In September 1839, in the first version of “The Fall of the House of Usher” published in Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine, Edgar Allan Poe wrote that Roderick Usher’s excited and highly distempered ideality led him to perform “a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber” (Selected Writings 145). This sentence is found in subsequent versions as well (1840, 1842, 1845, 1847, and 1850). Almost two years later in June or July 1841, in Ursule Mirouët, Balzac wrote that his exquisitely sensitive heroine Ursule “jouait à son parrain des variations sur la Dernière Pensée de Weber” [played for her tutor variations on Weber’s Last Thought] (3: 841).

Serendipity—the chance rereading of both texts at about the same time—brought to my attention this Close Encounter of the Musical Kind, and curiosity provoked me to seek its significance. My investigation took me through historical information about both the music and the literary works and beyond that to the authors’ common purpose of making magnetism realistic.

As critical editions of both Poe and Balzac inform us, the “last waltz of Von Weber” or “Weber’s Last Thought” is not by Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) at all but by his friend Karl Gottlieb Reissiger (1798–1859). It is the fifth piece of Reissiger’s “Danses brillantes pour le pianoforte,” opus 26, written in 1822; its title, “Webers letzte Gedanke,” explains how both Poe and Balzac referred to it. According to Pollin in Discoveries in Poe (85),
it was published in 1824. A New York publication by Firth & Hall (figure 14.1) gives the title “Von Weber’s Last Waltz,” under the presumed authorship of Weber, but with no mention of Reissiger’s name and no date; a librarian’s notation mentions 1831.¹

Balzac probably did not know Weber’s music well. The composer is mentioned only four times in the index to the Pléiade edition of La Comédie humaine, including once in Pierrette in June 1839 and once in Illusions perdues, about the same time, and no piece is named in those cases. Weber does not have the stature of other composers in Balzac’s writing, such as Beethoven, Chopin, or Rossini. As for Reissiger, he is never mentioned in La Comédie humaine. Hector Berlioz in his memoirs gives some justification for Balzac’s error, apparently a common one, by mentioning how little Reissiger is known in Paris: “La chapelle de Dresde, longtemps sous les ordres de l’Italien Morlacchi et de l’illustre auteur du Freyschütz [Weber], est maintenant dirigée par MM. Reissiger et Richard Wagner. Nous ne connaissons guère, à Paris, de Reissiger, que la douce et mélancolique valse publiée sous le titre de Dernière pensée de Weber” (Berlioz, Mémoires) [“The Dresden kapelle, for long under the command of the Italian Morlacchi and the illustrious composer of Freischütz [Weber], is now directed by Messrs. Reissiger and Richard Wagner. We know almost nothing of Reissiger’s in Paris, apart from the mild and wistful waltz published under the title ‘Weber’s Last Thought’” (The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz 302)]. Berlioz’s trip to Germany occurred in 1842−43, soon after Balzac’s novel, 1841−42; this passage comes from a letter to the violinist Ernst written in 1843. Not only did Berlioz know the real composer of the waltz, but his comment also testifies to the familiarity of the piece to Parisians.

But Berlioz also described it as gentle and melancholic (rendered as “mild and wistful” in David Cairns’s translation), and the description does not fit perfectly well with the two publications of the piece I have been able to find, particularly the older one (Firth & Hall). The waltz is in B-flat major, in the form of a minuet with two eight-measure phrases on different themes, each repeated, followed by an eight-measure trio in E-flat major, also repeated; there is a da capo and the first two sections are played again, without repeats, in typical minuet fashion. In the older edition, the piece is marked

