UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

SONGS OF OPHELIA: A PERFORMER'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE'S *FEMME TRAGIQUE* AND HER SONG SETTINGS BY BRAHMS, BERLIOZ, SAINT-SAËNS, STRAUSS, AND HEGGIE

A DOCUMENT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

By

AUBREY CHAPIN
Norman, Oklahoma
2026

SONGS OF OPHELIA: A PERFORMER'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE'S *FEMME TRAGIQUE* AND HER SONG SETTINGS BY BRAHMS, BERLIOZ, SAINT-SAËNS, STRAUSS, AND HEGGIE

A DOCUMENT APPROVED FOR THE
SCHOOL OF MUSIC

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Sanna Pederson, Chair

Ms. Valerie Bernhardt

Dr. Hyun Kim

Dr. Vivian Luong

Dr. Patrick Meirick

© Copyright by AUBREY CHAPIN 2026
All Rights Reserved.

For Darin, Addison, Bethany, and Charlotte

Table of Contents

Abstract vi

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet* 2

Chapter 2: The Character of Ophelia 6

Chapter 3: Ophelia's Appearances in the Play 15

Chapter 4: Ophelia's Language and Madness 27

Chapter 5: Ophelia's Songs in the Play 34

Chapter 6: Ophelia's Death 40

Chapter 7: Johannes Brahms, *Fünf Ophelia-Lieder* 44

Chapter 8: Hector Berlioz, *La mort d'Ophélie* 54

Chapter 9: Camille Saint-Saëns, *La mort d'Ophélie* 68

Chapter 10: Richard Strauss, *Drei Lieder der Ophelia* 76

Chapter 11: Jake Heggie, *Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia* 92

Chapter 12: Conclusion 112

Appendix A: Table of "Ophelia" Songs and Their Texts 115

Appendix B: Musical Comparisons with *Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia* (Heggie) 116

Appendix C: Institutional Review Board Documentation 119

Bibliography 120

Abstract

Marcel Proust once wrote, "The only true voyage of discovery…would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others." In doing so, he highlighted the often life-altering value of taking others' perspectives into account. As musicians, we are fortunate to be able to take into ourselves the very words, thoughts, and motivations of composers and characters. When we do so, we view the world from a different set of eyes.

When William Shakespeare created the character of Ophelia for his play *Hamlet*, he had a unique vision of her in mind. She was the quintessential *femme tragique*, a character whose life circumstances ultimately led to her tragic end. Since then, composers have turned to Ophelia as a rich wellspring of inspiration for song. They have alternately viewed her as ethereal and untouchable, realistic and grounded, or frenzied and psychotic. Whatever their stance, they have viewed the character from other perspectives and ultimately showed us different facets than we might have seen previously.

The songs composed by Brahms, Berlioz, Saint-Saëns, Strauss, and Heggie portray distinct views of Ophelia. By examining each composer's harmonic, melodic, textual, and stylistic choices, striking comparisons and contrasts may be found. Each composer wrote in different time periods and employed his own individual compositional techniques to illustrate the complex character. In taking time to observe Ophelia from each composer's point of view, we as audiences may come to a greater understanding of this complex and enduring character.

Introduction

Where the stars sleep in the calm black stream
Like some great lily, pale Ophelia floats
Slowly floats, wound in her veils like a dream –
Half heard in the woods, halloos from distant throats.
A thousand years has sad Ophelia gone
Glimmering on the water, a phantom fair;
A thousand years her soft distracted song
Has waked the answering evening air…

Arthur Rimbaud[1]

For over four hundred years, the character of Ophelia has fascinated her audience. Theatregoers have wept over her, critics have alternately praised or dismissed her, and artists have portrayed her in numerous mediums. For art song composers, in particular, she has become a subject to return to again and again. Her character, role in *Hamlet*, and ultimate demise have made her a nearly irresistible topic for song setting.

Singers wishing to portray Ophelia onstage, along with their teachers, will find this document an enlightening and helpful resource. In the following chapters, I will present historical context for Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet* and Ophelia, in particular. I will examine the character in terms of her relationships, role in the play, appearance, and personality. I will recount various portrayals of Ophelia, both onstage and in works of art. I will reveal how the views of the character have shifted through the passing of time. A thorough explanation of Ophelia's songs in the play, language, madness, and death will follow. The final chapters of the document contain comprehensive song studies to aid singers and teachers in their preparation. Readers may particularly appreciate the opportunity to engage with the insight of a living composer, Jake Heggie, who graciously allowed me the opportunity to ask for his thoughts on

[1] Carol Solomon Kiefer, *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia* (Amherst, MA: Mead Art Museum, 2001), 22.

his *Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia*. His song cycle initially led me to this topic of research and unlocked the fascinating world surrounding her.

Since Shakespeare's original conception of the character, all those who view Ophelia have done so in often highly contrasting ways. The five art song composers selected for this research are no exception. Johannes Brahms, Hector Berlioz, Camille Saint-Saëns, Richard Strauss, and Jake Heggie represent a wide cross-section of composers from different centuries and musical styles. Each has chosen to depict Ophelia in a specific and uniquely personal way. By examining the five composers' song settings, we as an audience may appreciate Ophelia for the multi-faceted, complex, and enduring character that she is.

Chapter 1

William Shakespeare, now regarded as the world's preeminent playwright, was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564 during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. His career as an actor and writer began to take shape when he moved to London in the 1580s. While in the city, he wrote the majority of his works between the years of 1590 and 1613. His earliest works may be generalized into three stylistic categories in roughly chronological order: historical dramas such as *Henry VI*, comedies like *The Taming of the Shrew*, and works with more romantic sensibilities such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, Shakespeare's style became noticeably more tragic, perhaps due to the unexpected deaths of his young son and father. He died in 1616 after writing what are considered some of history's greatest plays, sonnets, and poems.

Figure 1. William Shakespeare, public domain.

Music played an integral part in many of Shakespeare's works. As Wilson and Cooke noted, "there are around seventy vocal or performed songs in the plays of Shakespeare and more than two thousand references to music."[2] Most of the music referenced, however, exists in The Bard's comedies; not nearly as many are found in his tragic works. The most research on Shakespeare's use of music has taken place in the last century. Scholars have turned their attention to what part the songs play in the context of the larger dramatic action. Many of the songs reveal deep insights about a character's inner turmoil and motivations.

One of the exceptions to Shakespeare's lack of musical references in his tragedies is the play *The Tragedy of Hamlet*. Shakespeare composed the revenge drama sometime between the years of 1599 and 1601.[3] It is the longest of Shakespeare's plays and among the most well-known. He took inspiration from two sources: the 12th-century work entitled *Danish History* by Saxo Grammaticus and the French volume *Histoire Tragiques* by Belleforest, written in 1570.[4] Both of these works contain traces upon which Shakespeare elaborated in his conception of *Hamlet*.

Hamlet is set in medieval Denmark and centrally focuses on the disorder within the Danish royal family. The title character of Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark. His father, the former King Hamlet, was killed by his own brother, Claudius. Claudius has meanwhile seized the Danish throne and married the deceased king's wife, Queen Gertrude. Near the beginning of the play, the ghost of King Hamlet visits his son and instructs him to take revenge upon his uncle Claudius. Much of the play revolves around Hamlet's somewhat indecisive attempts to murder his uncle in order to avenge his father's death.

---

[2] Christopher R. Wilson and Mervyn Cooke, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Music* (Oxford: University Press, 2022), 5.
[3] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 1.
[4] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead books, 1998), 398.

Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius, one of King Claudius's advisors, and is sister to Laertes. She is deeply in love with Hamlet, who has shown her interest, but has not made a lasting commitment to her. In one of Hamlet's failed attempts to kill his uncle Claudius, he mistakenly stabs Ophelia's father. This crisis causes Ophelia to lose her sanity, as her beloved father was murdered by her love interest. In Ophelia's next entrance in the play, she sings meandering, confused songs while distributing flowers to other characters. Finally, in Act IV, Queen Gertrude relays the news that Ophelia has died by drowning in a nearby brook. An interesting parallel to Ophelia's storyline is noted by Harold Bloom, who writes: "When Shakespeare was a boy, a young woman named Kate Hamlet or Hamnet drowned herself in the Avon River, near Stratford, supposedly because she was disappointed in love."[5] It is not difficult to draw the conclusion that Shakespeare may have found inspiration for his character Ophelia from this true-to-life tragedy from 1579. The same "willow-lined stream, the crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples" that are referenced in Ophelia's death scene may be found "deep in the heart of Shakespeare's Warwickshire."[6]

Ophelia's madness and death may be linked not only to her father's death, but also to Hamlet's ill treatment of her. After the ghostly appearance of his father who gives him the solemn charge of murder, Hamlet becomes obsessive and lashes out at many individuals for whom he formerly cared. He makes particularly rude, obscene, and insulting comments to Ophelia, especially during the "play within a play" of Act III. Ophelia does not understand his dismissive tone and assumes he no longer loves her. Hamlet further associates Ophelia with his mother, whom he labels as incestuous and traitorous to his deceased father.

[5] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead books, 1998), 389.
[6] J.M. Nosworthy, "The Death of Ophelia," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 1964): 345, https://doi.org/10.2307/2868091.

There is disagreement among scholars whether Hamlet and Ophelia had a mutually loving relationship prior to the events of the play. There is also dissent as to how far their relationship had progressed. John Dover Wilson contends, "Hamlet was at one time genuinely in love with Ophelia,"[7] while Salvador de Madariaga argues, "I hold that Hamlet never was meant by Shakespeare to have been in love with Ophelia. Indeed the idea that Hamlet could be in love with anybody but himself is incompatible with Hamlet's character."[8] In Act III, Hamlet goes so far as to label Ophelia with whorish connotations, while at other times, his behavior seems quite ambiguous toward her. He is not present in the play during Ophelia's mad scenes, yet it is surely in part due to his actions that she has lost her sanity. Only at the end of the play does he make a final proclamation: "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum" (Act V, Scene 1). Ophelia is lost to him, but undoubtedly his actions contributed to that demise.

Figure 2. *Ophelia* by Arthur Hughes, ca. 1863-84, public domain.

Compared to Hamlet, Ophelia's role in the play is much smaller, yet her impact is great. With 169 lines to Hamlet's almost 1500,[9] she only appears in five of the play's twenty scenes. Both onstage and in works of art, Ophelia is generally given the same characteristic conventions of appearance. She is often dressed in white (signifying virginity or purity of character) and her loose robes are usually flowing around her. She is frequently depicted with bare feet and with her hair unbound, sometimes with a garland of flowers around her head. Jennifer Tipton remarks that Ophelia is

[7] John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: University Press, 1962), 108.
[8] Salvador de Madariaga, *On Hamlet*, 2nd ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1964), 36.
[9] Carol Solomon Kiefer, *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia* (Amherst, MA: Mead Art Museum, 2001), 54.

"traditionally portrayed as young, pale, and beautiful. Her disheveled hair and lost gaze are signs of madness, stemming from Elizabethan stage convention".[10] She is typically illustrated as being near water, foreshadowing her manner of death, and often carries flowers. The very name "Ophelia" means "simplicity and innocence."[11] She is Shakespeare's definition of the *femme tragique*, a woman whose life circumstances ultimately led to her tragic end.

Chapter 2

Aside from her appearance, Ophelia has proven to be an inspirational muse for artists for centuries due to her inner conflicts and outward expressions of tragedy. By understanding Ophelia as a character with motivations, flaws, and goals, we as an audience may better observe her in other mediums, such as song. Her personality is one which has been alternately viewed as inconsequential or of paramount importance to the play. There is a marked difference between critics who characterized Ophelia in early writings versus how modern critics view her today. As Magda Romanska observes,

> The nineteenth century directors chose to represent their Ophelias as a foil to Hamlet's troubled psyche, and the Shakespearean critics, if they were kind, interpreted her limited role as naivety, or, if they were less kind, as stupidity. None of them, however, whether they spoke of the specific performance or Shakespearean text in general, ever tried to analyze her character or her motivations.[12]

Modern observers are encouraged to take the current point of view regarding Ophelia's personality. Though she was often viewed as quite passive, she took an active and interested part in her father's investigation of Hamlet's actions. She was once seen as ignorant, but she is the

[10] Jennifer Leigh Tipton, *A document in death and madness: A cultural and interdisciplinary study of nineteenth-century art song settings on the death of Ophelia* (DMA diss., The University of Southern Mississippi, 2014), 2, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[11] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 163.
[12] Magda Romanska, "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia," *Women's Studies* 34, no. 6 (2005): 493, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870500277914.

first among those in the Danish court to perceive Hamlet's madness. Rather than remaining in naivete, she returns flirtatious barbs with Hamlet that indicate an understanding far beyond what was expected of her. Above all, if she is to be worthy of the hand of the future king of Denmark, it must undoubtedly be supposed that she is poised, articulate, well-mannered, and spirited enough to catch his eye. Even Queen Gertrude remarked after Ophelia's death, "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (Act V, Scene 1). Her personality is an aspect of her character which should be considered before an analysis of her songs.

Ophelia's importance to the play should not be underestimated. As Nigel Alexander remarks, "Shakespeare uses only one brief scene to establish Ophelia before he calls upon her to perform some of the most difficult and important acting in the play…There can be no *Hamlet* without Ophelia."[13] Though her part may be condensed, it is remarkably full of emotional range, acute perception, and sensitive communication. She has become an almost mythological figure in Shakespeare's panoply and an icon for artists to draw upon.

Much critical discussion over the past centuries has revolved around differing views of Ophelia's character. One point upon which early writers dwelt was her perceived sweetness and naivete. Anna Jameson's quote: "Ophelia – poor Ophelia! O far too soft, too good, too fair, to be cast among the briers of this working-day world"[14] accurately represents the view of audiences and critics of the nineteenth century. Ophelia was mainly described using language such as "young, beautiful, artless, innocent, and touching."[15] She was seen as pious, delicate, gentle, and weak. Along the same lines, her virginal state was also a common topic of

[13] Nigel Alexander, "Poison, Play, and Duel," in *Hamlet: Critical Essays*, ed. Joseph Price (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), 354-55.
[14] Anna Jameson. *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical* (England: G. Bell, 1911), 189, https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26152.
[15] Alan R. Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 281.

discussion. She was "the pure and innocent Ophelia, a sentimentally precious, aesthetic object, bereft of sexuality."[16] Ophelia's suggestive remarks to Hamlet and her complete understanding of her brother's sexual warnings seem to be overlooked by these early critics. Ophelia is too-often regarded as a one-dimensional object, rather than a fully-fledged character with complex emotions and an understanding of human relationships.

Furthermore, for many centuries Ophelia either took on the role of the feminine ideal of the time or was ignored altogether. "Transformed on the eighteenth-century stage to near-silent innocent victim, Ophelia continued to represent a kind of ideal femininity, marked principally by the supposedly 'natural' female qualities of emotionalism and passivity."[17] In her supposed frailty, indifference, and timidity, she was depicted as the female counterpart to Hamlet's strength, passion, and courage. For many critics, "Ophelia has been an insignificant minor character in the play, touching in her weakness and madness but chiefly interesting, of course, in what she tells us about Hamlet."[18] Portraying Ophelia as a mere mirror to show audiences more about Hamlet reduces her character to a minor and irrelevant role in the play, an argument with which Shakespeare seems to disagree.

More recent scholarship sheds light on Ophelia as a multi-dimensional, integral part of the storyline of *Hamlet*. With the advent of feminist criticism in the 1970s, a great deal of attention has shifted back onto Ophelia and, in particular, her role in a patriarchal society. Rather than a simplistic, one-dimensional view of the character, Ophelia is now often recognized for her actions, decisions, complex thought processes, and contributions to the play. Even her

[16] Carol Solomon Kiefer, *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia* (Amherst, MA: Mead Art Museum, 2001), 12.
[17] Alan R. Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 282.
[18] Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 77.

decisive death is regarded by some as an act of rebellion in a society which was often repressive toward young women. This change in perspective is one which should be encouraged, for to simplify human beings (whether created on the page or in reality) is to make them objects, rather than recognizing their inherent personhood, with all of its struggles, disarray, and triumph.

Another aspect which must be regarded in a study of Ophelia is her relationship with her father, Polonius, and brother, Laertes. Shakespeare does not give his audience any biographical information to form a complete picture of Ophelia's familial roots. No mention is made of a mother, which has led many critics to believe she may only have one surviving parent. Early scholarship has defined Ophelia only in terms of her relationships to men: Hamlet, her father, and her brother.[19] This is partly understandable, as so much of her dialogue and actions stem from those relationships. However, when viewed with the lens that Ophelia is a complex character in her own right, we may uncouple her from these domestic relationships and allow her a footing upon which to stand on her own.

Shakespeare portrays Ophelia's relationship with her father and brother as being rather one-sided. In their first conversation in the drama, Polonius and Laertes warn Ophelia about giving in to Hamlet too soon. They are preoccupied with her virginity and speak candidly about her behavior with Hamlet. She responds with obedience and assures them that she has been chaste. Throughout the drama, she speaks of her father in glowing terms, obeying his every request, and deeply mourning him after he passes. Sharon Hamilton makes the point however, that "lest we credit this submissive stance as Shakespeare's ideal, or as the feminine norm for that period, we have only to look at the blight that it creates."[20] Shakespeare does not seem to

[19] Kimberly Rhodes, "Performing Roles: Images of Ophelia in Britain" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1999), 14-15, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[20] Sharon Hamilton, *Shakespeare's Daughters* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003), 69.

indicate that complete and total submission to an overbearing parent is what he deems right. Rather, Ophelia's absolute acquiescence to her father and brother's demands actually contributes to her eventual downfall. "The model of female behavior that Polonius advances fails, however, and Ophelia ends up with no father, no brother, and no husband."[21]

At no point in the drama do Polonius or Laertes show tenderness or concern for Ophelia as their daughter or sister. She seems to be regarded only in terms of her outward behavior and whether she is meeting their expectations. The songs that Ophelia eventually sings in her madness stand in stark contrast to her society's and family's expectations. Ophelia, in her mad intoning, has shaken off her repressive chains.

Portrayals of Ophelia

Those who have been given the chance to portray Ophelia onstage have often made a name for themselves by doing so. The earliest depictions of the character were actually by young male actors. These "boy-Ophelias" were highly trained and skilled in the art of singing.[22] Jennifer Tipton writes, "The role of Ophelia was originally played by a boy in the Elizabethan age. It was not until the second half of the seventeenth century that women began to perform on the stage."[23] Interestingly, one of Shakespeare's most traditionally feminine characters was not actually played by a woman for several decades.

[21] Caralyn Bialo, "Popular Performance, the Broadside Ballad, and Ophelia's Madness," *Studies in English Literature* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 300, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24510000.
[22] Peter J. Seng, *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 131.
[23] Jennifer Leigh Tipton, *A document in death and madness: A cultural and interdisciplinary study of nineteenth-century art song settings on the death of Ophelia* (DMA diss., The University of Southern Mississippi, 2014), 7, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

Figure 3. Ellen Terry as Ophelia, 1878, public domain.

The first female Ophelia was Mary Saunderson in 1661.[24] She was followed by a line of illustrious stage actresses including: Jane Lessingham (1772), Sarah Siddons (1785), Mary Bolton (1811)[25], Harriet Smithson (1827)[26], Helena Modjeska (1871)[27], Ellen Terry (1878)[28], Helen Maude Holt (1891)[29], Stella Campbell (1895)[30], Gertrude Eliot (1904), Vera Komisarjevskaya (1904), and Jean Simmons (1948)[31]. Many of these stage portrayals brought fame and greatly increased the career opportunities for the actresses. Ellen Terry's "'poetic and intellectual performance' also inspired other actresses to rebel against the conventions of invisibility and negation associated with the part."[32] Audiences clamored for products that bore the images of famous Ophelias such as Terry and Smithson. Smithson herself became the impetus for Berlioz's song setting of the character.

[24] Mary Floyd-Wilson, "Ophelia and Femininity in the Eighteenth Century: 'Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds,'" *Women's Studies* 21, no. 4 (September 1992): 399, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1992.9978953.
[25] Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 82-83, 89.
[26] Kimberly Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 8.
[27] Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 82-83, 89.
[28] Kimberly Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 8.
[29] Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 82-83, 89.
[30] Kimberly Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 8.
[31] Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 82-83, 89.
[32] Ibid.

In addition to onstage portrayals, innumerable artworks have been created that feature Ophelia. She was "the single most often represented female figure"[33] of the nineteenth century and "became an important point of reference for the avant-garde of German art in the early twentieth century."[34] Two of the most enduring art pieces depicting Ophelia were created by Eugène Delacroix and John Everett Millais. Delacroix created influential paintings and lithographs of Ophelia in the mid-nineteenth century. His works showed the typical Romantic view of the character: in an idealized, ethereal state, suspended over a brook of flowing water with natural elements surrounding her.

Figure 4. *The Death of Ophelia* by Eugène Delacoix (1843), public domain.

Millais's 1851-52 painting of Ophelia, instead, took a more realistic stance. Ophelia is surrounded by flowers, trees, and water, but she is painted in a cold, blank-eyed stare, from which the audience cannot discern whether she is alive or deceased. The painting has an eerie backstory, as well. Millais used a popular model, Elizabeth Siddal, as his prototype for Ophelia. Siddal was asked to lie in a bathtub filled with water for hours while Millais painted her features onto his canvas. At some point during the process, the candles which had been warming the water blew out

Figure 5. *Ophelia* by John Everett Millais, 1851-52, public domain.

[33] Magda Romanska, "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia," *Women's Studies* 34, no. 6 (2005): 485, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870500277914.
[34] Christian Griffiths, "R. Strauss, Opus 67, 1-3, Drei Lieder der Ophelia: Ophelia Set Adrift in the Cross-Currents of Interdisciplinary Culture," *Australian Literary Studies* 29, no. 1/2 (2014): 16, https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/c/cdpn2g/viewer/pdf/5ebcsaschv.

and the water became deathly chilly. Siddal caught pneumonia and almost died.[35] Later in life, Siddal, like Ophelia, took her own life by an overdose of laudanum.[36]

Figure 6. Christina Nilsson as Ophelia in Thomas's *Hamlet* (1868), public domain.

Apart from the five song settings upon which this document is focused, Ophelia has long served as a muse for composers and musicians of all styles and genres. Her most famous depiction in opera is in Ambroise Thomas's 1868 work, *Hamlet*. Her mad scene in the opera is renowned for its virtuosic coloratura and exceedingly difficult vocal requirements. Other art song composers who have referenced Ophelia include Chausson, Quilter, Pasatieri, Schumann, Shostakovich, Dupont, and Reutter. More popular composers or bands include Bob Dylan, Taylor Swift, The Grateful Dead, Natalie Merchant, The Lumineers, and The Band. Whatever artistic medium or genre of music, the character of Ophelia has remained a touchstone and will assuredly continue to do so for years to come.

[35] Magda Romanska, "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia," *Women's Studies* 34, no. 6 (2005): 497, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870500277914.
[36] Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, eds., *The Afterlife of Ophelia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 6.

Table 1. Musical references to Ophelia

Composer/artist:	**Title of work:**	**Year:**
Johann Zumsteeg	*Ophelia*	1802
Hector Berlioz	*La mort d'Ophélie*	1842
Robert Schumann	*Herzeleid*	1851
Camille Saint-Saëns	*La mort d'Ophélie*	1857
Ambroise Thomas	*Hamlet*	1868
Johannes Brahms	*Fünf Ophelia-Lieder*	1873
Maude White	*Ophelia's Song*	1882
Ernest Chausson	*Chanson d'Ophélie*	1896
Gabriel Dupont	*Poèmes d'automne,* II. Ophélia	1904
Richard Strauss	*Drei Lieder der Ophelia*	1918
Elizabeth Maconchy	*Ophelia's Song*	1926
Roger Quilter	*How Should I Your True Love Know*	1933
Paul Hermann	*Ophélie*	1939
Bob Dylan	*Desolation Row*	1965
Dmitri Shostakovich	*Song of Ophelia*	1967
Thomas Pasatieri	*Ophelia's Lament*	1975
The Band	*Ophelia*	1975
Hermann Reutter	*Drei Lieder der Ophelia*	1980
Grateful Dead	*Althea*	1980
Indigo Girls	*Touch Me Fall*	1994
Natalie Merchant	*Ophelia*	1998
Jake Heggie	*Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia*	1999
The Lumineers	*Ophelia*	2016
PinkPantheress	*Ophelia*	2023
Taylor Swift	*The Fate of Ophelia*	2025

Chapter 3

Before beginning an in-depth song study, an understanding of the play's dialogue and dramatic plot points must be ascertained. Ophelia's development as a character, spoken lines and stage directions, and contextual drama all serve to inform how songs based on her character are performed. By undertaking a thorough analysis of her character arc through the play, singers will be fully prepared to portray the nuances of Ophelia onstage.

Ophelia's first entrance occurs in Act I, Scene 3 of the play. Laertes warns Ophelia not to give herself over fully to Hamlet: "or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open to his unmaster'd importunity. Fear it, Ophelia, fear it my dear sister." Later in the scene, Polonius continues his son's lecture and asks about the state of Ophelia and Hamlet's relationship. Ophelia responds that Hamlet has recently shown her "many tenders of his affection." This raises Polonius's suspicions and he instructs her to stay away from him for the immediate future and to give Hamlet back the letters he had written to her.

Ophelia's next appearance is in Act II, Scene 1. By this time Hamlet has conversed with his father's ghost and is almost mad with revenge. He has lost much of his social propriety and stumbles into Ophelia's chambers "with his doublet all unbrac'd, no hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd, ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ankle." Ophelia tells Polonius about Hamlet's abrupt appearance and he decides that it is surely due to Hamlet's love for her. In Scene 2, Polonius reads Hamlet's letters to King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. The letters reveal that he did love her at one time, despite his erratic behavior at this point.

Act III, Scene I opens with Ophelia and the Queen discussing the letters. Hamlet enters and they begin to speak. Hamlet tells Ophelia that he loved her once, but then follows with, "I loved you not" and the often-quoted, "Get thee to a nunnery." (The term "nunnery" may be

understood in its literal sense or it may refer to a house of ill repute.[37]) Either way, he speaks with importunity and ungraciousness toward the woman he once professed to love. Ophelia reflects on his rambling madness: "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown…Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state…O woe is me t'have seen what I have seen, see what I see."

Act III, Scene 2 contains the "play within a play" or "The Mousetrap" scene, in which a troupe of actors is employed to stage a play for the royal court. The play has obvious connotations to Claudius's treacherous acts. Hamlet hopes that as his uncle views the play, it will cause him to admit to his deeds. During the play, Ophelia is seated on a chair and Hamlet asks to lay his head in Ophelia's lap. He makes many coarse remarks to her which have double meanings and would be considered highly inappropriate to be speaking about in public, especially at the royal court. His frankness was unexpected, but perhaps even more surprisingly, Ophelia matches him with witty remarks and wry understanding. In the fourth and final scene of Act III, Hamlet speaks with Gertrude while Polonius hides and listens behind a curtain. When Polonius cries out, Hamlet believes it is Claudius and stabs his knife through the curtain. Polonius is killed instantly and at the end of the scene, Hamlet unceremoniously drags Polonius's body out of the castle.

Act IV, Scene 5 serves as Ophelia's mad scene. Queen Gertrude first appears, speaking with a gentleman. He says of Ophelia, "She is importunate, indeed distract…She speaks much of her father, says she hears there's tricks i'th'world, and hems, and beats her heart, spurns enviously at straws, speaking things in doubt that carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing." Ophelia has lost all reason at this point due to her father's murder at her lover's hands and that same lover's rejection of her.

[37] John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: University Press, 1962), 134.

At this juncture in the play, Ophelia begins to sing her "mad songs." The songs may be divided in different ways, but a common strategy is the division used below. The text for the first song is as follows:

> How should I your true love know
> From another one?
> By his cockle-hat and staff
> And his sandal shoon…
> He is dead and gone, lady,
> He is dead and gone,
> At his head a grass-green turf,
> At his heels a stone.

