

**SETTING EDGAR ALLAN POE TO MUSIC:
A VERSION OF "MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE" BY IRON
MAIDEN**

**Transplantando Edgar Allan Poe para a música
uma versão de "Assassinatos na Rua Morgue" de Iron Maiden**

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on "Murders in the rue Morgue", the song written by British heavy metal band Iron Maiden and inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's eponymous narrative. Stemming from a summary of the original story, we intend to investigate the process through which bassist-songwriter Steve Harris transplanted the story from the page into a diverse semiotic frame. If on the one hand the aggressive nature of heavy metal music favors the relocation of Poe's brutal plot, on the other the songwriter is obliged to exercise his ability to compress the storyline into short verses that, in order to remain true to this musical genre, are usually sung at a very fast tempo. Besides the song's lyrical analysis, we will also look into some musical facets such as the vocalist's diction, how the combined words and melody are delivered in order to convey a particular impression onto the listener, as well as some aspects concerning the arrangement of all of which will eventually contribute to the song's overall effect. To do that, we rely mainly on Luiz Tatit's writings about the Semiotics of the Song, explaining the analytical scheme he has devised for songs, and applying it to our object.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe; Iron Maiden; Popular Music Studies

RESUMO: Este artigo trata da canção "Murders in the rue Morgue", escrita pela banda inglesa de *heavy metal* Iron Maiden e inspirada pelo conto homônimo de Edgar Allan Poe. Partindo de um resumo da história original, pretendemos investigar o processo pelo qual o baixista e compositor Steve Harris transplantou o conto da página para um suporte semiótico distinto. Se por um lado a natureza agressiva do *heavy metal* favorece a adaptação do enredo brutal de Poe, por outro o compositor é obrigado a exercitar sua habilidade de comprimir o enredo em versos curtos que, para que se mantenham fiéis a esse gênero musical, devem ser cantados em andamento acelerado. Além da análise da letra da canção, também nos debruçaremos sobre algumas questões de natureza musical, como a enunciação do cantor, o modo como as palavras e a melodia interagem para comunicar uma impressão particular ao ouvinte, ou ainda alguns aspectos relativos ao arranjo de todos esses elementos que ao fim e ao cabo irão contribuir para o efeito geral da canção. Para fazê-lo, alicerçamo-nos, principalmente, nos escritos de Luiz Tatit sobre a Semiótica da Canção, explicando o esquema analítico por ele desenvolvido, e aplicando-o ao nosso objeto.

Palavras-chave: Edgar Allan Poe; Iron Maiden; Estudos de Música Popular.

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INTRODUCTION

“The Murders in the rue Morgue” is a short-story published by Edgar Allan Poe in *Graham’s Magazine* in 1841. Notwithstanding its undisputable condition as a Poe classic, it is perhaps not written in the same style which his mainstream stories are acclaimed for. After all, “Murders in the rue Morgue” is a detective story, allegedly the first of its kind; Poe would resume this genre in other works, namely “The Purloined Letter” and “The Mystery of Marie Roget”, in which the character Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin reappears. And by introducing Dupin, not only Poe inaugurates a new literary genre, but he would inspire a lineage of other classic detectives, such as Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot.

As stated, Edgar Allan Poe is better known for his horror stories. Although an American, and in spite of his technique of using a long dash not to specify dates or names of places (18--, L--), which adds to the mysterious tone of his writing, it is certain that many of his plots are set in Europe – especially in London and in Paris –, or at least they bear a European tinge. When one remembers the crimes that were occurring in the Victorian age, particularly those perpetrated by a certain Jack – Poe’s choices concerning literary genre and setting seem perfectly suited to his *Zeitgeist*.

The story is set in Paris, where a double murder takes place. The victims, a certain Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter, Mme. Camille L’Espanaye, are found terribly mutilated – the latter having been stuffed upside-down into the chimney of the room in which they lived. All the doors had been found locked from the inside, adding to the mystery. Written in the first person by a close acquaintance of M. Dupin, the story applies the same narrative strategy that would be later used by Conan Doyle (who chooses Watson, Sherlock Holmes’s assistant, to be the narrator) and even Umberto Eco (who, in *The Name of the Rose*, tells the story through Adso, the young novice of Brother William of Baskerville).

