Abstract
In the 2005 film Corpse Bride, director Tim Burton and composer Danny Elfman collaborate using both musical and visual signifiers to create two very different realms that the main characters must traverse: the land of the living, and the land of the dead. The characterizations of these places appear in the reverse of what a viewer might expect. Visually, grey skies and determinedly downtrodden city streets and citizens rendered entirely in traditional Victorian mourning colors—black, grey, mauve and purple—transport the viewer to a popular, if incorrect, vision of late-nineteenth century England: one of strict conventions and repression, manifested here in everything including the foul weather. The afterlife is situated in direct contrast with this sorry state of affairs: new arrivals find themselves in a rollicking bar complete with singing and joking patrons in various states of decay. Bright and bold colors—not least of which the bright blue faces of the deceased—indicate that the afterlife is a place of merriment and fun not allowed in the more reserved world "upstairs." In writing the music for this cabaret-style afterlife, Elfman deliberately conjures up the world of a 1930s nightclub through the use of torch songs and percussive novelty numbers. In death, existence is more casual and open than it is in life; the social structure appears to lack the classism—a major plot factor—and pettiness of the living. The use of music—and the characters who make and appreciate it—directly contributes to the creation of the two worlds, and creates an extra twist in the plot. This article will examine the musical creation of the living world and the afterlife in Corpse Bride, as well as explore the use of music in both locations as a method of creating narrative tension.
In 2005, director Tim Burton released *Corpse Bride*, a stop-motion animation film starring the voices of Johnny Depp, Emily Watson, Helena Bonham-Carter and a host of other mostly British luminaries of film and television. Although the origin of the film’s story is Eastern European, *Corpse Bride* is set in Victorian England, and takes its cues for plot twists, locations and musical styles from the “topsy-turvyness” of celebrated Victorian light opera creators William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. In this article, I will limn the film’s topsy-turvy musical aspects by examining the genres, styles, and other characteristics of the music applied to the two worlds of the film in context with Burton’s visual and textual designs. Burton and composer Danny Elfman, his frequent musical collaborator, use both musical and visual signifiers to create two very different realms that the main characters must traverse: the land of the living, and the land of the dead (Johnson 2005).

As Martin Stokes has written, music is an essential element in “articulating our knowledge of other peoples, places, times and things, and ourselves in relation to them.” He continues, “The ‘places’ constructed through music involve notions of difference and social boundary. They also organize hierarchies of a moral and political order” (Stokes 1997, 3). While the music of *Corpse Bride* avoids, for the most part, such hierarchies, Elfman’s score most definitely constructs two very different social worlds which, while contemporaneous in the film’s plane of existence, contain radical differences in their chronological settings, behavioral attitudes, and artistic approaches. Having worked together to create other dark and/or magical realist locations, including Edward Scissorhands’ mansion (*Edward Scissorhands* 1990), Gotham (*Batman* 1989; *Batman Returns* 1992), Halloween Town (*The Nightmare Before Christmas* 1993), and Sleepy Hollow (*Sleepy Hollow* 1999), Burton’s distinct look and Elfman’s equally recognizable music have established them a known quantity for setting gothic fantasy worlds.

Hugely popular with Victorian audiences, Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas generally include three trademark elements: an engagement with Victorian class structures and social mores, such as social restrictions against mixed-class marriage and the laws protecting peers (*H.M.S. Pinafore*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Sorcerer*) (Higbie 1980, 66-67); “exotic” locations, such as a pirate ship or a court in Japan (*The Mikado*) (Beckerman 1989, 304); and thematic musical gestures for individual characters that are easily varied and combined with those of other characters, usually to indicate an affinity between characters (the re-use of the Major General’s patter song by the Pirate King in *The Pirates of Penzance*, for example) (N. Burton 1988, 657-79). Gilbert’s texts almost always involve a topsy turvy twist, such as in *H.M.S. Pinafore*, in which a patrician child and a common one are revealed to have been mistakenly exchanged at birth, and a woman destined to marry a reluctant suitor turns out to be his mother. As Jane W. Steadman has written of the duo’s topsy-turvydom, “cause and effect are dislocated; modifiers annul their nouns; things become their physical, behavioral, or moral opposites, especially in ‘My Dream’ (19 March 1870), Gilbert’s first enunciation of Topsy-turvydom” (Steadman 1996, 26).
Writing in the 1890s of Gilbert’s plots and settings, Percy Hetherington Fitzgerald (1899, 14) noted:

perhaps the nearest approach to the Gilbertian humour which it certainly anticipated is to be found in Lewis Carroll’s children’s books *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. For here was the same system of treatment applied to fairy or nursery tales the same sincerity in dealing gravely with combinations only found in dreams and nightmares the same grotesque oddities which we are yet inclined to accept from the coherence with which they are treated.