The First Quarto edition of Shakespeare's play has the stage directions: "Enter Ofelia playing on her lute and her haire downe singing."[38] Though this is an often-disparaged version of the text, the stage convention has sometimes remained to portray Ophelia with a lute and almost always, with loosened hair. Though she seems unaware of their presence and does not acknowledge them, Ophelia sings her first two songs before Queen Gertrude and Horatio, a close friend of Hamlet. She is interrupted once mid-song by Queen Gertrude, who tries to becalm Ophelia, but she will not be deterred.

The conventional tune for this song is known as the "Walsingham Ballad," which was well-known to Shakespearean audiences.[39] The original text describes a pilgrim who has gone on a journey to Walsingham to find his true love. On the road, he meets a stranger and the alternating question and answer sections reflect their conversation. In the poem, the pilgrim is male; Shakespeare has changed the gender of the protagonist to reflect Ophelia's search for the person she is seeking. The object of her search is either considered to be her father (who was

[38] Peter J. Seng, *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 132-136.
[39] Kendra Preston Leonard, "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias," in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 103.

unceremoniously buried) or Hamlet (who has been sent to England for a short time). The original text reads as follows:

> As ye came from the holy land
> Of blessed Walsingham
> Met you not with my true love
> By the way as you came?
> How should I know your true love
> That have met many a one
> As I came from the holy land
> That have come, that have gone?[40]

Some of the imagery referenced in this song and subsequent songs may be unknown to modern audiences and requires explanation. The "cockle-hat" of verse one is a hat in the shape of a scallop shell, the traditional headgear worn by pilgrims on a journey.[41] The staff and sandals mentioned also imply the idea of traveling. Verse two is the response of the person on the road to the questions asked in verse one, but Ophelia adds the attribution of "Lady" to the end of the first phrase. This gives the impression that she may be aware of Gertrude's presence in the room, but is not directly addressing her. Ophelia's first tune, a funeral dirge, sets the scene for a sequence of emotionally-driven songs to follow.

Ophelia's second song continues the thought of the first, though the King enters after the initial phrase. Ophelia sings:

> White his shroud as the mountain snow
> Larded with sweet flowers
> Which bewept to the grave did not go
> With true-love showers.

The person in the white burial shroud whom Ophelia describes is assumed to be her father, Polonius. After Hamlet's disastrous revenge attack, Polonius was hastily buried without the proper esteem due him because of his noble position. The second line alludes to the custom of

[40] F.W. Sternfeld, *Music in Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 59.
[41] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 349.

strewing flowers upon a grave.[42] Gertrude refers to the practice after Ophelia's death, remarking, "I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid, and not have strewed thy grave" (Act V, Scene 1). Obedient daughter that she is, and despite Polonius's shortcomings, Ophelia wishes that her father had been given a more dignified funeral. Claudius explains, "For good Polonius's death, and we have done but greenly in hugger-mugger to inter him" (Act IV, Scene 5). Ophelia laments the fact that she was not able to properly mourn her father.

Between songs two and three, King Claudius tries in vain to bring Ophelia around to some sense of reason, but to no avail. She continues with her bawdiest song of the set, the text of which reads:

> Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
> All in the morning betime,
> And I a maid at your window
> To be your Valentine.
> Then up he rose and donn'd his clo'es
> And dupp'd the chamber door,
> Let in the maid that out a maid
> Never departed more…
> By Gis and by Saint Charity,
> Alack and fie for shame,
> Young men will do't if they come to't –
> By Cock, they are to blame.
> Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me
> You promis'd me to wed.'
> 'So would I'a done, by yonder sun,
> And thou hadst not come to my bed.'

The song was possibly sung to a melody called "Soldier's Life"[43], which was well-known in the time period.[44] Ophelia performed this song before an audience of Claudius, Gertrude, and Horatio. She does not seem to notice the impropriety of public singing at court, especially when the text contained such indecorous language. The lyrics are the most spirited of the five songs,

[42] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 349.
[43] F.W. Sternfeld, *Music in Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 63.
[44] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 534.

contrasting greatly with the somber mood of the previous two. Peter Seng notes, "The coarseness of the song is…characteristic of madness…Many people reveal an astonishing knowledge of obscene language and of songs when their wits leave them."[45] Some writers have speculated that Ophelia's lyrics were "doubtless childhood recollections of a nurse's songs…she has heard in childhood"[46], but Shakespeare offers no such confirmation. The Danish court in attendance were undoubtedly shocked at Ophelia's forthrightness.

The text depicts the ancient custom of the first person seen on the morning of the holiday becoming that person's "Valentine."[47] The young lady in the story has awoken early to appear at the window of the young man she loves. In her innocence, she offers her spoken affections to him. The young man rises from bed, allows her in, and she loses her virginity. Writers have speculated about whether the text alludes to an actual physical relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet or whether her subconscious desires are playing out in song. Either way, the woman is clearly betrayed by the double standard allowed to men of the period. As the young man in the song ultimately feels no obligation toward the woman, so Ophelia feels she has been rejected by Hamlet. Ironically, it is this same predicament that Polonius and Laertes so vehemently warned Ophelia about, yet most likely it never occurred.

It is helpful to understand the old English verbiage when considering Ophelia's songs. The word "dupt" is a contraction of "opened up," in reference to the young man's door. "By Gis" is an abbreviated oath meaning "By Jesus."[48] "Saint Charitie" was also a frequently-used oath.[49] "Do't" is a contraction of "do it" and along with "cock" and "tumbled," serves as a

[45] Peter J. Seng, *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 144.
[46] Ibid., 143.
[47] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 350.
[48] Peter J. Seng, *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 145.
[49] Ibid.

double entendre. Ophelia's rash and reckless language, along with her wildly varying emotional states, illustrate her lost grip on reality.

Ophelia exits before her fourth song, and the action of the play continues. Laertes enters, enraged at news of his father's death, then when Ophelia enters again, he is shocked by his sister's nonsensical behavior. "O rose of May! Dear maid – kind sister – sweet Ophelia – O heavens, is't possible a young maid's wits should be as mortal as an old man's life?" In an ominous foreshadowing of upcoming events in the play, Jessica Kerr remarks, "Shakespeare was also very much aware of the all too short life of a rose in bud or in its full glory."[50]

Ophelia returns to her theme of the funeral dirge in the fourth song. The text is as follows:

> They bore him bare-fac'd on the bier
> And in his grave rain'd many a tear –
> A-down a-down, call him a-down-a…
> For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy.

As in the previous songs, the text could refer to the literal burial of Polonius or to Ophelia's mourning over the figurative death of her relationship with Hamlet, or to both. Leslie Dunn makes an interesting point that "she does not lament so much as sing *about* lamenting…Her songs thus become ghostly echoes of rituals that never took place, griefs that were never articulated."[51] She seems to be pantomiming an image which she never actually saw and visualizing an experience she never really had.

The phrase "a-down a-down…a-down-a" has sometimes been replaced with the "hey non nony" syllables often found in various English ballads of the time period.[52] The syllables serve

---

[50] Jessica Kerr, *Shakespeare's Flowers* (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1997), 13.
[51] Leslie C. Dunn, "Ophelia's Songs in *Hamlet*: music, madness, and the feminine," in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in western culture*, eds. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 61.
[52] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 358.

as a nonsensical refrain that follows Ophelia's lament. When the text has been translated into German (as in the Brahms and Strauss song settings), the syllables have been replaced with "leider, ach leider" ("unfortunately, o unfortunately"). Her lapse into irrational speech patterns further illustrates her loss of reason. The final phrase of the song is taken from a popular Robin Hood ballad.[53] The term "Robin" was used as a phallic pun in the time period[54] and exemplifies Ophelia's repressed desires, only now loosed in song.

> Between songs four and five, Ophelia erratically hands out flowers to the listeners:
>
> There's rosemary, that's for remembrance – pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts…There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you. And here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace a Sundays…There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. They say a made a good end.

Figure 7. *Ophelia* (Act IV, Scene 5) by Caroline Watson, 1784, public domain.

These carry significant symbolic weight, as many people in Shakespeare's time were familiar with the traditional meanings of various flowers. The flowers, with their associated meanings, are as follows: rosemary (remembrance of the dead), pansies (erotic thoughts), fennel (women's sexual desire), columbines (cuckoldry), rue (sorrow), and daisy (self-sacrifice for love).[55] Ophelia's inclusion of rue has been a frequent topic for writers due to its abortifacient

[53] Susan Gale Johnson Odom, "Four Musical Settings of Ophelia" (DMA document, University of North Texas, 1991), 12, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[54] Kendra Preston Leonard, "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias," in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 103.
[55] Robert Painter and Brian Parker, "Ophelia's Flowers Again," *Notes and Queries* 41, no. 1 (March 1994): 42-44, https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1093/nq/41-1-42.

properties, raising questions of Ophelia's virginity.[56] Perhaps most poignant, the last flower that Ophelia distributes is the violet. This flower has long been associated with Ophelia herself, as its traditional symbolic meaning is faithfulness in love.[57] Like Ophelia,

> the violet is one of the best loved of all flowers…It is prized by poets for its perfume and sometimes pitied by them for the shortness of its life, for it is one of the very first flowers to appear with the coming of spring and seldom stays to enjoy the summer sunshine. For this reason it is often associated with death.[58]

After Ophelia's death, Laertes remarks, "Lay her i'th'earth, and from her fair and unpolluted flesh may violets spring." It is helpful to understand this scene before studying Ophelia's song settings, as many of the same flowers and plants are mentioned at her death.

Ophelia's fifth and final song reads:

And will a not come again?
And will a not come again?
No, no, he is dead,
Go to thy death-bed,
He will never come again.
His beard was as white as snow,
All flaxen was his poll.
He is gone, he is gone,
and we cast away moan.
God a mercy on his soul.

Deanne Williams notes that "this song, not otherwise known, matches the versification of a song called 'Go From My Window' that can be found in a 1595 songbook by George Attowell called 'Frauncis New Jigge,' and that appears, along with 'Walsingham,' in many manuscript music books."[59] The song concludes Ophelia's dirge theme as she mourns either the death of her father or the loss of Hamlet. The text that references the appearance of the aged seems to indicate

[56] Kendra Preston Leonard, "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias," in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 113.
[57] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 359.
[58] Jessica Kerr, *Shakespeare's Flowers* (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1997), 15.
[59] Deanne Williams, "Enter Ofelia Playing on a Lute," in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 128.

Polonius as the subject of her grief, but in her confused state, she could be changing topics erratically. The imperative tone of the phrase "go to thy death-bed" may be seen as Ophelia speaking to herself, foreshadowing her upcoming demise. Barbara Smith notes, "She is not reporting a death, but commanding one. Whom is she commanding?...Because this command is meant for herself."[60]

This final sung phrase is a chilling indication of what is to become of Ophelia in the rest of the story. This is the last time we, as the audience, hear Ophelia sing. As she exits the scene, she utters the phrase, "And of all Christian souls, I pray God, God be wi' you." This is Ophelia's benediction, the last phrase typically spoken at a funeral, and is a fitting testament to her all-too-short life. After she exits, she never appears alive again.

Both the Brahms and Strauss song settings use Ophelia's "mad songs" to illustrate her descent into insanity. An in-depth study of the textual elements is helpful to anyone wishing to learn the songs and to better portray the character. In contrast, Berlioz and Saint-Saëns chose a different scene in the play altogether, one in which Ophelia's voice is not heard, yet she is still the main character of the scene.

Act IV, Scene 7 opens with a conversation between King Claudius and Laertes. Queen Gertrude enters toward the end of the scene and announces, "One woe doth tread upon another's heel, so fast they follow. Your sister's drowned, Laertes." Laertes responds with, "Drowned, O, where?" The Queen begins a long narrative monologue describing Ophelia's manner of death. She relays the story in this way:

> There is a willow grows askant the brook
> That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.
> Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
> Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,

[60] Barbara Smith, "Neither Accident Nor Intent: Contextualizing the Suicide of Ophelia," *South Atlantic Review* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 100, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27784781.

That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do 'dead men's fingers' call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

The scene is rife with symbolic imagery and old English linguistic elements, so a comprehensive explanation is helpful. A willow tree, at the time, symbolized ideas which may be correlated with the character of Ophelia: sorrow,[61] unrequited love,[62] or forsaken love.[63] Cynthia Dior notes, "As an icon, the willow…symbolized sorrow and lost love. Tendrils of willow were worn by those in mourning, whether from death or a broken heart."[64] Shakespeare's choice of a willow tree indicates that Ophelia's death was due to these same factors. The garlands that Ophelia made were "a custom of Elizabethan times" and "a mark of joy or sorrow at weddings and funerals."[65] Ophelia's botanical crown could represent both a desire to have been married or an acknowledgment that her own death was near.

Like the flowers that Ophelia distributed during her mad scene, the flowers that Gertrude mentions are ripe with symbolic significance for Shakespearean audiences. Crow-flowers were also known as "ragged robins" (a double entendre as in her fourth song) and were symbols of

[61] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 544.
[62] Carroll Camden, "On Ophelia's Madness," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 252, https://doi.org/10.2307/2867895.
[63] Kimberly Rhodes, "Performing Roles: Images of Ophelia in Britain" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1999), 209, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[64] Cynthia Jolie Dior, "Ophelia: Becoming the Violet" (master's document, Idaho State University, 1998), 43, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[65] Jessica Kerr, *Shakespeare's Flowers* (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1997), 8.

dejection.[66] Nettles were associated with "pain, poison, or betrayal."[67] Daisies, as previously mentioned, illustrated self-sacrifice or forsaken love.[68] "Long purples" were a kind of wild orchid that grew near riverbanks. Though the "cold" (meaning chaste or modest) maids called them "dead men's fingers," they were shaped like tubers and also connoted a sexual meaning.[69] As in the previous scene, almost of all the plants and the tree mentioned "were also well known to the Elizabethans as contraceptives, abortifacients, and emmenagogues."[70] The inclusion of these particular plants would have raised questions in the minds of Shakespeare's audiences regarding Ophelia's virginal state or repressed desires.

The narration continues as Gertrude describes Ophelia's death in great detail and in a style unique to the play. "Crownet" is an old English term meaning "crown."[71] "Envious" may be understood as "malicious" in modern language.[72] "Laud" is a generic term meaning "any song or hymn of praise" but carried "specifically Catholic associations."[73] (A listener might recall Hamlet's command of "Get thee to a nunnery.") Gertrude's speech stands out in *Hamlet* due to its noticeably expressive and detailed style. In her account of Ophelia's death, "she describes it in artificially elaborate, poetic language she uses nowhere else in the play."[74] It is as if Shakespeare wanted his audience to pay particular attention to the tragic, and yet somehow beautiful, death of Ophelia.

---

[66] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 545.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Robert Painter and Brian Parker, "Ophelia's Flowers Again," *Notes and Queries* 41, no. 1 (March 1994): 41, https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1093/nq/41-1-42.
[70] Ibid., 42.
[71] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 374.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Alison A. Chapman, "Ophelia's 'Old Lauds': Madness and Hagiography in 'Hamlet,'" *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 20 (2007): 112, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24323015.
[74] Kimberly Rhodes, "Performing Roles: Images of Ophelia in Britain" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1999), 163-64, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

In the last scenes of the play, the gravediggers working to prepare Ophelia's burial site discuss whether she should be given a proper Christian burial due to the dubious nature of her death. Gertrude drinks a cup of poisoned wine intended by Claudius for Hamlet, then Hamlet kills his uncle Claudius, fulfilling his revenge plot. Laertes and Hamlet duel one another and each is killed by a poisoned sword. All of the main characters, including Ophelia, meet their final demise.

Chapter 4

Paramount to realizing Ophelia's character in the song settings is coming to an understanding of both her language and her madness. Ophelia's obeisance to her father has been well-documented. Despite his somewhat overbearing nature, she has shown herself to be an obedient daughter, even going so far as to return her lover's letters when asked to do so. However, when her language is loosed in Act IV, it is as if all of her pent-up frustration and repression is allowed free reign. Her speech is uncontainable; it ebbs and flows without thought of social constraint or familial obligation. Her deepest thoughts and emotions are released without care for who may be listening. Cherrell Guilfoyle observes, "Characters who go mad in renaissance drama frequently speak more truth, and deeper truth than when sane, and this can be said of Ophelia."[75] It is worthwhile to note that it is not spoken text, but music which is the medium through which Shakespeare allows Ophelia full expression.

Ophelia's grammatical choices are radically different in her mad scene than in previous appearances. They are full of "double or multiple voices, broken syntax, repetitive or cumulative

[75] Cherell Guilfoyle, "'Ower Swete Sokor': The Role of Ophelia in *Hamlet*," *Comparative Drama* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 6, https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/article/662150/pdf.

rather than linear structure, [and] open endings."[76] In songs one and five, Ophelia changes voices from a narrator to a secondary person responding, thereby asking and answering questions herself. Song four is composed entirely of broken, fragmentary phrases that do not connect to each other grammatically. She repeats lines frequently in the songs ("He is dead and gone, lady, He is dead and gone" and "And will a not come again? And will a not come again?...He is gone, he is gone") as if a new thought cannot form in her mind voluntarily. Some of the songs seem to trail off without coming to a definitive conclusion ("At his heels a stone…"). Additionally, Frances Barber writes, "The prose in the mad scenes is the only time Ophelia doesn't have to keep to any strict metre or rhythm, as if Shakespeare is suggesting that the actress must find an important contrast in the very way she speaks, when her mind is broken."[77] Ophelia's speech patterns in song reflect her disintegrating mental state.

An especially touching point should be made regarding Ophelia's voice in her final scenes. While it is true that we hear Ophelia's unrepressed flow of language and song in Act IV, Scene 5, her voice is actually mentioned in Act IV, Scene 7. She is "singing snatches of old lauds" as Gertrude explains it. Her voice is like a phantom to us as the audience. We know it exists in this final scene, yet we are not allowed to hear it. Perhaps Shakespeare is suggesting that her character and spirit will endure, though she herself has perished.

Throughout *Hamlet*'s performance history, Ophelia's role and lines in the play have often been abbreviated for various reasons. "During the eighteenth century, a time of chasteness, Ophelia's songs…were censored because they were deemed too risqué."[78] Sometimes lines were

[76] Sandra Fischer, "Hearing Ophelia: Gender and Tragic Discourse in 'Hamlet,'" *Renaissance and Reformation* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 2, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43444750.
[77] Frances Barber, "Ophelia in *Hamlet*," in *Players of Shakespeare 2*, ed. Russell Jackson and Robert Smallwood (Cambridge: University Press, 1988), 145.
[78] Caryn Alexis Crozier, "Johannes Brahms's Fünf Ophelia-Lieder: Performance History, Cultural Context, and Character Study as It Pertains to Johannes Brahms's Fünf Ophelia-Lieder: A Performer's Perspective" (DMA document, West Virginia University, 2019), 23, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

altered so as not to offend the sensibilities of the audiences. Passages such as "that liberal shepherds give a grosser name, but our cold maids do 'dead men's fingers' call them" were left out of the narration. In addition, Ophelia's role was deemed unessential at times, so her part was often drastically reduced. As perceptions and scholarly research shed new light on the character, Ophelia's role has generally been brought back to its full capacity.

The concept of madness is inextricably linked with Ophelia's character. This was especially true during the nineteenth century. Elaine Showalter explains that,

> Superintendents of Victorian lunatic asylums were also enthusiasts of Shakespeare, who turned to his dramas for models of mental aberration that could be applied to their clinical practice. The case study of Ophelia was one that seemed particularly useful as an account of hysteria or mental breakdown in adolescence…[79]

Women who were diagnosed with mental illnesses were labelled "Ophelia Types"[80] and actresses who were playing Ophelia onstage were encouraged to visit asylums to research their

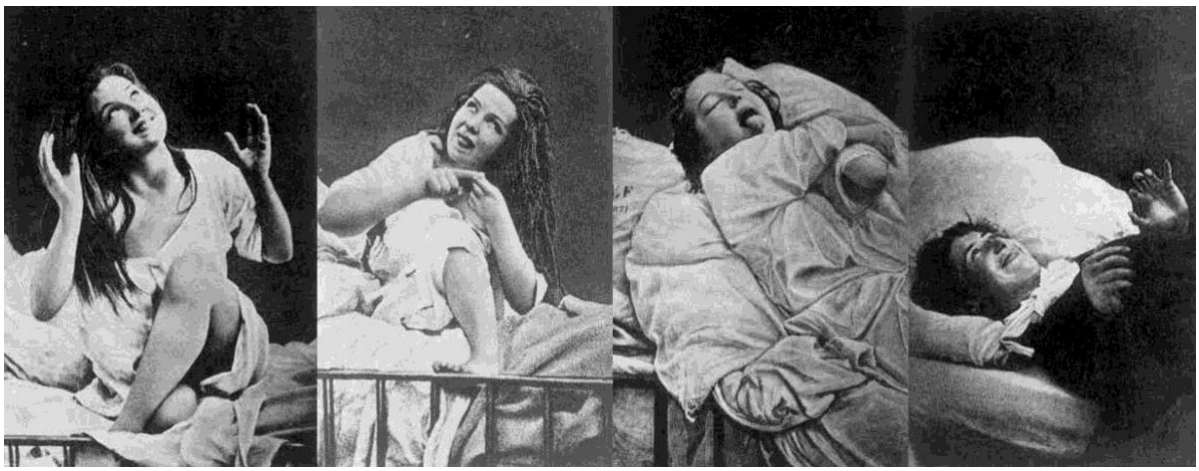


Figure 8. Images of "female hysteria" from *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* taken at the Hôpital Salpêtrière in Paris, 1870s, public domain.

[79] Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 85.

[80] Jennifer Leigh Tipton, *A document in death and madness: A cultural and interdisciplinary study of nineteenth-century art song settings on the death of Ophelia* (DMA diss., The University of Southern Mississippi, 2014), 11, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

character.[81] Neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot at the Hôpital Salpêtrière in Paris published photographs of his female patients with mental illnesses and created visiting hours for the public to see them on display. Ophelia was regarded as the ideal emblem of mental illness during the nineteenth century.

Much has been written regarding the connection between femininity and the idea of hysteria. Showalter, in particular, has elaborated on how madness was viewed as a uniquely female malady in the nineteenth century.[82] It was supposed that a woman could lose her senses entirely due to a prolonged virginal state or a repression of natural desires. In modern times, "lovesickness and erotomania are no longer formally diagnosed…Cases resembling what used to be known by those names are now more likely to be couched in terms of delusional, obsessive-compulsive, or histrionic disorders."[83] At the time when Berlioz, Saint-Saëns, and Brahms were writing their musical portrayals of Ophelia, these ideas still firmly gripped most of Western society.

When Ophelia sings her songs in Act IV, she has fully entered a psychotic state. She no longer controls her own thoughts and actions; rather, she is a void, a blank canvas onto which her emotions and impulses may be applied. This is a defining moment for Ophelia. All of the other characters' attention is fully focused on her. For perhaps the first time in her life, she is allowed to be completely in charge of the action. This was not an intentional decision on her part; nonetheless, it can be seen as a tragic victory for the character. The audience is left wondering if

[81] Kimberly Rhodes, "Performing Roles: Images of Ophelia in Britain" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1999), 88, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[82] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 84.
[83] Hanne Blank, "Sexuality, Dis/Ability, and Sublimity in Grand Opera," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and the Body*, eds. Youn Kim and Sander L. Gilman (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 312.

we should celebrate her freedom or mourn her inability to savor the moment. Sarah Gates observes,

> The few critics who discuss Ophelia tend to read her too starkly as resolute or passive. The former tend to see her madness as a form of power that allows her at last to assert herself as a subject, and her death as the taking of resolute action: a rational choice, given her impossible situation, and the act of a female hero. The others reduce her to a cipher, taking her so far into passive victimization, for example, that they read her as a murder victim, pinning responsibility for her death upon other characters in the play...Shakespeare makes use of both…The two expressions for becoming a lunatic, going mad and losing one's reason, express beautifully this equivocal status of the madwoman's agency in her condition: One is a willed action (going); the other is a passive failure to act, to pay attention, to keep hold (losing)…Both these dimensions of Ophelia's condition allow us to understand that it presents as equivocal and complex a balance between – or blend of – "opposing" and "suffering" (doing and being done to).[84]

Ophelia's madness may be contrasted with Hamlet's, as well. Hamlet's irrepressible desire for revenge is his motivation for his outlandish behavior, while Ophelia's is the outcome of the circumstances projected upon her. Hamlet, while rash and indecorous, is often praised by critics for his passion and upstanding intentions. Ophelia, meanwhile, is driven to madness not by some lofty goal, but by abandonment and loss. Hamlet desires most of all to make things right in the Danish court by avenging his father, removing his lecherous uncle from the throne, and punishing his mother for her hasty marriage to Claudius. Ophelia's desires lay unspoken until released in song. "Freud locates the heart of all neurosis, the root of humanity's discontent, in our uneasy relationship with our own desires. Every dream, Freud teaches, is a concealed wish…our own unacknowledged needs and drives."[85]

As revealed in her mad songs, Ophelia wishes more than anything to be loved, both by her family and Hamlet. Her songs allow her to make these wishes known, although not by her

---

[84] Sarah Gates, "Assembling the Ophelia Fragments: Gender, Genre, and Revenge in *Hamlet*," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 34, no. 2 (December 2008): 237, https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1163/23526963-90000358.

[85] James J. Marino, "Ophelia's Desire," *ELH* 84, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 821-822, https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2017.0031.

own conscious control. Through his conception of Ophelia, Shakespeare connects the ideas of madness, femininity, and music.

The cause of Ophelia's madness has been a frequent topic for writers, critics, and audiences for centuries. Some argue that "it is the loss of Hamlet's love which is the most compelling factor in Ophelia's derangement."[86] Others maintain that "the already unbearable loss of her father is exacerbated by the mystery surrounding his death."[87] Undoubtedly, both of these factors play a crucial role in her loss of sanity. Compounded with issues such as her family's constant oppression, Laertes' deflection to Paris when she needed him, and her youth and inexperience, she is battered from all sides. It is important to note that she also never knew about the elder Hamlet's visitation as a ghost, Hamlet's revenge plot, Claudius's crimes, or Gertrude's ill-advised marriage. One could conclude that if some of these issues were made clear to Ophelia, she might have not made such a steep mental decline.

Besides the five song settings portraying Ophelia's madness, other composers have long turned to the idea of so-called "female hysteria" for musical inspiration. Writers such as Elaine Showalter and Susan McClary have researched extensively on the topic. The idea gained in popularity in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries in works of art, literature, and especially operas. In her book *Feminine Endings*, McClary wrote about Monteverdi's nymph in *Lamento della Ninfa*, a creature whose storyline echoes that of Ophelia. "The nymph is fixated on memories of a lover who has abandoned her – who has awakened her sexually and has left her

[86] Susan Gale Johnson Odom, "Four Musical Settings of Ophelia" (DMA document, University of North Texas, 1991), 6, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[87] Barbara Smith, "Neither Accident Nor Intent: Contextualizing the Suicide of Ophelia," *South Atlantic Review* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 97, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27784781.

with no outlet for that excess, no recourse but madness."[88] The madrigal was composed in the early seventeenth century, just a short time after Shakespeare wrote *The Tragedy of Hamlet*.

McClary also researched the quintessential madwoman of opera, Lucia from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor.* Lucia's madness is also driven by a dysfunctional relationship and also results in suicide. Like Ophelia, Lucia is usually portrayed onstage wearing white with her hair unbound as keeping with theatrical conventions of madness. In a further parallel with Ophelia,

> Lucia…displays her deranged mind without inhibition as she variously relives erotically charged moments with Edgardo, imagines that they are exchanging vows in marriage, and anticipates her own death…She has lost touch with reality and lives now in a world made up entirely of the shards of her fears, hopes, and dreams.[89]

Donizetti composed *Lucia di Lammermoor* in 1835, just a few years before Berlioz and Saint-Saëns both portrayed Ophelia's watery death after her mad scene.

Finally, McClary scrutinizes the character of Salome, another prototypical musical madwoman. As in Ophelia's case, "Salome's madness is explicitly linked to excessive female sexuality."[90] Strauss composed *Salome* in 1905, thirteen years before he explored the character of Ophelia in song. Whether through Monteverdi's nymph, Lucia, Salome, or other characters such as Elvira and Amina (in Bellini's *I Puritani* and *La sonnambula*, respectively), composers have long fostered their musical imagination via the character of "madwomen."

