Aesthetics of the Arabesque and Grotesque in Mendelssohn's Witches' Sabbath

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During the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, there occurred a growing interest in the aesthetics of the grotesque. Many of the leading figures in these discussions were within a relatively close proximity to Felix Mendelssohn. While most of the literature on Mendelssohn's *Die erste Walpurgisnacht* (1833, revised 1843)[1] focuses on the friendship and aesthetic kinship between Felix and Goethe,[2] or on religious tolerance and social criticism,[3] the goal of this paper is to examine whether Mendelssohn's musical setting of Goethe's Witches' Sabbath can be understood in terms of the grotesque. In doing so, I seek to avoid the presumption that the musical setting is received as grotesque by virtue of its dramatic subject matter. Though the text, music, and narrative context interrelate, my argument distinguishes between what one might imagine as grotesque (from Goethe's text) and what one sonically experiences as grotesque (from Mendelssohn's musical setting).

By way of establishing a context, I will first survey the meaning of the grotesque (and its sister term "arabesque") as it was understood in literary and artistic discourse in early nineteenth-century Germany and highlight the extent to which leading figures in these discussions were in close proximity to Mendelssohn. I will then argue for an interpretation of the Witches' Sabbath in *Walpurgisnacht* that foregrounds the previously neglected trope of the grotesque.

My reading of the piece draws from the twentieth-century studies by Wolfgang Kayser and Lee Byron Jennings, both of whom offer a trans-historical definition of the grotesque in which the "ludicrous" and the "horrifying" are combined.[4] Because the early nineteenth century generated the first major body of theoretical writings on the grotesque,

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[1] The score to which I refer in this paper is the revised 1843 version.

[2] Julie D. Prandi, "Kindred Spirits: Mendelssohn and Goethe, *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*," in *The Mendelssohns: Their Music in History*, eds. John Michael Cooper and Julie D. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[3] John Michael Cooper, *Mendelssohn, Goethe, and the Walpurgis Night: The Heathen Muse in European Culture, 1700-1850* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007); and Lawrence Kramer, "*Felix culpa*: Goethe and the Image of Mendelssohn," in *Mendelssohn Studies*, ed. R. Larry Todd (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 64-79.

[4] In an extended version of this paper, I also use Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (1831) as a general barometer for musical grotesquerie during early Romanticism.

and because Kayser and Jennings are working out of this tradition, one aim of this project is to discern how discourse and practice merge or diverge during the early nineteenth century.

Early-Romantic discourse on the "arabesque" and "grotesque"

The term "grotesque"[5] derives from the Italian word *grotta* ("cave") and was applied to an ornamental style of painting discovered during fifteenth-century excavations in Rome and other parts of Italy.[6] The paintings were critiqued for their lack of verisimilitude, displaying instead an imaginative free-play of forms in which a mixture of plant-life, animal features, and human figures merged as though growing out of each other. The style was described interchangeably as arabesque or grotesque[7] and adopted by many Renaissance painters, most influentially in the paintings of Giovanni da Udine, who worked under the supervision of Raphael to decorate the pillars of the Papal loggias (c. 1515).[8]

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, particularly in Germany, France, and England, discussions concerning the visual aesthetics and appropriate purpose of the ornamental style became more controversial, specifically with respect to its place in the painting. While some completely rejected the style, others approved of it under the condition that it be used solely to frame a central focus. The style became aesthetically troublesome, however, when it began to break the frame and extend into the central image, blurring the division between incidental and constitutive.[9] In other words, the ornamental flourishing and fecundity of the style easily became threatening to the aesthetic principles of organization and coherence; inherent in the arabesque was a pernicious tendency to become a means of disorder and chaos.

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[5] Jennings gives an insightful and shrewd catalog of the various ways in which the term is used, more often confusingly and allusively than in any meaningful aesthetic sense. See Lee Byron Jennings, *Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1963), 1-6.

[6] Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature,* trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981 [1957]), 19-20.

[7] In addition to "grotesque" and "arabesque," "moresque" was on occasion misused to mean the same ornamental style. However, a distinction can be made. As Kayser points out, in art history the "moresque" is two-dimensional and rigidly stylized against a uniform background, whereas the "arabesque" gains perspective and is considerably more profuse to the extent that the background nearly disappears. The more relevant point is that the arabesque and grotesque of visual art are considered to have developed alongside each other so that up until roughly 1800, the terms are interchangeable in discourse, though not necessarily in practice. Kayser, 23. Throughout this paper, I will generally use the terms synonymously, while favoring slightly the "arabesque," and reserving the term "grotesque" for a more specific aesthetic structure.

