

Hearing the Music in *Harry Potter*

Becky Kolacki

In the *Harry Potter* series, J.K. Rowling presents a variety of themes throughout, but one of the more subtle devices she uses to expound on themes is her treatment of music and song. In a majority of cases, when music comes into play in the books it is used to bring hope, or used as a healing device. This is seen primarily in the recurring use of Fawkes and his phoenix song throughout the series, but it also comes up in other places as well. The Sorting Hat brings us messages through its early song, and music is involved with many other magical creatures aside from Fawkes. Rowling's inclusion of music in her novels can no doubt be attributed to the presence of music in other well-known epic fantasy works, most notably J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

We are introduced to Fawkes the phoenix in the second book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. He comes to Harry when Harry is in great need, down in the Chamber of Secrets when he is being attacked by the basilisk. The music that Fawkes sings is described in this passage as "eerie, spine-tingling, unearthly; it lifted the hair on Harry's scalp and made his heart feel as though it was swelling to twice its normal size," and then it reaches "such a pitch that Harry felt it vibrating inside his own ribs" (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* 315). The appearance of Fawkes here means that Harry is no longer alone, even though he might be in a dire situation which at one point looked utterly hopeless. Though Harry cannot see how a bird and the Sorting Hat which he brings Harry will help him out of the situation, it nevertheless encourages him and lifts his spirits and hopes, giving him the strength that he needs to keep up the fight. Whenever Fawkes sings, we get the sense that the people

hearing the music are filled with hope and experience emotion that they otherwise would not be able to get in touch with.

The second time that phoenix song plays a large role in the series is at the climax of the fourth novel, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Once again, Harry is in a seemingly hopeless situation. He is fourteen years old, and finds himself face to face with Lord Voldemort. Harry is injured while Voldemort has just returned to his own body, and he is surrounded by Death Eaters. Harry casts a spell at Voldemort in his last chance at survival, and when he does they experience the connection of the wands between Voldemort and Harry. When this happened, an “unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air” (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* 664). Harry identifies it as phoenix song, which he heard two years before down in the Chamber of Secrets. It is described as being “the sound of hope to Harry... the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life... He felt as though the song were inside him instead of just around him... It was the sound he connected with Dumbledore, and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his ear” (*GoF* 664). Again, one of the most important things about the music appearing here is that it affects Harry internally and affects his feelings and emotions. It is almost as if, when the phoenix song is playing, he is transported into a different plane of emotions from the one he has previously experienced. Even in some of the darkest times and most horrible moments, Harry can feel hope and experience beauty, just due to the music that he hears. Music has a strong power of its own, something else that I think we can safely assume Voldemort does not understand, as he scoffs at the songbird Dumbledore sends to Harry in the second novel. Like love, Voldemort does not understand the power of music and so underestimates it. However, the music of the phoenix gives Harry strength that he might not have had without it that gives him the courage and the ability to overcome Voldemort in at least

two situations. The description that Rowling gives of the phoenix song in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* says that “phoenix song is magical; it is reputed to increase the courage of the pure of heart and to strike fear into the hearts of the impure” (*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* 32). And that is certainly what happens here. Voldemort fears what he does not know and what he does not understand, and so fears the sound of the phoenix song.

Finally, we hear a bit of phoenix song again in *Goblet of Fire*, as Harry is forced to relive his experience in the graveyard so he can be able to explain what happened. He is in Dumbledore’s office and the last thing he wants to do is talk about what happened, but then “The phoenix let out one soft, quavering note. It shivered in the air, and Harry felt as though a drop of hot liquid had slipped down his throat into his stomach, warming him and strengthening him” (*GoF* 695). With just one musical note from Fawkes, Harry finds the strength and the ability to keep going and to keep talking about what happened, even though it is so difficult for him.