There are particular musical elements which have also been employed by composers to illustrate hysteria. Most of these are focused on excess, whether it be excess of range, agility, dynamic control, or chromaticism. The role of Lucia, especially, is known for its demanding coloratura passages. The very act of being able to sing such high-flying and daring feats of

[88] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 86.
[89] Ibid., 92.
[90] Ibid., 99.

vocalism sets the character apart as "other." Additionally, the extremely high tessituras of most female madwomen naturally makes the link to femininity and may emulate a hysterical scream in the highest register. The act of singing allows the character to translate ideas of madness in ways that spoken word does not. Hanne Blank observes,

> Voice, first among other musical and dramaturgical components, is the medium that translates somatic presence onstage into somatic reaction in the audience. And it is not just any voice, but athletic, cultivated, prolonged, and physically extreme vocalism that achieves this…Opera is…where the staggering and delusional are somehow capable of long spans of physically punishing, technically complex singing.[91]

The author was referring to opera in particular, but the same elements may be found in song, particularly in the more vocally demanding sections of Ophelia's song settings. Another element indicative of madness in music is the use of chromaticism. Vocal lines that are tonally unstable give the listener a sense of precariousness, as if the foundation of the character is not to be trusted. When the melody moves more by excessive half steps and outside the tonal boundaries, it sets an aural expectation for the listener that something is not quite "right."

Chapter 5

Ophelia's songs have not been a frequent topic for those who study madness in music, yet a close examination of her songs and their historical performances will be informative for those wishing to portray the character. Leslie Dunn notes, "Generally speaking, Ophelia's singing has received short shrift in *Hamlet* criticism."[92] However, Ophelia's songs are the medium through which she is finally able to completely reveal her inner thoughts, so they are an important vehicle

[91] Hanne Blank, "Sexuality, Dis/Ability, and Sublimity in Grand Opera," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and the Body*, eds. Youn Kim and Sander L. Gilman (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 310.
[92] Leslie C. Dunn, "Ophelia's Songs in *Hamlet*: music, madness, and the feminine," in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in western culture*, eds. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 51.

for understanding her. The three people who have most repressed or rejected her (Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet) are not present during her singing, which adds an extra layer of freedom and possibility to express herself.

The performance aspect of Ophelia's songs in the play has changed drastically since *Hamlet* was written. As mentioned previously, the earliest depictions of Ophelia onstage were by young, male actors. These boys were often trained in singing and frequently appeared onstage playing a lute as accompaniment, as instructed in the First Quarto.[93] By the eighteenth century, female actresses had taken over the role and for the most part, the addition of the lute was abandoned. A small ensemble might have also been employed to support Ophelia's singing.[94] At this time, however, the actresses were not expected to be trained vocalists; "sometimes the songs are crooned or sung in a small and pathetic voice in order to accentuate the pitifulness of the situation."[95] The general view of Ophelia as a minor player during the time period adds credence to this observation.

By the nineteenth century, the demand for more musically-trained actresses to perform the character increased. Professional singers were often engaged[96] and the songs gained respect as a critical element of Ophelia's character development. The most famous Ophelia (and she for whom Berlioz composed his *La mort d'Ophélie*), Harriet Smithson, "had a comparatively modest singing voice."[97] Ann Maria Tree, who played Ophelia at Covent Garden in November of 1821, was lauded because "she sang the airs in Ophelia with great feeling and sweetness," though she

---

[93] Kendra Preston Leonard, "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias," in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 104.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Peter J. Seng, *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 132.
[96] Christian Griffiths, "R. Strauss, Opus 67, 1-3, Drei Lieder der Ophelia: Ophelia Set Adrift in the Cross-Currents of Interdisciplinary Culture," *Australian Literary Studies* 29, no. 1/2 (2014): 20, https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/c/cdpn2g/viewer/pdf/5ebcsaschv.
[97] Peter Raby, *Fair Ophelia: A Life of Harriet Smithson Berlioz* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), 55-56.

"did not give the songs with the requisite *simplicity* of style. *Ornament* in the singing of a maniac is entirely out of character."[98] Actresses were praised for their musical abilities in the role, but they were expected to stay within the confines of acceptable characterization.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, more emphasis was placed on "costume, hair, floral arrangement, choreography, and so forth…Although musical performance was still present in these traditions, it was effectively subordinated to the other creative elements."[99] The role of Ophelia's songs diminished further as the twentieth century approached. Stage performances focused on increasingly more realistic portrayals and the quality of Ophelia's singing did not continue to be a priority. By the end of the nineteenth century, her songs were almost always performed *a cappella*.

The dawn of the twentieth century brought an increased focus on the idea of psychological realism.[100] Ophelia's songs lost their essential musicality in favor of "a form of aphasia: a catatonic spewing forth of 'nonsense.'"[101] It is noteworthy that Richard Strauss set his portrayal of Ophelia during this time, mirroring the period's emphasis on psychological breaks with his chromatically-driven, tonally unstable song cycle. In performances of *Hamlet* today, various choices are made in the portrayal of Ophelia's madness through song. Sometimes the role is drastically cut so the songs are eliminated,[102] while at other times the songs are performed as "rasping mantras devoid of musical content altogether."[103] The songs are now frequently

---

[98] Peter Raby, *Fair Ophelia: A Life of Harriet Smithson Berlioz* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), 55-56.
[99] Christian Griffiths, "R. Strauss, Opus 67, 1-3, Drei Lieder der Ophelia: Ophelia Set Adrift in the Cross-Currents of Interdisciplinary Culture," *Australian Literary Studies* 29, no. 1/2 (2014): 20, https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/c/cdpn2g/viewer/pdf/5ebcsaschv.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Kendra Preston Leonard, "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias," in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 104.
[103] Christian Griffiths, "R. Strauss, Opus 67, 1-3, Drei Lieder der Ophelia: Ophelia Set Adrift in the Cross-Currents of Interdisciplinary Culture," *Australian Literary Studies* 29, no. 1/2 (2014): 20, https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/c/cdpn2g/viewer/pdf/5ebcsaschv.

performed as spoken text rather than sung, or else the melodies are delivered in "nursery rhymes or folk settings."[104] Due to their inherent ability to portray the depth of Ophelia as a character, it is hoped that future productions would reestablish the songs as essential elements of the play.

The lyrics of Ophelia's songs are intriguing for their ability to provide a glimpse into her fractured mental state. With the exception of the strophic third song, most of the lyrics in the remaining songs do not follow a logical thought pattern. They are communicated in a stream of consciousness (or perhaps unconsciousness, in Ophelia's case). She sings "crude songs of the common-folk"[105] which seem incongruous with her privileged upbringing. The multiple narrative voices employed by Ophelia indicate a schizophrenic state. She intones her songs without regard for acceptable pauses in the conversation to start or stop. It is noteworthy that she herself did not compose any of the songs that she performs. Ironically, she uses the words of others in the one moment of the play when she is able to fully express herself.

The melodies which have historically been used for Ophelia's songs onstage were most often popular ballads of the common folk. Caralyn Bialo remarks, "Globe spectators were likely familiar with Ophelia's 'snatches of old tunes' and able to hum along in their places. They may even have strolled among peddlers singing precisely Ophelia's refrains as they entered the theater."[106] Most of the melodies associated with Shakespearean works were not notated; "they simply were not needed or expected when the tunes were of such familiar stock."[107] This association with common, everyday people helped to make Ophelia more of a sympathetic character for Shakespeare's audiences. When they "spoke her language" and could readily

[104] Kendra Preston Leonard, "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias," in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 45, 52.
[105] F.W. Sternfeld, *Music in Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 65.
[106] Caralyn Bialo, "Popular Performance, the Broadside Ballad, and Ophelia's Madness," *Studies in English Literature* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 298, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24510000.
[107] Ross W. Duffin, *Shakespeare's Songbook* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 32.

identify with that part of her character, her death at the end of the play seemed all the more tragic. Some of the melodies for Ophelia's songs were known by names such as "Bonny Sweet Robin," "Robin is to the Greenwood Gone," and "Walsingham."[108] A few of these were printed by early publishers such as William Linley, Samuel Arnold,[109] and William Chappell.[110] While many of the tunes have been lost to history, it seems that Shakespeare intentionally set these songs for Ophelia to well-known melodies that were then familiar to his audience.

The subjects of Ophelia's songs and their possible connections to actual events are also telling. Some of the songs clearly reference the unexpected death and hasty burial of her father, while others raise questions regarding the extent of her relationship with Hamlet. Thus, the overarching themes of the five songs encompass Ophelia's expressions of shock, grief, and abandonment. The third song has raised the most queries from scholars, who debate whether the young female depicted in the Valentine's Day encounter is really Ophelia herself. Questions emerge as to whether she actually visited Hamlet as described in the song and whether that meeting resulted in the ensuing predicament. Alexander writes that "in her songs Ophelia describes herself as seduced, made pregnant, and abandoned."[111] Other critics maintain that the song is merely a vehicle for Ophelia's repressed desires. Whichever the case, the songs clearly reveal what Ophelia could not express in the confines of her regular life.

Figure 9. *Hamlet: Act IV, Scene V* by Benjamin West, 1792, public domain.

[108] Kendra Preston Leonard, "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias," in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 103.
[109] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 530.
[110] Kendra Preston Leonard, "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias," in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 103.
[111] Nigel Alexander, "Poison, Play, and Duel," in *Hamlet: Critical Essays*, ed. Joseph Price (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), 360.

The very fact *that* Ophelia sang is just as important as examining the contents of the songs themselves. Paul Faber points out that young women at court were expected to be able to sing well, but that performances would be limited to certain social occasions and for specific purposes. "The custom of cultivating musical daughters to attract eligible young men thus appears to have been widespread and enduring."[112] However, Ophelia did not sing at such an event, nor for such a purpose. Her singing was not performative, but rather, an expression of her innermost thoughts.

Ophelia's musical outburst would surely have shocked her audience made up of nobility and royals. "For Elizabethan audiences, the spectacle of a noblewoman with her hair down, singing fragments of popular songs, would have been uniquely jarring."[113] Her appearance, defection from social norms, and unanticipated mode of discourse illustrated her break from reality. Not only were the texts of her songs highly inappropriate for the setting and the audience, but her singing at court at all was entirely indecorous. "Women who sang [of their own accord] in public…were regarded as courtesans and were pressured to grant sexual favors."[114] Ophelia's act of public and persistent singing immediately conveyed to her listeners that something was drastically different about her.

[112] Paul L. Faber, "Ophelia's Songspace: Élite Female Musical Performance and Propriety on the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage," in *Shakespeare, Music and Performance*, eds. Bill Barclay and David Lindley (Cambridge: University Press, 2017), 65.
[113] Scott A. Trudell, "The Mediation of Poesie: Ophelia's Orphic Song," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 57, https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2012.0013.
[114] Kendra Preston Leonard, "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias," in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 103.

Chapter 6

Ophelia's death at the end of Act IV has raised questions for audiences, critics, and writers for centuries. An awareness of the context, characters, and causes will aid any interpretation of the character onstage. Ophelia's death is touching because of her isolation; she is alone when she makes her garlands, she is alone when she falls into the brook, and she is alone when she floats, then drowns, in the watery depths. Her solitude is the culmination of what has been building throughout the play. Her father has been killed, her brother fled to another country, and her lover rejected her. One by one, all those for whom she cared the most abandoned her. Even we, as the audience, are not allowed to be present with her when she takes her last breath.

As madness has historically been associated with femininity, so has the idea of fluidity. Janet Beizer writes eloquently about the connections between womanhood and water.[115] The fluids from a female's body sustain, protect, and bring forth life. Ophelia's drowning is a completion of the life cycle begun in a woman's body. When floating upon the surface, she is described as returning to the medium she once inhabited: "And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up…like a creature native and indued unto that element." While Ophelia's death is certainly viewed as tragic, some writers have taken an alternative view that "though it appears to be a regression into insanity and suicide, her association in death with water, flowers, and spring points toward rebirth."[116] As her mad songs allowed her to express herself fully, her death permits her a restoration of sorts.

[115] Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).
[116] Alex Aronson, *Psyche and Symbol in Shakespeare* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 180.

Gertrude's involvement in Ophelia's death scene is one of the most controversial topics of the play. First, she describes the riverside setting in vivid, evocative language in a style used nowhere else in *Hamlet*. It is puzzling why Gertrude's speech patterns would be so lyrical and poetic in what was surely a shocking and emotionally distressing time. But perhaps the most pressing question, one for which the audience never gains clarity, is how Gertrude is able to describe the scene to Claudius and Laertes in such exacting detail. Some critics take the stance that Gertrude must have been present to witness the drowning, so the ensuing question must be: "Why didn't Gertrude help her?"[117] Others maintain that Gertrude "loathes the very thought of Ophelia…She saw and heard it all and budged not."[118] Still another view is that Gertrude must have been told about Ophelia's death, but was not actually present to witness it. In that case, "the content of this narrative must logically be no more than an imaginary reconstruction of unseen events."[119] Whether Gertrude was physically present to see Ophelia's drowning or not, *someone* must have been there to relate the tale with such minutia. But why would an observer take no action, especially when there seemed to be plenty of time to do so?

> The story certainly implicates an eyewitness, who followed closely, observed minutely…proceeded then to contemplate with interest the way in which Ophelia contrived to keep afloat, and finally lent an attentive ear to a recital of old tunes. And the incredible thing is that he apparently made no effort to rescue her.[120]

The audience is left utterly perplexed as to why no one intervened to help such a beautiful, respectable young girl, who obviously could not (or would not) help herself. At the end of the play, Queen Gertrude drinks the poisoned cup that Claudius intended for Hamlet to

---

[117] Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, *Hamlet*, 2nd ed. (Horndon, United Kingdom: Northcote Publishers Ltd., 2005), 47-48.
[118] Salvador de Madariaga, *On Hamlet*, 2nd ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1964), 118.
[119] Heather Hadlock, "Berlioz, Ophelia, and Feminist Hermeneutics" in *Berlioz: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Peter Bloom (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 124.
[120] J.M. Nosworthy, "The Death of Ophelia," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 1964): 346, https://doi.org/10.2307/2868091.

drink. Perhaps this was her own recompense for any guilt she may have felt over Ophelia's death. She, like Ophelia, is killed by a fluid in the end, further solidifying the connection between water and women. A singer who performs the Berlioz or Saint-Saëns settings of Gertrude's text must certainly take these matters into consideration.

A final question which must be pondered is whether Ophelia's death was a deliberate or unintentional act. The two gravediggers in Act V, Scene 1, discuss this topic at length. One believes that Ophelia made the conscious decision to end her life. He argues that she should not be given a proper burial, for "Christian funeral rites were denied to suicides…who were buried out of consecrated ground."[121] The second gravedigger argues the opposing side, that Ophelia's death was purely an accident. This conversation has echoed through the ages as audiences and writers have felt strongly one way or the other.

Some critics staunchly hold that Ophelia purposefully allowed herself to fall into the brook and to be carried down into its depths. "The guilt-ridden Ophelia believes that, rejected by her lover and more significantly, bereft of her father, death is her only option."[122] In this line of thinking, the circumstances of the past few days of Ophelia's life have led her to believe she is without hope for a future. Many of these same critics also believe that Ophelia may have been with child, leaving her further bereft. Recent scholarship (and feminist criticism, in particular) have lent support to this position. "Suggesting that it was indeed her choice rather than accident, gives more agency to her character than she is traditionally afforded."[123] If Ophelia died

[121] Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 376.
[122] Barbara Smith, "Neither Accident Nor Intent: Contextualizing the Suicide of Ophelia," *South Atlantic Review* 100, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 97, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27784781.
[123] Magda Romanska, "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia," *Women's Studies* 34, no. 6 (2005): 496, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870500277914.

willfully, those that portray her onstage must make deliberate decisions in how her character develops to this feeling of ultimate hopelessness.

Other writers are just as vehement in their belief that Ophelia's death was unintentional. They hold that the facts are just as Gertrude relayed them: Ophelia leaned too far over the water on a weak branch, the branch broke, and she fell into the stream. She was able to float on the surface for a while (some suggest perhaps she was injured in the fall), but ultimately, the weight of her garments pulled her down. "Ophelia does not actively commit suicide; her water-laden garments acted as murderers."[124] Some even refer back to the case of Kate Hamlet (or Hamnet) of 1579, from which Shakespeare may have taken inspiration. "Ophelia's death, like Katherine's, is here presented as accidental. Of this there can be no possible doubt."[125] These writers generally hold the view that Ophelia was a completely innocent victim of her circumstances; she did not make a conscious choice in the end.

What is often missing from the discussion of Ophelia's actions is the element of her madness. It is reasonable to assume that Ophelia was still in the same frenzied, psychotic state in which she sang her songs in Act IV, Scene 5. Nothing about the context has changed for her; her father is still dead and her lover has still rejected her. It is therefore logical to conclude that as Ophelia made her garlands, fell into the water, and sang her lauds upon the surface, she is just as "mad" as she appeared two scenes prior. If her mental state is thus taken into account, then neither suicide nor accidental death truly captures the intent. Rather, "it is the outcome of a neglected, fearful psyche confronted by impossible demands and unbearable emotional

[124] Sharon Hamilton, *Shakespeare's Daughters* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003), 90.
[125] J.M. Nosworthy, "The Death of Ophelia," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 1964): 345, https://doi.org/10.2307/2868091.

trauma."[126] When considering the death of Ophelia, a singer must decide which of the arguments to accept. Otherwise, her death remains "a silent and suicidal question mark."[127]

Chapter 7

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) was a pillar in the Romantic art song genre of the mid- to late-nineteenth century. He composed nearly 380 songs in total, of which 196 were intended for solo voice and piano, and 57 of which were arrangements of German folksongs.[128] He composed lieder all his life, which explains his considerable output of songs. His works, which exemplify many of the Romantic ideals, remain part of the standard canon of songs today.

Chief among Brahms's stylistic characteristics is his devotion to melodic expressiveness. He valued the beauty of the melodic line above other musical elements and his works are especially known for this quality. "Considering Brahms's songs as a whole, it is, more than anything else, their melodic invention that impresses…It is beautifully fashioned, spacious in line, and flexible in rhythm."[129] In conjunction with his emphasis on melody, Brahms is also regarded for the extended duration of his phrases and his frequent usage of irregular phrase lengths. In terms of harmony, Brahms was not as daring as many of his Romantic counterparts, but he did employ "striking harmonic excursions…[that] often take him into keys so remote that even the tonic note itself is erased."[130] Overall, his style is known for its beauty, expressiveness, and imagination.

---

[126] Barbara Smith, "Neither Accident Nor Intent: Contextualizing the Suicide of Ophelia," *South Atlantic Review* 100, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 108, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27784781.
[127] Magda Romanska, "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia," *Women's Studies* 34, no. 6 (2005): 487, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870500277914.
[128] Rufus Hallmark, *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), 119.
[129] Philip Radcliffe, "Germany and Austria," in *A History of Song*, ed. Denis Stevens (New York: Norton, 1970), 253.
[130] Donald Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), 206.

Brahms retained a firm footing in the Classical style, while simultaneously helping to usher in the new Romantic explorations of tonality, texture, and form. This dual footing gave Brahms a unique standing as he often held to traditional techniques, while embracing many of the emerging Romantic sensibilities. He made frequent use of rhythmic variety in his works, taking advantage of metric blurring via abrupt meter changes, hemiolas, and shifting bar lines. His vocal ranges were rather narrow compared to his contemporaries. However, his songs retain a general charm and accessibility that endure to modern times. Donald Ivey remarks,

> But in spite of these general idiosyncrasies, his songs are probably as readily accessible to performer and public alike as those of any other romantic composer…The melodies are gracious and appealing…and the harmonic richness makes an almost irresistible impact.[131]

Brahms had a deep and abiding interest in German folksong, which permeated much of his overall song output. The traditional characteristics of folk songs (limited range, dotted rhythms, melodic outlines of triads) were a base that Brahms used and built upon. He took the standard forms, manipulated them, and expanded them into a format which was at once recognizable and also visionary. His interest in and output of German folk songs far exceeded that of his Romantic counterparts.

A frequent criticism of Brahms's work was his utilization of inferior poetry. The lyrics themselves did not seem to be of paramount importance to him in relation to other musical elements. He is frequently assailed for misplacing textual accents and disregarding the meanings of words in the overall context. His concern for melodic richness and expression far outweighed any trifling with linguistic considerations.

Despite Brahms's perceived literary shortcomings, he was, in reality, an avid reader of Shakespeare's works. On October 25, 1858, he wrote to Auguste Brandt and Bertha Porubsky:

---

[131] Donald Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), 205.

"You are reading a lot of Shakespeare? That is marvellous. In him one has everything and everyone all in one, while all the others together don't add up to a Shakespeare."[132] In correspondence with Clara Schumann dated August 27, 1854, Brahms expressed: "I have replenished my library of books…Soon I won't know what else there is to buy. I have Shakespeare's and Schumann's complete works, Goethe's poems…and still more!"[133] He was a voracious reader and an admirer of Shakespeare, in particular.

The German translation that Brahms read was most likely furnished by Ludwig Tieck and A.W. von Schlegel. Schlegel and Tieck were German poets, critics, and writers. They collaborated on many of Shakespeare's works, including *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*. Schlegel began his work on *The Tragedy of Hamlet* in the late eighteenth century, then Tieck completed the effort in the early nineteenth.[134] Their translation of the tragic play became the standard and most widely-read German version.[135] They strove to provide the most accurate translation of the original source material possible.

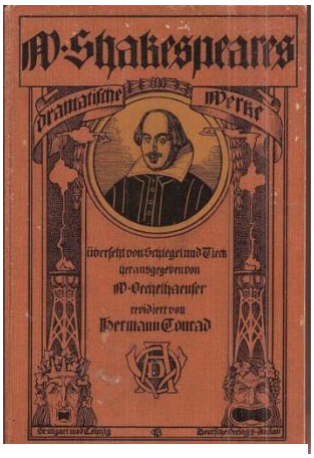


Figure 10. Schlegel-Tieck translation of Shakespeare's works, public domain.

[132] Styra Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, trans. Josef Eisinger and Styra Avins (Oxford: University Press, 1997), 204.
[133] Ibid., 60.
[134] Jennifer Leigh Tipton, *A document in death and madness: A cultural and interdisciplinary study of nineteenth-century art song settings on the death of Ophelia* (DMA diss., The University of Southern Mississippi, 2014), 7, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[135] Jerri Lamar Kantack, "Romantic Musical Characterizations of Ophelia" (DMA diss., The University of Alabama, 1993), 26, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

Figure 11. Olga Precheisen, 1900, public domain.

Johannes Brahms never intended to set Ophelia's mad songs to his own music. In 1873, he was approached by the celebrated stage actor, Josef Lewinsky, with the request. Lewinsky and his fiancée, Olga Precheisen, were members of the Vienna Burgtheater. Lewinsky (1835-1907) was "the leading male stage actor of Vienna."[136] He was engaged to Precheisen (1853-1935), who was to make her stage debut in Prague at the Deutsches Landestheater in the role of Ophelia.[137] Lewinsky wrote to Brahms:

> Frl. Precheisen and I urgently request that you fulfill your kind promise and write down the musical expression that seems to you appropriate for the songs of Ophelia. I would add that the Fräulein is rather musical and that her voice is a mezzo-soprano. She is extraordinarily successful in these parlando songs, especially in the deeper register [of her voice].[138]

Brahms was a friend and great admirer of Josef Lewinsky. Clara Schumann wrote to Brahms in 1862, "I could have predicted your enthusiasm for Lewinsky. Haven't I always told you he is a genius?"[139] The resulting set of songs were Brahms's only commissioned work in his entire oeuvre. Lewinsky wrote to his fiancée:

> Brahms is a dear fellow. He has kept his word and has composed the Ophelia songs. He has written a piano accompaniment for them so that you may learn them [more easily]. He would have liked to study the songs with you himself, but since that is not possible, he will in the meantime prepare himself for the pleasure of seeing you in this role once you are in Vienna, so that he too has gotten something out of it. Do you want to come to Vienna and study it with him? Then we would have an opportunity right away. He is not sure whether you'll like the songs; he is of the opinion that, on the stage, something simple often makes a greater effect. But you will surely get used to this and the folk-song manner [in which they are conceived]. Preserve the manuscript well, for it has a high value as an autograph.[140]

---

[136] Leon Botstein, *The Compleat Brahms: A Guide to the Musical Works of Johannes Brahms* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 406.
[137] Karl Geiringer, *On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies* (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2006), 389.
[138] Ibid., 390.
[139] Leon Botstein, *The Compleat Brahms: A Guide to the Musical Works of Johannes Brahms* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 406.
[140] Karl Geiringer, *On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies* (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2006), 390.

Precheisen premiered as Ophelia on December 22, 1873, alongside Lewinsky's portrayal of Hamlet.[141] She did not continue with the role, however, and there is no record that any other actress ever made subsequent use of the songs.[142] She did as her fiancé suggested, however, and "kept the manuscript of the songs as a cherished relic."[143] The set was mostly forgotten until 1935, when Precheisen gave permission for the musicologist, Karl Geiringer, to publish the songs for the first time.[144] Geiringer records,

> The present location of the autograph manuscript consulted by Karl Geiringer in the 1930s is unknown, but Geiringer's own manuscript copy of the songs is extant in the Music Division of the Library of Congress, submitted on 19 December 1934, for the purpose of securing a copyright on the songs for G. Schirmer, New York, the original publisher of Geiringer's edition.[145]

Today, the songs are most readily accessible in "The Lieder Anthology," edited by Virginia Saya and Richard Walters and published by Hal Leonard. However, Brahms never intended for the songs to be published. Rather, they were "composed for performance by a single singer on a single occasion."[146] He did not intend for them to be taken out of the context of the play, yet they form a unified group which are effective in a concert setting. Brahms did not give them an opus number nor a title; the "Fünf Ophelia-Lieder" label was given by Geiringer.[147]

On a similar note, Brahms's piano part was not to be used in performance at all, and perhaps should not even be labeled as "accompaniment." Rather, it was only provided for Precheisen's use as she learned the melody lines. Precheisen was not a trained singer, so Brahms

---

[141] Karl Geiringer, *On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies* (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2006), 390.
[142] Ibid., 391.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Inge Van Rij, *Brahms's Song Collections* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 162.
[147] Ibid., 228.

supplied her with a simple piano line which gave melodic support as she learned her part. The songs were to be performed *a cappella* in the play. Brahms's piano parts are intentionally simplistic in nature and the accompaniment for one song was never completed. Karl Geiringer finished the piano lines for the fourth song, "Sie trugen ihn," to match the previous material when he published the set in 1935.

Because the songs were not intended for concert use, they were not designed as a song cycle *per se*. However, due to their short length and the dramatic context of the play for which they were written, they are almost always performed as a set today, rather than individual pieces. Inge Van Rij notes,

> Out of all of Brahms's collections of solo Lieder, only the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, *Ophelia-Lieder* and *Magelone Romanzen* were indisputably conceived together as units. These three groups are also the ones most often to be treated as coherent groupings, perhaps because of the tendency of musicologists to privilege conception over arrangement.[148]

Although Brahms never planned for the songs to exist independent of the play, they nonetheless may be successfully performed as an effective group in a concert setting. Due to their purposefully simplistic nature, small range, and yet copious opportunities for character exploration, they are most appropriate for a young, collegiate-aged singer. Some of the melodic intervals may prove challenging for a high school singer, but would serve as an excellent training set for a young soprano.

Before beginning a study of the songs, it is helpful to understand some overarching ideas about the set as a whole. The songs reflect Brahms's lifelong interest in folksong, with their unsophisticated nature, narrow vocal range, and concise expression of ideas. This is not to imply that they are inferior, however; the songs still reveal Brahms's devotion to melodic beauty. Rather, the songs seemed to serve as a challenge to Brahms – to accomplish his compositional

[148] Inge Van Rij, *Brahms's Song Collections* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 74.

goals within the narrow confines given him. The vocal line only spans from D4 to G-flat 5, which is not a difficult range for most beginning sopranos. The text is mostly syllabic, with the exception of one short melisma on the word "Liebesregen" ("love's rain") in the second song. The boundaries of the set not only made it accessible for Precheisen, but effectively portrayed Ophelia's youth.