[8] Kayser, 20.

[9] John Daverio, "Schumann's Opus 17 Fantasie and the *Arabeske*," in *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993), 26-27.

Many figures in Mendelssohn's immediate and extended circles played important roles in these discussions. Goethe, in his essay *Von Arabesken* (1789), approved of the style after his visit to Italy, but only as a framing device.[10] During his career, Mendelssohn collaborated with the writers K. L. Immerman (whose works Lee Byron Jennings explores in his theory of the grotesque)[11] and Ludwig Tieck, who was a student of the art historian Johann Dominicus Fiorillo, a leading advocate for the ornamental style.[12] In 1798, Tieck published his novel *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* in which one of the characters, a painter, describes his work in terms of an unbounded arabesque:

> I would then portray the strangest figures related to each other in a confused and well-nigh incomprehensible manner; figures composed of the various types of animals and terminating in plantlike forms; insects and worms whom I would endow with a striking resemblance to human characters, so that they would express attitudes and passions in a manner at once terrifying and hilarious.[13]

One of the most notable figures with respect to both the grotesque and Mendelssohn was Mendelssohn's uncle-by-marriage, Friedrich Schlegel for whom the arabesque was a type of form or structure that flirted with caprice.[14] Because of its traditional role as parameter, the arabesque (like Schlegel's preferred medium of criticism, his "aphorisms" and "fragments") was in opposition to systematic coherence. As a visual concept and a form, the arabesque resonated well with Schlegel's definition of poetry as essentially a process of becoming.[15]

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[10] Daverio, 26-27; Kayser, 21. Hegel later gave lectures on the role of the grotesque and was inclined toward Goethe's conservative attitude. For Hegel, the grotesque was valuable only in so far as it could participate in a synthesis. More extreme, and what would become more modern forms of the grotesque resisted synthesis and in fact tended towards paralysis, a mode that was incompatible with Hegel's concept of historical progression (Kayser, 100-104).

[11] Jennings, 50-77. Lee discusses Immerman's *Die Epigonen*, *Memorabilien*, *Merlin*, and *Münchhausen*. Todd points out that the first and last of this list appeared in 1836 and 1838, respectively, after the collaboration between Mendelssohn and Immerman soured in 1835. See Todd, 250.

[12] Kayser, 49.

[13] Quoted in Kayser, 49-50. In addition to Tieck, the painter Otto Philipp Runge is worth noting due to his friendship with both Tieck (Kayser, 52) and Mendelssohn's early piano teacher, Ludwig Berger (Todd, 37). Runge's paintings illustrate the arabesque beginning to break the frame. See for instance, his *Der Tageszeiten* (Daverio, 27).

[14] Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum Fragments*, no. 305, in *German Romantic Criticism*, ed. A. Leslie Willson, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1982), 132. See also Kayser, 50.

[15] Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, in Willson, 127.

Likewise, for Schlegel, the novels of Jean Paul were themselves arabesques.[16] Indeed, the arabesque quality in Jean Paul's writing may have been what Mendelssohn was referring to in his letter to Carl Klingemann in 1834:

> I really believe that Jean Paul, whom I am at this moment reading with intense delight, has also some influence in the matter [Mendelssohn's good productivity], for he invariably infects me for at least half a year with his strange peculiarity of *brackets within brackets*.[17]

While examining the grotesque, one might distinguish between discourse and praxis. The turn of the nineteenth century provided the first major body of theoretical writings about the grotesque. Since then, further observations have been made that reinforce, but also grow out of the earlier theories in ways that clarify and are still relevant to the art works produced in early Romanticism. For instance, in twentieth-century literary and artistic discourse, the term "grotesque" separates from its context as an ornamental frame and distinguishes itself as a unique structural entity. This relationship is generally understood in terms of how one experiences the grotesque and often defined as some combination of the ludicrous and horrifying. To be sure, even though much of early Romantic discourse on the grotesque had in mind the ornamental arabesque, there was often an undercurrent of this relationship of the ridiculous and horrifying. Recall, for instance, Tieck's painter who created insects and worms to resemble humans in "a manner at once terrifying and hilarious."

This composite of the ludicrous and horrifying is how both Jennings and Kayser understand the grotesque, though they interpret its significance differently. Jennings, especially, is exclusive about the concrete nature of the grotesque as he observes it in post-Romantic German literature. Both qualities are determined by their opposition to normal human experience, and most concretely, to the human body. For Jennings, the concrete is primarily visual;[18] however, it can extend to all embodied senses, for it is through our senses that we encounter reality.