¹. My thanks are due to Bill McClellan, former librarian of the Music Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who helped me identify the piece originally via a BBC music library cross-reference to Reissiger from Weber. There is a short biographical notice of Reissiger in the new Grove Dictionary of Music. Nicholas Temperley, professor of musicology emeritus at the University of Illinois, recorded the waltz on tape for me; my research turned up no available recording. A Peters edition from 1824 was republished in France several times in the nineteenth century.
Figure 14.1 Waltz by Reissiger
“Energico”; in the newer edition, “Andante.” When performed, andante seems the appropriate tempo. Both editions give the dynamic “piano” (soft), but the older edition notes “il Basso ben marcato” (the bass well marked) for the first section, and both indicate “espressivo” for the trio. In fact, the trio alone might be considered melancholic, but the first two themes, whether played energico or andante, do not suggest sadness; wistfulness, perhaps. At an andante tempo or slower, and without a thumping bass, the opening phrase might be considered “gentle,” especially in the sense of delicate or light. In all, as a short dance piece (about one minute, 20 seconds), “Webers letzte Gedanke” suits the style of early romantic salon music.

There may be some justification for melancholy in the odd history that led to the confusion of authorship. Introducing “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Thomas O. Mabbott notes that “Roderick . . . plays a dirge based on a musical air supposed to have been written on the last day of its composer’s life” (Poe, Tales and Sketches I: 395). His endnote on the sentence concerning the waltz repeats the comment that Usher is playing a dirge for himself and cites in support of this the Library of Congress copy of the waltz published about 1830 with the following mention: “Weber’s Last Waltz/Composed by him a few hours before his death/for the Piano Forte” (Mabbott I: 418). Weber was in England and had copied out Reissiger’s waltz to play it at concerts, when he died suddenly of tuberculosis. Found among his papers, the waltz was published under his name. This odd coincidence connecting the piece with Weber’s death is perhaps the only reason Poe uses the word dirge and Berlioz connects it with melancholy. As for the adjective “wild” in “the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber,” little seems to explain it, unless the harmony of the piece’s second phrase, with its chromatic coloring, can be made to suggest savage, uncontrolled emotion—an unlikely stretch.

Both Poe and Balzac have their characters playing variations—Roderick Usher in a deranged manner more decidedly in keeping with the gothic tone of the story: “a certain singular perversion and amplification.” Variations on the waltz were not uncommon. I have found a “Fantasy on Weber’s Last Waltz” written by Henri Cramer (1818−77) and arranged by Harold T. Brasch in the 1960s for euphonium with band. After an introductory flourish, this fantasy restates Reissiger’s opening theme, and this is followed by two variations of a virtuoso stamp, including cadenzas. The Cramer piece was apparently part of the “Fantasies [read Fantaisies] élégantes” for piano, op. 74, and was called “Last Idea,” as far as one can tell. There is no date of composition, but Cramer would have been only twenty-one in 1839. Pollin also mentions three other variations: the Fantaisie for piano and clarinet by Friedrich Berr; piano Variations Brillantes by Henri Herz; and a four-hand
duet by Henry Karr (85). I have been unable to find editions or recordings of any of these three. Johann Peter Pixis wrote a “Fantasia” on the theme, thinking it was Weber’s, and sent it to Reissiger (Pollin 85). Pixis was in Paris from 1825 to 1845, where he might well have played variations on Reissiger’s air, calling it Weber’s (Johann Peter Pixis, online). In addition I found the opening theme of Reissiger’s waltz used by Karl Reinecke (1824–1910) in the second movement of his Toy Symphony together with several other little tunes, in the style of the popular ditty for simple instruments; the notes by Raymond Lewenthal on the LP jacket list the little waltz as a piece by Weber, his “Letzter Gedanke.” As Pollin can conclude about Roderick Usher’s performance on the guitar, his variations “induct him into the large company of musical enthusiasts who were varying Reissiger’s air” (86)—and I can add the same about Ursule Mirouët.