The songs are also purposeful in their harmonic structure and rhythmic features. The keys of the five songs, in order, are as follows: B-flat minor, F major, B-flat major, A-flat major, and F minor. "The *Ophelia-Lieder* do not have tonal rounding, but they do exist in a tightly interwoven tonal sequence."[149] Brahms employs modal borrowing, pivot chords that allow for brief key changes, and secondary dominant chords throughout. There are suspensions within the piano and vocal lines and frequent passing tones that keep the predominantly stepwise motion intact. At times, Brahms changes meter abruptly, effectively alluding to Ophelia's unstable mental state. The first, third, and fifth songs are strophic, while the second song features a brief, repeating melody line. The fourth song is the only through-composed of the set. The rhythms are fairly straightforward and would not prove difficult for Ms. Precheisen, or a young singer, to learn. The meters of the five songs are: alternating 4/4 and 6/4 ("Wie erkenn"), 3/4 ("Sein Leichenhemd"), 6/8 ("Auf morgen ist"), 6/8 ("Sie trugen ihn"), and 6/4 ("Und kommt er nicht mehr"). Overall, the songs allude to an earlier musical tradition, fitting for the time period of Shakespeare's tragic drama.

Analysis of the Songs

The first song, "Wie erkenn' ich dein Treulieb", is in B-flat minor and is marked *andante con moto* ("at a walking pace, with motion"). The first verse is in an alternating question and

[149] Inge Van Rij, *Brahms's Song Collections* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 163.

answer format. The second verse follows the same pattern, but instead it provides information, then elaborates upon it. Brahms's harmonic motion illustrates this textual pattern, as he concludes measure three with a dominant, F major chord. The "answer" comes in measure six, with the resolution to the tonic chord. Brahms uses modal borrowing in measures two and five, which the inclusion of a major II chord. The two strophes of the song are from Ophelia's first sung entrance in the play, which Brahms separates into songs one and two.

The second song uses the dominant pitch of the first as a new tonic, since "Sein Leichenhemd" is set in F major. Like most of the songs, there is no introductory material for the piano to play. Since the songs would be performed *a cappella*, the singer is expected to enter quickly after the piano has established the new key in rehearsal. (There is no known indication how Ms. Precheisen would be given a starting pitch; the key may have been spontaneously chosen in performance, or a pitch may have been provided by an instrument.). There is an alternating pattern of articulation in the repeating vocal line. Measures one and two (and their corresponding measures of five and six) employ skipwise, arpeggiating motion and dotted rhythms. This is in contrast with measures three and four (along with seven and eight), which instead use more stepwise motion and a more *legato* production. The same sections also alternate in their keys: measures one, two, five, and six are set in F major, while three, four, seven, and eight are in the relative key of D minor. The optimistic, cheerful tone of the major key contrasts with the somber minor, illustrating Ophelia's shifting states of mind.

Song number three consists of four strophes, each with identical melodic and piano lines. Brahms's harmonic progression is tonally straightforward, with the exception of a few secondary dominant chords on the third phrase of each verse. The song's bawdy text is reflected in its rollicking, jovial style. Eric Sams points out the "scene and the tone: hunter and prey, with a

left-hand tantivy."[150] Indeed, the left hand plays a galloping, barcarolle pattern throughout, while the right hand closely follows the vocal line. The brighter characteristics of this third song stand in contrast to the darker tones of the songs surrounding it.

The through-composed setting of "Sie trugen ihn," the fourth piece, makes it the outlier of the set. The various phrases seem fragmented from one another, and so effectively render Ophelia's fractured mental state. The vocal line features an unexpected leap of a minor seventh from "bloß" to the first syllable of "leider" (measures 2-3). The subsequent melodic tritone on the two syllables of "leider" illustrate the meaning of the word ("unfortunately"). The tritone is repeated again on the text "'nunter" in measure seven. The lyrics "leider, ach leider" and "'nunter, hinunter" were substitutions that Schlegel and Tieck made because the English "hey non nony" nonsense syllables did not translate into German. Additionally, the double entendre English word "Robin" is substituted for a more Germanic-sounding "Fränzel." Brahms chose to ignore the tawdry implication by not setting it apart melodically in any way.

Brahms did not complete the piano part for this fourth piece. His accompaniment ended after measure six. Karl Geiringer, in his 1935 publication of the set, finished the piano line in as similar a style as he could. "But as he [Brahms] carried the vocal part to its conclusion, I have ventured to finish the accompaniment, adhering to the spirit of these first measures."[151] After the upbeat nature of the third song, this fourth piece returns Ophelia and her listeners to a funeral dirge.

The final song, "Und kommt er nicht mehr," is the second of the set to contain a tempo marking (*con moto* or "with motion"). This propels the song forward, even though the text is

[150] Eric Sams, *The Songs of Johannes Brahms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 195.
[151] Karl Geiringer, *On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies* (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2006), 391.

mournful. The song shifts between F minor and A-flat major, depicting Ophelia's fluctuating disposition. The melody line echoes itself twice in measures 1-4, then again in 5-8. This sets up an overall AABBC form. The final, descending vocal line ends the set on a despondent, tragic note.

Brahms clearly reveals his view of the character of Ophelia in his settings of the *Fünf Ophelia-Lieder*. His conception of Ophelia is that, although she is "mad," she is a young, simple, and unsophisticated girl. Despite her courtly upbringing, she is familiar with the ways of the common folk, so much so that she is able to replicate their songs. His folksong settings are indicative of this, with their use of dotted rhythms, arpeggiations in the vocal line, and narrow vocal range. Their general accessibility not only made the songs appropriate for Ms. Precheisen to perform, but illustrate Ophelia's comfort with things of a simple nature. Brahms's devotion to melodic beauty is evident and presents an Ophelia who is pure, beautiful, and guileless. The pieces are charming and concise, suggesting the same about her personality.

The set stays grounded in tonality, hearkening back to an earlier musical style. Brahms's Ophelia is not one to venture too far past the confines of her familiar world. The *a cappella* intent allows the listener an intimate acquaintance with the character's voice, uncomplicated by outside forces or accompaniment. Though they were not intended for use outside of the play, much can be learned about Brahms's perception of the character by presenting the songs in a concert setting. His grounded, straightforward composition aptly illustrates Lewinsky's description of Brahms's ideal that "something simple makes a greater effect."[152]

[152] Karl Geiringer, *On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies* (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2006), 390.

Chapter 8

Living during the same time period, but having a different musical sensibility than Johannes Brahms, was the composer Hector Berlioz (1803-1869). Berlioz was not as prolific a song composer as Brahms, but helped to usher in the era of nineteenth-century French *mélodies*, eventually writing about 50 of these French songs. He first wrote in the style of the strophic *romance*, then after he gradually shifted to *mélodies*, he ultimately became known as "the founding father of romanticism [in France]."[153]

Like Brahms, Berlioz's primary concern in his songs was melodic beauty, but always bearing in mind the voice's relationship with the accompaniment. To many critics, Berlioz often seemed frustrated in working in such a small-scale genre.

> One is often aware of a gigantic musical personality not quite at home with a miniaturist medium, and somehow uncomfortably constrained by the limits of the single human voice, and the inadequacies of the pianoforte in terms of colour and power.[154]

Indeed, he provided an orchestration for over half of his songs.[155] His large-scale way of thinking was not entirely typical for French *mélodies* of the time.

In examining his songs, it is clear that Berlioz had a distinct preference for a certain voice type and that he began to push the boundaries of song composition in nineteenth-century France. Johnson and Stokes wrote about "the composer's own dislike of high sopranos…The majority of his finest vocal music for female voice is written for the middle range, and he had a love of the mezzo timbre."[156] Overall, his songs are mostly tonal, but he often experimented with what would become Romantic conventions *de rigeur*: "amplitude of melodic lines, bold modulations,

[153] Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion* (York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 15.
[154] Ibid., 16.
[155] Carol Kimball, *A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2006), 159.
[156] Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion* (York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 15.

unusual resolution of dissonance, [and] ornamental notes against chordal tones."[157] His bold personality revealed itself in many of his song compositions, with exaggerated moments of great tension and chains of sequences that left his listeners clamoring for resolution.

Throughout his career, Berlioz often turned to Shakespeare for inspiration. He composed on subjects from six of the Bard's plays (*The Tempest*, *King Lear*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *The Tragedy of Hamlet*). He voraciously read Shakespeare's works, learned English so as to better understand them, and attended performances whenever he could.[158] Additionally, "quotations from the plays fill his letters and his *Mémoires*, and are to be found in his scores as well."[159] However, it was one particular performance of a Shakespearean play which would prove to change his life forever.

Berlioz's "Ophelia"

Harriet Smithson was born in Ennis, Ireland on March 18, 1800. Her father managed a theater and her mother was an actress. Young Harriet first played the role of Ophelia early in her teens as an apprentice.[160] She soon moved to England and joined Charles Kemble's acting troupe. She again took up the role, but did not make much of an effect in London. "Even in England the role was secondary, and often given to a minor actress with a good voice who

Figure 12. Harriet Smithson, public domain.

[157] Jerri Lamar Kantack, "Romantic Musical Characterizations of Ophelia" (DMA diss., The University of Alabama, 1993), 56, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[158] John R. Elliott, "The Shakespeare Berlioz Saw," *Music and Letters* 57, no. 3 (July 1976): 308, https://www.jstor.org/stable/733579.
[159] James Haar, "The Operas and the Dramatic Legend," in *The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz*, ed. Peter Bloom (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 95.
[160] David Cairns, *Berlioz: The Making of an Artist 1803-1832, Vol. 1* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1999), 248.

could make something of the songs. Kemble felt it could safely be given to Smithson."[161] The company brought several of Shakespeare's works (*Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*[162]) to Paris in 1827. Smithson's Irish accent did not bother Parisian audiences as it had English spectators. On the contrary, her performance caused a frenzy the likes of which Paris had never beheld before.

On September 11, 1827, Kemble's company staged *Hamlet* at the Place de l'Odeon. The theatre had a capacity of 1,770 and every seat was filled.[163] Of particular note was the conspicuous number of Romantic figureheads present. Individuals such as Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Alfred de Vigny, Eugene Delacroix, and Auguste Prèault attended, though most did not speak English and could not understand a great deal of Shakespeare's dialogue.[164] This was not a hindrance to anyone in the theater, however. Smithson's performance as Ophelia was a revelation as she communicated clearly the character's desires, motivations, and mental state. It "moved many members of her audience to tears. Some even left the theatre to escape their uncontrollable emotions."[165] In a play which had up to that point been regarded as a showpiece for the actor portraying Hamlet, Smithson's onstage depiction of Ophelia was a dizzying success.

[161] David Cairns, *Berlioz: The Making of an Artist 1803-1832, Vol. 1* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1999), 248.
[162] Ibid., 242.
[163] Ibid., 245.
[164] Ibid., 248.
[165] John R. Elliott, "The Shakespeare Berlioz Saw," *Music and Letters* 57, no. 3 (July 1976): 294, https://www.jstor.org/stable/733579.

Smithson's appearance, acting capabilities, and madness conveyed through song left an indelible mark on those in attendance. When she came onstage for her mad scene, she wore a long black veil over a white dress "with scattered bedlamish wisps of straw in her hair."[166] She proceeded to spread the veil on the ground and covered it with flowers in the shape of a cross, depicting Polonius's grave.[167] Her tall stature, graceful movements, and large eyes were especially effective onstage. Smithson made great use of gesture and mime, which became part of a new realistic acting style that she helped to introduce. She did not treat Ophelia's songs as showcase pieces; rather, her singing only served to further convey the character's mental breakdown. To the audience members in attendance, she was no longer *playing* Ophelia; she had *become* Ophelia.

Figure 13. Smithson as Ophelia, 1827, public domain.

Smithson's sense of total identification with the character overwhelmed the Parisian crowd. There was a huge standing ovation and a "sudden blossoming to stardom."[168] Peter Raby notes, "She began the evening as an attractive, useful but inconsequential walking-lady[169], at least in the eyes of the public. She completed it as a tragic actress of note."[170] Her subsequent performances as Juliet were also sold out. The most fashionable women could be seen in the

[166] Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 83.
[167] John R. Elliott, "The Shakespeare Berlioz Saw," *Music and Letters* 57, no. 3 (July 1976): 294, https://www.jstor.org/stable/733579.
[168] David Cairns, *Berlioz: The Making of an Artist 1803-1832, Vol. 1* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1999), 248.
[169] "Walking lady": an actor engaged for parts of little importance where impressive appearance is desired. "Walking gentleman," Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, accessed April 25, 2026.
[170] Peter Raby, *Fair Ophelia: A Life of Harriet Smithson Berlioz* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), 66-67.

streets of Paris wearing the "coiffure à la folle" or "à la Miss Smithson," which consisted of a black veil with wisps of straw interwoven in it. Her image was "widely reproduced in prints and paintings, popular lithographs, and fashion design."[171] Her influence as the preeminent image of Ophelia has persisted for centuries. Janet Beizer records,

> Smithson's Ophelia dominated theatrical, medical, pictorial, and literary iconography of the character for generations – arguably until well into the twentieth century. Elaine Showalter points out that Jean Simmons's Ophelia in the Laurence Olivier film of 1948 is still dominated by Smithson's interpretation of the role.[172]

Even today, no other stage actress portraying Ophelia has made the same lasting impression as Harriet Smithson.

Also in the audience on the night of September 11, 1827, was a young Hector Berlioz. Unable to speak English fluently, he had prepared for the performance by reading the French translation beforehand. He called the evening "the grand drama of my life"[173] and exulted: "The impression made on my heart and mind by her extraordinary talent, nay her dramatic genius, was equalled only by the havoc wrought in me by the poet she so nobly interpreted."[174] He was so shaken by the experience that he swore to himself he would not take in another performance, but the very next day he rushed to the theatre to purchase a ticket for Smithson's interpretation of Juliet. He was equally as smitten with Shakespeare's works as he was with Harriet herself. In her performance, she had revealed to him a dramatic intensity and depth of character that he had never witnessed. In his own words, "my fate was doubly sealed."[175]

---

[171] Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 123.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ernest Newman, ed., *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, trans. Rachel Holmes and Eleanor Holmes (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1932), 66.
[174] Peter Raby, *Fair Ophelia: A Life of Harriet Smithson Berlioz* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), 75-76.
[175] Ibid., 77.

So began the five-year romance of Berlioz and Smithson, though for most of that time, the relationship was entirely one-sided. Berlioz developed a near-obsession, watching Smithson from afar, writing her letters (most of which she did not receive), and even moving into a neighboring apartment to be nearer to her. He wrote of that period: "I had spent some months in the kind of hopeless stupor of which I have only faintly indicated the nature and the cause, dreaming ceaselessly of Shakespeare and of the fair Ophelia of whom all Paris raved."[176] Berlioz so identified Smithson with her groundbreaking character from *Hamlet* that he began to refer to her as "Ophelia" rather than her actual name. His letters and memoirs are filled with references to Ophelia, meaning Smithson. It is as if she had become a mirage of the feminine ideal for Berlioz. During this period, he scribbled passionately, "Oh, if I could only find her…the Ophelia for whom my heart is searching."[177]

On December 9, 1832, five years after the life-changing performance of *Hamlet* at the Odeon theater, Berlioz hosted a concert of his works which Smithson attended. Unbeknownst to her, Berlioz had dedicated some of the evening's music to her. The program notes for his *Symphonie Fantastique* read,

> The Composer imagines that a young musician…sees for the first time a woman who possesses all the qualities of the idealised being that he has dreamed of in his imagination: he falls desperately in love.[178]

He eventually communicated his messages of love to Smithson, and the pair were married at the British Embassy on October 3, 1833.[179] They welcomed a son, Louis, in 1834.[180]

---

[176] Ernest Newman, ed., *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, trans. Rachel Holmes and Eleanor Holmes (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1932), 69.
[177] Peter Raby, *Fair Ophelia: A Life of Harriet Smithson Berlioz* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), 133.
[178] Ibid., 131-32.
[179] Ibid., 145.
[180] Melinda O'Neal, *Experiencing Berlioz: A Listener's Companion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 18.

Their wedded bliss was to be short-lived, however. After a few years of great success, Smithson's career began to falter. She suffered from mental and physical decline, and the quotidian details of married life wore on them both. Berlioz's idealized "Ophelia" turned out to be a normal human being, with quirks, faults, and mood swings, just like his own. Smithson could never live up to his romanticized image of her. By the early 1840s, she had turned to alcohol and he took a lover, the Spanish mezzo-soprano Maria Récio. As promising as it had begun, the marriage ended just as tragically.

It is no coincidence that Berlioz turned to composing for the character of Ophelia during this time. He did not write her in her opening scenes, however. He did not even compose for her mad songs. Instead, his portrayal of Ophelia focused on her tragic death, fitting for the demise of his marriage. Though he provided financially for her up to the time of her death, Berlioz and Smithson lived apart for over a decade. During her last few years of life, Smithson was immobilized, could not speak, and required a full-time nurse.[181] She died at her home in Montmartre on March 3, 1854. Berlioz could not bring himself to attend the funeral, preferring instead to stay at home and gaze at a picture from her illustrious earlier years. Clinging to his idealized image, he wrote: "And yet…he it is who now prepares your last journey, poor Ophelia…He who, with all the wrongs he did, can say, like Hamlet: Forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum."[182] Like the character she so vividly portrayed, Smithson, the world's immortalized Ophelia, died in a tragic way.

Berlioz composed *La mort d'Ophélie* in 1842, though it was not published until 1848. It was labelled as a *ballade* and intended for soprano or tenor, with piano accompaniment. True to his preference for large-scale works, he also arranged the piece for female chorus and orchestra.

[181] Peter Raby, *Fair Ophelia: A Life of Harriet Smithson Berlioz* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), 170.
[182] Ibid., 172.

The piece is 160 measures long and lasts approximately eight minutes in duration. The first edition of the song was dedicated to the Countess Marie d'Agoult, who was Liszt's companion and the mother of his three children.[183] In a telling parallel to Berlioz and Smithson's marriage, d'Agoult and Liszt were also enduring a painful separation at the time.[184] The cover of the first edition bears an image of an idealized Smithson in her portrayal of Ophelia. "The coronet of flowers and the downcast, pained eyes form a pathetic image of abandoned love."[185] The evidence of Berlioz's and Smithson's painful dissolution of their marriage could not be more clear.

Berlioz turned to the dramatist Ernest Legouvé for the text of his *La mort d'Ophélie*. The two men were friends, and Legouvé had written a poetic translation of Ophelia's death scene as recounted by Queen Gertrude. It is not a word-for-word translation, but a paraphrase of the text beginning, "There is a willow grows askant the brook…" Berlioz furthered emphasized the point by describing the song as a "ballade imitée de Shakespeare."[186] The poem is made up of four stanzas and contains a wordless refrain on the syllable "ah." Though the narrator is clearly Gertrude as taken from the play, Berlioz allows Ophelia a haunting melody throughout.

The song would be most appropriate for a collegiate-aged or more advanced singer. The singer must have good control over head, mixed, and chest voice registers, as the song delves into all of these. The second passaggio, in particular, must be navigated with care, as the tessitura of the piece stays within this range a great deal, especially on the sections of the wordless refrain. The singer needs to be able to execute leaps with precision and without strain,

[183] Peter Bloom, *Berlioz in Time: From Early Recognition to Lasting Renown* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2022), 143, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2dd47qg.1.
[184] Jerri Lamar Kantack, "Romantic Musical Characterizations of Ophelia" (DMA diss., The University of Alabama, 1993), 57, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[185] Peter Raby, *Fair Ophelia: A Life of Harriet Smithson Berlioz* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), 191.
[186] Ibid., 172.

as many of the phrases begin with a memorable interval of an ascending major sixth. The melody has a sustained, suspended quality, which requires solid breath support and the ability to hold a phrase for its intended length. A sense of dramatic expression and involvement in the storytelling aspect of the song is also helpful. The range of the melody is D4 – G5, making the song suitable for a mezzo soprano (appropriate for Berlioz's preference) or a soprano with solid capabilities in her middle and chest voice. The piece could also be performed by a tenor, but such instances are rare.

La mort d'Ophélie is in a modified strophic form. The four verses follow the rhyme scheme of *ababccb*. The modifications of the form occur with Berlioz's "stretching or contraction of recurring melodies."[187] Each verse is slightly different from the others in terms of length. (Verse one contains 48 measures, verse 2 contains 37, verse three has 28, and verse four has 47.) The overall key center is B-flat major, but Berlioz drifts to other tonalities briefly throughout the song. The 6/8 meter continues its rocking motion for the duration of the piece. There is a tempo marking of dotted quarter note = 63 and an indication of *andantino con moto quasi allegretto*, though some conductors have preferred a slightly faster motion.

> During a London roundtable discussion of conducting Berlioz held in October 1995, Norrington, Macdonald, David Cairns, and I [D. Kern Holoman] discussed the matter of finding workable tempos…The conversation turned naturally to other unaccountably slow markings in Berlioz…the [dotted quarter note] = 63 for *La Mort d'Ophélie*, which instead might well go 'swingingly along.'[188]

The song is melancholy and hauntingly beautiful in its description of Ophelia's final moments. The mostly diatonic harmony is relatively straightforward, though Berlioz infuses the work with some elements of chromaticism which are indicative of the Romantic style. The

[187] Melinda O'Neal, *Experiencing Berlioz: A Listener's Companion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 19-20.
[188] D. Kern Holoman, "Performing Berlioz," in *The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz*, ed. Peter Bloom (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 191.

melody of the piece is its outstanding feature. It is "sometimes confided to the voice, sometimes to the right hand of the piano part, and most often to the two simultaneously."[189] The lyrical beauty of the melodic line is shared by both vocalist and pianist.

Two outstanding components of the piece are found in the piano and the vocal line. Berlioz's continuous, rolling water motif serves as the song's main example of text-painting. The undulating arpeggiations and sixteenth-note figures ripple under the voice as Ophelia walks near the stream, falls into its depths, and is pulled under the water. Berlioz also incorporates the wordless "ah" refrain to represent the voice of Ophelia. Though Legouvé did not include it in his poem, Berlioz chose to incorporate the vocalise to give Ophelia a voice in Gertrude's otherwise uninterrupted soliloquy.

Analysis of the Song

The song opens with the water motif in the right-hand accompaniment and a clear establishment of the key of B-flat major. The voice's entrance at measure three is marked *sempre a mezza voce* at a *piano* dynamic level, creating the calm, buoyant atmosphere delineated by the voice and piano. The first instance of chromaticism occurs on the line "dans sa douce et tendre folie" (in her sweet and tender madness), suggesting that her mental state is outside the realm of expectations. As Ophelia walks beside the stream and gathers her flowers, the setting is bucolic and peaceful. The text describes the different kinds of flowers Ophelia is gathering. All seems at ease until she picks the pale pink flowers known as "dead man's fingers," when the tonality shifts via a pivot chord in measure 22 to F minor. This is an ominous foreshadowing of the events to come. All through the first strophe, the piano continues its rippling, shimmering motion beneath the vocal line.

[189] Frits Noske, *French Song from Berlioz to Duparc: The Origin and Development of the Mélodie*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 112.

The first instance of Ophelia's theme begins in measure 26. The piano begins the phrase, which is picked up by the voice in measure 27. Berlioz creates the first of a chain of suspensions which he will continue throughout the piece. This creates an unsettled, tension-filled atmosphere which never quite resolves as desired. The tonality returns to B-flat major in measure 30. The suspension chain passes between voice and piano until it fades away after measure 38. The theme, representing Ophelia's voice, may be interpreted as a sob or a faltering step at this point in the narrative. With each appearance, it descends gradually by step until it comes to a stuttering halt in the lower register in measure 36. The piano line continues thematic material, but in fragments until measure 42. Another theme occurs from measures 43-47, which will be repeated later in the piece.

A hopeful, right-hand motive introduces verse two in measures 47-48. The tone is again optimistic and remains in B-flat major. Ophelia's action of hanging her floral garlands upon the willow branches is set to the same melody as verse one. The piano line is slightly altered, with broken, arpeggiated figures, but still in the same quivering sixteenth notes as the beginning. Secondary chords complicate the harmony as the storyline intensifies in 53-55. As the evocative willow tree is named in 61-62, there is a shift to G minor. The sixteenth-note figures return in the accompaniment, drawing attention to the rushing water underneath Ophelia. Throughout verse two, more chromatic notes have appeared in both voice and piano, not only changing the tonality, but pointing out Ophelia's fractured mental state.

The action of the right-hand accompaniment changes in measure 67 to an insistent, pressurized series of unrelenting eighth notes. The tonality is suspended in a progression of diminished and half-diminished chords that build the dramatic action until the highest point of the piece occurs at measure 73. On the word "tombe" (fall), there is an emphatic, dominant

seventh chord built on A, that is marked *fortissimo*, sustained for three beats, and given an accent. No other note in the piece is set apart so dramatically. After Ophelia's fall, there is an entire measure of silence, then a return to *pianissimo* and a sorrowful, descending line in voice and piano in measures 76-77.

After a few moments marked by *fermati*, Ophelia's theme returns in measure 79 and continues through 85. Both hands of the piano play in the treble clef while the right hand continues the chain of suspensions. The water motif returns and eventually settles in the left hand as Ophelia settles into the water. Verse three begins at measure 86 and there is a move to G minor. The left-hand accompaniment ripples in sixteenth notes while Ophelia floats on the surface. The right hand makes a series of octave leaps which gradually descend by half steps, suggesting she is slowly sinking.

Beginning in B-flat major in measure 97, the water motif moves to the right hand while the left hand arpeggiates in a lower register. This gives the impression that she is moving deeper into the stream. There is a flicker of hope on the ascending melodic line of "chantant ainsi qu'une naïade" (singing like a naiad), but the hope is quickly extinguished with the reestablishment of G minor in 110. It is telling that Ophelia's theme does not appear in the vocal line at all in verse three, but only in the piano. Ophelia is unable to vocalize as the water begins to overtake her.

The theme returns in measure 111, its chain of suspensions depicting Ophelia's uncertain fate. As the voice begins verse four in B-flat major in measure 114, the right hand picks up her "étrange mélodie" (strange melody). The left hand plays a series of repeated open fifths, suggesting a void which Ophelia is about to enter. The rhythm begins its most heightened activity at measure 127 with tremolo thirty-second notes. There is a dramatic *crescendo* to a

sforzando at 128 on the word "l'abime" (the abyss) and the voice falls dramatically, covering the space of an octave and employing text-painting to depict Ophelia's descent. Berlioz again uses silence to emphasize the profundity of the moment at 129. When the voice enters after the *fermata*, the melody line moves in slippery, unstable chromatic tones in a lower register. The piano follows suit as Ophelia's life slips away.

Berlioz uses clever text-painting in transitioning from the end of the fourth strophe into the wordless refrain. The lyrics have just informed the audience that Ophelia's life has ended, her "melodious song having hardly begun." However, in the very next measure (136), Berlioz "hardly begins" her theme. He fragments the first two notes of the motive twice, then allows a full restatement in measure 138. The action begins again as the left-hand accompaniment picks up the water motif in the treble clef. The audience is left wondering where Ophelia's song has gone, then it suddenly returns in measure 140 on a faltering, sustained, *pianissimo* B-flat. It is as if she has gasped a breath of air and resumed her song, though we know she has actually perished. Ophelia is allowed two full restatements of her theme, then her melody line begins its slow descent at 147. The piano takes up her melody and the voice dies away, with the highly expressive *perdendo* ("dying away") marking. The piano continues to fragment segments of her melody until it cannot continue. The motive from measure 43 returns in 155 to close out the piece in unison with the piano. Berlioz gives three final "death knells" to confirm that the end has come.

Berlioz's conception of the character of Ophelia is markedly different from that of Brahms. His *La mort d'Ophélie* was composed in tribute to his faltering marriage with his idealized feminine conception of the character, played by Harriet Smithson. Thus, Berlioz's setting portrays Ophelia as otherworldly, dreamlike, ethereal, and fragile. Like Smithson was for

so many years to Berlioz, the Ophelia in this music is almost untouchable and unknowable. She floats above the surface of the water as if suspended in time, apart from the realities of earth. When Berlioz truly knew Smithson as a person, this mirage was shattered and their lives together ended in tragedy.

