its ghost-like effervescence, and much else in the context of Decadence and the commodification of art (Nelson). Exploring the relationship between Christine, the opera singer and performer, and the Phantom, the ghost-like musician and figure for Decadent values who resides beneath the opera house, allows one to see the potential implications of art without boundaries; without the notion of commodification present. The Phantom who haunts the opera

house is seemingly symbolic of “pure” art, as he is facially deformed and, as per this story, likely cannot generate profit if he performed as himself. Rather, he performs through the young, the beautiful, and the profit-generating Christine. As he embodies the pinnacle of pure, “true” art, Leroux’s novel tells us that the Phantom in fact had succumbed to a capitalist desire for profit, though he had initially appeared as a mystical musical angel, by beginning his own construction business. This third chapter will elucidate this crucial detail in Leroux’s novel, while analyzing the overall meaning of the text in the context of “art for art’s sake.” Following a discussion on Richard Wagner and the Musikdrama, Lloyd Webber’s adaptation of the novel into a highly profitable Broadway musical production lends itself to a discussion on both production and reproduction, as well as how this is related to Leroux’s novel and *Decadence*. The very idea that a novel, based upon the notion that the production of art is paradoxical, becomes reproduced countless times in musical form, is doubly paradoxical. Thus, the fourth chapter of this thesis will consider whether or not reproduction diminishes a particular work’s “artistry,” or enhances it in its repetition, in addition to the anomalous ways in which Lloyd Webber created his vastly successful musical.

In connecting *Decadence* to *The Phantom of the Opera*, as both a work of literature and a production which speaks to the fantasy of music’s transcendence, this thesis will be focused inward, on literary analysis, and outward, in looking at the modern production history of *The Phantom of the Opera* as a particularly revealing and ongoing moment in cultural history. This work will include four sections, the first providing a relevant history of the *Decadence*’s theory of music, the second focused on opera and the Musikdrama, the third exploring *The Phantom of the Opera* as a text, and the fourth centered around production, reproduction, and Lloyd Webber’s musical adaptation of Leroux’s novel.



The overall goal of this thesis is to argue that the 1890s and its aftermath showcased the truly paradoxical state of music as at once ethereal and commodified.

## I.

### Nineteenth-Century Decadence

This chapter explores the idealization of art in the European art movement known as Decadence, recognizing it as a key movement which validates art's special status in society. In prizing music, while English aesthetes are important to consider, French Decadent works are similarly important, especially in relation to French novelist Leroux. Joris-Karl Huysmans' 1884 novel *À rebours*, translated as "Against the Grain" or "Against Nature" is a prime example of Decadent French literature, as the novel follows Jean des Esseintes through nineteenth-century society's transition from aristocratic to bourgeois culture. This novel showcases the harsh social critique of music within the Decadent world view, while emphasizing the strong anti-commodification position held by the aesthetes at the time. Among the last of the French aristocratic families, Des Esseintes of *À rebours* pushes back on bourgeois culture, attempting to return to an aesthetic, idealistic world. The French novel can be seen to have inspired English Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as his "The Critic as Artist." In chapter fifteen of *À rebours*, Jean articulates his thoughts on music aesthetics, pushing back against the commodification of music at the time. Huysmans writes:

When not read in solitude, profane music is a promiscuous art. To enjoy music, one must become part of that public which fills the theatres where, in a vile atmosphere, one perceives a

loutish-looking man butchering episodes from Wagner, to the huge delight of the ignorant mob. (307)

This highly cynical view of the music which resides in the hearts of “that public” was not uncommon among the aesthetes who contributed to European Decadence. Music was sacred and beautiful, but certainly not the music enjoyed by the “ignorant” masses. In fact, music holds a particularly unique role in the Decadent movement, its ephemerality allowing for it to transcend the notion of excess which was so often associated with the movement at the time.

Further, the Decadent movement of the late nineteenth century offered a distinctive discourse on art’s role in an industrialized society. The values embodied by the movement included the oversaturation of the senses, artificiality, and profusion (Guérard xii). The emphasis on art and the unapologetic decoration of life, in addition to the idea that life’s purpose was in fact decoration, presupposes a level of economic comfort that was seemingly overlooked in much Western European writing of the nineteenth century. This sense of economic comfort was in fact blatantly assumed in the frequent processes of adornment and lavish embellishment, whether it had been dress shoes, table cloths, or other objects of potential aesthetic beauty (Burdett). Additionally, Decadence offered appreciation; appreciation for beauty, for life, and for the fusion of the two. This appreciation, at times, could simply be concentrated upon an existing object of nature. An example of this might be the anthers of a flower or an ornate china set, which someone had designed. Thus, both the natural and the manufactured were appreciated through the Decadent lense. At other times, this appreciation might be manifested in something of one’s own creation, like a self-portrait or a melodic composition. In this way, there was an objective appreciation; an objective beauty which those who were Decadents held close to themselves (Ryals 90).

As there was an ongoing search for beauty in the world, more likely than not, “beauty” was deemed present in the things that seemed the most ornate and laboriously designed. While that was considered the norm, those who called themselves Decadents were creating more than simply a formula for beauty and a public consensus for what should be named “beautiful,” as aesthetes would often create beauty out of thin air. To assemble an outfit was creation, just as it was to write a melody (Guérard xvii). This notion of creation, present in Decadence of the late nineteenth century, was particular to its time but can be seen as having embodied the crudest form of production. Production, most notably in the context of music, was art, or the creation of beauty. To relish art’s effect on the eyes, the ears, and often all of the senses combined was its intent (Ryals 86). For a work to succeed was for it to stir the senses in a way that was beautiful and pleasurable.

As this premise can be applied to all relevant art forms in Western European Decadence, Walter Pater declares, “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (Pater 135). Arguing that music is the only art kind in which both subject matter and form are unified, he distills the importance of music during this period. In his *The Renaissance*, Pater attempts to define productive means of consuming art through an analysis of art criticism. Pater undoubtedly values art highly, as did all nineteenth-century aesthetes, but it seems that in his work, Pater attempts to discover why in fact art should be held so close to the aesthete and to the soul. There were previous attempts to reduce art criticism and art appreciation to an exact and objective science, which Pater pushes up against. In particular, Matthew Arnold’s 1864 *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* showcases both Arnold’s and other English scholars’ attempts to quantify art and its meaning. In this piece, Arnold writes that “to see the object as in itself it really is” is criticism’s true purpose, but this is exactly what Pater disagrees with. Pater in fact quotes Arnold in *The Renaissance*, in order to redefine and rework

art criticism's purpose. Incorporating the first person is helpful for Pater in his take on the meaning of criticism, as it helps him to assume this notion of subjectivity which is present in the entirety of his piece. Pater writes:

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me?

What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or

degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? (viii)

In emphasizing the effect that a form of art bestows on “me,” or on the person consuming the art form, Pater focuses much less on the form of art and its production, but rather the subsequent effect that it creates. Namely, there is a production within a production that occurs when an art form is consumed through the senses, either by listening, reading, tasting, and more, and to Pater, this is art's purpose. While these are of course Pater's words and ideas, it seems that Pater is speaking for nineteenth-century aesthetes in general, while simultaneously addressing what they deem is their purpose. A group focused on scholarship and tasteful consumption, especially by way of their high class in society and access to knowledge, it could have been difficult to distinguish between having “true” art appreciation and simply being affluently “tasteful.” With that, however, Pater seemingly clarifies the purpose of this movement and of this group of people, providing access to the aesthete's particular way of consuming art by the truly subjective way in which he sees it. Pater continues, “What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” (Pater x). Thus, Pater denies the importance of criticism having a scholarly and contextualized basis, rather seeing this criticism as most productive when the critic allows himself to be moved; to be changed by the art's beauty. In a sense, Pater's work acts as a clarification on the entirety

of the Decadent movement, due to the fact that it could often have been confused with affluent privilege. For example, one would only be able to truly appreciate literature if he or she were literate, an inherently affluent privilege.