Indeed, Gilbert and Sullivan had an affinity to posing with the unusual as usual, just as do Burton and Elfman. Fitzgerald continues, “the design as the author himself told us was to treat a supernatural element on everyday principles as though it were an accepted element in human life. He thus made the situation superhuman and the characters human” (Fitzgerald 1899, 4).

Just as within Gilbert and Sullivan works, characters in *Corpse Bride* are positioned as social opposites with shared goals; conventional wisdom and rationality is suspended in the “exotic” world, and, due to an unexpected announcement at the end of the action, there is a happy ending. The placement of the unusual as perfectly normal follows Fitzgerald’s description of Gilbert’s approach exactly: the supernatural elements of *Corpse Bride* are framed as accepted elements of Victorian life. Indeed, when Victor finds himself married to the Corpse Bride, his mother expresses not disbelief or horror but indignation that he would do something so foolish.

**From Shtetl to High Society**

The story for *Corpse Bride* is based on a traditional Eastern European Jewish folktale from the “Shivhei ha-Ari,” a sixteenth century cycle of stories about Rabbi Luria: a young man, practicing his vows in anticipation of his wedding, places his bride’s ring on the skeletal finger of a woman murdered years before (Schwartz 1991, 51; Pfefferman 2005). Finding himself married to this “corpse bride,” the man must present his case to the rabbi, who adjudicates as to the validity of the marriage. There is usually a happy ending, in which the corpse bride relinquishes her claim to the groom, who is then reunited with his intended living bride.

As if the juxtaposition between the living and the dead are not quite enough in the original, Burton positions the entire environments of the living and the dead in opposition to one another, emphasizing the film’s topsy-turvy-ness. Like Gilbert, Burton gives the supernatural a very matter-of-fact existence. In a twist on the conventional codings of these realms, the land of the living is saturated with gloom, just as the realm of the dead is bright and colorful, both visually and aurally. “I always responded to characters and monsters, and cultures like Mexico and its Day of the Dead, because I felt like there was more life there,” Burton has explained of *Corpse Bride*’s settings (Salisbury
In this case, Burton’s own preferences establish a mirror for Gilbert and Sullivan’s own upside-down characterizations. In addition to the visual constructions of life and death, the film features several major musical numbers. Although Burton does not classify the film as a musical, music does play a significant role in establishing the realms of the living and the dead, in assisting with character development, and in creating narrative tension in the plot (Salisbury 2006, 260).

Burton’s adaptation adds a few extra plot twists, but stays true to the original story’s basic points, adding elements of Gilbert and Sullivan’s ever-present social anxieties about cross-class marriage and marital alliances based more on financial and social needs than love. Victor Van Dort, the son of nouveau-riche fishmongers, is engaged to Victoria Everglot, the only daughter of an impoverished aristocratic family. The marriage has been arranged to provide the Van Dorts with social capital and the Everglots with cash, a situation they the Van Dorts are thrilled to have arranged but which the Everglots despise. Luckily for their children, Victor and Victoria seem taken with one another despite their class differences. During their wedding rehearsal, however, Victor stumbles badly over his vows, and is sent away to practice them before the ceremony the next day. Rehearsing in the woods, he inadvertently slips Victoria’s ring onto what he thinks is a branch, but it is actually the skeletal hand of Emily, the Corpse Bride. Emily—who has been waiting for a proposal since her murder years before at the hands of an unfaithful lover—rises from the world of the dead only to return with Victor as her husband. There he is greeted by a curious crowd of the dead enjoying quite a jolly afterlife. Meanwhile, a certain Lord Barkis, claiming to be a relative, visits Victoria’s family. When the town crier announces that Victor has been seen in the arms of a “mystery woman,” Barkis misreads the social and financial situation surrounding the marriage and offers to marry Victoria in Victor’s place, thinking he will gain a rich dowry.

“Downstairs” in the afterlife, Victor makes various efforts to escape. A scholar of the dead community judges that Victor is only Emily’s lawful husband if he joins the dead of his own accord—by committing suicide. In the land of the living Barkis weds Victoria and finds out that she has no money after all. Hearing that Barkis has married Victoria, Victor agrees to stay with Emily, with whom he does, after all, seem well-suited. The dead rise to the land of the living to have a formal wedding in the church. As they do, they encounter living relatives and friends along the way, and the dead and the living—including Victoria—arrive at the church together. When Emily sees Victoria weeping for Victor, she gives up her claim on him. Emily then identifies Barkis as her killer. In a moment of hubris, Barkis drinks the poison intended for Victor, and the dead surround him menacingly, ready to take revenge on Emily’s behalf. Emily realizes that although she was denied marital happiness, she does not want to deny it to Victoria, and blesses Victor and Victoria’s union. Thus free, her physical remains dissolve into a cloud of butterflies against the night sky.
“Upstairs”: the land of the living