The aesthetic encounter with the ludicrous and horrifying in tandem emerges as a trans-historical phenomenon surfacing throughout human history. As such, it overlaps with the early nineteenth-century discourse surrounding the arabesque. It is in light of this interplay between "ornamental arabesque" and "grotesque composite" that Mendelssohn's Witches' Sabbath becomes historically significant.

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[16] *Letter about the Novel*, in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 288-9.

[17] Felix Mendelssohn to Carl Klingemann, Düsseldorf, December 16, 1834, in *The Letters of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy*, 60. Italics mine.

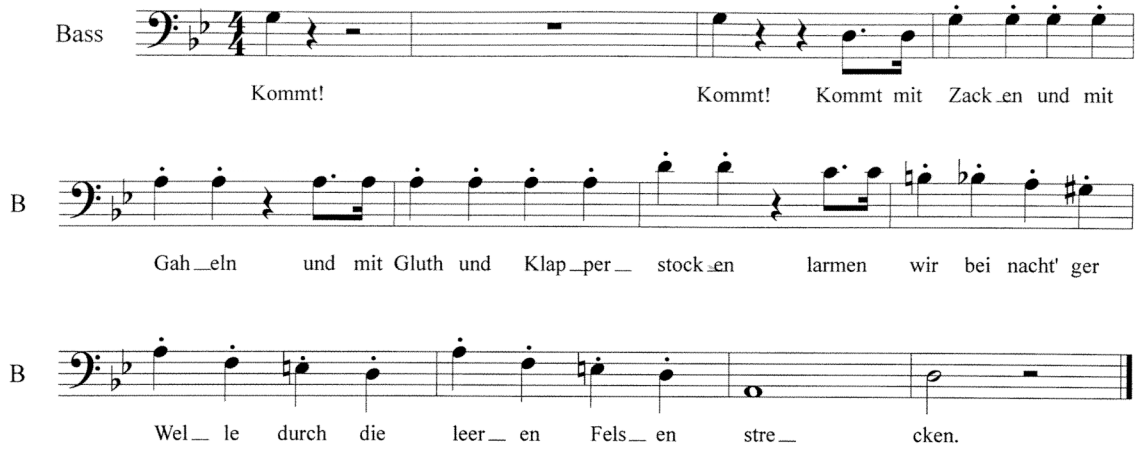
[18] Jennings, 10.

The arabesque and grotesque in Mendelssohn's Witches' Sabbath

The "Kommt mit Zacken" chorus in Mendelssohn's *Walpurgisnacht* depicts a mock-Witches' Sabbath performed by the pagan watchmen in order to frighten away the Christians and enable the pagans to celebrate the holy rite of spring. The scene divides into two movements: the first includes a solo watchman who proposes the ruse (Ex. 1) and a male chorus that echoes his ploy; the second movement entails a full chorus. In both of these, Mendelssohn uses a scherzo to convey the ruse (Ex. 2).

Mendelssohn's scherzo style so famous for depicting the fantastic fairy realm in what came to be dubbed the *scherzo fantastique* genre, represents a sort of musical arabesque: the *perpetuum mobile*, soft dynamics, staccato articulations, and flitting passagework become analogous to the intricate shoots, leaves, and tendrils that intertwine the fanciful creatures of the arabesques.[19] In Mendelssohn's chorus, however, the scherzo, which functions as an arabesque both in terms of its ornamental style and in terms of its framing role, abandons fairyland in favor of the human realm, merging its chaos with the order implicit under human domain.