Oscar Wilde, a symbol for Decadence and all things aestheticism, interacts with Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* in his "The Critic as Artist," in which he expresses his nuanced opinions of Pater's work. Originally entitled "The True Function and Value of Criticism," Wilde's piece is essentially a dialogue between two voices Gilbert and Ernest, where Gilbert seems to shadow Wilde's real opinions and thoughts on art criticism. Though Wilde deems literature to be the highest form of art, he believes that all art forms are accessible to those who open themselves and allow themselves to truly experience the art (Ellmann 368). Wilde says through Gilbert, "Temperament is the primary requisite for the critic—a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty, and to the various impressions that beauty gives us" (286). This so-called "temperament," while not necessarily learned, can be awakened through certain education, as Wilde details through Gilbert. This paragraph in "The Critic as Artist," in which Gilbert explains to Ernest the type of personality or temperament most conducive to a productive interpretation of art, is ambiguous in that it does not clearly state what means are necessary to acquire this. Gilbert simultaneously states, "We have now to make what is beautiful" (Wilde 287). This ultimately seems to be Gilbert's and thus Wilde's argument, in that a skilled critic does not need to be trained necessarily in the craft of art criticism, but rather open to the concept of experience, making the enjoyment of art both accessible and having the potential to become widespread. Openness to experience does not necessarily need to be learned, but a level of training or education can provide a critic assistance with this. The notion that any and every human being has in them the ability to become an art critic removes nearly every aspect of Decadence that would make the movement in any

way inherently commodified. No transaction would have needed to be in place for a person to be thought of as a “good” critic of that art, but this new accessibility of art criticism would allow for further consumption, and thus production, of all things art. Gilbert continues:

The nineteenth century is a turning point in history simply on account of the work of two men, Darwin and Renan, the one the critic of the Book of Nature, the other the critic of the books of God ... Creation is always behind the age. It is Criticism that leads us. The Critical Spirit and the World-Spirit are one. (Wilde 296)

In this, Wilde lays out two separate notions of art and the commodity. First, there is the notion that art criticism is in no way commodified due to its accessibility to all, and secondly, there is the concept that art criticism and art production, or creation, are one. In referring to Darwin, Renan, and the Bible, and as contradictory to his accessibility argument as this may seem, Wilde attempts to merge seemingly starkly opposite claims about creation. Just as there is no necessarily “wrong” way to consume an art form, both claims about creation are equally right.

Pater’s “Conclusion” to his *The Renaissance* similarly utilizes a Biblical framework, revealing his philosophical, often highly anti-Christian views on one’s life purpose, stating the importance of aesthetic appeal. Pleasure, he claims, is purpose enough. He writes:

We have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among “the children of this world,” in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. (238)

Pater almost uncannily uses the term “interval,” a musical term, which is the difference in pitch between two varied notes. Given that music is frequently named one of the highest aesthetic forms of

its kind, the use of “interval” here only furthers this notion. This is also interesting in that there exist infinite subsequent intervals within every interval, making it evermore clear that music is an inherently mysterious aesthetic medium which takes over the body in these similarly mysterious ways.

Pater’s “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* does more than just detail a philosophical perspective on Decadence and the way in which aestheticism handles art, time, and the soul. Rather, it provides a perspective on the role of society in the soul of man, particularly the soul of an aesthete. It is important to consider whether or not these differ at all, as Pater does not necessarily distinguish between the soul of man versus the aesthete, but it seems that he surmises they may be one in the same. He suggests that the two souls have the potential to become one, and even that all people can be aesthetes, given a conducive socio-political philosophy. In this way, perhaps this level of artistic embodiment is not inherent but is produced; on some level it is production by way of the soul. Oscar Wilde was heavily influenced by Pater’s thoughts, which subsequently led him to produce an attempt at defining the “ideal” sociopolitical climate for an aesthete like himself (Ellmann 84). Published in 1891, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” explains in detail how socialism is beneficial to the soul of man, and how only under socialism can man’s soul truly be set on fire, as Wilde deems it should. This essay is quite interesting to consider in the context of Wilde’s “The Critic As Artist,” in that it seemingly provides a solution to all that Wilde has suggested regarding the accessibility of both art and art criticism. Socialism, or Wilde’s socialism, is what would lead every man to have access to the kind of education that Wilde detailed in “The Critic As Artist,” allowing the “preparation” of the soul for the “reception of the beauty that is spiritual” (286). According to Wilde, this is the only form of education necessary to become a true critic.

Further, Wilde ties socialism directly to his notion of Individualism, in which man's soul is able to develop freely, and for himself. Private property and the system of work for profit are mere distractions, according to Wilde, and these distractions would be removed with socialism in place. Following that, people would be able to locate their souls; to find their unique purposes. Wilde expresses discontentment with the progression of this idea of private property, which he deems to be only blocking the true potential of the individual. He writes, "If there are Governments armed with economic power as they are now with political power; if, in a word, we are to have Industrial Tyrannies, then the last state of man will be worse than the first" (2). Here, Wilde seemingly alludes to the way in which the social and economic climate was drastically changing when he wrote this essay. The importance of political power during the turn of the nineteenth century was slowly eroding, as industrialization was taking over and reconstructing societal hierarchies during the time period. Families of significant political importance were commingling with families and individuals with, at the time, virtually no "name" to them, other than their industrialized creations (MacLeod 22). "Name," and the family to which one was born, proved not crucial to fortune, as opportunity could now be found anywhere. Families who previously would not have been exposed to the opera and other expensive, "elite" artistic productions were now equally exposed. This was due to the rise of production and industrialization, which provided many more families with the opportunity to explore art.

With this, there became an obsession with fortune, as it was now a possibility for so many more; for the masses. This infatuation with production for profit, which was only growing as Wilde saw it, contributed to his great concern about the future of humanity, and thus his proposal for socialism (Ellmann 290).



Further, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” pioneers the notion that “production” had lost its former meaning, as “the act of producing things” became increasingly feasible through industrialization by the turn of the nineteenth century. The production of art for profit seemed to not be production anymore, but instead a form of regurgitation, and even perhaps the regurgitation of a society to itself. Though of course, each and every novelty at the turn of the century was still derived from the real, genuine mind of an individual, Wilde seems to scoff at any sort of production that is not “true” to the soul. Rather, the wrong kind of production can be characterized as counterproductive to what he deems to be true Individualism. In an attempt to define and discover his truth about Individualism, Wilde details what he believes would lead almost all of the populace to join the Decadent movement; to become aesthetes like himself. As he addresses the fact that money, or capital, is unnecessary in art production or appreciation, he turns to socialism to contextualize his claim and even provides a surmisable solution for the problems that he sees in nineteenth-century Decadence, and in the world.

Walter Pater’s criticism, as well as the way in which Oscar Wilde interacts with these works through his essays, all support a specific claim that attempts to view art through a unique lens in history. Some of these works may idolize the way in which art functioned in society’s past, in addition to the particular way it was lauded, but both Pater and Wilde seem hopeful that former aspects of art’s societal role can be reimmersed in the nineteenth-century present. Much of this fixation on past ideals surrounding art was not so much on beauty in its objectivity, but it was rather a fixation on the necessary acknowledgement of beauty. More specifically, neither Pater nor Wilde claim that a particular era in art should be reintroduced to nineteenth-century English aesthetes, nor that it be

deemed the peak of beauty, but rather that a certain philosophy on art and beauty should hold precedence over others (Ellmann 42).

The role of industrialization is also relevant to consider in the context of Pater and Wilde's aestheticism. The notion that production was made increasingly easy, as it began in the 18th century and flourished through the nineteenth century, undoubtedly affected society both directly and psychologically. It affected society directly, in the sense that there was more being produced and at a quicker rate, and it second-handedly provided psychological effects in that society would simply expect more to be produced and more quickly (MacLeod 21). For something so immense and transformative like industrialization to not affect the arts, one of the largest areas for public and private consumption, especially in nineteenth-century Europe, would have been impossible. With industrialization came an energy; namely, an energy causing people to race one another to production. Whether it was the next canned good idea sought out or the next trend in opera, ongoing production for monetary gain was and is at the forefront of the minds of individuals living post-industrialization. Further, it seems that industrialization drove Wilde to detail his thoughts on a socialist world and Pater to understand true art appreciation and criticism, as industrialization was often at odds with their thoughts on the world (Ellmann 121). In order to fully understand its implications, as well as the implications of large-scale production in the context of art criticism and experience, it is helpful to look to literature, Wilde's most highly-lauded art form, even as literature in turn can often appeal to music as the ultimate art.