The last appearance that Fawkes makes is at the end of *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, after Dumbledore has died. Harry, his friends, and some of the teachers are gathered in the hospital wing, struck down by the news that Dumbledore is no more. While they are there, they hear music, and Harry realizes that “a phoenix was singing in a way Harry had never heard before: a stricken lament of terrible beauty. And Harry felt... that the music was inside him, not without: It was his own grief turned magically to song that echoed” (*Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* 615). The phoenix song is different this time, and while it might not bring as much hope as the previous phoenix song that has been experienced, it is certainly a positive feeling. It strengthens the grieving listeners to hear it, and Rowling states that “it seemed to ease their pain a little to listen to the sound of their mourning” (*HBP* 615). Throughout the series, Dumbledore emphasizes the importance of expressing emotions and feelings, and that pain is a part of being

human. Keeping emotion locked inside of you and hidden away is bound to do more damage than good, and will only make the pain worse when you finally feel it. The ability of the phoenix song to turn their grief to music is one way that the mourning wizards and witches can cope with the pain that they feel.

The phoenix has a long history in fantasy and the magical world, and also has ties to religion, as it is resurrected when it dies, just as Jesus was. Certainly the phoenix song in these novels lends something to the parallel of religion. Twice it is described as an “unearthly” sound, and it is able to instill hope during times when hope might seem impossible. More directly, however, the phoenix music is a symbol that help is always there for those who need it. It gives hope and brings strength to those that are good at heart and need the extra boost to keep going in the fight for good.

Fawkes the phoenix is closely associated with his owner, Professor Dumbledore, who is the biggest champion of music in the books. We first learn about him when Harry gets his chocolate frog card on the train to Hogwarts, where he reads that “Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music” (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* 103). While this may seem a small, apparently inconsequential detail, it shows that Dumbledore finds music important enough to go in a short, few sentence summary about him. While Dumbledore has many achievements and interests, much more than could possibly fit on the back of a chocolate frog card, it is this one that is important enough to mention. When we actually meet him for the first time in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, he has the students sing the Hogwarts school song. At the conclusion of that number, he declares that music is “a magic beyond all we do here!” (SS 128). Dumbledore, at least, is aware of the power magic has in terms of granting hope and strength to its listeners. In a sense, music truly is magical in this way. It brings out emotions in people and

can give them hope, something that even us muggles can experience. While some of the instances of music in Harry's world might have magic involved, the basis lies in the essence of music itself, which is its own kind of magic.

When Harry is on trial in the beginning of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, it is Dumbledore's arrival that gives him some hope. When he sees Dumbledore walk in, he gets a "hopeful feeling rather like that which phoenix song gave him" (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 139). Harry associates the music of Fawkes with Dumbledore because both give him the same inward feelings. They both bring hope and strength with them and Harry is used to good triumphing over evil when both are near. Fawkes and Dumbledore clearly have a special connection because Dumbledore understands the importance of an animal like Fawkes and his music so well. In *Half Blood Prince*, Fawkes lets out a "low, musical cry" when Harry tells Dumbledore that he informed Scrimgeour that he was "Dumbledore's man, through and through." Though Dumbledore is overcome and brought to tears, Fawkes can express Dumbledore's wordless emotion with his own music. Just like Fawkes' ability to communicate grief, he can also communicate other difficult-to-express emotions.

Other animals in the magical world are also associated with music, though not always in the same way that the phoenix is. Many of the more vicious and dangerous animals are soothed or tamed by music. When Hagrid has Norbert, the baby dragon, he is seen singing Norbert a lullaby. Whether this actually affected the dragon and calmed him at all, or if Hagrid just thought that perhaps Norbert would enjoy a little singing, is not clear, but the idea of a lullaby to soothe and calm is nothing new. It works on babies and young children, and so I see no reason why it would not work on animals in the magical world as well. Another of Hagrid's pets is Fluffy, the three headed dog. Hagrid (accidentally) tells Harry that you "jus' play him a bit o'

