The technical term for the use of spoken text with music is melodrama. The association of the term melodrama with Victorian popular drama has altered its meaning; for much of its history, melodrama referred to "the technique of using short passages of music in alternation with or accompanying the spoken word to heighten its dramatic effect, often found within opera, or as an independent genre, or as a sporadic effect in spoken drama." As a musical technique, melodrama has served an important role for several centuries.

While it is feasible to propose that the use of music as an adjunct to spoken drama dates to a very early period, the first piece documented to rely exclusively on the technique was *Pygmalion*, premiered in 1770 with text by Jean Jacques Rousseau and music written by

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1 This essay is derived from the essay accompanying my dissertation composition, a melodrama for two narrators and chamber orchestra entitled *The Light*. The dissertation essay also includes details about the process of composing melodramas from a composer’s perspective, as well as analysis of *The Light* in particular. The full essay, composition, and audio samples are available at www.drfeezell.com.

2 A related form is the Singspiel, in which songs or other musical pieces are worked into an otherwise continuous dramatic form. Two schools of Singspiel composition emerged in the late eighteenth century: the Viennese school, of which Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (1791) is the supreme example, and the North German school, of which Johann Adam Hiller is the most noted composer. For historical background, see Charlotte Greenspan, "Singspiel," *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Don Michael Randel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 750-1. Whereas in Singspiele the music's alternation with the spoken text forms two distinct but related dramatic streams, in melodrama the emphasis is on music functioning as a corollary to a spoken text, thereby creating an indivisible dramatic unit.


Rousseau and Horace Coignet.⁵ After many performances in France, Rousseau's text reached Vienna in 1772, where Franz Asplmayr produced a setting,⁶ and Germany, where Anton Schweitzer produced a setting, now lost.⁷ The composer who truly launched the incipient genre, however, was the Bohemian Georg Benda.

Scholars universally acknowledge Georg Benda's *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1775) as the first significant melodrama.⁸ Thomas Bauman has described the impact of Benda's melodrama:

> Audiences…were stunned by its compelling realism and sweep, effects enhanced in the case of *Ariadne* by the first use of historical costuming on the German stage. Benda's epoch-making scores swept triumphantly across every stage in Germany and traveled as far as France and Italy.⁹

By 1778, Benda's influence extended to the important musical center at Mannheim, where Mozart heard his melodramas.¹⁰ Mozart later incorporated the technique into several of his own works.¹¹ Like Benda, Mozart uses neither rhythmic nor pitch notation for the speech.

Melodrama appears in many operas of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the two most famous examples are the grave-digging scene in Beethoven's *Fidelio*¹² and the Wolf's Glen scene

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⁶ Shapiro, "Melodrama."
¹⁰ Mozart's enthusiastic comments on the Benda melodramas are recorded in letters he wrote to his father from Mannheim on the 12th and 24th of November and the 3rd of December in 1778, and from Kaisheim on the 18th of December. See Branscombe, "Melodrama."
¹¹ The unfinished Singspiel *Zaide* includes melodrama in Act I, scene ii and Act II, scene i; the setting for the play *Thamos, König in Ägypten* uses melodrama during the opening monologue of the heroine, Sais, at the beginning of the fourth act. See Shapiro, "Melodrama."
in Weber's *Der Freischütz*. Schubert uses it in *Die Zauberharfe* (1820) and *Fierrebras* (1823), Verdi uses it in the letter scene in Act II of *La Traviata* (1853), and Puccini uses it in *La bohème* (1896). Notably, Wagner disliked melodramatic delivery, equating it with the egotistical trappings of solo piano virtuosity. Despite Wagner's objections, however, melodrama appears occasionally in opera throughout the nineteenth century.

Composers of the nineteenth century also incorporated the technique into non-operatic works. One notable example is Schumann's incidental music to Byron's *Manfred* (1848-9). Several other examples fall into the tradition of "chamber melodramas," which combine a single speaking part with a piano accompaniment. The tradition of the chamber melodrama failed to affect major composers in the latter half of the nineteenth century significantly, but pieces such as Richard Strauss's *Enoch Arden* (1897) kept the approach alive until Schoenberg's important early twentieth-century Sprechstimme compositions.