## II.

## The Music of the Future

This chapter explores the artistic synthesis of music and literature in nineteenth-century Decadence, as a precursor to a literary analysis of both the French novel and modern musical, *The Phantom of the Opera*. Analyzing the transition from different forms of opera to others, namely Bel Canto to Grand Opera and then to Musikdrama, is undoubtedly useful in understanding the ways in which nineteenth-century aestheticism altered art production and consumption at the time. In understanding how multimedia art was developed in Decadence, in addition to how it was both lauded and criticized, one can determine its effects on industrialized society and art itself.

At this point in history, there was a drastic increase in art for monetary gain, which cannot be ignored in the context of nineteenth-century aesthetic ideals. In thinking about music specifically within nineteenth-century aestheticism, we can look to Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" again, as Wilde, through Gilbert, lauds music to a substantial degree in this text, even naming it a "perfect" art form, because of the particular way in which it takes over the body and the soul. Gilbert states in the context of music, "It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in its beauty" (163). Having praised music in this way, it may seem confusing as to why Wilde eventually lauds literature as the highest art form; however, we can notice that literature actually encompasses music as part of itself, especially in the context of Wagner's Musikdrama. Wilde refers to a sort of endless melody present in poetry, as there is some mysterious entity taking over the soul and making a human being feel something. In referencing none other than Homer, Gilbert begins a discourse on poetry, rhythm, and music. He states, "I have sometimes thought that the story of Homer's blindness might be really an

artistic myth, created in critical days, and serving to remind us, not merely that the great poet is always a seer ... but that he is a true singer also, building his song out of music” (250). In this, Wilde seeks to merge literary composition and musicianship, even naming the great Greek poet a musician in his literary proficiency. As Wilde is openly boastful about his literary skills, it is then clear, through this passage, that Wilde would consider himself a musician. While this seems solely theoretical, as Wilde assumes that writers are musicians in pure theory, Gilbert proceeds and speaks to Ernest about this matter more practically. He says, “Yes: writing has done much harm to writers. We must return to the voice” (250). With this, Gilbert suggests that writers should, in practicality, elicit the musicianship that they already have on a theoretical level. This is perhaps reflecting upon Richard Wagner and his 1860 “Music of the Future,” which came thirty years prior to “The Critic as Artist.”

Once Wagner’s Musikdrama was implemented in both Europe and through Wilde’s play *Salomé*, writers did in fact become musicians and the once-stark boundary between music and literature disappeared (Ellmann 339). Wagner was notably inspired by Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy on music and primarily his “The World as Will and Representation.” In this work, Schopenhauer details a concept of the “ideal” that Wagner takes up. Schopenhauer writes:

For music always expresses only the quintessence of life and its events, never these themselves, and therefore their differences do not always affect it. It is precisely this universality, which belongs exclusively to it, together with the greatest determinateness, that gives music the high worth which it has as the panacea for all our woes. Thus, if music is too closely united to the words, and tries to form itself according to the events, it is striving to speak a language which is not its own. (338)

Schopenhauer alludes to the difficulty of presenting words in conjunction with music, while allowing music to provide its same mysterious, noteworthy effect. Because Schopenhauer deems the universality aspect of music to make it the “perfect” art form, he believes that the addition of words can dilute its perfection. Richard Wagner, on the other hand, strives to disprove this belief, surmising that adding language to music can only make the music closer to “perfection.” Wagner imagines the Musikdrama as the “music of the future,” an all-encompassing and unified work of art, which in fact would merge Wilde’s visions of both literature and art. Trahndorff’s term “*Gesamtkunstwerk*” came twenty years prior to Wagner’s “Musikdrama,” as Wagner sought to refine the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* by thinking about its effect on a stage. Inspired by the ancient Greek tragedy, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was an idealized form of media in which there was a “synthesis of arts.” This synthesis would allow for each art form to present “equal weight” on a stage, and in Wagner’s case, pioneer the concept of multimediality with which we are so familiar today (Lajosi 58).

While opera was always enjoyed as both a form of entertainment and a social scene, the gradual switch from the Bel Canto opera form to the Musikdrama, with Grand Opera falling in between the two time periods, affected both society and the art itself. Bel Canto, meaning “beautiful singing” from the Italian, put the beauty of voice before all else in an opera production (Stark 21). In contrast, the Musikdrama was a comprehensive artwork in which numerous art forms coexisted, notably sharing a storyline or drama, both on the stage and in the music (Martin). The Grand Opera, which gained popularity during the middle of the nineteenth century, came between Bel Canto and the Musikdrama, introducing the extravagance of opera and boasting numerous singers, ballet interludes, and visual beauty. The role of music in opera notably changed in this transition, acting as the focus of the production and the source of the art’s beauty in Bel Canto, while steering and being steered by

theatrical plot, in the Musikdrama (Fubini). While music played different roles in Bel Canto than it did in the Musikdrama, in his writings, Wagner expresses his certainty that the Musikdrama allows for a greater musical expression. In discussing the ideal of music in his essay “Music of the Future,” Wagner simultaneously attempted to introduce one of his operas, *Tannhäuser*, to a French audience. The concept of a recurring melody throughout an operatic composition was important for Wagner. The introduction of librettos with leitmotifs present throughout a piece was at the heart of the Musikdrama, which stressed the synthesis of all art forms in its creation (Dahlhaus 11-15). Unlike Hungarian composer and Wagner rival Franz Liszt, who espoused the idea of musical poetry, Wagner was relentless in his belief that the music of the future was its unity with other art forms. With music’s ephemeral quality which seems to take over the body and the soul in mysterious ways, the commingling of other art forms to re-identify music was Wagner’s mission. However, this mission was interchangeable with his drive to encourage the attendance of his initial Musikdrama performance. Music with a storyline, focused on words through poetry, mise-en-scène, leitmotifs, and other standard forms of music was the basis of his Musikdrama. Wagner writes, “Poetry will find this path and acknowledge its own deep longing for an eventual merging with music as soon as it realizes that music itself has a need which only poetry can fulfill” (28). While Wagner describes poetry and music as distinctly different entities, with poetry having a “deep longing” for music, Wagner nonetheless sees music as an all-encompassing art form.

Just as much as Wagner’s “Music of the Future” is theoretical, Wagner’s determination to merge art forms to create what he envisions to be the future of music, as well as his prediction of its success, is present in his essay. Composers who came after him seemed to hold similar beliefs about how opera and the musical performance should be, as they created their own forms of Musikdrama

(Dahlhaus 16). Understanding the success of the Musikdrama is important in delving into the driving force behind music and art for profit; Wagner's "music of the future" could be later understood to produce artworks as commodities. Due to the fact that through the century, opera began to incorporate more acts and thus more performers, the transition to the "comprehensive artwork" known as Wagner's Musikdrama sought to impact increasingly more individuals than prior operatic forms. According to Huysman in his *À rebours*:

There was not one single scene, not even a phrase of one of the operas of the amazing Wagner which could with impunity be detached from its whole. The fragments, cut and served on the plate of a concert, lost all significance and remained senseless, since (like the chapters of a book, completing each other and moving to an inevitable conclusion) Wagner's melodies were necessary to sketch the characters, to incarnate their thoughts and to express their apparent or secret motives. He knew that their ingenious and persistent returns were understood only by the auditors who followed the subject from the beginning and gradually beheld the characters in relief, in a setting from which they could not be removed without dying, like branches torn from a tree. (307)

As Wagner's work inherently includes a variety of performers, artistic skills, lends itself to a larger production, and craftily utilizes melodies which shape the characters on the stage, one is able to notice traces of the Musikdrama within highly successful multimedia performances to date (Lajosi 43). Modern multimedia performances include the musical, which will be relevant to consider in the remainder of this thesis, as both the written and musical forms of *The Phantom of the Opera* are discussed in relation to nineteenth-century Decadence.

## III.

*The Phantom of the Opera*

This chapter will include a literary analysis of a work in which we can notice traces of Wagner's Musikdrama, as well as one which emphasizes the importance of opera in France: Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*. Published fully in 1910, the work of literature appeared in serial form in the French newspaper *Le Gaulois*, from September 1909 to January 1910 (Nelson). Leroux was very much influenced by the nineteenth-century Paris Opera, namely the physical opera house which inspired the novel. The Paris Opera was both the main opera and ballet company of France, and Leroux's storyline is undeniably linked to the reality of the opera house at the time (*The Phantom of the Opera*). Though the Paris Opera was founded years prior to the production of Wagner's musical and Leroux's novel, the modern interest in a comprehensive artwork was likely inspired by the Paris Opera, as it boasted a few forms of art.