It is revelatory that by choosing to interpret Legouvé's poetry based on Gertrude's narration, Berlioz did not give Ophelia any actual text to sing. Instead, she exists on a different plane, with only the wordless "ah" assigned to her. It is as if in his large-scale way of thinking, he saw Ophelia in such an idealized state that she did not even communicate by normal, human means. Instead, her haunting melody, passed between voice and piano, continues on even after Ophelia's (and Harriet's) death.

Additionally, the character of Ophelia captured the essence of Romanticism. Berlioz is often referred to as the "founding father of Romanticism"[190] in France. The movement celebrated the idea of the individual, a person who lived outside the realm of societal expectations and was often portrayed as melancholy or otherwise disturbed. There was also a high value placed on emotionalism as opposed to stark realism. Both of these ideas may be seen in the character of Ophelia as represented in Berlioz's composition. His choice to portray the character in her death scene from *Hamlet*, surrounded by water, flowers, and natural elements point to the Romantic fascination with nature. Referring to Smithson's performance as Ophelia, David Cairns writes: "In the late summer of 1827 the diverse energies of French Romanticism found what they had been waiting for: a focal point, a standard to rally to, a Bible."[191] In her

[190] Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion* (York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 15.
[191] David Cairns, *Berlioz: The Making of an Artist 1803-1832, Vol. 1* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1999), 242.

ethereal, removed, and beautiful state, Ophelia represented a summation of French Romantic qualities.

Chapter 9

Born slightly later than Berlioz, Camille Saint-Saëns nonetheless shared many of the same Romantic ideals and compositional style. He was born on October 9, 1835, and was soon recognized for his prodigious musical talent. He played the piano well by the age of three and began to compose at age four.[192] His father passed away while he was still young and Saint-Saëns was raised by his mother, who was known for her demanding and difficult personality. By the age of six, he played the piano and organ and had begun to compose simple *mélodies*. He was accepted into the Paris Conservatoire as a teenager.

As a young man, Saint-Saëns was hired to teach music at the École Neidermeyer in Paris. He was one of Fauré's teachers at the school, and he and Fauré remained lifelong friends.[193] His career covered many fields, including pianist, organist, composer, music critic, author, editor, and teacher. At the age of forty, he married Marie-Laure Truffot, with whom he had two sons. Tragically, both sons died young, at the ages of two and seven months. The marriage ended disastrously, with Saint-Saëns eventually leaving Truffot and having no contact with her for years. His mother then passed away in 1888. "He had been passionately devoted to her, although there is no doubt that their relationship was far from healthy, and it left Saint-Saëns emotionally stunted in certain respects."[194] For the last years of his life, he traveled abroad a great deal, eventually passing away in Algiers in 1921.

---

[192] Kelsey K. Rogers, "Silent Songs: Unearthing the Song Repertoire of Camille Saint-Saëns" (DMA document, North Dakota State University, 2023), 19, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[193] Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion* (York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 450.
[194] Ibid., 451.

Saint-Saëns wrote prolifically, but is mainly known today for his orchestral compositions. He wrote vocal music as well, including choral music and thirteen operas, the most well-known of which is *Samson et Dalila*. Unfortunately, his output of over 140 *mélodies* has fallen into obscurity. He composed songs throughout his lifetime, but most of these have not remained in the standard canon. Many of his songs have remained unpublished and are not performed regularly. Despite these hindrances, the songs are worth reconsidering and programming in current performances.

The obscurity of Saint-Saëns's songs may be partly due to his inherent personality traits. He was a man who often lived in solitude and did not particularly enjoy large crowds.

> To this day no one knows the real Camille Saint-Saëns…Fewer people today know his music. Obsessive privacy has a way of translating into anonymity, a quality which seeps into the compositions, and can render them all too easy to neglect.[195]

In spite of being called the "Master of Disguises,"[196] he remains to this day one of the great contributors to the massive outpouring of French *mélodies* at the end of the nineteenth century.

The songs of Camille Saint-Saëns are praised for their sparseness, humor, and attention to melodic phrasing. The "economy of means"[197] with which he composed gave his songs a charming simplicity which makes them accessible and memorable. This restraint allowed him plenty of space to include humorous and endearing motives. He is noted especially for his piano accompaniments, which is understandable due to his prodigious talents on the keyboard. He was more concerned with melodic over textual elements, possessing "an astonishing ability to write long-breathed melody that can rival the best of Gounod."[198]

---

[195] Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion* (York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 449.
[196] Kelsey K. Rogers, "Silent Songs: Unearthing the Song Repertoire of Camille Saint-Saëns" (DMA document, North Dakota State University, 2023), 3, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[197] Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion* (York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 450.
[198] Kelsey K. Rogers, "Silent Songs: Unearthing the Song Repertoire of Camille Saint-Saëns" (DMA document, North Dakota State University, 2023), 3, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

Saint-Saëns is often criticized, however, for his commitment to traditional forms during a time when musical boundaries were being pushed. His works are simpler in nature, often based in conventional harmonic structures, and do not veer far from tonality. His style of composition never altered fundamentally throughout his lifetime, even as his contemporaries experimented in groundbreaking melodic and harmonic forms. This led to his works being seen as antiquated during the progressive lifetime in which he lived and composed. However, with modern eyes, Saint-Saëns's works may be viewed from a fresh perspective. While indeed, his songs generally remain grounded in tonality and traditional forms, they are also uniquely elegant, creative, and rich with elements such as text-painting and lyrical melodies. It would be regrettable to lose such a vast trove of excellent art songs simply because they were not considered *en vogue* in Saint-Saëns's day.

Saint-Saëns composed his version of *La mort d'Ophélie* in 1857, fifteen years after Berlioz's rendition. He was only 22 years old when he wrote the piece and the details surrounding the composition, like many of his works, are unknown. He was employed as the church organist at Saint-Merri at the time, having left the Paris Conservatoire in 1853. He would not be employed at the École Niedermeyer until 1861, so his energies were concentrated on his work at the church. He set the same poetic translation by Legouvé as Berlioz with only one minor textual difference. Berlioz opens his version with "Auprès d'un torrent" (near a stream), while Saint-Saëns used the words "Au bord d'un torrent" (at the edge of a stream). While this detail may seem inconsequential, it does, from the first sung line, set up the urgency with which Saint-Saëns composed the rest of the piece.

Saint-Saëns conceived of his *La mort d'Ophélie* with an insistent, driving forward motion. While the pace of Berlioz's setting was more like a lullaby, Saint-Saëns's version

surges ahead with momentum and compulsion. The scene is more dramatic in its portrayal of Ophelia's death, focusing on the action more than the emotion. There is a pronounced halt in the activity at the end of the piece, but up until that time, the energy flows uninterrupted. A great deal of the forward momentum is due to the piano's unrelenting sixteenth-note motion. Saint-Saëns's talent as a pianist is well-documented, and this song is an excellent example of his virtuosic skill level at the keyboard. It requires a pianist of tremendous capability and conveys Saint-Saëns's respect for the collaboration between singer and pianist. The accompaniment and vocal part are "full and equal musical partner[s]."[199]

The song is most suitable for an experienced soprano of solid technique and expressive capabilities. The vocal range stretches from D-sharp 4 to G-sharp 5. She should be comfortable negotiating large intervals, as a key component of the melody is an ascending octave leap. She should also be proficient in delivering the French text efficiently and clearly, as required by the tempo marking. Dependable intonation is a requirement due to the shifting tonalities between major and minor. Additionally, she should be able to carry extended phrases and convey various dynamic levels. A secure system of breath management is needed, as there are not many long pauses in which to recover before singing another phrase.

Analysis of the Song

The song opens with a clear delineation of the 4/4 meter and F-sharp minor key, with insistent sixteenth-note quintuplet figures based off of the tonic note on each beat. The *vivace* tempo and minor tonality gives the song an immediate "sense of urgency and suggests a rushing watery torrent."[200] If the stream that Berlioz portrayed was rocking gently side to side in a

[199] Kelsey K. Rogers, "Silent Songs: Unearthing the Song Repertoire of Camille Saint-Saëns" (DMA document, North Dakota State University, 2023), 61, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[200] Jerri Lamar Kantack, "Romantic Musical Characterizations of Ophelia" (DMA diss., The University of Alabama, 1993), 68, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

lulling, 6/8 meter, Saint-Saëns's stream, in contrast, is flowing swiftly down its course, depicting Ophelia's quickly-impending fate. These water figures continue in the piano's right hand with almost no deterrence for the opening 15 measures.

The first appearance of Ophelia's melodic theme is in the vocal line from the anacrusis to measure three through measure four. The left hand plays in unison with the voice one octave lower through measure 16. A key characteristic of the theme is the ascending octave leap which could portray the character's desperation or a cry for help. In measures 16 and 17, the quintuplet water figures descend downward over the span of an octave until they reach F-sharp 3. This shift occurs as the voice is singing "des doigts de mort" (dead man's fingers), an example of Saint-Saëns's text-painting. There is also a dramatic *crescendo* and *decrescendo* on the word "mort" (death), drawing attention to its significance in the story. The first strophe of the poem concludes in measure 17.

At measure 18, the original, repetitive water motive resumes, but this time an octave lower from its first appearance. This indicates aurally that the scene is beginning to change to something more dangerous. The voice begins the text of verse two in measure eighteen. The melody initiates in the same way as the first verse, but changes course in measure 23 with a brief modulation to the relative major of A. In this optimistic, major key, all seems well momentarily as Ophelia hangs her garlands on the branches of the willow tree. The left hand has been playing staccato broken chords during this section, which could indicate water drops from the stream.

The description of the branch breaking and Ophelia falling occurs from measures 26 through 31. There are sudden *rinforzandi* and a *sforzando* on the words "mais" (but), "brise" (breaks), and "tombe" (falls). The vocal line also descends by an interval of a minor seventh on the word "tombe," illustrating Ophelia's plunge into the stream. The piano plays left-hand

octaves which move down by half steps to further illustrate the action. Saint-Saëns has shifted the tonality to C-sharp minor in this section, as well.

The action of the accompaniment plays a key part in the transition from verse two to verse three (measures 33 through 36). The water motif continues, but in broken form, suggesting that Ophelia has been injured by her fall. There is another descending quintuplet movement from 35 to 36, until the voice picks up verse three in measure 37 and the piano resumes its normal water motif.

Measure 37 brings a modulation to D major as Ophelia floats on the surface of the water, suspended in a dreamlike state and singing her old lauds. Saint-Saëns instructs that the voice should perform *sotto voce*, perhaps giving Ophelia space to intone. After the repeating melody in the first two sections, it might be expected that the third strophe would begin in the same way. The rest of the piece is through-composed, however, with melodic references to what has come before. Kelsey Rogers notes, "It is almost as though the form loses its footing as Ophelia loses her hold on sanity and life."[201] The right hand of the piano continues the water movement, while the left hand plays rolled chords and lyrical, slurred segments of the melody.

The vocal line from measures 41 through 48 reflects the "suspended" nature of Ophelia at this point in the story line. She is still floating on the surface of the water and the melody line bobs along with her, moving slightly away from D5, then immediately coming back to it as a point of reference and as the tonic. Saint-Saëns further reinforces this idea by repeating the text of "elle flottait" (she floats), though it is not written in the poem in that way.

There is an abrupt shift to C-sharp major at measure 49. Ophelia's theme, with its ascending octave leap, returns in the voice and there is a feeling of triumph as she sings her

[201] Kelsey K. Rogers, "Silent Songs: Unearthing the Song Repertoire of Camille Saint-Saëns" (DMA document, North Dakota State University, 2023), 49, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

songs like a naiad in the stream. At the end of this strophe, the right hand again plays a descending quintuplet figure, while the bass clef is silent. By measure 57, the tonality has returned to the original key of F-sharp minor. The same water motif from the beginning of the song appears in the right hand, while the left hand plays ominous-sounding, open chords. The left hand crosses the right to play Ophelia's theme an octave higher from 57 through 59. This high register alludes to the common use of flutes or high coloratura singing to depict madness in music. Jennifer Tipton observes, "This is the first time the motive has appeared without the voice, signifying that Ophelia is now part of the water."[202]

Verse four begins in measure 59. Her theme, having just appeared in the piano, is another example of Saint-Saëns's text-painting. It not only depicts Ophelia's madness but also her "étranger mélodie" lingering in the air. Saint-Saëns repeats the figure in measures 61-63. The piano continues the water motives, sustained blocked chords, and depictions of water droplets throughout this fourth strophe. The action intensifies from measures 65-71, as each phrase begins on a successively higher pitch. There is also an accompanying *crescendo*, then a *riforzando* on the word "entraîna" (dragged down).

The action comes to a fever pitch after these three phrases, then there is an abrupt halt at measure 72. The piano drops out completely and the voice is left to sing the phrase "laissant à peine commencée sa mélodieuse chanson" (leaving, hardly begun her melodious song) *ad lib* and *a cappella*. The voice repeats the ascending octave leap in this phrase, then the piano plays two rolled, *pianissimo* chords to complete the thought.

[202] Jennifer Leigh Tipton, *A document in death and madness: A cultural and interdisciplinary study of nineteenth-century art song settings on the death of Ophelia* (DMA diss., The University of Southern Mississippi, 2014), 51, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

The left hand begins the first three notes of the water motif in triplets at measure 78, but does not complete the figure. Ophelia's theme returns two more times in successively higher octaves at a *pianissimo* dynamic level, suggesting that she is dying away. The left and right hands trade off ascending octave figures, then the song ends completely in the bass clef, signifying a metaphorical sinking down. Indications of *ritardando* and *adagio* lead to the final F-sharp minor chord of the song.

Saint-Saëns composed his version of Ophelia fifteen years after Berlioz's and sixteen years before Brahms's songs. Despite this thirty-one year span, Saint-Saëns's conception of the character is quite different from either of the other two. Saint-Saëns incorporated much of his early trauma and tragedy into Shakespeare's *femme tragique*, after suffering the loss of his father and young sons and enduring difficult relationships with both his mother and wife. Thus, the Ophelia he envisioned was more intensely- and dramatically-realized. His creative and colorful compositional style reflected his love of travel and broad range of career fields. The piano accompaniment he devised was born from his own prodigious talent at the keyboard. Saint-Saëns drew on his personal history and life experiences to portray an Ophelia who was wrought with tension and anxiety.

Though he was sometimes ridiculed for adhering to traditional forms and styles, Saint-Saëns's *mélodies* should not be overlooked today. *La mort d'Ophélie* is one example of his ability to portray a character in a way that is clear and straightforward, yet still elegant in its sparseness. His depiction of Ophelia, with its urgent, swiftly-moving watery currents and ominous, minor tonality rushes the character to her inescapable fate, rather than lingering in the moment. Saint-Saëns, too, gives Ophelia a voice via her unmistakable theme running throughout the piece. His portrayal of her death scene is more insistent and riveting; the listener has no

choice but to follow along the current he has created. Saint-Saëns's Ophelia setting is but one example of why his works should be reconsidered today as rich resources for song.

Chapter 10

Richard Strauss (1864-1949) lived a generation later than Brahms and Saint-Saëns, but the musical world in which he existed was dramatically different. He made his living as a composer, conductor, and pianist, but his most enduring contributions to music are his operas and tone poems. Even though he is best known for these, he composed over two hundred lieder, many of which are highly exemplary of the musical time period in which he wrote. Strauss's songs "stand at the end of the great nineteenth-century German lied tradition."[203] At the same time, they point ahead to a broadening of musical constructs that would continue to expand throughout the twentieth century.

Strauss wrote lieder throughout his career, but virtually stopped from 1905-1917.[204] It was during this period that he composed four of his most well-known operas: *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. Some believed that Strauss was finished composing lieder after this long absence, but in 1918, Strauss made a remarkable comeback to the genre, creating four groups of songs (Opp. 66-69) in rapid succession."[205] He completed 29 lieder in all during this year. These songs from the later stage of his life "show the influence of operatic writing in their coloratura vocal style, accompaniments conceived for orchestra instead of piano, and dramatic, expansive scenalike structures."[206] His time away from

[203] Rufus Hallmark, *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), 250.
[204] Ibid., 251.
[205] Ibid., 250.
[206] Ibid.

the art song genre informed his forthcoming compositions. He most often wrote for soprano[207] and, like Berlioz, tended to prefer composing on a larger scale. He often wrote initially for voice and piano, then later orchestrated his songs.

Many of Strauss's compositions served to bridge the Romantic and Modernist styles.[208] He referenced the lyrical, lush tradition established in the late nineteenth century, yet helped to push ahead emerging twentieth-century methods such as the breakdown of tonality, expanded forms, and extended techniques. He was considered more traditional than his contemporaries like Mahler and Wolf[209], though his melodic lines were groundbreaking in their "broad and exhilarating" gestures.[210] The harmonies Strauss employed were most often due to his proclivity to modulate to remote tonal centers. His piano accompaniments did not retain the text-painting qualities so often used in Romantic art song, but instead "important material in the accompaniment is reserved for portions where the voice is resting or when, for dramatic purposes, the melody line is sustaining a long note."[211] Overall, his compositional style retains important elements of the previous generation, yet points ahead to innovative techniques of the music yet to come.

Strauss had a long history with mental illness in his own family before writing for Ophelia. Some of his earliest memories involved his mentally unstable mother, Josepha, trying

[207] Rufus Hallmark, *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), 250.
[208] Alexander Michael Shannon, "'O Wake in Me': Contextualizing Vocal Writing, Text-Setting, and Harmonic Syntax in Richard Strauss's 'Deutsche Motette,' Op. 62" (Master's thesis, University of Missouri – Kansas City, 2021), 1, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[209] Philip Radcliffe, "Germany and Austria," in *A History of Song*, ed. Denis Stevens (New York: Norton, 1970), 260.
[210] Alexander Michael Shannon, "'O Wake in Me': Contextualizing Vocal Writing, Text-Setting, and Harmonic Syntax in Richard Strauss's 'Deutsche Motette,' Op. 62" (Master's thesis, University of Missouri – Kansas City, 2021), 1, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[211] Donald Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), 220.

"to intervene as peace-maker when Strauss and his autocratic father Franz quarreled."[212] She struggled with nervous breakdowns, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.[213] She was confined to an institution during the time when female mental illness was considered sensational and psychiatric hospitals held viewing hours for the public to observe the mentally ill. "Strauss defended his mother, who 'never uttered a cross word'…and spoke of her in idealizing ways. But his experience of mental illness at close quarters left its mark."[214] Strauss's own wife, Pauline de Ahna, suffered with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Throughout his career, Strauss would go on to write such unstable characters as Salome (1905) and Elektra (1909), both of whom became icons of female madness onstage and whose mental disturbance, like Ophelia's, could be connected with their sexuality. When he set out to write songs for Ophelia, Strauss was highly attuned to these ideas. "Female psychosis was a subject Strauss would address over and over again, and thus it was perhaps inevitable that he would join forces with the many painters, poets, and musicians at the turn of the century who were also fascinated with Ophelia."[215]

The circumstances surrounding Strauss's composition of the Ophelia songs were somewhat unusual. In the late nineteenth century, Strauss resolved that composers should retain performing rights over their own songs. The publishing houses of the time were not in agreement with Strauss's views. One of these firms, Bote & Bock, based out of Berlin, still held a contract with Strauss from 1904 that stipulated he owed them twelve lieder.[216] He completed six of them by 1906, but by 1917, he still had not submitted the other half-dozen. They

---

[212] Susan Youens, "'Actually, I like my songs best': Strauss's lieder" in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Dowell Youmans (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 170.
[213] Kurt Wilhelm, *Richard Strauss: An Intimate Portrait*, trans. Mary Whittall (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 14.
[214] Donald Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), 220.
[215] Susan Youens, "'Actually, I like my songs best': Strauss's lieder" in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Dowell Youmans (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 171.
[216] Susan Gale Johnson Odom, "Four Musical Settings of Ophelia" (DMA document, University of North Texas, 1991), 48, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

threatened him with legal action, so Strauss finally relented and wrote a set of songs for Bote & Bock. The resulting songs were not what they expected, however. Strauss composed a set of pieces entitled "Krämerspiegel." These were a "group of songs containing clever satires on the names of publishing firms."[217] Bote & Bock refused to accept the pieces and sued Strauss for breach of contract. Subsequently he was ordered to provide "proper" songs which fulfilled the original contract.[218]

In order to avoid further legal action, Strauss quickly composed six replacement songs. The group, entitled Opus 67, contained two collections of songs. The first set was Ophelia's "mad songs" from *Hamlet*, and the second was taken from Goethe's *West-öchlicher Divan*.[219] Though Strauss's compositional process was often described using language such as "he rapidly threw off a bundle of little sketches intended to make clear his irritability at being thus forced to capitulate,"[220] the reality may be less impulsive. Barbara Petersen notes that:

> the sketchbook [for Strauss's songs]…is quite typical of his song sketches. Two of the poems are copied into the inside covers, and drafts of the music show that he had the overall outline of each song in mind from the start, then gradually filled in the details.[221]

In the end, Bote & Bock withdrew the court injunction and copyrighted the songs on January 1, 1919.[222] After all of the legal wrangling, however, the publishing firm found that the songs did not sell well, possibly due to their "technical virtuosity, harmonically abstruse,

---

[217] Susan Youens, "'Actually, I like my songs best': Strauss's lieder" in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Dowell Youmans (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 171.
[218] Michael Kennedy, *Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999), 201.
[219] Michael Kennedy, *Richard Strauss* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), 192.
[220] Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works, Vol. 3* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co., 1969), 366.
[221] Barbara A. Petersen, "Die Händler und die Kunst: Richard Strauss as Composers' Advocate" in *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and His Work*, ed. Bryan Gilliam (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 123.
[222] Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works, Vol. 3* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co., 1969), 366.

tortuous, and inaccessible qualities."[223] Perhaps this was one last intentional jab by Strauss to inflict damage on the publishing firm. Nonetheless, the works freed Strauss from his contractual obligations and allowed him to freely return to song composition.

Strauss's sketchbook entries concerning Opus 67 do not contain dates, so no information is known regarding the exact timeline of its composition. The two halves of the set, on texts by Shakespeare and Goethe, are each miniature song cycles, yet are often performed independently from each other. The cycle does not contain a dedication, perhaps due to its hurried compositional process, but authors have noted that Strauss "composed this collection of songs with Elisabeth Schumann's voice in mind."[224]

Like Brahms, Strauss chose to set Ophelia's mad songs to music, rather than her death scene. Despite the use of similar textual material, "Strauss is unlikely to have known of [Brahms's set]…as they were not published until Karl Geiringer rediscovered them in 1935."[225] The text is taken directly from Act IV, Scene 5 of the play. Two instances of spoken dialogue are also set to music. The lyrics follow the same order as Shakespeare's original, but Strauss breaks the verses into three songs, rather than Brahms's choice of five. Interestingly, Strauss chose to use the lesser-known German translation by Karl Joseph Simrock, rather than the Schlegel and Tieck version Brahms utilized. It was known to be "more literal and stilted"[226] and

[223] Kurt Wilhelm, *Richard Strauss: An Intimate Portrait*, trans. Mary Whittall (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 151.
[224] Alexander Michael Shannon, "'O Wake in Me': Contextualizing Vocal Writing, Text-Setting, and Harmonic Syntax in Richard Strauss's 'Deutsche Motette,' Op. 62" (Master's thesis, University of Missouri – Kansas City, 2021), 90-91, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[225] Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works, Vol. 3* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co., 1969), 366.
[226] Ibid.

"not as inspired as the Schlegel and Tieck."[227] This may have been a sly move on Strauss's part, because Simrock was a competitor to Bote & Bock.[228]

According to Matthew Guerrieri, the *Drei Lieder der Ophelia* "set is something of an outlier."[229] Many of Strauss's earlier songs were strongly Romantic-leaning, but this set pointed toward the new *avant-garde* practices of the twentieth century. They are "dazzling pieces, eerie and affecting."[230] Many of these observations stem from Strauss's innovative harmonic choices for the set. Strauss makes a remarkable parallel between Ophelia's fluctuating mental state and the vacillating phases of tonality and atonality in the songs. He is both backward-looking by loosely holding a sense of tonality, and forward-looking by breaking down the tonal function at every turn. This coincides with Ophelia's tenuous grip on the reality of her circumstances, while at the same time, her mental state is continually deteriorating. The songs may not be regarded as entirely tonal nor wholly atonal, but suspended between the two. This mirrors Ophelia's pendulous psychological condition, and the way she will be suspended on the water in the forthcoming act of the play. Strauss himself holds a tenuous stasis between two competing musical time periods, that of the past and of the future.

The melody line of the *Drei Lieder der Ophelia* does not reflect a Romantic sensibility, either. Though there are moments of lyrical beauty, they are fleeting and dissolve almost immediately into more jarring, angular vocal lines. The singer who attempts this set must be at a high level of training. She must be comfortable with constantly shifting meters, registers,

---

[227] Susan Gale Johnson Odom, "Four Musical Settings of Ophelia" (DMA document, University of North Texas, 1991), 50, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[228] Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works, Vol. 3* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co., 1969), 366.
[229] Matthew Guerrieri, "Fulfilling a contract, Strauss limned madness in 'Ophelia' songs," *The Boston Globe* (Nov. 9, 2014), https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/ha/default.aspx#./!?&_suid=176504770410304367427811742165.
[230] Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works, Vol. 3* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co., 1969), 366.

articulation, dynamic levels, tonal centers, tempi, and expressions of character. The melody line is comprised of a great deal of chromatic movement as well as wide leaps, difficult intervals, and rhythmic syncopation. The soprano must be proficient across her entire vocal range, as the song encompasses a span from A3 to A5. The songs are drastically different in their tempi, as the second is marked *lebhaft* (lively), while the third moves quite slowly (*ruhig gehend*), meaning she needs to have control over the movement of the voice. The accompaniment does not consistently support the vocal line, but at times seems to actually fight against it, so the singer must have a solid sense of vocal independence. Being comfortable with a vocal tacet is also helpful, as the piano plays an extended postlude at the conclusion of the first song. Above all, she must be able to express Ophelia's alternating mental states throughout the set.

Analysis of the Songs

The first song of the set, labeled as "Erstes Lied der Ophelia," contains the text for the songs "How should I your true love know" and "White his shroud as the mountain snow." The left hand plays a disorienting ostinato pattern of quarter notes on off-beats in the treble clef. The chord might have been interpreted as a dominant seventh or a minor seventh built on D, except the third is missing. This immediately set up an atmosphere of confusion and meaninglessness, projecting the listener into Ophelia's muddled mental state. The right hand plays a chromatically wandering motive which becomes the main theme of the song, and which will be referenced in many altered states throughout the piece. Both the left-hand chord and the right-hand motive feature a prominent open fifth (D to A in the left hand, B-flat to F in the right) which add to the sense of hollowness and echo Ophelia's confusion. The tempo is marked as *Leicht bewegt* (gently moving) and the vocal line is marked *Ophelia, im Wahnsinn* (in madness).

There are no sharps or flats indicated in the key signature. As for the tonal center, Susan Youens poses the question, "Where are we…? We have no idea. There are remnants of tonal discourse, memories of a tonal world, but they are not used to affirm any location we can recognize or in which we can remain."[231] At this point in the play and in Strauss's songs, Ophelia's mind has left the recognizable world.

Beginning in measure nine, the right hand plays descending tritone figures, while the left hand continues the off-beat ostinato, with a half-step alteration to D-sharp. When the voice enters in measure eleven, the right hand plays the original motive at a transposed pitch level. The left hand moves to a first-inversion C major chord at measure 12, the voice responds in like manner, and there is a fleeting respite of tonality in C major. The moment passes immediately, however, as the falling tritones reappear in 16 and 17. The left hand once again takes up its indeterminate form, missing its meaningful third, beginning in 16. Strauss moves the vocal line entirely syllabically, suggesting an innocence and childlike utterance on Ophelia's part.