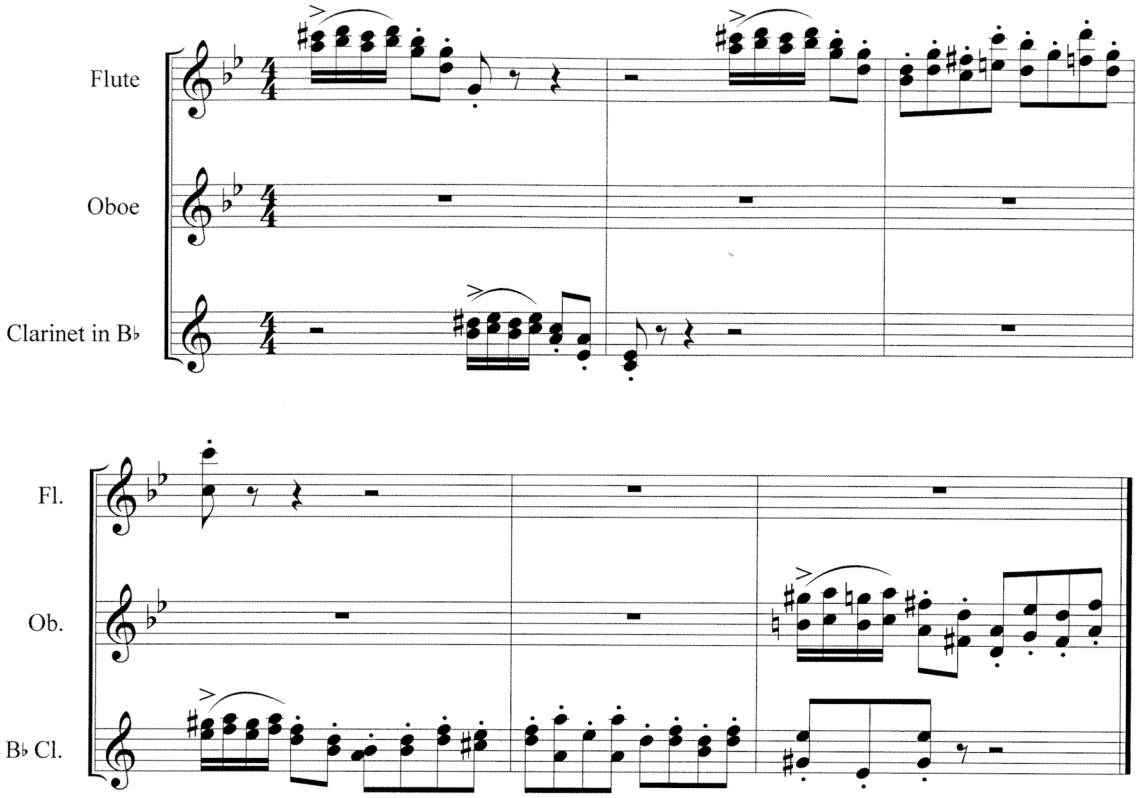
Ex. 1 "Watchman's solo," No. 5 "Kommt mit Zacken!" *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*, mm. 2-13



Several factors contribute to this transition that deal especially with the interrelationship between the scherzo style, chorus, and text. Mendelssohn's scherzo begins when the male chorus echoes the watchman's ploy. During this chorus, the vocal and instrumental textures become multi-layered, giving the sense of a growing crowd. Though the energy increases, the scherzo remains distinct from the vocal line and retains its ornamental status as background. However, when the full chorus begins, a shift occurs in the musical narrative after a fortissimo fanfare interrupts the watchmen, initiating a change in meter from duple to compound duple. The metric shift drastically changes the nature of the scherzo from flighty fairies to tarantella.

[19] Francesca Brittan, "On Microscopic Hearing: Fairy Magic, Natural Science, and the *Scherzo Fantastique*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 527-29, 531.

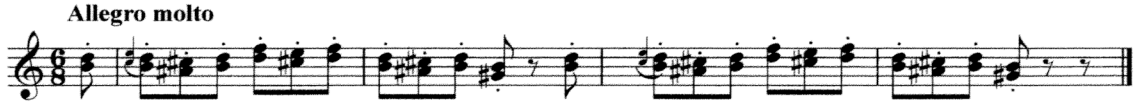
Ex. 2 "*scherzo fantastique*," No. 5, mm. 38-43 *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*



In terms of the grotesque, the distinction between the two meters becomes significant. The previous duple meter maintained a threshold between the world of the arabesque and the world of the watchmen. Mendelssohn's *scherzo fantastique* was able to convey a hovering atmosphere of play, while the watchmen remained grounded in their appropriate stepwise military style. The distance between registers of the treble scherzo and bass vocal lines also preserved the identities of these two worlds.

By contrast, the compound meter initiates a movement to merge the fantastic with the human body. Owing to the triple influence, the meter instantly evokes a dance. However, within the dance the scherzo style is weighted by a grace note, making the figure appear slightly lopsided and clumsy (Ex. 3).