This analysis of *The Phantom of the Opera* will concentrate on the meaning of aestheticism through Leroux, music in Decadence, and the commodification of music in the novel. Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* portrays nineteenth-century Decadence and opera within Decadence. Both its setting and storyline showcase nineteenth-century aestheticism by the many leitmotifs throughout. Namely, the Phantom can be seen as a Decadent figure, while simultaneously one who conforms to the capitalist society in which he lives, as we learn at the end of the novel. *The Phantom of the Opera* also brings to light the commodification of art, by the way in which it addresses the voice, namely Christine's voice. Additionally, the commodification of the novel itself is considerable, through the



way in which it eventually became both a film and a highly lucrative, long-running musical. Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* showcases Decadence and aestheticism in interesting ways, many of which are later furthered by the visual adaptations of the novel through its mise-en-scène.

In his storyline, Leroux seems to take nineteenth-century aestheticism and turn it over, making a reader question what the Decadent movement truly sought to do with artists and art critics. To summarize the plot, the Phantom, known as Erik, falls into a complicated love triangle with main character Christine Daaë and her childhood friend Raoul de Chagny. Painted as the villain by everyone but Christine, the Phantom is assumed to have killed an innocent stage machinist by hanging, and crushed another man with a fallen chandelier. He is a ghost to everyone in the Opera house, and he is feared by everyone besides Christine. Poignantly, in terms of the aesthetics of the novel, is the Phantom's wretched face and outward appearance. While he wears a mask in an attempt to cover his ugliness, his appearance resembles that of a ghost. He hides underground in a river, which is supported historically by the lake found underground in the Paris Opera house. While his voice is beautiful enough for him to tutor the talented Christine, he nonetheless cannot show himself and therefore sings "through" Christine. Though he can be read as a figure of Decadence, he is physically deformed and deemed hideous by the entirety of the opera house. This notion of whether or not the Phantom is beautiful by way of his voice despite his outward appearance invokes a redefinition of Decadence and aestheticism. In making this Decadent figure hideous in his physical deformities, Leroux suggests that there is a source of Decadence and aestheticism which comes solely from within; in this case, solely from music. As Walter Pater writes in his *The Renaissance*, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" (135). Leroux thus adheres to this related idea that music is an

art form which can be held above all others, taking over the soul in mysterious ways, rather than assessed by its physical vessel.

Though Leroux tells us otherwise later on in the work, music is certainly not lauded in the beginning of the novel, despite the fact that the story takes place at an opera house. Firstly, the Paris Opera company expresses clear anger when their shows are consistently halted and beautiful music cannot be delivered, due to the Phantom. Nonetheless, the company overlooks the Phantom's voice, though it rings loudly and clearly and is hauntingly beautiful. Christine seems to be the sole character, at least at the beginning of the novel, to acknowledge music as an art form taking precedence over outward aesthetics, or outward beauty. She does not discount the Phantom's teachings, nor his voice, though he cannot be seen; the Phantom allows for the visual to come second to the auditory. The Phantom's voice is disembodied, as we do not see it as coming from his grotesque physical form. Rather, we separate it and declare it beautiful, in its disembodiment. The way in which Christine is able to speak to this disembodied voice can be potentially attributed to the passing of her father, in that she expresses the ability to hear him distinctly, though he is deceased, especially when she visits his grave. There is a striking parallel between Christine's experience of the Phantom and her interactions with her deceased father, leaving room for interpretation regarding their spiritual connection and further highlighting the notion of a disembodied voice. While there is a distinctly powerful connection between the Phantom and Christine, there is also a notable dissimilarity between them. Christine is described throughout the novel as beautiful and youthful, while the Phantom is deemed wretched and hideous-looking. His wretchedness often relegates him to nonexistence. With such an emphasis on aesthetics and beauty at the time in Europe, it seems as though, without beauty, one might fade completely into the background, just as the Phantom does in the novel for those other than Christine.

It is unclear for a reader whether or not the Phantom exists as a human being, or if he is in most ways a figment of Christine's imagination, a reflection of her deceased father, or even her deceased father's music tutor. In the novel, we are faced with the possibility that Christine's father had sent her a singing tutor, but we think otherwise when Christine encounters her father's grave and hears the Phantom. Even if the Phantom is purely a voice and a figment of Christine's imagination, the novel attributes many physical qualities to the Phantom, humanizing him for all practical purposes. It is possible to see Christine's relationship with the Phantom as something quite deep; the insignificance of the Phantom's bodily form is stressed, as Christine falls in love with his music.

Others in the opera house do not seem to share Christine's optimistic thoughts about the Phantom, as when they hear the Phantom's voice, they do not even slightly acknowledge its beauty. Instead, they panic in fear. This is more applicable in the film and in musical adaptations of the novel, but one would assume that a voice as beautiful and highly trained as the Phantom's would not go entirely unnoticed by the opera company. Leroux creates an obvious point in the novel in which aestheticism is stressed, through the masked ball scene. The scene begins by reviewing Christine's emotional state as a new musical prodigy, following the death of her father. The narrator says:

After her father's death, she acquired a distaste of everything in life, including her art. She went through the conservatoire like a poor soulless singing-machine. And, suddenly, she awoke as though through the intervention of a god. The Angel of Music appeared upon the scene!

(116-117)

Rather than emphasizing the notion that Christine sees music, or the Angel's music, more clearly and authentically than others in her company, the narrator showcases the idea that the Angel allows for Christine to regain this aesthetic appreciation that she had once lost. In saying that she was "poor" and

“soulless,” the narrator hones the idea that in order for art to be authentic, it must contain an aspect of soul. If not, the art is bleak and lacks beauty. Further, it seems that this “awakening” can be taken quite generally, more specifically in the context of art’s form. The novel advocates an unmistakable hierarchy of beauty, especially in the company members’ aversion to the Phantom’s appearance. The hierarchy of art in this aesthetic moment, as seen by Leroux, seems to place visual art at the peak of aestheticism, with music somewhere beneath it. However, at the beginning of the masked ball scene and in this introduction by the narrator, it seems that Leroux suggests that Christine begins to truly hear the voice of her ghost; she begins to hold music up to where it should be in this aesthetic hierarchy of sorts.

Further, in the masked ball scene, we see Christine take the Phantom’s feelings under closer consideration than Raoul’s. Though there are moments in which Christine seems to prioritize her relationship with Erik over her relationship with Raoul, in this scene, Christine finally notices this and comes to terms with it. Those attending the ball realize that the Phantom is there, by his “red feet” (121), and though everyone is masked at this ball, the Phantom’s mask is named “hideous,” and it is visibly different from the other masks worn by the ball’s attendees. As Leroux decides to create this scene in which people’s outer selves are masked, beautiful or not, he seemingly implies that anyone can be whomever he or she wants on the surface. What cannot change, however, is the inner; inner talent and the Phantom’s musical capabilities are relevant here. In the disaster that occurs during this scene, in which Erik is “discovered” because of his red feet, Raoul decides to come face to face with Erik, in an attempt to do away with this love triangle once and for all and claim the prize, which is Christine. Raoul exclaims, “I shall snatch off his mask, as I shall snatch off my own; and, this time, we shall look each other in the face, he and I, with no veil and no lies between us; and I shall know whom you love

and who loves you!” (121). While ready to do away with this deranged situation, this seemingly reasonable idea on Raoul’s part does not go as planned. Rather, Christine pities the Phantom and attempts to give him time to escape this disaster, so as not to embarrass himself. Her connection with the Phantom as Erik is truly unmasked, as there seems to be no comparison between her connection with him and her love for Raoul. Following the climax of the scene, the narrator writes, “Christine entered, took off her mask with a weary movement and flung it on the table. She sighed and let her pretty head fall into her two hands . . . What had Erik to do with Christine’s sighs and why was she pitying Erik when Raoul was so unhappy?” (125). With this, Christine has made an obvious choice, prioritizing the feelings of this wretched, ugly, ghost-like figure over a man who loves her, and who is not deformed like the Phantom. It seems that this monumental decision is derived from the storyline’s emphasis on beauty which cannot be seen.