The theme continues its transpositional journey in the right-hand accompaniment at measure 18. A significant moment occurs in measure 22 on the word "tot" (death). The voice sings a tritone figure, a signifier of extreme distress. Four *sforzandi* indications are marked between 22 and 25, as if the second speaker (in the original text) is trying to emphasize his point to the first. The left hand plays a minor seventh chord based on B-flat, while the right hand plays a dissonant tritone based on B-natural. The piano responds to the text by reaching its highest pitches yet, another traditional aural indication of madness.

After this musical outburst, there is a brief respite in D minor beginning with the anacrusis to measure 26. The left hand plays a calming, fully-formed second-inversion triad,

[231] Susan Youens, "'Actually, I like my songs best': Strauss's lieder" in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Dowell Youmans (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 172.

while the voice moves through a simple melodic figure within the key. Strauss employs a moment of text-painting in this concise passage, picturing the serenity of the body at its mortal rest. Again, this phase does not last long however, as the left hand picks up the motive for the first time in measure 29. The right hand takes up the open fifth figure, then the same type of harmonic frenzy occurs again in 31. The left hand plays a minor seventh chord built on G, while the right provides an open fifth based on G-sharp.

The first moment of dynamic intensity occurs in the pick-up to 33 as Strauss indicates *forte* on the exclamation, "O-ho!" The left and right hands resume their original motion and the voice returns to *piano* as the text describes the deceased's appearance. At 44, the theme returns at its original pitch level and the left hand continues its initial motion. This continues until 49, when there is another dynamic outburst with three *sforzandi* indications for the final phrase. Strauss uses the same musical device of minor seventh figures in the left hand and open fifths in the right at 49 and 50. He offers the song's final moment of peace on the concluding word "Liebesschauern" (love's showers). From 52 through most of 54, the song rests in a clear, hopeful E major. The left hand, for the first time, grounds the song into bass clef for one measure. The voice reaches its highest pitch level on a G-sharp 5 and seems to hang, suspended in air for just a moment.

As before, however, the respite does not last long. The song immediately plunges back into harmonic confusion with the fully-diminished seventh chord on the last eighth note of 54, then a diversion with a C-sharp minor chord on the second beat of 55. The voice has finished and the piano picks up its meandering, unstable motion from the song's opening. The theme is repeated at various pitch levels and in different hands while the off-beat ostinato resumes. The final iterations of the theme occur in 66 and 69, both based on the original F5. As Ophelia's

mind disintegrates, the left-hand ostinato begins to fragment, then die away. Odom remarks, "Strauss's musical interpretation of Ophelia preserves her inner conflict by refusing to allow harmonic repose."[232] As her inner and outer world crumble, so does the postlude to Strauss's first song.

The second song of the set, "Zweites Lied der Ophelia," consists of the lyrics from the "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day" song. The *lebhaft* (lively) tempo marking indicates a turn from the more somber mood of the first song into a manic, frantic, unrestrained state of mind. The meter is marked as 3/8, but is performed so rapidly, it could be interpreted as 6/8 instead. As in Brahms's piece, the animated setting contrasts ironically with the forsaken protagonist of the storyline. The key signature indicates either G major or E minor, but like the first song of the set, "we ask, 'Where are we?' and are vouchsafed no comfortable answer."[233] There is a constant shift between major and minor, a blurring of tonality that serves as a clear parallel to Ophelia's alternating, chaotic thoughts. There is also a recurring pattern of extreme dynamic shifts. Through Strauss's frenzied musical setting, the listener can visualize Ophelia's frantic chattering and flailing movements.

The song opens suddenly, with no preparation, echoing Ophelia's interruption of normal discourse. The first four chords are E minor, C minor, A minor, and B major, the roots of which appear on the off-beat. They are all in the right hand and do not follow conventional voice-leading patterns, resulting in awkward parallel fifths and octaves. The melody line, which begins on an E-natural, then immediately moves to an E-flat, is disjunct and filled with inelegant and difficult intervals. (If the pianist does not play a cue note between songs one and two, the singer

[232] Susan Gale Johnson Odom, "Four Musical Settings of Ophelia" (DMA document, University of North Texas, 1991), 55, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[233] Susan Youens, "'Actually, I like my songs best': Strauss's lieder" in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Dowell Youmans (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 173.

must use her auditory skills to enter on a E5, as there is no preceding material.) Beginning in measure three, Strauss sets up a harmonic pattern of alternating between a chord's major and minor forms. Measures two and three follow the pattern of G major, G minor, G major, then measure four contains E minor, E major, E minor. All the while, the piano plays a consistent sixteenth-note pattern. The "left-hand part nearly always falls on the weak half of the beat (opposite of what one would expect for this pattern whereby a harmony is divided between the hands)."[234] This reversal of expectations leaves the listener unsteady and depicts Ophelia's instability.

The progression of C minor, A minor, and B major from the first measure is repeated at 4-5, then will be revisited throughout the piece (in measures 24, 27, 40, 62, 68, and 70). The first instance of near-traditional cadential activity appears in measures 9-10. There is clear movement from an A dominant seventh chord to its expected D major resolution. This fleeting passage expresses the hopeful meaning of the text, "I…want to be your Valentine." Strauss follows his established pattern of usurping moments of normalcy by immediately resuming the major-minor alternation in measure 10. The blurring of tonality continues through measures 12-13 as the melody seems to indicate a descending scale in G major, but the underlying chords do not support this conclusion. Measures 14 and 15 alternate between C major and C minor, then the blurring continues in 17 and 18. There is a progression of dominant-seventh chords from measures 18 through 21. The alternation between major and minor continues in measures 22-23, then again in 25-26.

During this frenetic harmonic progression, the vocal line has been ricocheting from pitch to pitch at a breakneck pace. Difficult intervals abound, such as the ascending tritone in measure

[234] Susan Youens, "'Actually, I like my songs best': Strauss's lieder" in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Dowell Youmans (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 174.

six, major seventh from 16-17, and descending major seventh from 23-24. This pattern will continue with ascending sevenths from 51-52 and 56-57. The singer must be in control of her full vocal range, as passages like 29-31 move through the middle voice, second passaggio, and down into the lowest register. Additionally, she will need to be proficient at clear, crisp German diction due to the pace of textual delivery. There is only one melismatic passage in the song, occurring on the word "Sonnenlicht" (sunlight). This allows the singer one brief moment of more lyrical production as opposed to the rapid-fire articulation through the rest of the piece.

Returning to the piano accompaniment, Strauss again accomplishes a sense of instability in measures 35-36 and 38-39 by marking an accent over the typically unaccented second beat. The same patterns of major-minor alternations continue through to the end of the piece (measures 39 and 41 on E, 55 on C, 65 on E, 66 on G, and 67 on E). The dynamics continue to oscillate between lowest and highest levels. Regarding the right and left hands, Susan Youens observes, "Only twice in the entire song do the two hands join forces for emphatic accents on the downbeat ('ver-*spracht*' and 'beim *Son*-nenlicht') – [they] result paradoxically in a wrong-footing of the reversed pattern."[235] On the melismatic "Sonnenlicht," the piano joins forces with the voice for the first time as the roots of the chords follow the descending scalar motion of the voice.

Measures 62 and 63 return to the original progression of C minor, A minor, B major from the opening line. Strauss tags on a 13-measure postlude which effectively captures Ophelia's fragmented, stuttering thought patterns. The sixteenth-note figures continue, but are broken into pieces by measures of silence. All of the chords from 68 to the end are in minor, conveying a

[235] Susan Youens, "'Actually, I like my songs best': Strauss's lieder" in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Dowell Youmans (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 174.

dark, hopeless state. The piece stumbles to an end with a tonally unsatisfying, unresolved E minor chord.

In the final song of the group, "Drittes Lied der Ophelia," Strauss sets the text for "They bore him bare-fac'd on the bier" and "And will a not come again." The song is marked *ruhig gehend* (calmly moving), but the tempo changes several times throughout. The 4/8 meter and the E-flat minor tonality are clearly established (at least, initially) by the opening theme. This is a half-step lower than the ending of the second song, but the singer has six full beats to adjust to the new key. The longest of the set, this third song is also the most complex and emotionally vulnerable. It conveys Ophelia's madness in an even more amplified and transparent way than the first two songs.

The piano plays the first instance of the song's major theme in the opening measure. Beginning on the dominant, there is a clear arpeggiation of the tonic chord in the first four notes. Following this movement, the theme slips around chromatically, but begins a restatement in measure two. Strauss will return to this theme repeatedly throughout the piece, fragmenting and altering it at times. Its wandering, sixteenth-note triplet movement depicts Ophelia's distracted mental state. It also "anticipates the flowing water in which Ophelia will shortly die."[236] Ophelia's opening line hangs suspended on the dominant B-flat, then Strauss immediately blurs the established tonality by lifting the phrase to E-natural in measure four. The voice and piano descend in unison as the left hand enters for the first time. Like Brahms's Schlegel and Tieck translation, Strauss's Simrock version alters the "a-down a-down, call him a-down-a" to "leider, ach leider" (unfortunately, o unfortunately). Strauss chooses to employ a tritone in the vocal line

[236] Susan Youens, "'Actually, I like my songs best': Strauss's lieder" in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Dowell Youmans (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 176.

in measure five, emphasizing Ophelia's depth of grief. Meanwhile, the piano continues its triplet motion, regularly referencing the opening theme.

Measure seven revives the theme, while the singer makes a tricky A-flat entrance as the pianist has been playing A-natural. The piano again plays a unison descending line with the voice from measures 10-11. The following line, "fahr wohl, meine Taube" (farewell, my dove) appears as spoken text in the play. As Ophelia bids her father goodbye, Strauss emphasizes the poignancy of the moment by alternating between a fully-diminished seventh chord on the fourth beats of 11 and 12, an optimistic-sounding E-flat major chord on the downbeats of 12 and 13, and a striking shift to a G major chord on the third beat of 13. This progression depicts both her sorrow and the tenderness she felt toward her father. As she sings "Taube," the piano falls chromatically, then begins a winding ascent from 14 to 15.

Measure 16 begins the first dramatic musical shift. Ophelia moves from a mournful lament to irrational, ecstatic babbling. The musical marking is *sehr rasch und lustig* (very quickly and lively) and the meter changes to 3/4. Simrock has altered the "bonny sweet Robin" text (which would not have the same meaning to a German audience) to "Mein junger frischer Hansel ist's der mir gefällt" (my young, fresh Hansel it is who pleases me). This line is sung *a cappella*, the first instance of such in the set, and marks a clear shift to A major. Ophelia reaches her highest pitches of the group of three songs on this phrase. The piano moves from its sixteenth-note motion into animated, folk-like triplet rhythms.

At 21, the mood reverts again to its previous somber state. There is a single eighth-note measure which serves as an anacrusis to 22 and indicates a return to 4/8. The section is marked *wieder langsamer* (slowly again) and with a return to *tempo primo*. The ascending, arpeggiated C major chord in measure 23 illustrates Ophelia's question, then the resolute answer comes with

the suggested dominant-tonic downward movement of "Er ist tot" in 24. Her response of "o weh" (o woe) seems almost flippant in Strauss's realization of the text.

Ophelia's dirge restarts in measure 26. The left hand plays the crawling theme, but at a lower, more sinister-sounding pitch level. Youens labels this as "warped water music."[237] The voice moves by a tritone in measure 28. There is a suggestion of A-flat minor in the interlude from 27-31, then a reference to C major from 32-33. This dissipates quickly as the single, chromatic line winds its way again into the upper register in the right hand from 33-34.

Another manic episode occurs in measure 35. The 3/4 meter returns with waltzing, jaunty rhythms in the piano. Ophelia describes her father's appearance with a vocal line that leaps up by a minor seventh, then falls by chromatic motion. The piano and voice carry on in a dialogue fashion, speaking back and forth to each other in musical phrases from 39 through 49. Ophelia's lowest pitch of the set, an A3, occurs in measure 44. One might imagine the gravity of the situation impressing upon her, yet the music reflects a casual acceptance of her situation with a glib "kein Trauern bringt Gewinn" (no mourning brings profit).

The final section of the song, beginning in measure 50, may be interpreted as a musical benediction. The pace slows considerably (the section is again marked *wieder langsam*) and there is a return to 4/8. The piano plays a stately, processional-like motion underneath a solemn-sounding vocal line. There are two descending tritones in the voice in measure 51, then Ophelia is again suspended on a B-flat as in the opening line. The voice and piano are instructed to slow down (*immer ruhiger*), perform expressively (*espressivo*), then finish very slowly (*sehr langsam*). Ophelia's final three lines, a portion of which are spoken (not sung) in the play, sound very much like a parting blessing a priest might give at the close of a service. The right hand

[237] Susan Youens, "'Actually, I like my songs best': Strauss's lieder" in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Dowell Youmans (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 177.

plays the final, fragmented chromatic line in measure 56 which is echoed by the left hand in 58 an octave lower. It might be expected that the set would close in a mournful way, but Strauss again subverts expectations. He instead chooses to reinforce the hymnlike context by concluding with a fully-diminished seventh chord, then a Picardy-inspired, E-flat major chord. For Ophelia's last appearance and final spoken words, Strauss offers a glimmer of hope.

Strauss's depiction of the character of Ophelia is drastically different from that of Brahms, Berlioz, or Saint-Saëns. His association with mental illness in his family and through his previous compositions informed his view of her. Though the compositional process was unusual and perhaps a bit rushed, it nonetheless resulted in one of the most disturbed, revealing, and virtuosic portrayals of the character up to that point.

Strauss rendered Ophelia in alternating haunting, manic, and psychotic ways in his set of three songs. She is no longer the naïve, realistic young girl of Brahms's folklike composition. She is also neither ethereal nor beautiful as in the Berlioz and Saint-Saëns settings. Instead, Strauss's Ophelia is starkly realistic. She is tortured and utterly bewildered. By choosing to jumble the texts of the mad songs together into three entities, Strass communicates her rambling style of communication and incoherent thought processes.

Strauss accomplishes these purposes through harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic means. His unresolved dissonances, abnormal chord progressions, and use of parallel fifths and octaves communicate her position of being outside of social norms. Additionally, his vacillation between Romantic and Modernist styles and constantly shifting or blurred tonal centers illustrate Ophelia's instability. The wandering themes in both voice and piano convey her inability to remain focused on a singular thought. The purposeful lack of lyrical phrasing and insistence on disjunct melodies and accompanying troublesome intervals reveal her disordered mental

processes. Strauss effectively employs syncopation, obsessive repetition, and metrical shifts to continually disorient the listener. Finally, his use of dynamic shifts, abrupt stylistic changes, and brief musical respites further portray Ophelia's psychosis. Strauss's Ophelia is strikingly mad in a chilling, yet irresistible, way.

Chapter 11

American composer Jake Heggie was born in West Palm Beach, Florida, on March 31, 1961.[238] His family moved to Bexley, Ohio, soon afterward. Though his parents were not professional musicians, Heggie remarks that he had:

> music all around when I was a kid. My father, who was a medical doctor, was an amateur jazz saxophonist who played for fun, and the record player always had a big stack of records by it. The family listened to big band vocalists…alongside musical theatre.[239]

Heggie began his musical pursuits at age seven, when he started taking piano lessons. He said, "at age six or seven, you couldn't get me away from it."[240] Tragically, his father suffered from depression, which led to him committing suicide when Heggie was only ten years old.[241] Soon afterward, Heggie started to compose music of his own. He reflects, "From then it was central to my life. I just never put down the pencil."[242] He elaborates that his earliest compositions were "music-theatre type songs, before I was introduced to classical music in a more profound way."[243]

---

[238] "Jake Heggie," Wikipedia, last modified March 6, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jake_Heggie.
[239] Kate Wakeling, "Jake Heggie: A Life Less Ordinary," Classical Music, BBC Music Magazine, November 5, 2023, https://www.classical-music.com/features/composers/interview-jake-heggie.
[240] "Jake Heggie," Wikipedia, last modified March 6, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jake_Heggie.
[241] Vivian Schweitzer, "Composer of the Year: Jake Heggie," Musical America Worldwide, accessed January 5, 2026, https://www.musicalamerica.com/features/?fid=371&fyear=2025.
[242] "Jake Heggie," Wikipedia, last modified March 6, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jake_Heggie.
[243] Ibid.

Heggie's family moved across the country to the San Francisco Bay area, where he continued his studies at the piano. He also studied composition with Ernest Bacon. He traveled to Paris as a young adult, spending two years at the American University.[244] Upon his return to America, he enrolled at UCLA. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in performance and composition in 1984, then a Master's degree in composition in 1988.[245] His most significant teacher during this time was Johana Harris (1912-1995).[246] Heggie and Harris travelled and performed concerts together, then eventually married, despite a significant age difference.

As a young adult, Heggie's career took a dramatic turn. He developed focal dystonia in one hand, which required him to reevaluate his artistic pursuits as a pianist. He explains:

> I would have to stop playing for a while, retrain myself, build a new technique and find a way to make a living. At the time, it felt like the biggest loss and tragedy imaginable. All my life I'd defined myself by performing and playing the piano. When that went away, I also lost the courage to compose. So, who was I? The journey turned out to be kind of a miracle – and would never have happened had I not lost my ability to play the piano in that moment.[247]

Due to this unforeseen circumstance, Heggie began a series of arts-related jobs, including public relations at the UCLA Performing Center for the Arts and the San Francisco Opera.[248] While there, the director saw his potential and encouraged him to attempt writing for the opera.[249] This was a fortuitous move, because Heggie began work on what would become his most famous opera, *Dead Man Walking*. He was subsequently named Composer-in-Residence at San Francisco Opera.[250]

---

[244] "Jake Heggie," Wikipedia, last modified March 6, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jake_Heggie.
[245] Jake Heggie, "At a Glance," accessed January 5, 2026, https://www.jakeheggie.com/ataglance.
[246] "Johana Harris," Wikipedia, last modified April 4, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johana_Harris.
[247] "Jake Heggie '84, M.A. '05," UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, September 21, 2021, https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/jake-heggie-84-m-a-05/.
[248] "Jake Heggie," Wikipedia, last modified March 6, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jake_Heggie.
[249] Vivian Schweitzer, "Composer of the Year: Jake Heggie," Musical America Worldwide, accessed January 5, 2026, https://www.musicalamerica.com/features/?fid=371&fyear=2025.
[250] Ibid.

Heggie has gone on to become "arguably the world's most popular 21st-century opera and art song composer."[251] His most famous works for the operatic stage are *Dead Man Walking* and *Moby-Dick*. Along with his *Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia*, Heggie has composed over 300 art songs. He has written for and collaborated with such renowned singers as Joyce DiDonato, Jamie Barton, Susan Graham, and Frederica von Stade.[252] These singers, and others, refer to Heggie as a "singer's composer."[253] He cares about the intricacies and capabilities of each voice for which he writes. "If a singer tells him, for example, that he or she can't sing a certain vowel in a particular register, he adjusts the score. 'I want singers to feel strong and empowered,' he says."[254] One of his artistic motivations is "blurring the storytelling lines between art song and opera."[255] He maintains a steady career of composition and teaching, and is currently on the compositional faculty at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.[256]

Figure 14. Edna St. Vincent Millay (ca. 1920), public domain.

Born nearly 70 years before Jake Heggie, American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay is one of the writers to whom Heggie has turned repeatedly for lyrical inspiration. She was born on February 22, 1892, in Rockland, Maine.[257] She grew up mainly around females for most of her young life, being the eldest of three sisters

[251] David Littlejohn, "A West Coaster With a Global Reputation," *The Wall Street Journal Eastern Edition* (March 2, 2015).
[252] "Jake Heggie '84, M.A. '05," UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, September 21, 2021, https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/jake-heggie-84-m-a-05/.
[253] Vivian Schweitzer, "Composer of the Year: Jake Heggie," Musical America Worldwide, accessed January 5, 2026, https://www.musicalamerica.com/features/?fid=371&fyear=2025.
[254] "Jake Heggie '84, M.A. '05," UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, September 21, 2021, https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/jake-heggie-84-m-a-05/.
[255] Jake Heggie, "At a Glance," accessed January 5, 2026, https://www.jakeheggie.com/ataglance.
[256] Vivian Schweitzer, "Composer of the Year: Jake Heggie," Musical America Worldwide, accessed January 5, 2026, https://www.musicalamerica.com/features/?fid=371&fyear=2025.
[257] Allan Ross Macdougall, ed., *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), xii.

and raised by a single mother after her parents' separation.[258] As she grew, Millay showed intense streaks of rebellion against society. Her life seemed to be a "constant struggle against boundaries" and she was "considered a subversive figure in her time due to a perception of questionable morality."[259] Her writing, too, reflected her nonconformity. Even so, she produced works of great public acclaim. Her output included six plays, an opera libretto, 500 poems, and nearly 200 sonnets.[260] She was the first woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. Though her life was short (she died on October 19, 1950), it emulated one of her most famous lines, from her poem "First Fig":

> My candle burns at both ends;
> It will not last the night;
> But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends –
> It gives a lovely light![261]

Heggie composed *Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia* for soprano Peggy Kriha-Dye after hearing her cover the role of Ophelia in a performance of the opera *Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas.[262] An Adler Fellow at the San Francisco Opera, she premiered the cycle on May 9, 1999 as part of the James Schwabacher Series at San Francisco's Old First Church.[263] Regarding this cycle and two others he composed in the same time period, Heggie states,

> Each of the cycles was conceived and written specifically for that soprano because I knew each of them so well as a friend – and was able to give them a piece they could really get inside of and make their own. I gave each of them very strong, powerful, yet vulnerable women…and wanted the music to reflect all of that and give them the opportunity to explore many different facets.[264]

---

[258] Nancy Milford, *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), xvi.
[259] Elizabeth Frazer, "Ophelia as archetype: Jake Heggie's 'Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia'" (DMA diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2012), 18-20, ProQuest, accessed Nov. 23, 2025.
[260] Allan Ross Macdougall, ed., *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), xi.
[261] Nancy Milford, *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), xiii.
[262] Jake Heggie, email message to author, March 12, 2026.
[263] Jake Heggie, CD booklet for "Passing By: Songs by Jake Heggie" by Isabel Bayrakdarian et al. (Avie Records, September 13, 2010), 9.
[264] Jake Heggie, Kathleen Tagg, and Regina Zona, CD booklet for "Connection: Three Song Cycles" by Kathleen Tagg and Regina Zona (Naxos, June 1, 2014), 3-4.

Heggie chose to set the group of four songs inspired by the character of Ophelia in a unique way. Instead of using the source material from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, he opted to utilize text that he wrote himself for the first song, and sonnets by Edna St. Vincent Millay for the following three.

In previous writings and in an email conversation with Jake Heggie, he has revealed meaningful insights about the cycle. He encourages performers to embrace the different musical genres that might be perceived in the songs.

> In these songs, the singer encounters the full gamut of the influences I grew up with: folk music, jazz, pop, opera, rock, art song. I encourage performers to embrace these elements in the songs and not shy away from them. If it feels jazzy, well, it probably is.[265]

He also discusses that his song compositions are entirely motivated by his conception of the character involved. "Everything is driven by character and by the mindset of the character…it all means something."[266] He elaborates that in his music, "everything is character driven: what that character wants in the moment – where they are – the forces surrounding them…it's all part of finding the heartbeat – the pulse – of every moment."[267] Due to this galvanizing force, a singer undertaking this set of Ophelia songs (or any character-driven songs composed by Heggie) should thoroughly understand the protagonist in order to achieve his compositional intent.

Jake Heggie has "always loved the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay"[268], but did not set out to make a connection between the poet and the character of Ophelia.

> There's no correlation to me between Millay's life and the songs. Never even considered that. The poems speak for themselves – and just seemed to be the right fit for this setting. She did not intend for them to be about Ophelia…that is entirely my interpretation.[269]

---

[265] Jake Heggie, email message to author, March 12, 2026.
[266] Ibid.
[267] Ibid.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid.

He spoke about the tenses employed in the four poems by himself and Millay. "The first song and the last song are the present moment – the songs in the middle are reflections on previous events." "The middle two poems…worked perfectly as reflections on what led her to the moment. The final song is back in the present…"[270] When performing the set, a singer should keep in mind the time frame in which the action takes place.

Finally, Jake Heggie remarked on the high value he places on text-painting in his works. He states, "I am ALWAYS using text painting."[271] This may be observed throughout the set, but is especially remarkable in the pastoral setting of the first song, the churning ocean waves of the second, the moments of childlike simplicity of the third, and the stark detachment of the fourth. Alongside the vocal line, "the piano is giving us information about place, pace, mood, larger forces – and what is in Ophelia's heart that goes beyond the words alone."[272] The *Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia* have come to hold a special place for Jake Heggie in his oeuvre. When asked, "Have your thoughts on the cycle changed as time has passed?", he responded with the thoughtful comment, "I think I love it more and more. It has been performed, studied, and explored constantly by performers internationally since I wrote it. So it must resonate as authentic and truthful! That's the hope when putting it onto the page."[273]

The songs are most appropriate for a high-level singer. Though the melody is often lyrical, it is not completely tonal and requires solid musical training. The time signatures, keys, dynamics, and tempi shift a great deal, not only between, but within the individual songs. The singer must be comfortable with syncopation (the songs often employ hemiola figures), chromaticism, and difficult intervals. Often, the entrances to phrases require a great deal of

[270] Jake Heggie, email message to author, March 12, 2026.
[271] Ibid.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid.

concentration and musical timing. The singer should have well-trained breath control, as the songs necessitate an ability to sustain melismatic passages on a neutral vowel, such the "ah" section of the second song (measures 29-34 and 52-55).

The set stays within a typical soprano range, with a span of D4-B5. A5 is sustained at a *forte* dynamic level in the second song (measures 46-48), B5 is sustained at *forte* in the third (measures 40-41), and A5 is sustained and undergoes a *decrescendo* at the end of the fourth song (measures 45-46). The pieces require an excellent pianist, and the collaboration between singer and pianist is of paramount importance. The piano and vocal lines should weave seamlessly together, as if in dialogue. Above all, the soprano needs to be able to clearly enunciate the English text and fully express the changing moods of Ophelia.

Jake Heggie offers his own insight into how to portray the character. His interpretive recommendations are as follows:

> Be strong in these songs. Not weak or tragic. Be the beautiful, youthful, joyful, bright young woman who comes to a terrible place in her life…and makes a decision that the audience might find tragic – but she does not.[274]

He goes on to suggest:

> Do all the poems as monologues and find out how the words alone resonate to you. Do them angrily, sadly, giddily, etc., etc. – do them in a declamatory way – and in an intensely quiet and personal way…then take what feels honest to you with the words alone and take that to the score. And then – very important – sing the songs TO SOMEONE. Look them in the eyes and do not look away – and do not let that person look away. Make them as personal as possible without crossing the line into sentimentality. Remember that in these songs Ophelia is powerful – vulnerable – deeply feeling – and brave.[275]

A singer would do well to abide by the counsel of the composer himself.

[274] Jake Heggie, email message to author, March 12, 2026.
[275] Ibid.

Analysis of the Songs

Jake Heggie wrote the lyrics for the first piece of the set, entitled "Ophelia's Song." He comments:

> I had long ago composed 'Ophelia's Song' when one gorgeous spring day in 1983, Johana Harris said to me: 'The hills are green, my dear one.' The lyrics and tune came to me immediately, and I just needed the right place to put the song. Sixteen years later, I found it in this cycle inspired by Shakespeare's Ophelia.[276]

The song evokes the young, naïve, and simple qualities of Ophelia. Its folklike melody and 6/8 meter are calm and buoyant. However, the façade of simplicity also includes darker, more foreboding elements, indicative of the tragedy yet to come. Heggie's text is as follows:

> The hills are green, my dear one,
> and blossoms are filling the air.
> The spring is arisen and I am a prisoner there.
> In this flowery field I'll lay me
> and dream of the open air.
> The spring is arisen and I am a prisoner there.
> Taste of the honey. Sip of the wine.
> Pine for a chalice of gold.
> I have a dear one and he is mine.
> Thicker than water. Water so cold.
> In this flowery field I'll lay me
> and dream of the open air.
> The spring is arisen and I am a prisoner there.