Did Balzac, who wrote Ursule Mirouët almost two years after “The Fall of the House of Usher,” read Poe’s story? It is highly unlikely. To prove it, one would at least have to find a very early translation into French, since Balzac did not read English. One old source claims authoritatively that the earliest French translation of Poe was “Le Scarabée d’or” in the Revue Britannique in November 1845 (Cambiaire 30). On the other hand, it is clear, though not immediately relevant for this encounter, that Poe knew Balzac’s work (Cambiaire 166). Messac, writing in 1929, also indicates that Poe had read Balzac, without saying what and when, but establishing several likely comparisons. However, it is painfully obvious that Poe did not read Ursule Mirouët before writing his story, because Ursule Mirouët was written at the earliest two years after “The Fall.” In the absence of a direct influence of one author on the other, I can only observe a commonality of interest highlighted by the use of the Reissiger waltz. The fact that both authors specify variations on the piece suggests that they may have actually heard performances in which variations were played.

A second conjecture about this conjuncture is that both authors had a common source. The likeliest are Walter Scott, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and possibly Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

2. Messac compares “Monos et Una” to Séraphîta with a common source in Swedenborg; also “Ligeia” and “Morella” (35ff); Louis Lambert is linked with “William Wilson” and “The Tale of the Ragged Mountain” (42ff); and La Grande Bretèche with “The Cask of Amontillado.” See also Eisenzweig, who compares Maître Cornélius with “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Other encounters of Balzac with Poe include the theme of burial alive in Le colonel Chabert and in “The Premature Burial” and “The Cask of Amontillado,” as well as “The Fall of the House of Usher.” L’Interdiction, February 1836 (3: 428), has the house seen by an “Observateur,” and it appears solid; compare to the observer at the beginning of “The Fall” and its lack of solidity due to its age.
Balzac was of course a fervent reader of Walter Scott and thought to improve on Scott’s creation of the historical novel in his own vast historical sweep of society. In *Ursule Mirouët*, Balzac mentions “les récits de Walter Scott sur les effets de la *seconde vue*” [Walter Scott’s narratives about the effects of second sight] among the proofs and manifestations of “la science des fluides impondérables” [the science of weightless fluids] (3: 824). Lucy Ashton, the heroine of Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermoor*, written in 1819 (three years before Reissiger’s waltz), is sensitive like Balzac’s heroine, but not to the degree of somnambulism that Ursule attains. Neither mesmerism nor magnetism plays a part in her psychological makeup, but there is an episode of communication with the dead. In the woods, the ghost of old blind Alice, servant of Edgar’s father, appears to the Master of Ravenswood at the Mermaid’s Well just at the moment of her death, to warn him again against marrying Lucy (Scott 235–37). She had strongly urged him not to contemplate this marriage earlier. Her extreme desire to see Edgar to warn him again makes it possible for her spirit to appear before him. Edgar wonders, in terms that Balzac must have approved: “can strong and earnest wishes, formed during the last agony of nature, survive its catastrophe, surmount the awful bounds of the spiritual world, and place before us its inhabitant in the hues and colouring of life?” (Scott 239). In *Ursule Mirouët* (see chapter 11), the dead doctor Minoret similarly surmounts the bounds of the spiritual world, his spirit surviving its last catastrophe, to convey an urgent message to Ursule; he appears in her dreams to tell her where he has hidden her inheritance and to show her just exactly how his relatives have stolen it. It is also in this novel that Balzac writes that Swedenborg had proved that communication with the dead is possible (3: 962).

If there are comparisons to be made between Scott’s novel and Poe’s story, they begin with the description of the castle of Ravenswood, gothic like the house of Usher, and its fall as a house in the sense of a family: “the final fall of the house of his fathers” occurs when Ravenswood’s house burns down (Scott 265). Communication from the dead does not occur, strictly speaking, in Poe’s story, but Madeline’s desperate attempts to be heard from the tomb where she is buried alive can be considered an effort of her spirit to survive the last catastrophe. Unlike Balzac, Poe does not make us privy to the thoughts or visions of Roderick Usher until one frenzied outburst just before the nearly dead body of Madeline appears at the door; but if he does not see his sister materially present before him, the way Ursule sees Minoret, he has had a mental vision:

“Said I not that my senses were acute? I *now* tell you that I heard her first
feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I dared not speak! . . . Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footsteps on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? MADMAN!”—here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul—“MADMAN! I TELL YOU THAT SHE NOW STANDS WITHOUT THE DOOR!” (Selected Writings 156)

In Balzac’s novel and in the Poe story, playing variations (wild or not) on Reissiger’s air demonstrates both characters’ excessive sensibilities, so that the musical reference can be considered a semantic device that lends support to the strategic narrative device of the spirit passing an urgent message. Poe was not the great explicator that Balzac was, and to atmospheric effects alone, including the wild music, he confides the task of conveying Usher’s unique hypersensitivity. But there is no chance that either Balzac or Poe found such a use of this music in The Bride of Lammermoor, because Scott’s novel predates Reissiger’s waltz by three years.

E. T. A. Hoffmann’s tales were translated into French by Loève-Veimars in 1829–33, and he is mentioned often in the La Comédie humaine, for instance in Le cousin Pons, La muse du département, and a sketch of Les martyrs ignorés. He is particularly present in the context of magnetism, and the Hoffmann tales mentioned are “Casse-noisette,” “Maitre Floh,” “L’homme au Sable,” and “Petit Zack.” Influences of Hoffmann on Balzac have been very well examined by Wanuffel, Guise (“Balzac, lecteur”), Jamin, and Wais. See also the excellent summary of Balzac’s appreciation of Hoffmann in Pierre Brunel’s preface and notes to the Folio edition of Sarrasine, Gambara, and Massimilla Doni. There is no mention of Reissiger’s (or Weber’s) waltz in these studies nor in Hoffmann’s 1822 tales “Des Vetters Eckfenster,” “Genesung,” “Meister Floh,” and “Der Feind” (Hoffmann died the year Reissiger’s waltz was published, 1822), or in “Schnellpfeffer,” date unsure. The story “L’archet du Baron de B . . .,” published in 1828 in a review called Le Gymnase which Balzac printed, portrays a mad violin teacher whose wild playing on the violin recalls especially Roderick Usher’s playing (see Wais 153). Like Frenhofer with his unknown masterpiece (Le chef-d’œuvre inconnu), the baron thinks his music shows genius, but only dreadful sounds are heard. This rapid review of the presence of Hoffmann in Balzac, in many other ways quite significant, nevertheless shows that Balzac almost certainly did not borrow the idea of variations on “la dernière pensée de Weber” from Hoffmann.
The influence of Hoffmann on Poe is also well documented, by Alterton, Stedman, and Cobb, among others. Alterton opposes “The Fall of the House of Usher” to the Hoffmann tale that she claims is its source, “Das Majorat” (1817), which was translated in 1826 into English as “The Entail” (17). Yet in none of these studies are there mentions of Weber or Reissiger. Walter Scott also wrote an article on Hoffmann, published in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in 1827, which Poe read; Poe “got his Hoffmann” through Scott, according to Alterton (93). Other than themes of the occult, then, I found nothing in Hoffmann that might have functioned as a common source for the musical reference in Poe and Balzac.

In Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *The Last Man*, there is a mention of “the wild eastern air of Weber introduced in Abon [sic] Hassan” (173). This operetta by Weber was performed in England in 1825. According to Pollin (83–86), the Wollstonecraft novel is a source for Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death,” and Pollin rather adventurously makes a connection between this allusion to the “wildness” of Abon Hassan and the “wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber” in “Usher,” while going on to admit that Reissiger’s salon piece would hardly strike a modern ear as wild (and we have already seen how unsuitable that adjective would have been to Berlioz’s ear). From that admission stems what is possibly a creditable hypothesis, that Poe’s reference to a piece by Weber as “wild” borrows its adjective, if not its identity, from the Wollstonecraft novel, rather than from a hearing of the piece itself. As for Balzac, there is no reason to believe that the reference to Weber in *The Last Man* had any influence on him.