While the Paris Opera at the time was a culmination of very many things that one would describe as “aesthetic,” with beautiful dancers and an ornate set, it seems that through Leroux and through *The Phantom of the Opera*’s storyline, music resides above all other forms of art. Christine is able to recognize this, despite all of her peers who cannot, though they claim to devote their lives and careers to music at the opera house. As we see ties between this mysterious vocal tutor, or this Angel of Music, and Christine’s deceased father, we are able to come to the conclusion that perhaps this notion of music being the highest form of art comes back from the dead; it is derived from the past. Just like a memory tends to do, music takes over the mind in ways which we cannot quite understand. This notion of death and memory intertwined with music is furthered when we learn that Christine’s father had told her a similar story of an angel who had turned musicians into prodigies. Whether or not this Angel of Music is an embodiment of Christine’s deceased father, if he is just some other figment of her

imagination, or if he is a real ghostlike figure living in the lake below the Opera house, Leroux's story puts emphasis on music and the way in which it is overlooked in this development of the Musikdrama and in "new-wave" art production, more generally. We can also see the way in which Christine prioritizes the Phantom's music, as well as his critiques of her singing, as being a step towards partially reforming Wilde's Decadent thought and taking music as the highest form of beauty, rather than literature. "The Critic as Artist" allows for a reader to see precisely how Wilde saw music as an art form, now in the context of the Phantom in Leroux's novel. Through Gilbert, Wilde expresses the notion that effective art often comes with extreme ambiguity. Gilbert says:

Music can never reveal its ultimate secret. This, also, is the explanation of the value of limitations in art. The sculptor gladly surrenders imitative colour, and the painter and the actual dimensions of form, because by such renunciations they are able to avoid too definite a presentation of Real, which would be mere imitation, and too definite a realization of the Ideal, which would be too purely intellectual. (265)

As Wilde expresses his thoughts on aestheticism through Gilbert, it is clear that Wilde sees music's beauty through the seemingly anonymous source which produces it. The way in which it becomes inspired, as well as its points of reference, are unknown. In the context of Leroux's novel, music's source is often starkly anonymous through the disembodied voice of the Phantom.

Moving on from *The Phantom of the Opera*'s and Leroux's view on the importance of music in a Decadent world, we can see *The Phantom of the Opera* as representing a turning point, through the way it questions music's commodified status. Both the ways in which music and the voice is commodified within the novel, in addition to the way in which the novel itself was and continues to be commodified through its highly profitable adaptations, is relevant here. In the novel, Christine's voice

is initially called upon as a replacement for one of the lead sopranos who is ill. Immediately, her voice becomes a means of profitable gain for the opera house, as we see her being tutored later on by the Phantom. Becoming a commodity of a greater importance to the opera as the novel progresses, we see Christine take on roles that she would never have been able to accomplish prior, as she was quite the underrated singer. Just as Christine is relevant in looking at the commodification of voice and music in Leroux's novel, so is the Phantom. Living hidden beneath the opera house, we may wonder what his role is within the opera house itself. Perhaps he is a means for bettering the commodity that is Christine's voice, by way of improving it so drastically, or perhaps he is responsible for turning the opera house upside down and ruining its potential for profitable gain by this eerie ghost rumor, which he began. Looking at the end of the novel is especially interesting, in that we see Erik's past and future flash before our eyes as readers, in a surprising manner. Despite our opinions of the Phantom's realness, we are dealt a final story which supports our reading of Erik as a real man. Narrated at the end of the novel, we learn that Erik had been deformed from birth and that he was the son of a construction business owner. With this, he becomes entirely demystified to us readers. We learn that after traveling the world and beginning his own construction business, he had returned to France and to the Paris Opera House, building himself an underground lair in which he would be able to hide. This final chapter in Leroux's novel allows us to see that Phantom Erik, too, played a role in the capitalist society in which we find Christine. Though a skilled, angelic vocalist with the ability to train a prodigy, Erik had been subject to the profit-focused society in which he lived, nonetheless.

*The Phantom of the Opera* contains much in its plot which involves music and art commodities, which is interesting to consider as the work itself becomes commodified through its various adaptations. Countless film adaptations, beginning with the nearly-forgotten 1916 film *Das*

*Phantom der Oper*, to its memorable 1943 version which features Claude Rains as the Phantom, made significant contributions to cinematic history as well as the industry's profits. There have also been various television episodes of the work, in addition to radio performances, comics, and other forms of media (Meg). Perhaps most notably and relevant is Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1988 musical adaptation of Leroux's novel, which itself was adapted into a film by 2004 (Nelson). As the longest running Broadway musical in history, it has won various awards and made a significant impact on the industry by the vast profit which it generated, having been seen by over 130 million people worldwide (The Phantom of the Opera). By the attention that it received, Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* could not have remained a novel, but rather it needed to embody the Musikdrama; it needed to become the "music of the future." By demonstrating itself as a commodity, in its various and continually profitable forms of media, as well as in its storyline which embodies the notion of the commodification of voice and music, it has done just that.

#### IV.

##### Music as Commodity

This section will closely examine Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation of Leroux's novel, while considering the meaning of reproduction in the context of things as transitory as music and live performance. Additionally, this chapter will evaluate Leroux's novel as a work which was designed for reproducibility, as well as the modern, highly lucrative, and subjective implications of this. The transformation of the French novel into a musical showcases how capitalist society has taken the text, which—at least in some ways, as I have already demonstrated—intends to laud Decadence



and its purist doctrine of “art for art’s sake,” and distorted it. In 1984, aspiring to create a new musical appealing to romantics, the renowned composer of many previously notable works, Andrew Lloyd Webber, suggested to Cameron Mackintosh, co-producer of *Cats*, that Leroux’s novel might be a source of inspiration (Andrew Lloyd Webber). That it was, and thus *The Phantom of the Opera* and the peak of musical success was written. The music of the production, written and lyricized by Webber and Charles Hart, is especially compelling, with both operatic and more traditional Broadway musical style (Discogs). Following its 1988 Broadway debut, *The Phantom of the Opera* has astonishingly not left Broadway for thirty-two years now. The longest-running Broadway show in history, *The Phantom of the Opera* has been praised by eager show-goers all throughout the world, ready to witness the musical production which Andrew Lloyd Webber has made possible. An estimated 140 million people have consumed the product thus far, in 41 countries. Further, the show is in fact the first stage production in history to gross \$6 billion, a profit that substantially surpasses the profit of enormously popular films including *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* (The Shubert Organization).

Now, it should be noticed that in the same way that Leroux portrays the notion that pure art cannot endure within a capitalist society, *The Phantom of the Opera*, as a movie, a musical, and much else, presents itself as a paradox. As a novel whose protagonist is especially hard on the commodification of music, *The Phantom of the Opera* offers an outward-looking perspective on the commodification of music in performance. While the novel can be seen as an attempt to critique how art loses its true meaning when embedded within for-profit institutions like the opera house, the cultural phenomenon that *The Phantom of the Opera* became is an example of just that. On the one hand, Leroux may have been aware of his novel’s potential success. First published as a serialization in

*Le Gaulois* from September 1909 to January 1910, Leroux's novel was originally unsuccessful in terms of consumption and even went out of print numerous times (Nelson). The novel was later published in volume form by Pierre Lafitte in March of 1910. As the novel's original publication demand did not dictate its volume form release, this later publication was most likely in an attempt to draw in potential consumers. It is clear through the novel's publication history and success, or lack thereof, that Leroux could not have anticipated the fate of Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation of his work. That said, Leroux certainly released his novel in order for the public to read it. If he had wanted his novel to remain within a theoretical tight-knit circle, made up of only aesthetes and their families, then he would not have published it. In this way, it seems that Leroux himself reenacted the very point which he made about art and commodification, leading this notion to resonate more deeply in society and societies to come, and making an even stronger impact. With the host of products related to a musical based on a novel that questions the coexistence of capitalism and art, including but certainly not limited to *The Phantom of the Opera* mugs, hoodies, and, even undergarments, there is either a sort of irony or an intention behind them.