The song opens with a rolled series of sixteenth notes extending from F-sharp 4 to C-sharp 7, then down to F-sharp 2. The key signature indicates B major, but the pitches include A-natural, indicating use of the Mixolydian mode. The pianist is instructed to play the passage as "shimmering" and the musical marking is "freely." Though the time signature denotes 4/4, the meter is obscured due to the rolled set of pitches and the two subsequent blocked, sustained chords made up of the same pitches. In between these right-hand statements, the left hand plays

[276] Jake Heggie, CD booklet for "Passing By: Songs by Jake Heggie" by Isabel Bayrakdarian et al. (Avie Records, September 13, 2010), 9.

a low, sinister C-sharp 1. This sets up an aural expectation that something is not quite right, that an unnamed danger is lurking just out of sight. The piano part gradually decrescendos throughout the introduction and allows the notes to vibrate before the voice enters.

When beginning to learn the piece, the first entrance may prove difficult for the vocalist, as she will need to pick out the opening interval of F-sharp to B from the mass of blocked pitches she just heard from the piano. A suggestion would be to focus in on the lowest pitch of F-sharp played by the right hand in the preceding chord. The vocalist will also need to quickly establish the new meter of 6/8 (dotted eighth = 48 bpm) beginning in measure seven. The piano is instructed to play "flowingly" at this point, mirroring so many of the Ophelia settings in its waterlike reference. A pattern of broken arpeggiations begins for this first verse of the poem. Both piano and voice continue utilizing the flattened seventh scale degree of A-natural. Hemiolas begin to make regular occurrences in the song, such as in measure eight, where the voice sings a pair of quarter notes against the piano's groupings of eighth-note figures. Other syncopations also begin to appear, like the soprano's off-beat pitches on the text "the air" in measures 9-10. The first instance of the A-sharp leading tone appears in measure 12, emphasizing the cadential closure of the phrase.

The piano makes two more sweeping flourishes and resumes the Mixolydian mode before the voice's second verse entrance at measure 15. The melody and rhythms are virtually the same as in the first verse until the ascending line in measure 20. The voice reaches its highest pitch of the song (F-sharp 5) and sustains a *fermata* on the third syllable of "arisen." The text for these first two verses contains a somewhat surprising, foreboding turn. While Heggie's setting and the initial lyrics of each phrase are pastoral and folklike, the final phrase of "I am a prisoner there" takes the listener by surprise. The singer may choose to transition to a different facial expression

on the ends of these phrases, revealing that despite Ophelia's perceived optimism, she is in fact not allowed true freedom to make her own decisions.

Up to this point, the piano has continued its broken, disjunct groups of three eighth notes. Beginning at measure 24, however, there is a shift in the rhythmic action. The piano changes to sets of two eighth notes, while the voice carries on the typical 6/8 grouping of three, creating another hemiola effect. The tempo speeds up and the dynamics increase. The text changes its rhyming scheme and contains no repetitions from the previous sections. Another high point in the music occurs at measure 28 as Ophelia describes her "dear one." She remarks that "he is mine," though the audience is not certain that is true. She may be delusional in her thinking at this point in the song. The next line should be delivered quite poignantly. Ophelia describes the water while the piano's action stills. This may be considered an eerie foreshadowing of her imminent death via drowning.

At measure 33, the key changes to B-flat major, a half-step descent from the original B major. The piano restarts its broken accompaniment figures and the text repeats the same lyrics as the second verse. Heggie again uses the flattened seventh scale degree along with a slightly altered rhythm. The vocal line concludes with the same melody as in 11-14. There is a *ritardando*, extra breath mark, and *fermata* indicated on the final line. The piano again plays the sweeping series of pitches at a decreasing volume level. Just as in the beginning, there is one final, sinister note in the bass (a B-flat 0), a distant death knell for Ophelia.

The second song, "Women Have Loved Before," is a striking contrast to the first. No longer pastoral and naïve, Ophelia exhibits a brazenness and seething anger that no other setting has yet portrayed. The lyrics are taken from Millay's sonnet of the same name, appearing as the twenty-sixth in a collection of fifty-two entitled "Fatal Interview." The text reads:

Women have loved before as I love now;
At least, in lively chronicles of the past –
Of Irish waters by a Cornish prow
Or Trojan waters by a Spartan mast
Much to their cost invaded – here and there,
Hunting the amorous line, skimming the rest,
I find some woman bearing as I bear
Love like a burning city in the breast.
I think however that of all alive
I only in such utter, ancient way
Do suffer love; in me alone survive
The unregenerate passions of a day
When treacherous queens, with death upon the tread,
Heedless and willful, took their knights to bed.

The song opens in 6/8 meter at a tempo of 82 beats per minute. There is an indication to perform the piece as "bright and nervous," which the left-hand staccato movement, followed by the right-hand sixteenth note triplets, immediately reflect. The key signature indicates E-flat major and the first two piano figures correspond, but the tonality is immediately dissolved with the appearance of D-flats, F-sharps, and A-naturals in the accompaniment. The piano repeats these same two passages at a different pitch level which alludes to D major, then C major, so any initial impression of an overarching key is destabilized. The voice enters with two "nervous-sounding" tremors. The piano makes one more triplet ascent to a high register in measures 7-8, then helps the vocalist by solidifying the D-flat of her next entrance on two chords.

After this introductory material, the voice begins *a cappella* with the sonnet's text. The tonality is D-flat major until measure 18. At that point, the rhythmic activity increases as the piano begins a rolling pattern of sixteenth notes akin to billowing ocean waves. The tonality shifts to G major at measure 20. The meter alternates between 9/8 and 6/8 for the following section, further destabilizing any foundation that may have been built previously. A shift to E minor occurs at measure 23. Heggie employs text-painting with the accompaniment's surging waves as Ophelia references the ships entering foreign ports. The text may be understood as a

double entendre and may be expressed by the singer to reference Hamlet's taking advantage of Ophelia ("much to their cost invaded"). This interpretation sets up a context for Ophelia's heightened emotion later in the song.

A new section consisting of a vocalise set to the syllable "ah" begins in measure 29. This is not part of the original sonnet, but further reinforces the "bright and nervous" feeling. It is as if the meaning of the previous phrases has settled in for Ophelia, and she responds accordingly. The imagery of the ships on the ocean resumes in measure 34 and there is no clear tonality. The piano and voice seem to be in conversation with one another in this section, which requires a synchronous sense of ensemble. The tempo and meter continue to alternate, then Ophelia reaches her highest pitch of the song (A-flat 5) on another "ah" at measure 47. The piano's activity picks up considerably to a series of manic, sixteenth-note triplets that roll under the voice from measures 46 through 52, where they fragment away. Ophelia lets out two more "ah" syllables as if she is sighing after her emotional outburst.

The final section of the song begins at 56 with a stately, imposing succession of eighth notes in 4/4 and in C minor. The tempo is significantly slower and Ophelia seems to be silently seething with anger. She sees herself as singularly betrayed ("…of all alive I only in such utter ancient way do suffer love; in me alone survive…"), as if no one else could truly understand the depths of grief and bitterness she has endured. She makes two more brief outbursts of heightened pitch and emotion on the words "love" and "unregenerate," which both extend to G-flat 5. The meter changes one last time to 6/8 at measure 63. The piano's action changes to rolled, imposing chords that lend strength to Ophelia's imagery of "treacherous queens" leading their victims to an act of vengeance. The last line is the slowest of the song, depicting Ophelia's unabashed, daring feminine predecessors. As the left hand of the piano continues its plodding

eighth note action, the right makes two final "nervous" figures corresponding to the opening of the song. The piece concludes with a dramatic, ascending scale and a fluttering motion that mirrors the initial vocal line. Ophelia's emotions, like the tonality, meter, dynamics, and tempi of the piece, have run the gamut and finally exhausted themselves.

Song number three, "Not in a Silver Casket," is taken directly from Millay's eleventh sonnet in "Fatal Interview." The poem reads:

> Not in a silver casket cool with pearls
> Or rich with red corundum or with blue,
> Locked, and the key withheld, as other girls
> Have given their loves, I give my love to you;
> Not in a lovers'-knot, not in a ring
> Worked in such fashion, and the legend plain –
> *Semper fidelis*, where a secret spring
> Kennels a drop of mischief for the brain:
> Love in the open hand, no thing but that,
> Ungemmed, unhidden, wishing not to hurt,
> As one should bring you cowslips in a hat
> Swung from the hand, or apples in her skirt,
> I bring you, calling out as children do:
> "Look what I have! – And these are all for you."

The piece opens in 4/4 at a moderate tempo of 66 bpm. Though the key signature indicates E major or C-sharp minor, the presence of the A-sharp in the piano and vocal lines lend credence to a tonality of G-sharp minor. The first three chords played by the piano and first line sung by the voice (and played in unison by the right hand) both appear as recurring themes throughout the piece. The A-sharp is dropped to A-flat in measure two, destabilizing the key, but returns in measure three. The meter alternates between 3/4 and 4/4, never allowing a dependable footing for the character or the listener. Measure five shifts to E major, then returns to G-sharp minor at nine.

The text of this section portrays Ophelia offering her pure, unconditional love to Hamlet. She does not offer it in any adorned, superficial, or teasing way ("Not in a silver casket cool with

pearls or rich with red corundum or with blue, locked, and the key withheld as other girls have given their loves"). Rather, she willingly offers it to Hamlet without obligation or reservation ("I give my love to you"). The meaning of this line should inform the way this *a cappella* phrase is sung – simply, without any artifice or embellishment. The line referencing the "locked casket" (here meaning a small, ornamental box) recalls a line from Act I, Scene 3 of the play. Ophelia, speaking to her brother, Laertes, remarks, "'Tis in my memory lock'd, and you yourself shall keep the key of it." He also warns his sister not to keep her "chaste treasure open," yet in this song, Ophelia opens her entire heart and life to Hamlet.

The song's action picks up again in measure nine. Ophelia describes the purity of her love, mentioning that no ring (implying a wedding ring) is required. The piano intensifies in dynamics, rhythmic activity, and register with Ophelia's outburst of "Semper Fidelis," emphasizing her enduring faithfulness. Like the previous song, she shifts into a "steady" section at 15 as she attempts to calm her passionate emotions. The piano provides stability, but the vocal line is unable to keep pace, as it employs syncopation and shifting meters.

Another section begins at measure 22, returning to the original tempo. The tonality seems to be G minor, but is undermined in the following measure with the momentary addition of A-flat and D-flat. This pattern occurs again in 24-25. The piano lines echo the initial theme in unison octaves. At measure 26, Ophelia reverts to a childlike state. The tempo increases and the meter shifts to a skipping, hopeful 5/8. Regarding her flower imagery, Jessica Kerr explains that "in England the cowslip used to be the children's favorite flower. Each year in April they would go out with baskets to pick the blossoms in the field…Tying the flowers together tightly at the top of the stalk in big bunches, they then cut away most of the stalk."[277] (The mention of the

[277] Jessica Kerr, *Shakespeare's Flowers* (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1997), 9.

blossoming of the flowers in April is significant when considering the title of the fourth song.) In measure 30, the meter moves to a steadier 6/8 and the piano plays an insistent, compelling series of eighth-note figures as Ophelia pleads her case with Hamlet. She cries out "as children do" in a sincere, unrestrained vocal line to close the song. The piano rushes along in support of her in a wave of triplet sixteenth-notes that accelerate and crescendo to the end. It is most fitting that Heggie chose for Ophelia to reach her highest pitches of the set on this line "And these are all for you." Ophelia offers her true, devoted love to Hamlet, which she hopes he will accept. This final section is in a definitive E major, leading the listener to believe that all may end happily. However, the final three chords played by the piano echo the opening line, introducing chromaticism and undoing the optimistic tone. Unfortunately, the story concludes with sorrow.

Heggie's fourth song, "Spring," is the great unifier of the set. Ophelia has experienced a broad range of emotions through the first three songs and is left to cope with the heart-rending consequences. The text is taken from a different collection of Millay's sonnets, entitled "Second April." The first in the collection, the lyrics read:

> To what purpose, April, do you return again?
> Beauty is not enough.
> You can no longer quiet me with the redness
> Of little leaves opening stickily.
> I know what I know.
> The sun is hot on my neck as I observe
> The spikes of the crocus.
> The smell of the earth is good.
> It is apparent that there is no death.
> But what does that signify?
> Not only under ground are the brains of men
> Eaten by maggots.
> Life in itself
> Is nothing.
> An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs.
> It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,
> April
> Comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing flowers.

The tempo indication is “rather slow” and the meter is 4/4. Right from the beginning, Heggie sets the listener’s expectations for what is to come. Accented, descending major seventh intervals clash with their dissonant half- and whole-step counterparts in the right and left hands of the piano. The dynamic level begins at a startling *fortissimo*, then tapers off. The voice enters in broken, unsettling, recitative-like fragments of phrases. The piano reinforces the sense of angularity and disintegration with its wide leaps and staccato motion. Measure eight begins more *legato*, but is immediately fragmented again in 9-10. This disjointed phrasing intimates that Ophelia cannot sustain a connected thought. The text itself is bitter and jaded. Things in nature that used to thrill her (the green hills and blossoms from the first song) are now only a painful reminder of more hopeful times. The tonality varies between B-flat minor and D-flat minor.

Measure 11 begins a new section with more lyrical phrases and rhythmic activity. Millay’s text “I know what I know” unintentionally echoes one of Ophelia’s lines from the play: “O woe is me t’have seen what I have seen, see what I see” (Act III, Scene 1). The Ophelia in this fourth song has more worldly experience, but instead of it bringing positive growth, it causes resentment in her. The tonal center changes to B minor at measure 12. As is common in Ophelia settings, there is another “suspension” in the melody as Ophelia sustains a B5 from measures 14-17. As she describes the “smell of the earth” and speaks about death, there is a shift in meter, tonality, and tempo. This may be seen as a foreshadowing of what is to come.

Heggie again employs syncopation as Ophelia repeats the line “there is no death” (which is not repeated in the sonnet). Another shift occurs at measure 25 with the return to *a tempo* and a new, C minor tonality. The text from measures 25-31 is especially meaningful when one realizes that Ophelia is about to end her life. She has decided that “life in itself is nothing.”

Heggie emphasizes this moment by almost completely eliminating the piano's action and marking a *subito piano* for the voice. The starkness of the opening section returns and there is a dramatic *fermata*.

The final section of the song begins in measure 32. The meter moves from 6/8 to 4/8, then returns to 6/8 again, reflecting Ophelia's agitation. The piano makes dramatic, wide leaps in the left hand, then sweeping, scalar motions in the right from 32-35. All of the accidentals disappear from the key signature, but there is an implication of G minor with the appearance of B-flat in the vocal line. A flurry of rhythmic activity bursts out at 36-37, then stills into sustained chords as Ophelia prepares her final phrase. The text continues its hopeless and harsh tone until the end. The key signature changes again at 40, this time to D-flat minor with the inclusion of the flattened C.

At measure 44, Ophelia sings her "swan song." The piano parallels her four-note cry in octaves and the dynamics appropriately echo her "dying away." There is one more ascending surge in the right hand of the piano, but Ophelia's life has come to its end. Her final, *pianissimo* "ah" is her dying breath. The last chord of the set, made up of a minor triad built on D-flat, is an enharmonic respelling of the sinister, C-sharp from the introductory material of the first song of the set. What has finally occurred at the end, was already decided in the beginning.

Heggie makes some highly intriguing musical references in this final song. In measures 15-17, the piano plays the theme from the third song, "Not in a Silver Casket." At measure 18, the motive from the first piece, "Ophelia's Song," may be heard. By incorporating melodic material from the previous songs, these references help to unify the set as a whole. But perhaps even more interestingly, parallels may be found between Heggie's "Spring" and the Ophelia settings by Brahms, Berlioz, and Strauss. Each of these may be viewed in Appendix B.

As Ophelia sings the line "But what does that signify" in measures 23-24 of the Heggie setting, the piano plays an ascending D – G – A – B – C-natural in the right hand. Though it is brief, it is enough to warrant a relationship with the same melodic material from Brahms's third song, "Auf morgen ist Sankt Valentins Tag." The same rhythmic and intervallic structure occur in transposed forms throughout the piece. An example may be seen in measures 2-3, as the voice sings the pitches F – B-flat – C – D – E-flat.

Another parallel may be observed in measures 32-34 and 40-41 of "Spring." The right hand plays a discernible melodic motive made up of eighth and quarter notes. The same type of melodic and rhythmic figures may be found throughout Berlioz's *La mort d'Ophélie* at a different pitch level, such as in measures 15-19 and 63-66.

A final correlation may be viewed in the left-hand accompaniment of Heggie's piece from measures 22 to 23. The piano plays a descending scale that begins with an upward leap from the dominant pitch (D) to the fourth scale degree (C-natural). The scale concludes on the dominant pitch again. The same pattern appears, in a transposed form, in Strauss's "Zweites Lied der Ophelia" from measures 56-59. Again, we see an upward leap from the fifth scale degree (B) to the fourth (A), then the same descending scale that ends on the fifth.

Such musical relationships are fascinating and appear throughout the literature. Sometimes, they are intentional, as when a composer deliberately reuses material from a different source to strengthen his/her musical goals or perhaps to honor another writer. Other times, they may be entirely serendipitous. In our correspondence, Jake Heggie stated, "Those musical similarities are all coincidental, I think. I was certainly not thinking about Berlioz, Brahms, or Strauss when composing these in 1999…but I'm impressed by your research and

honored to be in such esteemed company!"[278] While these compositional choices were not intentionally made, it is compelling that such disparate composers as Brahms, Berlioz, Strauss, and Heggie all came to similar musical conclusions when considering the character of Ophelia.

Jake Heggie's interpretation of Ophelia is markedly different from that of his predecessors, though elements of each may be found in his works. His "Ophelia's Song," in its folklike simplicity and modal references, portrays Ophelia in the same young, somewhat naïve, simplistic, and grounded way as Brahms's *Fünf Ophelia-Lieder*. "Women Have Loved Before" echoes Saint-Saëns's *La mort d'Ophélie*. Both songs portray Ophelia in a heightened emotional state, driven by intensity and swift-moving currents in the accompaniment, yet maintaining a strong sense of lyricism. Berlioz's *La mort d'Ophélie* may be compared to Heggie's "Not in a Silver Casket" due to the two songs' devotion to melodic line and thematic underpinnings. Heggie's "Spring" and Strauss's *Drei Lieder der Ophelia* are notably similar in their portrayal of Ophelia's tortured, haunting state. The angularity, fragmentation, and agitation contrast with sections of remarkable beauty in both pieces, revealing different aspects of Ophelia's character.

However, Heggie's set stands alone in one noteworthy aspect. While each of the earlier composers has focused on Ophelia's psychotic tendencies which lead to her eventual death, Heggie clarifies that in his set, "Ophelia is NOT confused or unstable."[279] His insistence that she is sane makes his pieces distinctive from the other songs. He has great respect for the character, who "doesn't exhibit any typical heroine qualities yet she has great influence on the plot and subplots of the work."[280] Though she is "used as a pawn in the lives of the overbearing men

[278] Jake Heggie, email message to author, March 12, 2026.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Jake Heggie, Kathleen Tagg, and Regina Zona, CD booklet for "Connection: Three Song Cycles" by Kathleen Tagg and Regina Zona (Naxos, June 1, 2014), 3-4.

around her," Heggie sees her as "very strong, smart, and determined."[281] In our interview, he describes the character in this way:

> Ophelia is brilliant, a voracious reader, and a lively spirit who – as a teenager – is on fire with possibility, emotions, and passion. But she lives in a time when she is viewed as property by the men in charge (very much like Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor*). So there is this profound struggle within her. I find that struggle deeply moving and inspiring.[282]

Rather than attributing Ophelia's ultimate demise to madness, Heggie takes a different stance. He notes that in the first song, "she's considering the river as a way out of her situation. As she looks at the water, she reflects on the situations that brought her there."[283] In the final song, "Ophelia makes her powerful choice. The audience might think of it as tragic – but Ophelia thinks of it as liberating and empowering. A choice SHE can make for herself instead of being used as a pawn by the powerful men around her."[284] Heggie refuses to allow Ophelia to be seen as a victim.

> She wants to take control of her life and destiny. She does this by the only means she can think of – to end it all…And ultimately, the choice to commit suicide is a POWERFUL one. It is her way of taking charge of the circumstances of her life…so from her perspective it is powerful, not sad or pathetic.[285]

Out of the five composers studied, Heggie is the only interpreter who has viewed Ophelia's suicide as a deliberate act fueled by able-minded intent.

Heggie's fresh interpretation must also be informed by the fact that "in his song cycle, Ophelia has made the decision to take her life right from the beginning."[286] Performers should be aware of this before starting the cycle, as this fact will inform most of the interpretive choices

---

[281] Jake Heggie, Kathleen Tagg, and Regina Zona, CD booklet for "Connection: Three Song Cycles" by Kathleen Tagg and Regina Zona (Naxos, June 1, 2014), 3-4.
[282] Jake Heggie, email message to author, March 12, 2026.
[283] Jake Heggie, Kathleen Tagg, and Regina Zona, CD booklet for "Connection: Three Song Cycles" by Kathleen Tagg and Regina Zona (Naxos, June 1, 2014), 3-4.
[284] Ibid.
[285] Ibid.
[286] Ibid.

made. Alongside this bold declamation, Heggie allows Ophelia a "voice" that other composers did not, both in a metaphorical and literal sense. Metaphorically, Heggie gave the character the agency to make her own choices by retaining her sanity. In a literal sense, by electing to disregard Shakespeare's original source material in favor of text settings by himself and Millay, Heggie provided Ophelia with actual language of her own conception. Whereas previous composers set Shakespeare's "mad songs" or poetic renderings of Gertrude's speech, Heggie gave voice to the voiceless. Other composers employed the use of monosyllabic utterings such as "ah" set to memorable melodic themes, but Heggie elected instead to allow the listener to "hear" Ophelia in what he imagined could be her own voice, her own thoughts, and her own choices.

Chapter 12

Since Shakespeare composed *The Tragedy of Hamlet* at the beginning of the seventeenth century, other artists have repeatedly turned to the play for inspiration. In particular, the character of Ophelia has sparked the imagination of musicians, visual artists, filmmakers, and writers. William Shakespeare conceived of a character who, like a finely-faceted jewel, may be appreciated entirely differently when viewed from an alternate perspective. At times, she has served as a type of blank canvas upon which an artist may project his or her own interpretations, thereby recreating the character in seemingly innumerable, disparate ways.

A performer who desires to portray the character of Ophelia should have a thorough understanding of Shakespeare's original representation of her. She should comprehend her personality, relationships, motivations, life circumstances, actions, speech and song patterns, and in particular, her madness and death. She would do well to research various portrayals of

Ophelia throughout history, whether onstage, in visual artworks, or in music. An awareness of the idea of female madness through the last few centuries would be advantageous, as well. She should come to concrete conclusions regarding Ophelia's mental state in the last few scenes of the play and the circumstances leading to her eventual drowning.

The five composers considered in this document have each viewed Ophelia in highly varied ways. Johannes Brahms, with his commitment to melody and folk-song, created an Ophelia who could perform Shakespeare's "mad songs" in a simplistic way. His view of the character retained her youth and naivete. Hector Berlioz saw Ophelia as ethereal and eternally beautiful. Stemming from his idealized vision of Harriet Smithson, his composition suspended the character in an otherworldly, untouchable state. Alternatively, Ophelia gained a driving sense of drama and urgency in Camille Saint-Saëns's composition. His prodigious, rushing water motif gave the character an intensity and anxiety not seen before. Richard Strauss took a different stance in his virtuosic, forward-looking depiction. In his set of songs, Ophelia became deeply disturbed, manic, and eerie as she underwent her mental breakdown. Finally, at the end of the twentieth century, Jake Heggie suggested an altogether new version of Ophelia. Disregarding any suggestion of madness, he allowed the character to have agency to make her own decisions. His substitution of alternative text gave Ophelia a voice of her own, unlike his predecessors.

Shakespeare's Ophelia has and will continue to be a wellspring of imagination for artistic works. By examining the settings of five different song composers, listeners are allowed a glimpse of the character from five vastly different perspectives. Although Shakespeare's original conception may favor one particular point of view, these song composers have given Ophelia a multi-dimensional context. Elaine Showalter wrote, "there is no 'true' Ophelia…but

perhaps only a Cubist Ophelia of multiple perspectives, more than the sum of her parts."[287] As human beings, we would do well to regard any person, fictional or not, in such a thoughtful way.

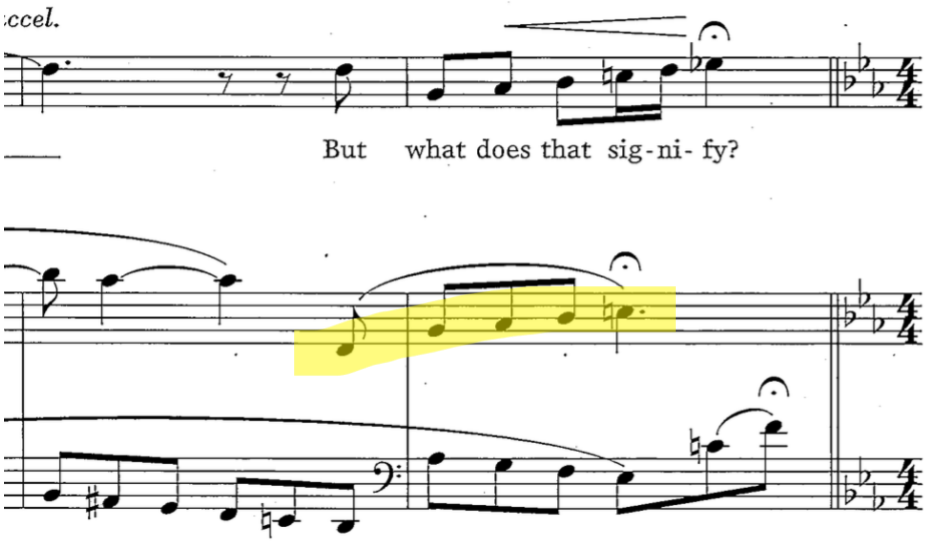
[287] Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 92.