The narrative is said to have inaugurated the detective story genre, for it assembles the information piece by piece in a logical way, supposedly leading the reader to find out, from the clues exposed, all the details concerning the crime. Naturally, and in order to make Dupin seem extraordinarily clever in his reasoning, these clues are far too scarce for the average reader to draw any conclusions from; indeed, to any reader at all, therefore producing a sense

of marvel at Dupin's brilliant guesses. What is more, the narrator shares this impression with the reader, thus reinforcing the mystique around the detective.

The first few pages of the story are devoted to a long excerpt devoted to the logical techniques applied by chess players, as opposed to those used by draughts players. In this passage the reader becomes familiar with the sort of rationale that will be employed later on in the story. When the plot is finally introduced, the narrator firstly informs the reader of the circumstances in which he befriended M. Dupin – the central character –, and gives details of their relationship: a most secluded one, whose main common denominator was a passion for reading.

The two men learn of the murders in the rue Morgue from the newspapers, and since Dupin is attracted to unsolved puzzles and is acquainted with the Prefect of the Parisian Police, he asks for permission to look into the case. Permission granted, the following pages are a lengthy demonstration of Dupin's methods based on the clues found in the scene of the crime. Because the object of this paper is not Poe's narrative itself, but a musical adaptation of the short story recorded by a rock group, we will take the liberty of cutting this long story short (no pun intended); by skipping the details, let us simply sum it up by saying that, at the end of the story, Dupin and his assistant discover that the women had not been killed by a human being. Strangely enough, the atrocity was executed by an orang-outang who had escaped from its owner, a sailor who had brought it from a trip to Borneo. Having seen the sailor shave himself, the beast, now in the possession of a sharp razor, tries and "shaves" the poor victims, resulting in a hideous "butchery", as the narrator puts it. The unexpected participation of an ape playing the role of the murderer is somewhat disappointing to anyone who read other stories by Poe, for it lacks the emphasis the author often stresses on man's innate cruelty and vengeful impulses (in stories such as "The Cask of Amontillado"), or the occurrence of supernatural phenomena (in "The Mask of the Red Death", among others). Even so, and seeing that a "morgue" is, by definition, "a building or a room in a hospital where dead bodies are kept before they are buried or cremated", the title of the story must have drawn the attention of the musicians of Iron Maiden, whose style, heavy metal, has traditionally been attached to gruesome and demonic themes.

SETTING POE TO MUSIC

Iron Maiden is an English heavy metal band whose debut album was launched in 1980. The group's name was inspired by a medieval instrument of torture that consisted of a sarcophagus fitted with sharp prongs on the inside; by placing the victim in and slamming the door, he or she would bleed to death, but would not be killed at once; because the prongs were positioned in such an arrangement that no vital organ was pierced, the victim would agonize for as long as 72 hours. Although terrifying, this gruesome image is common to most heavy metal acts; the one facet that distinguishes Iron Maiden from other groups are the historically oriented and literary inspired lyrics. As a musical genre, heavy metal is marked by the use of ultra-distorted guitars, a thunderous rhythmic section (i.e. bass and drums) and aggressive vocals, and although its enthusiasts deny any bond with the Punk movement (which arose in the 70s), both genres share a non-conformist attitude. In a word, heavy metal and punk music constitute the soundtrack of society's "drop-outs".

Because this musical style is characteristically played and sung *uptempo*, it is sometimes difficult for the lead singer to enunciate lyrics that are too elaborate. This proved to be a problem for Iron Maiden on some occasions, for example when they wrote a version of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Upon trying to set Coleridge's long poem into music, Iron Maiden came up with a 13-minute long masterpiece which has become a mainstay in their repertoire. Nevertheless, as vocalist Bruce Dickinson put it, it was very difficult to utter the long verses without the words getting jumbled, seeing that the accompaniment was very fast.