It should be noted that *The Phantom of the Opera* novel was not the only novel aestheticizing music to endure such paradoxical "commodification." Even in the Decadent period, George du Maurier's 1895 *Trilby* became a text which inspired productions of all kinds. In the novel, Trilby O'Farrell, upon meeting musicians Svengali and Gecko, becomes hypnotized by spell-caster Svengali. Through Svengali and in the trance which he induced, Trilby becomes a renowned singer, selling out concert halls and various performance venues with her now-beautiful voice. She becomes worn down, sick, and tired, as her identity becomes her manipulated voice; her sole purpose is in producing concert shows and pleasing crowd members. At the end of the novel, Svengali is killed by Gecko, and Trilby

loses her musical talent, singing utterly out of pitch at her final concert and enduring verbal harassment from an audience member. Trilby dies shortly after this, as she was not able to survive without her hypnotist (Britannica). To this date, the term “trilby” refers to a hat which is popular in both the United Kingdom and the United States, as the term was inspired by a hat used in a live theatre performance of the novel. Making more of an impact than on simply men’s fashion, *Trilby* became commodified and caused vast commodification, inspiring a host of things, including soap, stoves, and much else (Katz 165-168). There are undoubtedly many plot-related similarities between George du Maurier’s *Trilby* and Leroux’s *The Phantom of the Opera*, as we can specifically compare Trilby to Christine and Svengali to the Phantom. Both Trilby and Christine are young, impressionable, and heavily reliant on their vocal mentors, who vanish by the end. *Trilby* and *The Phantom of the Opera* are novels about the relationship between art and art performance, as well as ideals of artistry and production. Even further, both novels feature characters who embody the kind of Decadent ideals embedded within Wilde’s “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” and yet later become a pipeline for production, industrialism, and capitalism.

In thinking about why *The Phantom of the Opera* in particular became the longest-running Broadway musical and transcended the norm, by the way in which it truly touched all forms of media, we can look to its aspects which are most memorable by its consumers. Giorgio Biancorosso, in his *The Phantom of the Opera and the Performance of Cinema*, surmises that this memorability perhaps derives from the highly “cinematic,” visual event within it: the falling of the chandelier. He also showcases the way in which the work has been remembered historically and how it continues to make its mark on current societies, through various modern forms of media. In beginning his article by discussing a YouTube video entitled “Chandelier Crashes,” in which a chronological montage shows numerous

screen adaptations of Leroux's novel, he sets the stage for his discussion of the modernization and recommodification of the timeless story. Biancoroso writes:

The catastrophic accident is perfectly timed and encapsulates the novel's ambivalent appeal as an allegory of opera at once uplifting and lurid. It symbolizes the move from the allusiveness of neo-Gothic literature to the graphic literalness of a new, and wholly modern, sensibility, one which the cinema would be supremely well equipped to cultivate. (153)

Here, Biancoroso speculates the reasons as to why the novel was seemingly "groomed" for its own commodification. Following this, Biancoroso analyzes other Phantom-related media forms, which prove the novel's ongoing, global relevance. Tracing through various adaptations, including one particular Mexican parody and a Chinese-language version, Biancoroso allows us to see how exactly the infamous chandelier crash event in the novel became and stayed relevant within many cultures, through many time periods. According to Biancoroso:

Economics, sensibility, questions of casting and personnel, audience expectations, and inertia all play a role. It is my contention that *The Phantom of the Opera* owes at least part of its longstanding fortune on the big screen—and in the culture at large—to its appeal as a template for the exploration of the immense possibilities of the cinematic medium. (156)

While we can read the crash of the chandelier as being related to music by the sound that inherently succeeds it, whether or not the novel's cinematic potential is derived from the crashing event is not relevant in acknowledging its vast implications on the commodification of art and music. However, it should be noted that critics and scholars offer conflicting views regarding the most memorable aspects of the movie or musical; while some consider the auditory piece of *The Phantom of the Opera* to be most significant, others remember the highly visual chandelier crash most clearly. It seems that if one

were to solely read Leroux's novel and not experience the movie or musical version of *The Phantom of the Opera*, the concept of sound which the story emphasizes would likely be most significant to a reader. However, as the novel became increasingly commodified and appealing to popular culture, the visual of the chandelier crashing is a glaring aspect of the show; one that viewers remember when they walk out of the theatre.

While it is clear that the visual aspects of *The Phantom of the Opera* performances have been highly commodifiable, and successful in that, music is less directly associated with commodity in its ephemerality. With that said, music plays a unique role in the context of art and production, as it has always been something which is undeniably produced, whether or not directly for profit. In returning to the Decadents, Oscar Wilde's "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" directly states that art cannot be effectively created with an economic structure in place that draws human beings to do activities which lead to earning money. Only without a kind of capital structure in place can a human being truly create art and unleash his or her artistry. In acknowledging the nature of the society in which we live, at this point in time, we can see that Wilde would not consider the musical composition for the production of *The Phantom of the Opera* as being "authentic" art. Rather, it might fall in between art and some notion of commodity, as it was likely composed with the intention of having a mass audience of some kind. In order to make the distinction between music as a commodity or an art, particularly within the context of Leroux's novel and Webber's musical adaptation, one must decide whether or not music, if truly a commodity, has been stripped of its artistry. The Phantom himself, as portrayed within the novel, is a Decadent figure, by the way in which he immerses himself in and even embodies Christine's voice and music. This seemingly alters the materiality of his own body, further emphasizing the ephemeral quality of music. The Phantom *becomes* the music, as he appears and

disappears through his voice. His ghostly, transient quality allows him to escape the confines of the opera house's structure, but by the end of the novel, we find that he has secretly succumbed to this society to which profit is most important and in fact has worked in the construction business all along. Rather than embodying—or disembodying—the fleeting beauty which lives within the opera house, the Phantom is responsible for the outer walls of the opera house, as he built the structure.

In addition to understanding the significant role played by music in the novel, the role it plays outside the novel is highly important to consider. Given that the Broadway music which both Webber and Hart jointly created in order to suit Leroux's novel became highly successful as its own entity, music in particular is relevant in thinking about how the show's storyline contributes to the idea of the commodification of art. In analyzing the vastly popular musical score created for Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* musical, we can consider whether or not the musical score, which is brought to life by the assembly line of actors and actresses, contributes to the art "production," or in some ways "purifies" it, due to music's inherently ephemeral nature. Just as a Broadway souvenir, such as a mug or t-shirt, is frequently mass-produced in the context of *The Phantom of the Opera*, we can consider whether or not the music within the production illuminates the musical as art or plays a different role. *The Phantom of the Opera* soundtrack defines the musical, leading to its great success.

In order to succinctly analyze the musical, one must grapple with both the tangible and fleeting things which make the production the highly-consumed product which it currently is. British scholar Steven Connor puts into words the difficulty in marrying ephemerality with the tangible. He emphasizes that human beings are drawn to things which encompass both the spiritual and the "aura," as well as the physical. Though it cannot be seen, Connor implies that music is something which

affects the human, or the skin, like nothing else, eliciting an often drastic and spiritual reaction. In his *The Book of Skin*, Connor writes:

Why should it be that a phrase of music . . . should be registered so immediately in this lifting, this shifting, this sizzling of the skin, as though they had not needed to be taken in and made intelligible by the ear at all? (246)

As we can imagine through Connor's words, there is no trace left of the music which caused such an effect. Once finished, it is as though the music never played at all. With this, we can see that it is increasingly difficult to encompass the production, or reproduction, of that which vanishes so quickly and even cannot be seen. That said, it is clear that music has been made into some highly-producible version of its former self, upon the rise of the production of other art forms. Webber and Hart jointly created a musical score which has shaped *The Phantom of the Opera* musical into something that is highly producible. Notably, one can point to the commodification of the *bel canto* form of opera, translated as "beautiful singing," present throughout the musical's score. A mid-nineteenth-century style of opera, Bel Canto has been undoubtedly adopted to fit the modern audience, and even utilized for the commercialization of the musical. As the musical is set in an earlier historical period and in an opera house, Lloyd Webber drew upon much of Bel Canto in the music style which he assigned to *The Phantom of the Opera*. James Stark's *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* details the precise way in which a singer might sing in this particular operatic style. He writes:

Belting takes place in both female and male singers when the chest voice is carried beyond the point where it would ordinarily switch registers, at about *E4* (330 Hz) . . . this requires high effort and muscle rigidity which often results in a tone without vibrato, or one in which

vibrato only begins toward the end of the duration of the note in what is sometimes called a “vibrato crescendo.”