music an' he'll go straight off ter sleep -" (SS 266). It is this way that Harry, Ron, and Hermione get past Fluffy in order to save the Sorcerer's Stone. Harry plays music from the flute Hagrid had given him for Christmas. A convenient present, in light of the events of the book. Hagrid has been shown to be a loyal and true follower of Dumbledore, so it is possible that Hagrid picked up on the importance of music from Dumbledore. Throughout the series Hagrid is a very emotional man, not afraid to cry or show his feelings, and as a result it seems natural that Hagrid would have a fondness for music. After Aragog's death, not to mention quite a few drinks, Hagrid and Slughorn sing together the song "Odo the Hero" (HBP 488). While this is a depressing song and situation, it occurs while Harry is able to get the memory from Slughorn, something he has been trying to do in vain for quite awhile. At last Harry has the hope that his task will be completed and the memory will be his. At the same time, Hagrid is in mourning, and singing gives him the ability to express some of his emotions. It gives form to his grief and gives him a way to deal with it.

In *Goblet of Fire* we meet another sort of creature with an affinity for music. At the Quidditch World Cup Harry sees Veela for the first time. The Veela are beautiful women that many of the males fall for despite their best efforts. Before the game there is music playing, and the Veela dance. In the book it says that "the music started, and Harry stopped worrying... about anything at all" (GoF 103). This combination of music and dancing is able to dispel worry from the mind of Harry, who thoughts had previously been occupied by the mundane, every day worries and stresses of being Harry Potter. He enters a sort of euphoria, where he is worry free and completely happy. However, this is not always for the best, because to be absent of all worry can be a dangerous thing. Indeed, the spell that is cast over them causes Harry to think it might be a good idea to leap from the top box onto the quidditch pitch below to impress the

veela. While there is some danger posed here, there is no denying that the music playing helped to contribute to the enchantment of the veela during their dance. In this situation there is a general feeling that overtakes most of those who hear it, just like the phoenix song leads to an emotion or feeling that overpowers its listeners. However, in the case of the phoenix song it is a very positive experience, and while the veela song and dance might lead to positive feelings while experiencing it, it can ultimately have negative results.

One other creature that has its own song is the Merpeople. Their song plays an important role in Harry's attempts to discover the secrets of the Golden Egg during the Triwizard Tournament. It is informative, so that Harry knows what is coming in the task ahead, and it also serves as a bit of a warning. In *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*, we are told that "the love of music is common to all merpeople" (*FB* 29). The next time we see the Merpeople it is at the end of *Half Blood Prince*, and they are again singing. During Dumbledore's funeral, Harry hears "strange, otherworldly music" which he soon discovers is a chorus of Merpeople (*HBP* 642). Though the Merpeople rarely come out from the lake, Dumbledore's death is important enough for them to make an appearance and to sing of their grief. It is stated that "The music made the hair on Harry's neck stand up, and yet it was not unpleasant. It spoke very clearly of loss and despair" (*HBP* 642). Although the music is sad, and is very clearly expressing their grief and sadness, it does not make Harry feel sad. On the contrary, it actually lifts his spirits a bit to be able to experience the grief that he is feeling through someone else's song, and he can feel a connection with the others that are going through the same thing that he is. Again, we see music being used as a way to strengthen the listener and as a healing device when people are feeling depressed, down, or hopeless.

While Hogwarts itself does not have any obvious ties to music, there are some that do pop up. The one year that Harry is away from Hogwarts, during *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, he comes across people singing at a Christmas Eve service in Godric's Hollow. This sound "made Harry's throat constrict, it reminded him so forcefully of Hogwarts" (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 324). I think it's fair to say that it is the emotions that the music provokes that remind him of Hogwarts, rather than the actual place and people. When Harry hears this music he is hearing people sing of hope, faith, and happiness, feelings that he usually only experiences when he is at Hogwarts. Hogwarts, of course, is also closely associated with Dumbledore in Harry's mind. In Harry's first year, Dumbledore leads the school in a rendition of the Hogwarts school song. It seems a silly event, with everyone picking whatever tune they like and singing along, ending with the Weasley twins singing by themselves to a very slow funeral march. While this certainly provides a few laughs, the school song also makes an important point. In the lyrics, the students ask to be taught "the things worth knowing," which is an indication that Harry will learn much more at Hogwarts than just what is taught to him from textbooks. He will learn critical thinking and life skills that help him to understand himself and his place in the world.