As we will see, the strategy used in adapting "Murders in the rue Morgue" (renamed for the song without the article) was not to retell the original story, but to draw inspiration from it and add in other elements. Basically, the lyrics refer to the supposed assassin who is trying to escape from the police (as we saw, in the actual story it was an orang-outang). The words also succeed in conveying the mental agony experienced by the murderer, who visualizes the scene of the crime continually. So, without further ado, below we transcribe the lyrics of "Murders in the rue Morgue", by Iron Maiden:

Murders In The Rue Morgue
[Steve Harris]

I remember it as plain as day although it happened in the dark of the night.
 I was strolling through the streets of Paris and it was cold it was starting to rain.
 And then I heard a piercing scream and I rushed to the scene of the crime
 But all I found was the butchered remains of two girls lay side by side.

(Chorus) Murders in the Rue Morgue ó Someone call the Gendarmes
 Murders in the Rue Morgue ó Flee before the killers go free

There's some people coming down the street ó at last there's someone heard my call
 I can't understand why they're pointing at me, I never done nothing at all.
 But I must have got some blood on my hands because everyone's shouting at me
 I can't speak French so I couldn't explain and like a fool I started running away.

(Chorus) Murders in the Rue Morgue ó Someone call the Gendarmes
 Murders in the Rue Morgue ó Flee before the killers go free

(Middle 8) And now I've gotta get away from the arms of the law ó All France is looking
 for me.
 I've gotta find my way across the border for sure ó Down the South to Italy.

(Chorus + guitar solo + chorus)

Well I made it to the border at last but I can't erase the scene from my mind
 Anytime somebody stares at me, well I just start running blind
 Now I'm moving through the shadows at night away from the staring eyes
 Any day they'll be looking for me 'cause I know I show the signs of...

(Chorus) Murders in the Rue Morgue ó Someone call the Gendarmes
 Murders in the Rue Morgue ó Flee before the killers go free

It took so long and I'm getting so tired, I'm running out of places to hide
 Should I return to the scene of the crime where the two young victims died
 If I could go to somebody for help it'd get me out of trouble for sure
 But I know that it's on my mind that my doctor said I've done it before.

(Chorus) Murders in the Rue Morgue ó Someone call the Gendarmes
 Murders in the Rue Morgue ó Flee before the killers go free

The song is structured into five distinctive parts: I) instrumental introduction, II) stanzas, III) chorus, IV) ãmiddle 8ö, and V) guitar solo. Before analyzing these parts, it is relevant to make some comments about the key, namely E minor. The minor mode traditionally suggests sadness in the Western musical system. The key of E is very used in heavy metal music.

This genre is built around the electric guitar, and in this instrument the songs in E offer a range of advantages for the musician, be them the so-called *power chords* (formed only by the root note, plus the fifth), which are used played with saturated distortion, or *clean* chords. In the latter case, it is handy to play songs in E, since the first and sixth strings are already tuned in this key and the remainder of the strings require minor adjustments to be in tune, thus making the guitarist's job easier.

When played with a distortion, the chords in E offer unparalleled depth in the instrument's range, since E is the lowest of the strings; combined with the distortion, it produces an *in your face*, brutal sound that suits the heavy metal style perfectly. Concerning solos, the key of E has also many advantages for the player, firstly for the same reasons stated above; besides, in the guitars fitted with 24 frets, a range of 4 octaves is fully covered, starting and finishing in E.

Finally, for playing harmonics (high-pitched sounds that are produced by only touching lightly on the string, but which are easily achieved on certain frets), it is also practical to be play in E. For all this, many heavy metal songwriters choose E as their favourite key, and Iron Maiden is no exception to the rule: examples in their repertoire include *Aces High*, *The Trooper*, *The rime of the ancient mariner*, *Wretchchild*, *Children of the damned*, *Hallowed be thy name*, *Die with your boots on*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Somewhere in time*, 'Wasted years', and *Alexander the Great*, to name but a few, many of which very much follow the aforementioned E-C-D harmonic scheme closely.

That being said, let us turn to the instrumental intro. It starts in a series of chords beginning in the key of E minor: Bm, C, D, and back to Bm, being slowly played in *fingerpicking* style. Built as a *crescendo*, this chord sequence is shadowed by a bass line played on the upper frets and by the snare drum, both of which grow in volume and intensity until they explode in a two-guitar solo in very high register. The *tempo*, although not slow, is at around 135 bpm (beats per minute). But it will appear to be slow when the main stanzas enter, since these are played at a breakneck speed of about 210 bpm (metronomes, the devices used to measure the music's *tempo*, usually range from 30-40 to 230-250 bpm).