This description of “belting” within Bel Canto can be seen as quite familiar in the context of *The Phantom of the Opera*, as it occurs frequently within numerous songs in the musical, by Christine, the Phantom, and others. This singing technique is highly difficult to execute, it is required by those actors and actresses which are crucial to the production, and it is practiced heavily. According to the Los Angeles Times, “actresses playing Christine were encouraged to train their voices ‘bel-canto style,’ in hopes to achieve Lloyd Webber’s musical vision for the production” (Slate). Lloyd Webber’s Bel-Canto style musical score was anything but an accident, as he found a way to both set the musical in the time in which it was written, while commercializing a style of opera and music which had been popular for years previous to his musical adaptation of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Beyond the style of music, the lyrics to Webber’s musical score, written by Hart, are important to consider in thinking about the commercialization and commodification of the musical in whole. Highly romantic with sensationalist notes and wit, no matter its ephemerality, the music was bound to be tethered to the production and reproduction of *The Phantom of the Opera* musical.

While *The Phantom of the Opera* soundtrack has certainly been profit-generating and lauded by many, it is clear within Enrico Fubini’s *A History of Music Aesthetics* that quite a few music theorists would deem this cross between capitalism and art untrue to the art itself, much like Wilde’s opinion. Fubini discusses German philosopher Theodor Adorno’s criticism, particularly within his 1948 book *Philosophie der neuen Musik*: “Adorno stated here that ‘the only works of art that really count are those that are no longer works at all.’ His entire examination of ‘advanced music’ was designed to show that the only way to survive in an advanced capitalist society is to stand out against



it" (443). "Survival" is an intriguing term, particularly in this context of what music "must" do in order to stand alone, as art rather than commodity. It is clear that Fubini himself may see music as almost "having to do something other than being" in order to stand as none other than itself. In the present moment, if not "surviving" or "fighting" this large being that might just be capitalism, perhaps music as we know it would change completely. In Regula Burckhardt Qureshi's *Music and Marx*, we can see just how Adorno began to frame music's commodification. Qureshi states, "For Adorno, the mindless, mechanistic use of standardized song form in commercial popular music epitomized the conformism, commodification, and decline of critical faculties and human agency in the new political and economic order." (59) This notion of conformism is important, especially in the context of *The Phantom of the Opera*, a highly produced musical. Webber intentionally set out to create a musical production, actively choosing Leroux's novel as one which he deemed would be especially productive and fruitful for a musical production. In reflecting on its great success, there was undoubtedly a level of conformism which occurred, as society was notably "ready" for a production like the one Webber created, in acknowledging the past successes of Webber's past live performance productions, like *Cats*. According to Fubini:

In today's society, intellectual activity runs the risk of being completely dominated and submerged by economic and social relations, and the individual feels alienated because capitalist industrial society has stifled his independence and free creativity, and brought about an ever-increasing degree of standardization that has encroached upon art generally and turned it into a commercial item subject to the laws of supply and demand. Music in particular is becoming commercialized and spoiled, losing its character as truth and becoming a mere plaything. (448)

This highly negative forecasting of the nature of music is one way to see what has already happened as a result of a global, seemingly-inevitable commodification of performance. *The Phantom of the Opera* soundtrack, for example, is both a standardized and commercialized product. It is clear that many theorists would unapologetically state that the perceived level of “artistry” present within the soundtrack might have decreased substantially upon the introduction of industrialization, if it would be possible to measure numerically. However, Qureshi’s *Music and Marx* offers “hope” for music, if you will. She states, “The gradual elevation of the reflective listener and the disappearance of musical practice proves to be a significant part of the development of an ideology of serious music in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (12). Here, Qureshi references the time just before Leroux’s novel was published, as well as the time in which Walter Pater and Wilde were actively thinking about how to conduct art criticism and perceive the quality of music within industrialization.

While *The Phantom of the Opera* emphasizes a powerful ideology of the purity and uniqueness of art in its storyline, it simultaneously offers a highly non-unique, marketable product, in practice. In Matthew Reason’s *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance*, one can see that the production of a musical itself is just that; it is a *production*. In putting on any successful musical or show, there is undeniably something which is produced; a multimedia performance is not unlike any other kind of commodity. According to Reason, “Performance becomes a commodity that is repeated as exactly as possible not just night after night but year after year regardless of cast changes, the employment of new directors or the restaging in new venues” (17). The product that is industrialized, replicated, and utterly commodified is nothing other than what was intended to be the art itself. Thus, Leroux’s novel, which can be read as criticism on art and this very sense of production,

is reduced to a single commodity on the conveyor belt. Reason quotes from Susan Russell, a former actress who played the role of Carlotta in the *Phantom* musical:

I was one of thirty-seven workers who built the standardized product of *The Phantom of the Opera* every night. My function was to replace a missing worker, accomplish their required tasks, and assemble the product without missing a beat, interrupting the flow, or disturbing the rest of the machine. (17)

In referring to *The Phantom of the Opera* as a “standardized product,” Russell abolishes any notion of creativity or “the artist,” a notion which occupies much of this particular production’s plot. With this statement, one can imagine that Russell, an actress on the Broadway *Phantom* team, was rotely uttering her words on the stage and stoically enunciating her assigned lines. The musical loses its musicality, and the actress, or artist, becomes no different than any employee, delivering the machine-generated product which he or she has been told to. The machine analogy implies that each performance exactly replicates any other. The undeniable notion that bodies, which are inherently unique and authentic, are the focus of the performance, which makes it absolutely impossible to standardize any given performance, is also relevant here in thinking about the nuances of live performance. With that said, key aspects of the show do not change for the most part, including the 130 cast and crew members per performance, the 230 costumes, and the two hours that it takes for the Phantom to apply his makeup (The Phantom of the Opera).

Moreover, the musical is one which attracts its same audience a second, third, or even hundredth time around. Although on the one hand, repeat viewing suggests the pleasures of repetition, on the other hand, it could also mean that there are small differences within each performance which makes it worth paying the ticket price more than once, such as a change in cast or a

different nuance in the artistic direction, as time progresses. Reason works through the notion that audience members return time and time again, in part attributing this to the specific marketing of live theater performance, and “liveness as a product” (17). He states:

According to the terms of such marketing, while promoting a unique, one-off, live experience it is likely that such repeated consumption is the result of the standardisation of the product (its quality of already being known) rather than of any truly radical experience or expectation of difference. (17)

This “uniqueness” which is, by definition, the distinction between more than one performance, is contradicted as a product of the very marketing of performance. The notion of uniqueness is very much interrelated with the ideology of “pure” art, as something which derives from none other than the particular human being, or soul, and thus cannot be replicated. Thus, the term “unique” loses its meaning when used in order to market the live performance to a mass audience. Rather than simply acting as a quality of the performance, it becomes the essential part of the standardized product and thus the standardized performance.

On the contrary, performing *The Phantom of the Opera* live, time and time again, brings an audience closer to the show’s very first live performance, and thus a notion of “fidelity” is enhanced. Distinguishing between reproduction and repetition is crucial to understanding the implications of live theater performance within capitalism, as one is able to question whether or not reproduction or repetition maintains a larger sense of individuality. Oneness is emphasized through repetition, allowing for a closeness to the authenticity that can be found through any “first” or “only.” According to Reason, referencing Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*:

Perhaps this repetition at the level of external conduct echoes, for its own part, a more secret vibration which animates it, a more profound, internal repetition within the singular. This is the apparent paradox of festivals: they repeat an “unrepeatable.” They do not add a second and a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the “nth” power. (19).

Here, Deleuze supposes that repetition in fact enhances or even causes an art form to substantiate itself. In music, especially, we might find this notion true, as the repetition of a particular note can enhance the musical piece’s “artistry,” crossing the boundary from mere sound to music. Through Deleuze, we are able to think about the film adaptations of Leroux’s novel. We can see the way that *The Phantom of the Opera* on film might be perceived as more unique through its repetition rather than reproduction. Using this same logic, the live theater performances of *The Phantom of the Opera*, which have broken such records and reached such peaks of success, can perhaps be seen as contributing to the height of capitalism, as with every reproduction, one is drawn further and further away from the original production. It should be noted that while “uniqueness” is described as what defines live performance, this word seems quite limiting. Rather, it seems that the notion of an audience’s presentness and the ephemeral nature of instantaneous sound and song defines live performance and cannot be diminished by any sort of mass marketing.