I arrive then at my third set of conjectures, which measure the significance of the Close Encounter. If no tangible linkage between these Balzac and Poe narratives can be proved, as I believe, there is instead a major point to be made about this complex of intertextual and musical reference as a creative method in literature in general, and Balzac in particular. To begin with, it is well-known that both authors shared a preoccupation with mesmerism, magnetism, somnambulism, excessive sensibilities, and other such theories of the material manifestation of the immaterial. Magnetism will serve as a general term for those several phenomena. In both narratives, whatever the source or influence, the authors have created structures to make magnetism consonant with their realism, thus naturalizing the occult phenomena. And in both texts the music has the same function: it underscores and symbolizes the protagonists’ mental disposition, both of whom similarly play variations
on the Reissiger piece. Both characters have a similar ability to see beyond
the visible; both are visionaries whose gifts are revealed in their music. The
atmospheric function of the music helps to win the implicit wager both
authors make to naturalize the spiritual phenomena and make them enter the
world of realism and of their realistic writing.

The case of Poe has been well studied, and I intend to add little here. Its
gothic characteristics are the subject of a recent study by Perry and Seder-
holm. Roderick Usher suffers from “a morbid acuteness of the senses” and
“an excited and highly distempered ideality” (Selected Writings 143, 145).
The morbid condition of his auditory nerve renders “all music intolerable
to the sufferer with the exception of certain effects of stringed instruments”;
Usher’s confining himself to the guitar “gave birth, in great measure, to the
fantastic character of his performances” (146). In the wildness of his notes
and “the fervid facility of his impromptus,” Poe’s narrator detects “that
intense mental collectedness and concentration to which I have previously
alluded as observable only in particular moments of the highest artificial
excitement” (146). Except for their morbidity, these exalted states come the
closest to those of Balzac’s heroine in her moments of somnambulism, when
her love makes visible to her not only the spirit of her dead tutor, Minoret,
but also letters from Savinien de Portenduère the night before they arrive.
Poe’s text is of course overloaded with many other symbolic objects (such as
Usher’s paintings in a manner outdoing Fuseli), and scores of pages have been
written on the heavy-handed atmospheric charge of the story.

The heroine Ursule Mirouët counts among her idealized qualities a spe-
cial talent for playing the piano, and there are several scenes of music in the
novel, some of which stress this idealization in contrast to the stupidity and
cupidity of Minoret’s blood relatives. If Ursule is to be described as playing
the piano, suitable salon pieces must be named, and “la Dernière pensée
de Weber,” a recent, fashionable piece, readily falls into that category. As
such, Reissiger’s familiar waltz might have served only to provoke a minor
“effet de réel,” alluding to what Barthes called a reality seen but not demon-
strated (Le plaisir du texte 73–74)—only one of thousands of such products
of contemporary reality found in La Comédie humaine. But this piece of
music enters into a system of meanings far beyond this little touch of realism,
meanings in which intangible realities become consonant with the famous
Balzacian realism.

The piece is mentioned as if incidentally, in a subordinate clause: “Pen-
dant que la filleule jouait à son parrain des variations sur la Dernière Pensée
de Weber” [While the goddaughter played for her tutor variations on Weber’s
Last Thought] (3: 841). In spite of the attenuation of this incidental mention,
the reader will notice this clause because it comes at the start of a paragraph just after one of the high points in the novel, Minoret’s conversion under the effect of the powerful demonstration of animal magnetism. Already in this opportune mention there is a suggestion of a link between the piece and spirituality. Nevertheless, in case we do not pay much attention to this connection when it occurs at this relatively early point in the novel (about one-third), a later paragraph extensively develops this link between music and magnetism and does not allow us to be indifferent to it. I will quote from this paragraph at length (briefly discussed in chapter 11 as well):