Ex. 3 "Tarantella scherzo," No. 6 mm. 11-14



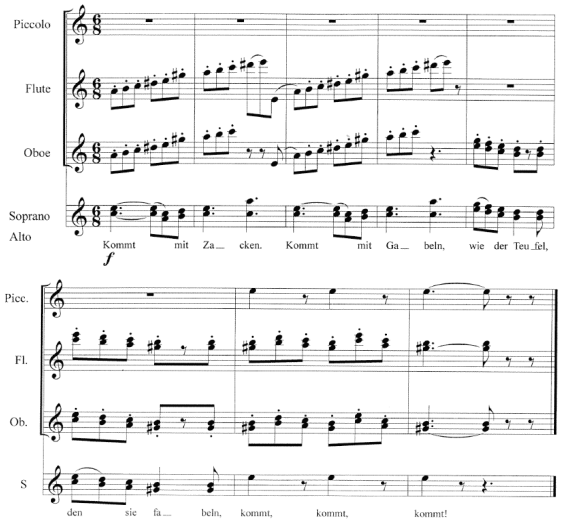
Mendelssohn's alteration, though subtle, opens up the possibility for an ugly dance. Jennings states that "the characteristic motion of the grotesque object is that of dancing, since this is the activity most calculated to call forth fear alongside amusement."[20] Furthermore, when the chorus enters, it participates in the style of the

[20] Jennings, 19.

scherzo, emphasizing the new meter; this is especially apparent when the women enter at measure 59. Notably, the treble voices are the first to fuse with the scherzo, as though taking on the features of the arabesque; while previously, register preserved distance between the fantastic and the human, now it participates in merging the two (Ex. 4).

As the "Kommt mit Zacken" chorus intensifies, one gets the sense that its spirit of play has gone awry; this is conveyed most concretely by the way in which the chorus swells into a violent mob. The mob – as an outgrowth of the nineteenth-century ballroom – is a pervasive grotesque *topos* in twentieth-century opera, notably – as Esti Sheinberg has shown – in the works of Shostakovich.[21] Jennings describes something akin to the mob when he suggests that "the grotesque situation may be favored not only by the setting in motion of the grotesque object, but also by its duplication. The appearance of the grotesque monstrosity alongside others of its kind removes its accidental quality and lends it an air of the cosmic."[22]

Ex. 4 "Treble voices merge with scherzo, taking on features of the arabesque." No. 6, mm. 59-66



Mendelssohn's mob becomes increasingly grotesque as it combines the initial stealth and mockery of the solo with explicit mob-like characteristics. Here, the dynamic level drops to *piano* as the vocal line adopts the staccato and rhythmic pulse of the original solo watchman. In doing so, the chorus, which had previously sounded threatening, pretends to play.[23] This play becomes horrifying, however, as the chorus

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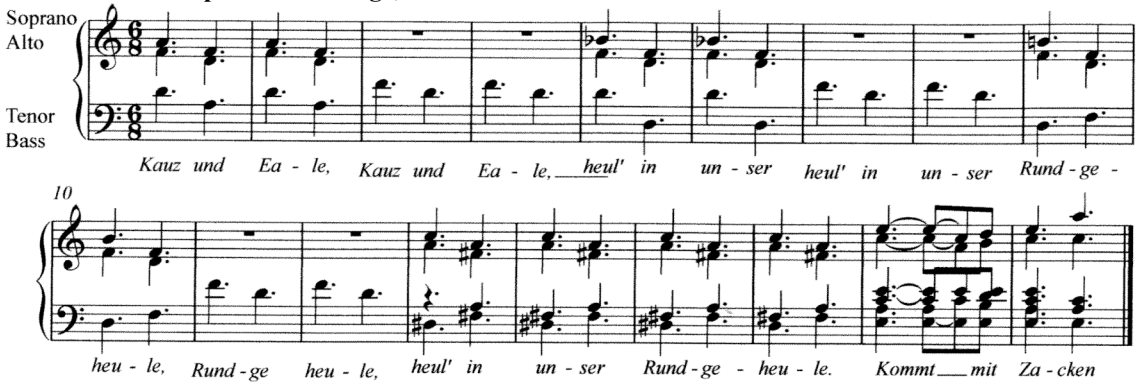
[21] See Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000).

[22] Jennings, 20.

[23] Indeed, this may be the first instance in which the music through *musical* means does convey a ruse. Such means, however – those of aggression and violence, which precede and belie the "play" aspect – amplify the grotesque structure.

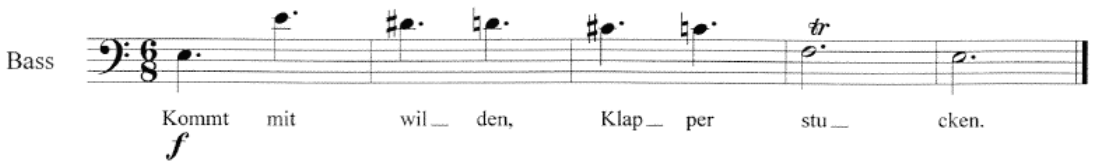
begins a growing antiphonal exchange, indexical of a round dance or an enclosing crowd (Ex. 5).