The other main experience with music we have while at Hogwarts is the annual Sorting Hat song. The first time we hear it, it is simply a song describing each of the houses and the properties that are valued in each. We aren't treated to the Sorting Hat's song again until Harry's fourth year, when it again sings about the different houses, though it sings a different song. Through this we learn that the Sorting Hat spends each year composing a new song for the next sorting. It has plenty of time to think about what it wants to say, and that becomes apparent in Harry's fifth year. The song that it sings is quite different, and gives a warning to the students

about the importance of staying unified in troubling times. It also expresses the fear that sorting students is wrong. We learn from Nearly Headless Nick that “the hat feels itself honor-bound to give the school due warning” during dark times (*OotP* 207). Though just a hat, it is able to communicate through the one chance it gets, which is a yearly song. Instead of sticking to the typical description of the houses, the hat finds the ability through its song to present its beliefs and give the school its opinion and advice.

Another annual event that brings song with it is Christmas. Christmas, whether in the wizarding world or the muggle world, has long been associated with music and singing. We see it a few times throughout the series, such as when the Yule Ball is celebrated at a dance with live music in Harry’s fourth year, or when Mrs. Weasley forces the family to listen to the singing of Celestina Warbeck on Christmas Eve in Harry’s sixth year. Also, in Harry’s fifth year, when he spends Christmas at Grimmauld Place, Sirius is heard singing “God Rest Ye, Merry Hippogriffs” around the house. The Christmas spirit infects Sirius, not just because of the season but also because it means that he has company and he will not be spending the holidays alone, which puts him in a good mood. It is only natural that when one is in a good mood, it leads them to sing. However, the time when Christmas music is most moving to Harry is when he is not even celebrating at all. In *Deathly Hallows* he and Hermione arrive in Godric’s Hollow on Christmas Eve, and are treated to carol singing. They have been out of touch with society and people for so long, and the singing is an indication that there is still happiness and hope in the world. The pub where carols are being sung is even a place Harry considers taking refuge in. When the music stops, Harry feels the silence and the darkness and is “thinking of dementors, then realized that the carols had finished” (*DH* 327). The absence of the music that had given him hope is equivalent in his mind to the creatures that suck hope and happiness out of people.

Finally, we see music pop up within the wizarding world's culture, just as it does in our own. Wizards and witches listen to the Wireless Wizarding Network, and there are popular singers such as Celestina Warbeck and the Weird Sisters. Even at Nearly Headless Nick's party there is an orchestra playing, though it isn't exactly the most happy tune. Harry receives a musical message on Valentine's Day from an admirer, and the Slytherins attempt to bring down Gryffindor morale by singing "Weasley is our King." In this instance, however, the Gryffindors are able to turn around this ill-intentioned song and use it to celebrate Ron Weasley and the rest of the team. Finally, Luna Lovegood is seen at Bill and Fleur's wedding dancing all alone on the dance floor just because she liked the song and wanted to dance to it. We see subtle hints that music plays a role in the everyday life of a magical person, just as it does for us. In some instances there might be an important message or feeling brought with the music, but in others it just serves as something that is a part of daily life.

The use of music in fantasy books is nothing new, and comparisons have been drawn in other areas between the Harry Potter books and the Lord of the Rings books. Tolkien had a great affinity for song, and there are many different poems and lyrics throughout his books. No doubt this inspired JK Rowling to add some of her own poems and lyrics, which come up quite often. Music is used in many ways by Rowling, but overall she shows us, and Harry, that music has the power to bring hope, strengthen, and heal.

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