Il arrive souvent qu’un morceau pauvre en lui-même, mais exécuté par une jeune fille sous l’empire d’un sentiment profond, fasse plus d’impression qu’une grande ouverture pompeusement dite par un orchestre habile. Il existe en toute musique, outre la pensée du compositeur, l’âme de l’exécutant, qui, par un privilège acquis seulement à cet art, peut donner du sens et de la poésie à des phrases sans grande valeur. (3: 890)

[It often happens that a piece of slender means on its own terms, when performed by a young woman under the sway of a deep emotion, makes more of an impression than a grand overture pompously pronounced by a skillful orchestra. One finds in all music, in addition to the composer’s ideas, the soul of the performer, who, by a privilege pertaining only to this art, can give meaning and poetry to phrases lacking much value.]

Reissiger’s little waltz could indeed be called “pauvre en lui-même”—it is nothing special; but inventing variations on it places the accent on Ursule’s execution of the piece, in which her soul expresses itself. The ideal example of such execution on the piano is Chopin, mentioned here, and Ursule is like him:

3. Compare to this description of Schmucke playing the piano in Le cousin Pons: “Il trouva des thèmes sublimes sur lesquels il broda, des caprices exécutés tantôt avec la douleur et la perfection raphaëlesque de Chopin, tantôt avec la fougue et le grandiose dantesque de Liszt, les deux organisations musicales qui se rapprochent le plus de celle de Paganini. L’exécution, arrivée à ce degré de perfection, met en apparence l’exécutant à la hauteur du poète, il est au compositeur ce que l’acteur est à l’auteur, un divin traducteur de choses divines” [He made up sublime themes which he ornamented, caprices performed sometimes with the sadness and Raphaëlesque perfection of Chopin, sometimes with the verve and Dantesque grandiose of Liszt, the two musical organizations who come closest to Paganini’s. Performance at this degree of perfection raises the performer to the apparent height of the poet; he is to the composer what the actor is to the author, a divine translator of divine things] (7: 705). Schmucke is the piano teacher who has brought Ursule’s talent to perfection.
Chopin prouve aujourd’hui pour l’ingrat piano la vérité de ce fait déjà démontré par Paganini pour le violon. Ce beau génie est moins un musicien qu’une âme qui se rend sensible et qui se communiquerait par toute espèce de musique, même par de simples accords. Par sa sublime et périlleuse organisation, Ursule appartenait à cette école de génies si rares. (3: 890)

[Chopin today proves for the ungrateful piano the truth of this fact already demonstrated by Paganini for the violin. This admirable genius is less a musician than a soul that makes itself visible, that can be communicated by any kind of music, even by simple chords. By her sublime and perilous organization, Ursule belonged to this school of rarefied geniuses.]

As she plays now for both Minoret and Savinien, her soul goes out with the music:

Par un jeu à la fois suave et rêveur, son âme parlait à l’âme du jeune homme et l’enveloppait comme d’un nuage par des idées presque visibles. . . . Savinien admirait Ursule dont les yeux arrêtés sur la boisserie semblaient interroger un monde mystérieux. . . . Les sentiments vrais ont leur magnétisme, et Ursule voulait en quelque sorte montrer son âme. . . . Savinien pénètre donc dans ce délicieux royaume, entraîné par ce cœur qui . . . empruntait la puissance du seul art qui parle à la pensée par la pensée même, sans le secours de la parole, des couleurs ou de la forme. (3: 891)

[Through her at once suave and dreamy playing, her soul spoke to the soul of the young man and enveloped it, like a cloud, with nearly invisible thoughts. . . . Savinien admired Ursule whose eyes resting on the woodwork seemed to interrogate a mysterious world. . . . True feelings have their magnetism, and Ursule wished to reveal her soul, as it were. . . . Thus Savinien penetrated into this delicious domain, carried along by her heart which . . . borrowed its power from the only art that speaks to thought by means of thought itself, without the aid of words, colors, or shapes.]