Nevertheless, we would not put forward these figures only for the record, or we that would result in a merely descriptive analysis. We believe that in popular music it is much more productive to try and infer meanings from these musical elements, and see how they can

be interpreted when read alongside the lyrics, in order to form a meaningful whole. In this sense, it is imperative to remind readers that music is not able to *represent* elements of the palpable reality as spoken or written language does, in a significant-signified fashion. However, the music sign is certainly capable of *suggesting* states of mind, feelings, and atmospheres, and this is how we intend to analyze the musical background of these songs: by comparing them with the lyrics and trying to detect the songwriter's intentions in the process of putting together certain words and chords, timbres, melodies, intervals, *tempos*, etc.

Thus, the instrumental introduction described above, with its very slow fingerpicking first part supported by the bass-drum *crescendo*, and the second part of the intro exploding in a mind-blowing guitar solo may be semiotically interpreted firstly as the background to the murders in the rue Morgue (i.e. a quiet and dimly-lit street in 19th century Paris), and secondly as the crime itself. Then comes the main character's frenzied attempt at escaping, hence the very fast *tempo*.

In the first stanza, the main character narrates in flashback the occasion when the murders in the rue Morgue took place – not forgetting to mention that it was starting to rain, an element that adds to the somber scene – and he reveals having been a witness of the crime (first he hears a piercing scream, then he runs to the site of the crime to find only the butchered remains of two women lying dead).

Here a note on Luiz Tatit's interpretive model of popular music may be appropriate. In his seminal work *A Canção*, the Linguistics professor from USP proposes a 3-part scheme to characterize the vocal line, depending on the effect the singer/songwriter wishes to convey to the listener; in a free translation, these are called (i) figurativization, (ii) thematization, and (iii) passionization. These are compositional strategies applied to the song, and refer, respectively, to (i) a way of singing that mimes everyday conversation; (ii) the recurrence of a melodic fragment or theme, which is often easy to memorize; and (iii) the predominance of long vowels that, when sung, indicate certain emotional states. In figurativization, the listener is involved in the singer's discourse by means of the intimacy produced by a confessional, so to speak, way of singing that is similar to normal (i.e. natural) speech; in thematization, the listener is almost irresistibly driven by the melodic patterns that arise from the song; this will lead him or her to sing along, and depending on the accompaniment, the listener may also be rhythmically involved, thus getting physically engaged to the song by

dancing, nodding, tapping, or clapping; finally, in “passionalization” it is the singer’s emotion, either distressful or joyous, that keeps the listener’s attention; the involvement is now emotional.

According to what has been just exposed, we can state that the vocal-melodic scheme used on “Murders in the rue Morgue” hinges on two strategies: in the stanzas, which are sung fast as if to mime the murderer’s escape, the way of singing is marked by “figurativization”; accordingly, the tone is confessional, and the listener is the privileged receptacle of the singer’s/character’s inner-thoughts and fears.

The chorus is immediately introduced, and the melodic line will be repeated *ad nauseam* throughout the song. It is then that the second strategy we referred to enters, namely “thematization”. Incidentally, it should also be pointed out that, whereas heavy metal shares the same feeling of discontent with the established society that was also the flagship of the Punk movement, in the 70s, on the other hand metal goes one or two steps further, musically speaking, in this respect being in line with progressive rock (although not achieving the same technical level). This refers to some compositional procedures, such as the constant changes in tempo, melodic and harmonic structure, long narrative lyrics, and so on.

In this particular case, it is remarkable that at barely 1:30, 4 different musical parts have been already used (intro parts 1 and 2, stanza, chorus); and two more themes will still be introduced (the middle 8 and the harmony that frames the guitar solo). In order to better visualize the melodic scheme of the choruses, here goes a diagram as put forward by the aforementioned Brazilian popular music scholar Luiz Tatit. Each line corresponds to a half-note, and the syllables are placed accordingly. Thus, the reader will easily visualize the way the melody is distributed according to range (from lowest to highest note), or whether the lyrics suffer melodic variation (different notes in a single verse) or otherwise if they follow a steady melodic pattern (thus suggesting stillness), etc. This is the way vocalist Paul D’Anno sings the chorus:

B	
A#	
A	
G#	
G	rue -armes rue
F#	
F	

E	Murders	the	Morgue, someone	gend-	Murders	the	Morgue ó Flee	free
D#								
D		in	call the		in		be-	
C#								
C								
B							-fore	
A#								
A							kil-	
G#								
G							the	-lers go
F#								
F								
E								

The diagram clearly shows that the center of gravity of the melody lies on the middle E. The melody oscillates a little upward (1 and a half note) and downward (1 note), and then it descends sharply. This melodic movement is not without a reason: it is coherent that it goes up when the singer yells for someone to send for the *gendarmes*; likewise, it gets somber at the perspective of not finding the killers ó and consequently being mistaken for them ó, which generates an atmosphere of uneasiness, represented by the verse óFlee before the killers go freeö, a dread that is reinforced by the pause that follows.

The snare drum introduces the second stanza, ósummoningö the other instruments and the voice back to action. The drumming pattern ó very fast beating ó adds to the tension, and at the same it reminds us of a machine gun. The introductory stanza describes the scene of the crime; the second stanza is the key to the narrator's drama, for it is here that he tells the listener he has been mistaken for the assassin(s). From this point on, it is clear that the song completely departs from its starting point, Edgar Allan Poe's short story. Whereas Poe focuses on the clues left by the murderer in the scene of the crime, until the mystery is eventually unveiled, the song's perspective now is that of a character that is not even present in the original story.

The middle 8 in practice consists of another stanza with an alternative melodic scheme that adds variety to the whole of the song. As we shall see, because the middle 8 describes the character's desperate attempt to escape from the French police, the register is high and fast, and to aggregate more tension, the instruments follow accordingly, specially the bass guitar ó whose main function is, usually, to give the instruments a tonal gravity by means of a bottom endö, as musicians put it ó in this case the bass is played in a high register and in quavers.

B	arms	is	bor-
A#			
A	love gotta get away	the of	France look- -ta find my way -cross the -der
G#			
G	Now	from the All	-ing got- a- for down the South to Ita-
F#			-ly
F			
E	And	law	for me love sure
D#			

The chorus is then reintroduced, and other stanzas follow, always respecting the same melodic scheme of the previous stanzas/choruses. In all of them, the subject is unchanged: the putative murderer narrates his frenzied escape, and we are the privileged listeners who eavesdrop his confession, not really knowing whether we should believe him or not. At a certain point he seems to have grown paranoid with the whole situation:

Well I made it to the border at last but I can't erase the scene from my mind
 Anytime somebody stares at me, well I just start running blind
 Well I'm moving through the shadows at night away from the staring eyes
 Any day they'll be looking for me 'cause I know I show the signs of...

The inconclusive content of his speech leads to an equally dubious ending on the musical sphere: if on the one hand the harmony reaches a resolution, for it closes in the key of E, on the other hand the words shake the listeners' views about the narrator (that might even have sympathized with him at this point), because of the introduction of an unexpected character, the runaway's doctor:

It took so long and I'm getting so tired, I'm running out of places to hide
 Should I return to the scene of the crime where the two young victims died
 If I could go to somebody for help it'd get me out of trouble for sure
 But I know that it's on my mind that my doctor said I've done it before.

The final verse leaves room for some speculation; after all, if the images of the crime are on his mind, this might mean the main character is suffering from some kind of delusion; on the other hand, if his doctor claimed that the narrator had done *it* before, could it be that he (the narrator) had *killed* other people before, or just that he had *had another*

delusion? The cymbals that chime at the very end of the song shroud the listener in doubt, as the track draws to a close.

CONCLUSION

As a final thought, we would like to register our commitment towards the consolidation of popular music studies in the academic debate. The inclusion of a paper that deals with the adaptation made by a heavy metal band of a short story written by a mainstream literary author is a proof that many barriers have already crumbled; indeed, the insertion of popular music in the academic sphere has been growing steadily in the recent years. Conversely, we sincerely hope this paper has contributed to undermine the stereotypical image that often reduces heavy metal songs to demonic themes. Likewise, we hope this work encourages fellow scholars to embrace the ever inspiring field of popular music studies.

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