Appendix A
Table of "Ophelia" Songs and Their Texts

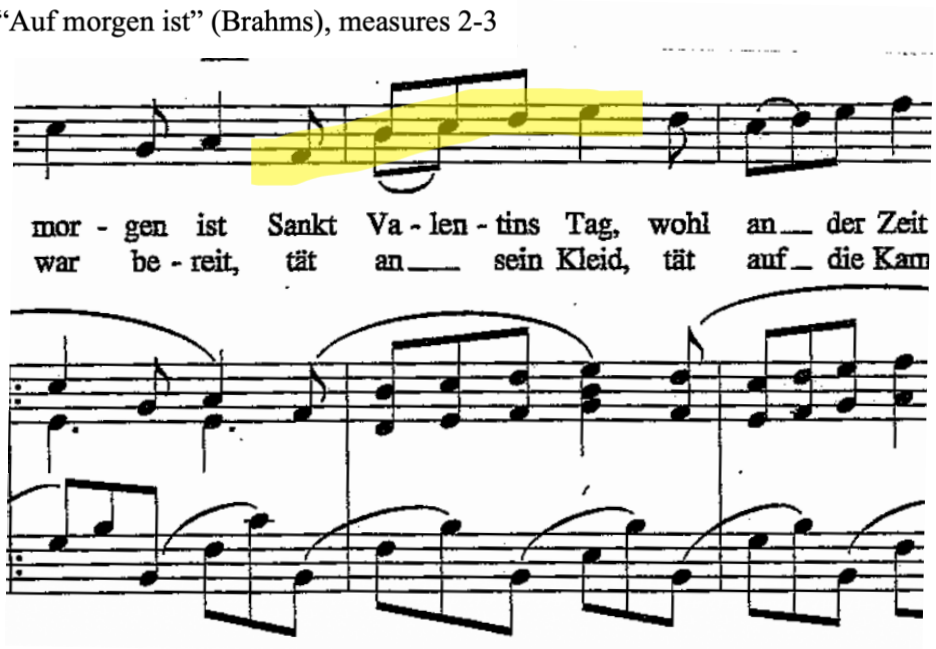
Composer	Title of Work	Language	Scene in *Hamlet*	Text Utilized
Brahms	*Fünf Ophelia-Lieder*	German	Act IV, Scene 5 (Ophelia's mad songs)	I. How should I your true love know II. White his shroud as the mountain snow III. Tomorrow is St. Valentine's Day IV. They bore him bare-fac'd on the bier V. And will a not come again?
Berlioz	*La mort d'Ophélie*	French	Act IV, Scene 7 (Ophelia's death scene as recounted by Gertrude)	There is a willow grows askant the brook
Saint-Saëns	*La mort d'Ophélie*	French	Act IV, Scene 7 (Ophelia's death scene as recounted by Gertrude)	There is a willow grows askant the brook
Strauss	*Drei Lieder der Ophelia*	German	Act IV, Scene 5 (Ophelia's mad songs)	I. How should I your true love know/White his shroud as the mountain snow II. Tomorrow is St. Valentine's Day III. They bore him bare-fac'd on the bier/And will a not come again?
Heggie	*Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia*	English	Text not taken from *Hamlet*	1. Ophelia's Song (Heggie) 2. Women Have Loved Before (Millay) 3. Not in a Silver Casket (Millay) 4. Spring (Millay)

Appendix B
Musical Comparisons with *Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia* (Heggie)

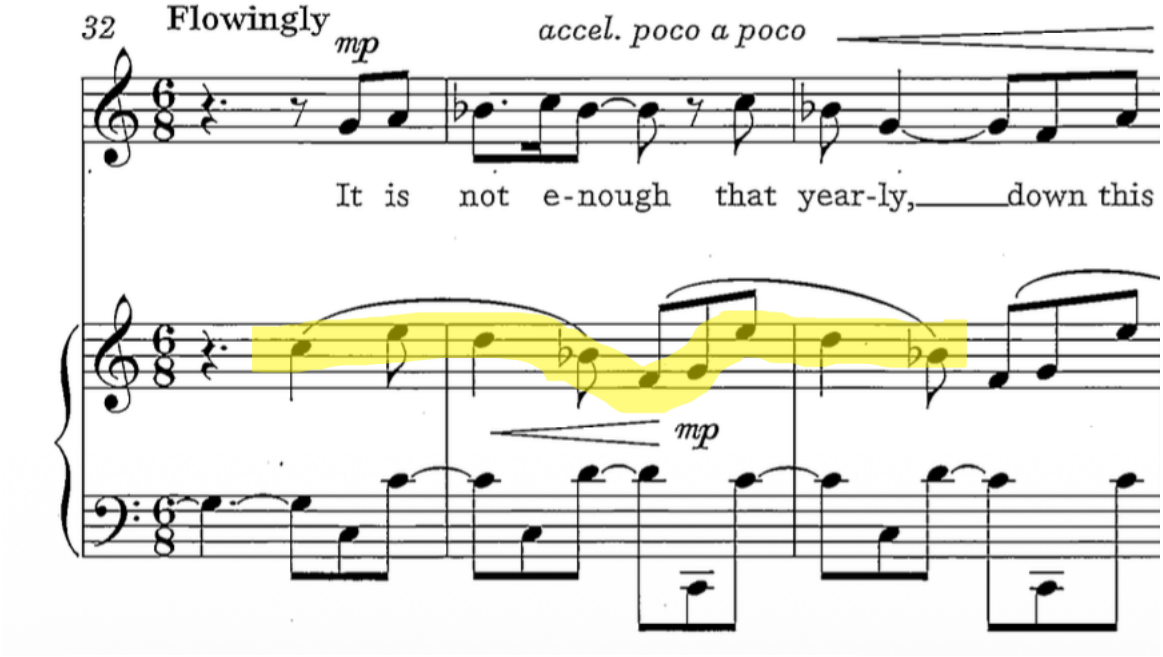
"Spring," measures 23-24



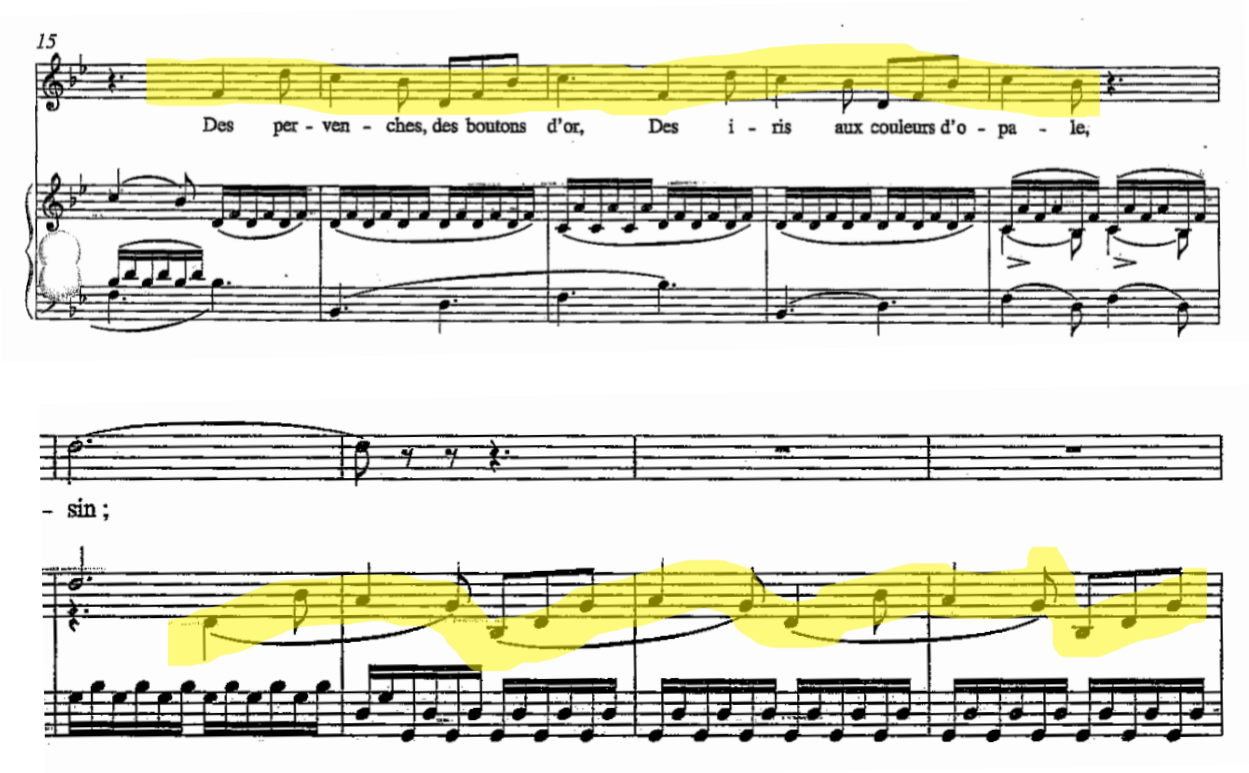
"Auf morgen ist" (Brahms), measures 2-3



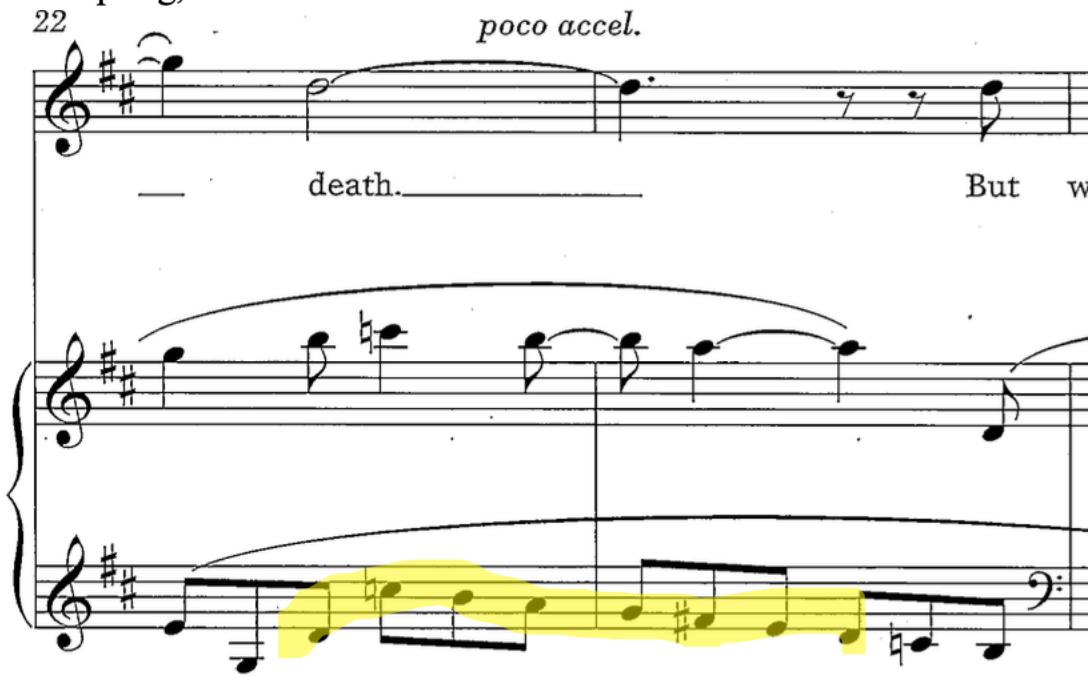
"Spring," measures 32-34



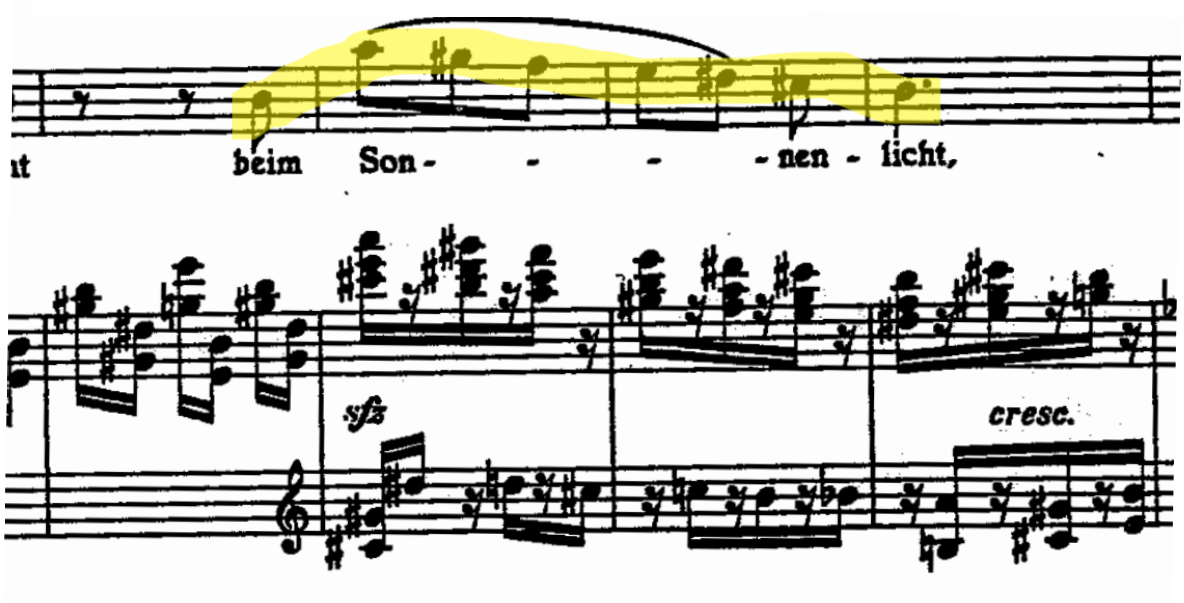
La mort d'Ophélie (Berlioz), measures 15-19 and 63-66



"Spring," measures 22-23



"Zweites Lied der Ophelia" (Strauss), measures 56-59



Appendix C
Institutional Review Board Documentation

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: March 06, 2026 **IRB#:** 19548

Principal Investigator: Aubrey N Chapin

Approval Date: 03/06/2026

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: "Five Song Settings Based on Shakespeare's Ophelia"

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Eric Pennello, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

Bibliography

Aronson, Alex. *Psyche and Symbol in Shakespeare*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972.

Ashley, Tim. *Richard Strauss*. London: Phaidon Press, 1999.

Avins, Styra. *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*. Translated by Josef Eisinger and Styra Avins. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Aydelott, Katherine. *Three Musical Interpretations of Hamlet's Ophelia*. 2020. Middle Tennessee State University, Master's thesis. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fthree-musical-interpretations-em-hamlet-s-ophelia%2Fdocview%2F2407317238%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Barclay, Bill and David Lindley, eds. *Shakespeare, Music and Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Barzun, Jacques. *Berlioz and His Century*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Beizer, Janet. *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Bernac, Pierre. *The Interpretation of French Song*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Kahn & Averill, 1976.

Berry, Paul Buettner. *Memory, Inspiration, and Compositional Process in the Solo Songs of Johannes Brahms*. 2007. Yale University, PhD dissertation. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fmemory-inspiration-compositional-process-solo%2Fdocview%2F304783019%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Bialo, Caralyn. "Popular Performance, the Broadside Ballad, and Ophelia's Madness." *Studies in English Literature* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 293-309. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24510000.

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.

Bloom, Peter. *Berlioz in Time: From Early Recognition to Lasting Renown*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2022. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2dd47qg.1.

Bloom, Peter ed. *Berlioz: Past, Present, Future*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003.

Bloom, Peter ed. *Berlioz: Scenes from the Life and Work*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008.

Bloom, Peter ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Berlioz*. Cambridge: University Press, 2000.

Botstein, Leon. *The Compleat Brahms: A Guide to the Musical Works of Johannes Brahms*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

Boustead, Alan. *Music to Shakespeare*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Bucknill, John Charles. *The Mad Folk of Shakespeare: Psychological Essays.* London: Macmillan and Co., 1867. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015001986085&seq=1.

Bucknill, John Charles. *The Psychology of Shakespeare.* London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1859. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo1.ark:/13960/t2t448v9j&seq=11.

Butler, Katherine and Samantha Bassler, eds. *Music, Myth, and Story in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019.

Cairns, David. *Berlioz: The Making of an Artist 1803-1832*, vol. 1. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Camden, Carroll. "On Ophelia's Madness." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 247–55. https://doi.org/10.2307/2867895.

Champion, Larry S. *The Essential Shakespeare: An Annotated Bibliography of Major Modern Studies*, 2nd ed. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1993.

Chapman, Alison A. "Ophelia's 'Old Lauds': Madness and Hagiography in 'Hamlet.'" *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 20 (2007): 111-135. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24323015.

Crozier, Caryn Alexis. *Johannes Brahms's Fünf Ophelia-Lieder: Performance History, Cultural Context, and Character Study as It Pertains to Johannes Brahms's Fünf Ophelia-Lieder: A Performer's Perspective*. 2019. West Virginia University, DMA document. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fjohannes-brahms-s-f%C3%BCnf-ophelia-lieder-performance%2Fdocview%2F2402509135%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

de Madariaga, Salvador. *On Hamlet*. 2nd ed. London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1964.

Del Mar, Norman. *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works.* Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co, 1969.

Dior, Cynthia Jolie. *Ophelia: Becoming the Violet*. 1998. Idaho State University, Master's document. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fophelia-becoming-violet%2Fdocview%2F194118474%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Doran, Molly C. *Women's Suffering in French Opera: Nineteenth-Century Contexts and Twenty-First-Century Performance*. 2021. Indiana University, PhD dissertation. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fwomens-suffering-french-opera-nineteenth-century%2Fdocview%2F2598477498%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Duffin, Ross W. *Shakespeare's Songbook*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.

Dunn, Leslie C., and Nancy A. Jones. *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Elliott, John R. "The Shakespeare Berlioz Saw." *Music & Letters* 57, no. 3 (July 1976): 292–308. https://www.jstor.org/stable/733579.

Esposito, Vernoica. "Writing a Novel Limited to the 483 Words Spoken by Ophelia." *Lit Hub* (website), August 29, 2016. https://lithub.com/writing-a-novel-limited-to-the-483-words-spoken-by-ophelia/.

Fischer, Sandra K. "Hearing Ophelia: Gender and Tragic Discourse in 'Hamlet.'" *Renaissance and Reformation* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 1-10. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43444750.

Floyd-Wilson, Mary. "Ophelia and Femininity in the Eighteenth Century: 'Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds.'" *Women's Studies* 21, no. 4 (September 1992): 397-409. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1992.9978953.

Flynn, Timothy. *Camille Saint-Saëns: A Guide to Research*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Frazer, Elizabeth. *Ophelia as archetype: Jake Heggie's "Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia."* 2012. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, DMA dissertation. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fophelia-as-archetype-jake-heggies-songs-sonnets%2Fdocview%2F1024271703%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Frisch, Walter. *Brahms and His World.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Gates, Sarah. "Assembling the Ophelia Fragments: Gender, Genre, and Revenge in *Hamlet*." *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 34, no. 2 (December 2008): 229-247. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1163/23526963-90000358.

Geiringer, Karl. *Brahms: His Life and Work*. 3rd ed. Oxford: University Press, 1982.

Geiringer, Karl. *On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies*. Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2006.

Gerwig, George William. *Shakespeare's Ophelia: A Shakesperean Story of a Broken Heart*. East Aurora, NY: The Roycroft Shops, 1929.

Gilliam, Bryan, ed. *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and His Work*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992.

Graves, Henry Mercer. *An Essay on the Genius of Shakespeare, with Critical Remarks on the Characters of Romeo, Hamlet, Juliet, and Ophelia*. London: Botson and Palmer, 1826. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015082264048&seq=16.

Green, Amanda Lenora. *William Grant Still's Highway 1, U.S.A.: A Character Analysis of Mary; Ophelia Lieder; and Songs of the African Diaspora*. 2020. University of Michigan, DMA dissertation. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fwilliam-grant-stills-em-highway-1-u-s-character%2Fdocview%2F2479880744%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Greer, David, ed. *Musicology and Sister Disciplines: Past Present, Future*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Griffiths, Christian. "R. Strauss, Opus 67, 1-3, Drei Lieder Der Ophelia: Ophelia Set Adrift in the Cross-Currents of Interdisciplinary Culture." *Australian Literary Studies* 29, no. 1/2 (2014): 12-27. https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/c/cdpn2g/viewer/pdf/5ebcsaschv.

Guerreri, Matthew. "Fulfilling a contract, Strauss limned madness in 'Ophelia' songs." *The Boston Globe* (November 9, 2014). https://global-factiva-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/ha/default.aspx#./!?&_suid=176504770410304367427811742165.

Guilfoyle, Cherrell. "'Ower Swete Sokor': The Role of Ophelia in *Hamlet*." *Comparative Drama* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 3-17. https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/article/662150/pdf.

Hallmark, Rufus E. *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Schirmer, 1996.

Hamilton, Sharon. *Shakespeare's Daughters.* Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003.

Harrison, Max. *The Lieder of Brahms.* New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972.

Hartnoll, Phyllis, and John E. Stevens. *Shakespeare in Music; Essays by John Stevens [and Others] with a Catalog of Musical Works.* London: Macmillan, 1964.

Hartsock, Mildred E. "Major Scenes in Minor Key." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1970): 55–62. https://doi.org/10.2307/2868402.

Heggie, Jake. "At a Glance." Accessed January 5, 2026, https://www.jakeheggie.com/ataglance.

Heggie, Jake, Kathleeen Tagg, and Regina Zona. "Connection: Three Song Cycles." Naxos (June 1, 2014).

Heggie, Jake. "Passing By: Songs by Jake Heggie." Avie Records (September 13, 2010).

Hervey, Arthur. *Saint-Saëns*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969.

Holoman, D. Kern. Review of *Fair Ophelia* by Peter Raby. *The Musical Times* 124, no. 1690 (December 1983): 749–50. https://doi.org/10.2307/962216.

Ivey, Donald. *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles*. New York: The Free Press, 1970.

Jackson, Rusell and Robert Smallwood, eds. *Players of Shakespeare 2: Further Essays in Shakespearean Performance by Players with the Royal Shakespeare Company*. Cambridge: University Press, 1988.

Jacobson, Bernard. *The Music of Johannes Brahms*. London: The Tantivy Press, 1977.

Jameson, Anna. *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical.* England: G. Bell, 1911. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26152.

Jefferson, Alan. *The Lieder of Richard Strauss.* New York: Praeger, 1972.

Jenkins, Harold, ed. *Hamlet*. London: Methuen, 1982.

Johnson, Graham, and Richard Stokes. *A French Song Companion.* York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Kantack, Jerri Lamar. *Romantic Musical Characterizations of Ophelia*. 1993. The University of Alabama, DMA dissertation. ProQuest, https://www.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/304019305/EC0AF9E809B7452FPQ/3?accountid=12964.

Kennedy, Michael. *Richard Strauss: Man Musician, Enigma*. Cambridge: University Press, 1999.

Kerr, Jessica. *Shakespeare's Flowers*. Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1997.

Kiefer, Carol Solomon. *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia*. Amherst, MA: Mead Art Museum, 2001.

Kim, Youn and Sander L. Gilman, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Music and the Body*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Kimball, Carol. *A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature.* Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2006.

Kines, Tom. *Songs from Shakespeare's Plays and Popular Songs of Shakespeare's Time*. New York: Oak Publications, 1964.

Littlejohn, David, "A West Coaster With a Global Reputation." *The Wall Street Journal Eastern Edition*, March 2, 2015. https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fblogs-podcasts-websites%2Fwest-coaster-with-global-reputation-jake-heggie%2Fdocview%2F1659808066%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Lyons, Bridget Gellert. "The Iconography of Ophelia." *ELH* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 60–74. https://doi.org/10.2307/2872526.

Macdonald, Hugh. *Berlioz*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

MacDonald, Malcolm. *Brahms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Macdougall, Allan Ross, ed. *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952.

Marino, James J. "Ophelia's Desire." *ELH* 84, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 817–39. https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2017.0031.

Martin, Helena Faucit. *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters: Ophelia, Portia, Desdemona, Juliet, Imogen, Rosalind, Beatrice, Hermione*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1901. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b27167&seq=15.

McClary, Susan. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Milford, Nancy. *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Random House, 2001.

Millay, Edna St. Vincent. *Fatal Interview*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931.

Millay, Edna St. Vincent. *Second April*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1921.

Newman, Ernest, ed. *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*. Translated by Rachel Holmes and Eleanor Holmes. New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1932.

Noske, Frits. *French Song from Berlioz to Duparc; the Origin and Development of the Melodie.* 2nd ed. New York: Dover Publications, 1970.

Nosworthy, J. M. "The Death of Ophelia." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 1964): 345–48. https://doi.org/10.2307/2868091.

O'Neal, Melinda. *Experiencing Berlioz: A Listener's Companion*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Odom, Susan Gale Johnson. *Four musical settings of Ophelia*. 1991. University of North Texas, DMA document. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Ffour-musical-settings-ophelia%2Fdocview%2F303960627%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Ortiz, Joseph M., ed. *Shakespeare and the Culture of Romanticism*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013.

Painter, Robert and Brian Parker. "Ophelia's Flowers Again." *Notes and Queries* 41, no. 1 (March 1994): 42-44. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1093/nq/41-1-42.

Park, Yi-Yeon. *A study of German, French, and English vocal settings of Ophelia from Shakespeare's Hamlet*. 2013. Indiana University, DMA document. IU ScholarWorks, https://hdl.handle.net/2022/15285.

Parker, Patricia and Geoffrey Hartman, eds. *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*. New York: Methuen, 1985.

Pasler, Jann, ed. *Camille Saint-Saëns and His World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1mjqv95.1.

Petersen, Barbara Ellingson. "'Ton und Wort': The Lieder of Richard Strauss." 1977. New York University, PhD dissertation. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fton-und-wort-lieder-richard-strauss%2Fdocview%2F302865912%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Peterson, Kaara L. and Deanne Williams, eds. *The Afterlife of Ophelia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Price, Joseph. *Hamlet: Critical Essays*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986.

Raby, Peter. *Fair Ophelia: A Life of Harriet Smithson Berlioz*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Rhodes, Kimberly. *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008.

Rhodes, Kimberly. *Performing Roles: Images of Ophelia in Britain, 1740--1910*. 1999. Columbia University, PhD dissertation. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fperforming-roles-images-ophelia-britain-1740-1910%2Fdocview%2F304500359%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Rogers, Kelsey K. *Silent Songs: Unearthing the Song Repertoire of Camille Saint-Saëns*. 2023. North Dakota State University, DMA document. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fsilent-songs-unearthing-song-repertoire-camille%2Fdocview%2F2919203335%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Romanska, Magda. "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia." *Women's Studies* 34, no. 6 (2005): 485–503. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870500277914.

Sams, Eric. *The Songs of Johannes Brahms*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

Sanabria, Carolina. *Ophelia Through Time: Reimaginings in Art and Film*. Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2025.

Schmid, Mark-Daniel, ed. *The Richard Strauss Companion*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003.

Schweitzer, Vivian. "Composer of the Year: Jake Heggie." *Musical America Worldwide*, accessed January 5, 2026, https://www.musicalamerica.com/features/?fid=371&fyear=2025.

Seng, Peter J. *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1njkw8.1.

Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.* London: John K. Chapman and Co., 1859. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015082526982&seq=1.

Shannon, Alexander Michael. *"O Wake in Me": Contextualizing Vocal Writing, Text-Setting, and Harmonic Syntax in Richard Strauss's "Deutsche Motette," Op. 62*. 2021. University of Missouri – Kansas City, Master's thesis. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdi

ssertations-theses%2Fo-wake-me-contextualizing-vocal-writing-text%2Fdocview%2F2540832912%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Smith, Barbara. "Neither Accident nor Intent: Contextualizing the Suicide of Ophelia." *South Atlantic Review* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 96–112. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27784781.

States, Bert O. *Hamlet and the Concept of Character*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Sternfeld, F.W. *Music in Shakesperean Tragedy*. New York: Dover Publications, 1967.

Stevens, Denis, ed. *A History of Song*. New York: Norton, 1970.

Studd, Stephen. *Saint-Saëns: A Critical Biography*. London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999.

Thomas, Julia. "Ophelia." In *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era: 1760-1850*, edited by Christopher John Murray, 828-829. New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004.

Thompson, Ann and Neil Taylor. *Hamlet*. 2nd ed. Horndon, United Kingdom: Northcote Publishers Ltd., 2005.

Tipton, Jennifer Leigh. *A document in death and madness: A cultural and interdisciplinary study of nineteenth-century art song settings on the death of Ophelia*. 2014. The University of Southern Mississippi, DMA dissertation. ProQuest, https://login.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdissertations-theses%2Fdocument-death-madness-cultural-interdisciplinary%2Fdocview%2F1609185128%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12964.

Trudell, Scott A. "The Mediation of Poesie: Ophelia's Orphic Song." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 46–76. https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2012.0013.

The True Ophelia: And Other Studies of Shakespeare's Women. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1913.

UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music. "Jake Heggie '84, M.A. '05." September 21, 2021, https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/jake-heggie-84-m-a-05/.

Van Rij, Inge. *Brahms's Song Collections*. Cambridge: University Press, 2006.

Wagner, Linda Welshimer. "Ophelia: Shakespeare's Pathetic Plot Device." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1963): 94–97. https://doi.org/10.2307/2868164.

Wakeling, Kate. "Jake Heggie: A Life Less Ordinary." *Classical Music, BBC Music Magazine*, November 5, 2023, https://www.classical-music.com/features/composers/interview-jake-heggie.

Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page.

Wikipedia. "Jake Heggie." Last modified March 6, 2026. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jake_Heggie.

Wikipedia. "Johana Harris." Last modified April 4, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johana_Harris

Wilhelm, Kurt. *Richard Strauss: An Intimate Portrait*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989.

Wilson, Christopher R. and Mervyn Cooke, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Wilson, J. Dover. *What Happens in Hamlet*. Cambridge: University Press, 1962.

Youmans, Charles Dowell. *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*. Cambridge: University Press, 2010.

Young, Alan R. *Hamlet and the Visual Arts*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002.

Zoladz, Lindsay. "The Sound of 'Ophelia.'" *The New York Times*, October 7, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/07/arts/music/amplifier-newsletter-ophelia-songs.html?searchResultPosition=1