Music is thought without words. It would have been singularly appropriate to mention “la Dernière Pensée de Weber” among the pieces she plays during this evening, given the emphasis on speaking to another’s thought through thought. And that is exactly what we find in the manuscript version of this passage dating from June and July 1841, where Balzac had written: “Sur sa demande Ursule joua le mélancolique morceau appelé la dernière pensée de Weber” [On his request Ursule played the melancholy piece called
Weber’s last thought] (3: 1611). But this sentence disappeared from the final version of the paragraph; instead of answering her tutor’s request, it is she who chooses to play a caprice by Hérold, in the final version: “Le Songe de Rousseau, morceau choisi par Ursule, une des compositions de la jeunesse d’Hérold, ne manque pas d’ailleurs d’une certaine profondeur qui peut se développer à l’exécution; elle y jeta les sentiments qui l’agitaient” [Rousseau’s Dream, the piece chosen by Ursule, one of Hérold’s youthful compositions, is actually not lacking in a certain profundity, which can be demonstrated in the performance; she filled it with the emotions that were troubling her] (3: 891). Along with this change of music, Balzac engages in a significant reworking of the passage for the text published in Le Messager from August 25 to September 23, 1841. Most of Balzac’s analysis of the soul making itself visible through the musical art—the paragraph quoted above—was written during this revision for the Messager version, with much new language, and this new language seems to entail the removal of the mention of Weber’s last thought. It is almost as if the words “la dernière pensée de Weber” stood as a place-holder, in Balzac’s manuscript, for the development of this musical theory he no doubt had in mind in June or July and would write out about two months later.

Balzac has given to music, unique among all the arts, the privilege of revealing the intangible, placing it even above the ability of words to express meaning. For a writer driven by the passion to convey knowledge to his readers, for a man whose only expressiveness was in the power of his words, this priority given to music is remarkable. In La recherche de l’Absolu, written in 1834, an extended analogy with music illuminates the moment when two people predestined to fall in love first meet. Marguerite Claës and Emmanuel Solis each discovers the other as the one they have seen in their dreams, and the effect, as Balzac analyzes it, is like the astonishment a child feels on first hearing music: “Parmi les enfants, les uns rient et pensent, d’autres ne rient qu’après avoir pensé; mais ceux dont l’âme est appelée à vivre de poésie ou d’amour écoutent longtemps et redemandent la mélodie par un regard où s’allume déjà le plaisir, où poind la curiosité de l’infini” [Among children, some laugh and reflect, others laugh only after reflecting; but those whose soul is called upon to live on poetry or love listen for a long time and request

4. Berlioz concludes a chapter of his Memoirs with similar reflections on music’s power: “No other art has music’s power to affect one retroactively. Not even the art of Shakespeare can evoke the past with this degree of poetic intensity. Only music appeals at one and the same time to the imagination, the intellect, the feelings and the senses: and from the reaction of senses on intellect and feelings, and vice versa, come the phenomena which people with the right physiological mechanism are susceptible to, but which to those not so endowed (otherwise known as philistines) will always remain a sealed book” (438).
the melody again by a glance in which pleasure is already alight, in which
the yearning for the infinite appears] (10: 741). The aspiration to the infinite
found here characterizes the poetic soul from the start of Balzac’s writing of
La Comédie humaine. In Massimilla Doni, written in 1837 and 1838 and
published in 1839, music conveys ideal love. Gambara, dating from the same
period, portrays the maniacal composer through theories of doubling and
unity in music, ideas that are also central to Balzac’s preoccupations as “his-
torian” of society. By 1841, when Balzac was writing Ursule Mirouët, the
mysticism of music has deepened and strengthened to the point that it serves
to motivate the spirituality without which the novel could not come to its
happy and necessary conclusion, the restoration of the doctor’s fortune to
Ursule. This resoundingly realistic effect of Ursule’s somnambulism forces the
reader to accept spirituality as an element of materialistic reality and wins for
Balzac the wager to naturalize magnetism.