Although not always described as such, Schoenberg's important innovations in writing for the voice reflect a further refinement of the technique of melodrama. Beginning with *Gurrelieder* (1911), which uses notated speech, Schoenberg explored the potential of the human voice in a myriad of performance permutations: strictly notated, pitched speech (*Pierrot

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12 The scene in *Fidelio* (Act II, scene i) is the opening of an episode wherein the jailer, Rocco, and Florestan's wife Leonora, disguised as Rocco's assistant Fidelio, are depicted digging a grave for the unjustly imprisoned Florestan.
13 Act 2, scene ii "combines singing by Caspar and unnotated melodramatic speech by Samiel, the two forms showing differentiation between human and supernatural. Later in the scene, in a section subtitled ‘Melodram’, Caspar symbolically joins the supernatural in his long unnotated speeches over held notes and slow trills, with spoken echoes following each count as he numbers the bullets." Shapiro, "Melodrama."
14 See Shapiro, "Melodrama."
15 The small repertory includes several works by major composers, including Schubert's *Abschied von der Erde* (1826), Schumann's *Schön Hedwig* (1849), and Liszt's *Lenore* (1860) and *Der traurige Mönch* (1872).
16 For further discussion see Peter Branscombe, "Melodrama."
Lunaire, 1912), choral speech in Sprechgesang\(^{17}\) (*Die Jakobsleiter*, 1917-22, unfinished), relative pitches and precise rhythms in *Die glückliche Hand* (1910-13), and simpler notation systems in the later works, including *Kol nidre* (1938), *Ode to Napoleon* (1942), *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947), and *Modern Psalm* (1950). In his incomplete opera *Moses und Aron* (1930-32), Aaron sings and the tongue-tied Moses speaks. Schoenberg's integration of the full spectrum of vocal performance possibilities freed later composers to approach the voice with a new freedom.

Already with Alban Berg the effect of Schoenberg's liberation is clearly evident. In the performance directions preceding his opera *Lulu*, he delineates six techniques of vocal performance: unaccompanied dialogue; free prose (accompanied); rhythmically fixed performance (notated using stems and beams without noteheads); Sprechstimme in high, middle, and low ranges; half sung; and completely sung.\(^{18}\) Berg's performance instructions in *Lulu* codify the full breadth of the vocal performance spectrum that Schoenberg made available.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, composers such as Pauline Oliveros,\(^{19}\) John Cage,\(^{20}\) Milton Babbitt,\(^{21}\) and Luciano Berio\(^{22}\) expanded the vocal spectrum even further, incorporating the timbral possibilities of the voice as an integral part of the musical structure.

\(^{17}\) Paul Griffiths has shed light on the terms Sprechgesang and Sprechstimme. He writes that Sprechgesang is "A type of vocal enunciation intermediate between speech and song. Sprechgesang…was introduced by Humperdinck in *Königskinder* (1897), though in the edition of 1910 he replaced it by conventional singing…” Griffiths then distinguishes Sprechstimme: "…Schoenberg devised a new, related type of enunciation, which was later referred to by Berg as ‘Sprechstimme’. According to the directions for performance provided with Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* …the performer must clearly distinguish between speech, song and the new style, in which speech takes a musical form but without recalling song." See Paul Griffiths, "Sprechgesang," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 13 August 2002), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

\(^{18}\) As translated in Shapiro, "Melodrama."

\(^{19}\) "A fine example of a modern musical treatment of the voice is *Sound Patterns* (1964) by Pauline Oliveros, which uses a mixed chorus to produce a large variety of *unpitched* timbres." [italics mine] Robert Erikson, *Sound Structure in Music* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1975), 133.
Anne Dhu Shapiro argues that later composers' integration of such techniques is "properly seen more as an outgrowth of extended vocal techniques of the 20th century than as a continuation of melodrama techniques of the 18th and early 19th centuries." The connection between the later composers and Schoenberg, however, together with Schoenberg's self-proclaimed links with the past, seems to argue that the line of development in the technique of melodrama continues from Rousseau and Benda to the present. Shapiro herself writes:

From the works of Schoenberg and Berg onwards, the emphasis has shifted away from the exaggerated sentiment of the 19th-century form back to the narrower interpretation of the term articulated by Rousseau – that of music that announces and prepares for the spoken phrase.