In thinking about the purpose of live performance further, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production” by Walter Benjamin is especially interesting to consider. This essay deals with the possibility of art, both within and following industrialization, producing something which he refers to as “aura,” a remnant of art which is both similar and dissimilar to “true” art. In expanding on his notion of “aura,” Benjamin writes, “One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of

art” (4). In using the term “withers,” Benjamin seemingly implies that the original form of art is actively decreasing in strength or quality and simultaneously being reduced to some notion of “nothingness,” neither art nor aura. While Benjamin does suggest a negative connotation here, he further expands on this point in his essay and fathoms the quite double-edged nature of aesthetic reproduction. He states:

By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. (4)

With this, it is possible to see that during the turn of the last century, what had been formerly known as tradition within art was destroyed, while simultaneously permitting this “renewal” of the human being and rebirth of culture. In the context of tradition versus rote reproduction, we can use both Homer’s song and Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera* “The Music of the Night” track as relevant examples. Homer’s poetry is known to be passed through the generations by tongue, because no two repetitions of words nor melody were entirely alike. This was tradition: to pass a story through the generations, by way of music. It is also important to note that it is undeniably impossible to introduce to modern society Homer’s original song. There will never be any way to attain this first “copy,” as any version which we hear or read of “The Odyssey” to this date was not by any means what had been uttered through the original ancients’ lips. There is artistic beauty in this; there is beauty in a detachment from the original, as this detachment signifies artistic revision by a modern people and culture. Modern day voice is different, as is the inherent meaning which we extract from any ancient word. Still, *The Phantom of the Opera*’s “The Music of the Night,” which is a standardized track,

proposes something which is not very different. According to Benjamin, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (3). Though the very utterances of the renowned actresses who played Christine, Sarah Brightman, do not change in terms of texture of voice, precise pitch, and so forth, there is a level to which her voice does change (Playbill).

Further, Benjamin’s argument implies that pure reproduction, such as in replaying an audio tape or movie, is no less authentic than any other kind of reproduction such as the passing down of “The Odyssey” through generations and the live *The Phantom of the Opera* musical. Any “level” of authenticity is removed here; the differences inherent within varying art reproduction modes are not hierarchized in any way. Benjamin writes:

One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. (4)

As Benjamin supports this notion of “detachment from the original,” he still does not say that this is negative. This “own particular situation,” which he references in the context of any listened artwork, may in fact add to the original, detract from the original, or, that which is more likely, simultaneously do both.

Benjamin’s notion of art reproduction can not only be applied to the state of the art critic, but also to the one who in fact produces the art. The nineteenth century was a pivotal moment in history which notably marked a social change in terms of who were the artists, who were the producers, and whether or not these would be mutually exclusive identities. Leroux’s novel sheds some light onto this

notion, in that the primary artist, the Phantom, is both an artist and a “producer.” He produces work for a living, he produces Christine’s art, and he produces his own art in the form of music, as per Webber’s musical. In wearing so many hats, it seems that The Phantom, as both a Decadent figure as well as a citizen in a capitalist society, gives way to the possibility that there can be a “Decadent producer,” and that this is not an oxymoron. Benjamin discusses the potential impact of the rampant notion of reproduction within society, on the artist. He states, “For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (6). The very impossibility to separate the art itself from the person, society, or entity on which it has impact causes innumerable changes to this fragile relationship between art and art-consumer, as well as now, art and art-producer (Attali 10). The notion that nineteenth-century art was not only being reproduced, but that its reproduction was somehow only in reference to “true” art, is complicated. Rather, the art which was being reproduced was simultaneously the art that was a product of this reproduction-centered mentality, now ingrained within not only Europe, but the entirety of the world. Benjamin suggests a way in which perhaps this symbiotic relationship between a reproduction-centered society and “art,” in whichever form it takes, might be combatted and amended. He writes, “Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art . . . The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public” (14). With this, it is interesting to think about the level to which Andrew Lloyd Webber was influenced by the time in which he lived, when he turned *The Phantom of the Opera* into the highly-reproducible, successful musical that it became.



The level to which the musical form of *The Phantom of the Opera* was “designed for reproducibility” is disputable, but one can assume that monetary gain was part of Webber’s decision to create the production, especially because he had the idea to create “a musical,” prior to choosing Leroux’s novel as his next project in particular (Andrew Lloyd Webber Online). An audience might evaluate to what extent a given live performance reveals its reproducibility, as its purpose is partially in limiting this notion, keeping the audience in the dark with regards to how the performance had been constructed in order to produce an emotional effect. Perhaps this particular type of “testing” is what drives an audience to watch *The Phantom of the Opera* musical, leading to its \$6 billion gross profit thus far (The Shubert Organization). Perhaps there exists a thrill in the attempt to “crack the code,” by the presence of real people on a real stage, revealing each of their secrets that this exact interlude had already been performed thousands of times, and will be again.

While this analysis may seem to harshly condemn the musical’s very existence, it is important to note that there are two major ideas to consider here, as we now think about the commodification of both live performance and music in a more positive light. Firstly, in assuming that Leroux’s novel was attempting to relay a message about music as a commodity, we can see that the traction which both the novel and the musical received serves as a precise example of what Leroux had seemingly foreseen. This is especially relevant in the context of Webber’s musical, as Leroux plays with various concepts surrounding the commodification of music through his portrayal of the Phantom. Secondly, the mass production of *The Phantom of the Opera*’s musical tracks, as well as the reproduction which occurs during each live performance of the show, allows the public access to music which would not have been possible if art and music were treated the way that Wilde had yearned for within his “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” and other works. This kind of accessibility can arguably create a more

art-driven society, even if the type of art which draws a level of mass consumption is not necessarily deemed the “purest” art.

Whether or not we see Leroux’s novel or its multimedia representations as ones which were designed for reproducibility, or view this very reproducibility as bringing the novel closer to its “purest,” most Decadent form, there is undoubtedly value to an artwork with such a propensity to reproduce. While perhaps Huysmans’ *Jean des Esseintes* might see a musical such as *The Phantom of the Opera*, in all of its enormous popularity, as ceasing to be pure or true, I believe that the *The Phantom of the Opera*’s very accessibility, as a product of its reproductive nature, is overall positive. Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera* musical has been the largest single handed generator of jobs in American theatrical history, which is certainly beneficial to any society, excluding Wilde’s socialism (The Shubert Organization). Additionally, *The Phantom of the Opera*’s vast popularity has normalized the concept of the “Decadent producer,” through the Phantom character, modernizing Decadent ideals and allowing for Decadents to be businesspersons and vice versa. Overall, the idea that the commodification of *The Phantom of the Opera* has allowed for the artists and the businesspersons (mutually exclusive or not) to sit side by side and experience such a beautiful thing, in whichever form, is nothing short of spectacular.

## Conclusion

Through the previous chapters of this thesis, we know that music has been commodified, and that the nineteenth century was a moment which questioned the newly commodified nature of music in the wake of industrialization. I believe that it is worth exploring why music has been commodified in the way that it has; why the commodified nature of music was and continues to be something so hidden. It seems that a major part of the success of the commodity that is music is the denial of its commodified nature. We do not wish to be reminded of the fact that it is produced or of the fact that it is produced for financial gain. Its ephemerality is what makes it worth money. According to Steven Connor's *The Matter of Air: Science and the Art of the Ethereal*:

Human beings have always believed themselves to be in part airy, and have often wanted to believe that their most essential part - their spirits, as they have liked to call them - were aeriform. And yet, in their clinging humility, human beings have viewed the idea of a literal translation into an airy condition with suspicion. For airiness also signifies delusion, insignificance, even madness. (10)

We humans, unlike other animals (so we think), have this "airiness" to us. This belief is perhaps grounded in nineteenth-century Europe, where socioeconomic hierarchies required a self-indulgent excuse to sustain. We believe that we have these certain souls, and music seems to feed our souls in a way which we cannot fully understand. We notice magical, bodily reactions when certain chords ring; we relish believing in magic. As per Connor, the magic of music is beautiful yet it is frightening, and we seemingly have found a way to reduce its "suspicious" nature, in succumbing it to capitalism, like everything else. On top of that, humans will pay any price for a commodity which touches such a

special part of them. Music satiates an otherwise untapped human need, which is invaluable, and any price can be put on magic.

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