Ex. 5 "Mob - Antiphonal exchange," No. 6 mm. 235-52



Similarly, the mob recalls the descending chromatic line of the opening solo in what John Michael Cooper calls "conspicuously irreverent and thus, un-Mendelssohnian imitation."[24] (Ex. 6) In the final measures, the orchestra also recollects the original mockery, when for instance the cymbal crashes – recalling the oddly present cymbal at the beginning of the solo – alternate with offbeat brass and strings to contribute to the ungainly dance of the mob.

Ex. 6 "Descending chromatic line from opening solo," No. 6, mm. 255-59



In Jennings's definition of the grotesque, he pinpoints several prototypes that have been consistently described as such, one of which is the "ludicrous demon." This demon, for instance, is found in the Gothic gargoyle "whose menacing display of beaks, horns, and talons is often accompanied by a foolish, leering expression and scurrilous gestures."[25] For Jennings, the grotesque object on some level functions as a disarming mechanism against the horror of the demonic.[26] The irony of Mendelssohn's Witches' Sabbath is that the ludicrous demon is already implied by the ruse of the text, suggesting that there is no need to disarm the devil, for he is "fabled" and does not exist. Instead, the point of the scene is to mock those who do fear the devil. But as the scene unfolds, becoming more terrifying as the arabesque intrudes upon the human and as the mob

[24] John Michael Cooper, "Mendelssohn and Berlioz: Selective Affinities" in *Mendelssohn Perspectives*, eds. Nicole Grimes and Angela R. Mace (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 142.

[25] Jennngs, 10.

[26] Ibid., 14.

magnifies that intrusion, the sense of play and mockery that the listener might initially "laugh" with gives way to an impression that there is in fact a demonic undercurrent to be feared. The ruse – or the impossible devil – it would seem, crossed over into the possible.

Perhaps it was the unique structure of the grotesque surfacing in Mendelssohn's chorus that the contemporary critic A. B. Marx found so incongruous. In the following statement about the relationship of Mendelssohn's music to Goethe's text, Marx describes in rather ambivalent terms how the two seem opposed:

> Mendelssohn has clothed the narrative … in pretty choruses of the witches; his orchestra, at the same time, rises in crescendo to the most boisterous clamor of actual witchery. … [T]he fact that the whole affair is supposed to be an illusion is not expressed by the music, because music is incapable of doing so. The poet's imagination can indulge in lighthearted play; but for the musician it has to be in real earnest, even though the poem itself offers neither cause nor place for this. Hence the witchcraft never becomes real witchcraft, with its cruel power, but rather hovers between prank and reality.[27]

Though one might disagree with Marx's assumption that music is incapable of a ruse, what is important is his observation that this music is not experienced as a ruse, but rather in earnest. The earnestness, however, is somewhat equivocal: it is not actual witchery "with its cruel power." Instead it hovers between the terrifying and the "prank." It would appear that Marx approaches near our definition of the grotesque as a composite of the horrifying and ludicrous. Indeed, the original sense of the word ludicrous was that of a sportive and derisive jest and derived from the Latin *ludicrum* meaning "stage-play."

The question of how intensely we experience the grotesque in Mendelssohn's devilry remains open for interpretation. The critical reviews of the revised version certainly described the movement as such,[28] but whether they recognized the structure of the ludicrous and horrifying, a grotesque style, or simply inferred the grotesque based on the Walpurgis Night *topos* is difficult to parcel out. What is evident, however, is that Mendelssohn establishes an ornamental arabesque by framing the watchmen's ploy with his *scherzo fantastique*. Out of that ornament, the grotesque emerges almost unconsciously from the seemingly innocuous scherzo as it intrudes upon the central human domain, imbuing it with a disorder that climaxes in a violent mob and vulgar dance.

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[27] Adolf Bernhard Marx, "From the Memoirs of Adolf Bernhard Marx," Translated by Susan Gillespie, in *Mendelssohn and His World*, edited by R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 217. One should note, however, that the friendship between Marx and Mendelssohn had been estranged since the *Paulus* collaboration in 1839. See Todd, 266-68.

[28] Cooper, *Mendelssohn, Goethe, and the Walpurgis Night*, 180-89.

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