Ironically, the trend toward the earlier interpretation of the term melodrama has created the illusion of a broken historical continuity.

In reality, Rousseau and Benda's technique of melodrama forked into two related streams in the mid-twentieth century. The first stream, carried forward in works by composers such as Cage, Oliveros, and Berio, departed from the traditional melodrama to focus on the possibilities of using the voice as primarily a timbral rather than a narrative element. The second stream allied
itself with the traditional interpretation of melodrama, focusing on the voice as a narrative element, a conveyor of textual meaning in dialogue with the music of the orchestra.

Contributions to this stream include Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* (1936), Aaron Copland's *Lincoln Portrait* (1942), Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947), and Joseph Schwantner's *New Morning for the World* ("Daybreak of Freedom") (1982), as well as my composition, *The Light*.

Appendix: Chronological List of Selected Pieces Using Melodrama

1770: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Pygmalion*, first melodrama
1775: Georg Benda, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, first important German melodrama
1779: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Thamos, König in Ägypten*, play using melodrama
1780: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Zaïde*, unfinished Singspiel using melodrama
1806: Ludwig van Beethoven, *Fidelio*, act 2, scene 1, grave-digging scene
1815: Gioacchino Rossini, *La gazzetta ladra*, opera using melodrama
1820: Franz Schubert, *Die Zauberharfe*, opera using melodrama
1821: Carl Maria von Weber, *Der Freischütz*, act 2, scene 2, Wolf's Glen scene
1823: Franz Schubert, *Fierrabas*, opera using melodrama near the end of Act II
1828: Daniel Auber, *La Muette de Portici*, opera using pantomime-only melodrama
1831: Hector Berlioz, *Lélio, ou Le retour à la vie*, symphonic rather than operatic
1833: Heinrich Marschner, *Hans Heiling*, Act II, scene 2 includes melodrama
1847: Giuseppe Verdi, *Macbeth* (rev. 1865), includes melodrama
1849: Robert Schumann, *Schön Hedwig*, op. 106, chamber "declamation" with pf
1849: Robert Schumann, incidental music to Byron's *Manfred* (1848-9), melodrama
1853: Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata* (1853), includes melodrama
1860: Franz Liszt, *Lenore*, chamber "recitation" with pf
1872: Franz Liszt, *Der traurige Mönch*, chamber "recitation" with piano
1874: Bedrich Smetana, *The Two Widows*, includes melodrama
1884: Jules Massenet, *Manon*, includes melodrama
1890: Pietro Mascagni, *Cavalleria rusticana*, includes melodrama
1891: Zdenko Fibich, *Hippodameia*, trilogy of monodramas

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1892: Jules Massenet, Werther, includes melodrama
1896: Giacomo Puccini, La bohème, includes melodrama
1897: Richard Strauss, Enoch Arden, op. 38, chamber melodrama with pf
1905: Richard Strauss, Salome, opera using melodrama
1909: Arnold Schoenberg, Erwartung, op. 17, monodrama approaching Sprechstimme
1912: Arnold Schoenberg, Pierrot lunaire, op. 21, monodrama employing Sprechstimme
1916: Richard Strauss, Ariadne auf Naxos, revised, opera using melodrama
1922: Arnold Schoenberg, Die Jakobsleiter, unfinished oratorio, chorus in Sprechgesang
1922: William Walton, Façade, speaker and chamber ensemble
1929: Carl Nielson, Island [Iceland], speaker, piano
1930: Darius Milhaud, Christophe Colomb, op. 102, opera in two parts with melodrama
1932: Arnold Schoenberg, Moses und Aron, unfinished, Moses uses Sprechstimme
1934: Igor Stravinsky, Perséphone, melodrama in 3 scenes
1935: Alban Berg, Lulu, unfinished, includes full spectrum of vocal delivery possibilities
1935: Arthur Honegger, Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher
1936: Sergey Prokofiev, Peter and the Wolf
1938: Arnold Schoenberg, Kol Nidre, op. 39
1942: Arnold Schoenberg, Ode to Napoleon, op. 41, reciter, pf quintet
1945: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes, opera using melodrama
1947: Arnold Schoenberg, A Survivor from Warsaw, op. 46
1942: Aaron Copland, Lincoln Portrait
1946: Marc Blitzstein, The Airborne Symphony
1947: Benjamin Britten, The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, spkr ad lib, orch
1948: Hans Werner Henze, Das Wundertheater
1948: Pierre Boulez, Le visage nuptial
1949: Ralph Vaughan Williams, An Oxford Elegy, spkr, small chorus, small orchestra
1953: Luigi Nono, Tre epitaffi per Federico García Lorca, 1951–3: 3. Memento: romance de la guardia civil española, speaker, speaking chorus, chorus, orchestra
1956: Reginald Smith Brindle, Grafico della Petenera, Mez, Bar, spkr, SATB, orch
1958: Toru Takemitsu, Tableau noir, speaker, chamber orchestra
1960:29 Harry Partch, Revelation in the Courthouse Park, multimedia, inc. 4 speakers
1960: Michael Tippett, Words for Music Perhaps, spkr(s), b cl, tpt, perc, pf, vn, vc
1961: Igor Stravinsky, A Sermon, a Narrative and a Prayer, A, T, spkr, chorus, orch
1962: David Amram, The American Bell, narrator and orchestra
1962: Alvin Lucier, Quatre poèmes de Mallarmé, narrator and orchestra
1964: Margaret Sutherland, Sequence of Verse into Music, speaker, ensemble
1965: Roy Harris, Sym. no.10 'Abraham Lincoln', speaker, SATB, brass, 2 pf, perc
1967: René Leibowitz, Motifs, op.74, speaker, cl, vn, vc, pf
1967: Daniel Pinkham, Jonah, speaker, solo voices, chorus, orchestra
1967: Gian Francesco Malipiero, L'aredodese, speaker, chorus, orchestra
1968: Alvin Lucier, Quatre poèmes de Mallarmé, narrator and orchestra

28 A monodrama is a melodrama for a single speaker. See Shapiro, "Monodrama."
29 The number of works including at least one narrator or speaker has increased dramatically since 1960; the listing here is only a small sampling of the many pieces available.
1968: Karlheinz Stockhausen, *12 Litanei*, speaker, chorus
1969: Bernd Alois Zimmerman, *Requiem fur einen jungen Dichter*, speaker, vocal soloists, 3 choruses, orchestra, jazz group, organ, tape
1972: Frederic Rzewski, *Attica*, speaker, low instruments, ensemble
1972: Carlisle Floyd, *Flower and Hawk*
1974: George Rochberg, *Phaedra*
1975: Einojuhani Rautavaara, *Kainuu*, speaker, mixed chorus, percussion
1978: Einojuhani Rautavaara, *Odotus* [Waiting], speaker, mixed chorus, organ
1982: Joseph Schwantner, *New Morning for the World* (*"Daybreak of Freedom"*)
1984: Herbert Brun, *SNOW* (Sentences Now Open Wide), 3 spkrs, ensemble, tape
1986: Erik Bergman, *Lemminkainen*, for narrator and mixed voices
1988: Judith Weir, *Missa del Cid*, speaker, chorus
1988: John Harbison, *Christmas Vespers*, speaker, brass quintet
1988: Steve Reich, *Different Trains*, uses taped speech
1991: Lou Harrison, *Homage to Pacifica*, spkr, bn, perc, hp, psaltery, Javanese gamelan
1992: Lou Harrison, *Suite*, 4 haisho, percussion, speaker
1992: Roger Dean, *Silent Waves*, speaker, 2 instruments, tape
1996: Barry Truax, *Patterns*, female speaker, tape
1997: Geoffrey Poole, *Rune Labyrinth* (Anglo-Saxon texts), narrator, dancer, oboe, harp
2000: Claudio Ambrosini, *Passione secondo Marco*, speaker, vocalists, ensemble
Bibliography