The architecture, costuming, and music used in the opening scenes of Corpse Bride establish the time period as the late Victorian era. Visually, grey skies and determinedly downtrodden city streets and citizens rendered entirely in mourning colors—black, grey, mauve and purple—transport the viewer to a popular vision of Victorian England of strict conventions and repression, manifested here in everything including the foul weather. Owen Gleiberman, writing for Entertainment Weekly, described the film’s sets as “kiddie-gothic expressionist design,” with “mansions of such foreboding shadow and architecture that they make Count Orlock’s look like a well-lit condo” (Gleiberman 2005, 1). As Matthew Sweet (2001, ix) has written, this is the Victorian world that has been invented by more recent generations; nonetheless, it remains steadfast in popular depictions of the era. (Sweet 2001, ix). It is important to take into consideration the palette of the world of the living as the film progresses: its initial dreariness actually contains moments of subtle romanticism, which Victor must remember as he makes his decision to remain with Emily. Ultimately, critic Stephanie Zacharek (2005, 1) explains:

“It’s a tossup as to what’s more appealing, the rainbow-hued Land of the Dead, beneath the Earth’s surface, or the grayish Land of the Living up above. […] The colors in the Land of the Living are more subtly beautiful: There are endless variations of grays, and Burton (along with his clearly hardworking technical team) uses the whole palette, tinting this allegedly boring color with pinks and blues and violets. The delicacy of these creamy tones suits the passionate but tender nature of the story, and their earthbound beauty fits the movie’s realistically romantic theme: Love isn’t ownership, and it’s no good unless it’s freely given.”

Music in the living world of Corpse Bride is remarkably period-appropriate. The film opens with a very Gilbert-and-Sullivanesque vocal quartet—set as interpolated duets—in which the parents of Victor and Victoria reveal their differing social statuses and what the impending marriage of their children will do for their respective places in the world (Video Clip 1). This clip illustrates the shadowy living world, emphasized by the dead creature wrapped around Mrs. Van Dort’s neck and the looming houses in the background, including the carved fish on the Van Dort’s doorstep that marks the source of their money. The music in the video excerpt is also signifier of the “upstairs” Victorian world: employing techniques common to Victorian orchestral writing including bells, celesta, and repeated circle-of-fifths writing for the strings, it is unrelentingly tonal and consonant and maintains an exact rhythm, never varying as the couple dances into their carriage.

Should all go “According to Plan,” the Van Dorts will move up in the world:

We’ll go right into the heights of society
To the costume balls
In the hallowed halls
Rubbing elbows with the finest  
Having crumpets with Her Highness  
We'll be there, we'll be seen, having tea with the queen  
We'll forget everything...that we've ever ever been.

The lower-class origins of the van Dorts are revealed as well in their vocalization: Mrs. Van Dort's vowels in “costume balls,” come out nasally as “costoom bawls,” and “been” is “bean” rather than “bin.”

The Everglots, on the other hand, are land-rich but cash-poor, and marrying off their daughter Victoria to help prop up the family’s finances:

How could our family have come to this?  
To marry off our daughter to the noveaux-riche  
They’re so common  
So coarse  
Oh, it couldn’t be worse!

With its satirical lyrics and comically melancholy melodic turns, “According to Plan” is deliberately reminiscent of Sullivan’s operetta music, immediately providing the audience with a time period and aura of social mores while at the same time hinting that what is to follow will be a comedy of social and class identities as impractical as any story penned by Gilbert. The text also refers to “Her Highness,” who could be none other than Queen Victoria; to the financial worries of the period—“land-rich bankrupt aristocracy;” and to the social rituals of the time, including “having tea” and “attending costume balls.” The names of characters are also used to locate the film in Victorian England: the Van Dorts’ servant Mayhew shares his name with Henry Mayhew, a co-
founder of Punch magazine, and Lord Barkis shares his with a character from Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*. Thanks to these hints, the somber visual *mise-en-scène*, and the period music used to introduce the main characters, there is no question that the fantastical action that follows takes place sometime between Prince Albert’s death in 1861 and Queen Victoria’s own death in 1901. Finally, in a musical reversal—the film’s first aural nod to topsy-turvydom—of their social stations, the Van Dorts sing in higher registers—soprano and tenor—than the Everglots, who fill in the quartet’s alto and bass lines. Living “upstairs”—in the land of the living—means constant negotiation between classes, sexes, and etiquette.

Upon entering the Everglot house for his wedding rehearsal, Victor lingers at the Everglots’ dusty piano, playing what will become “Victor’s Theme,” an excellent example of the sentimental piano music popular during the Victorian period that will be varied throughout the film in the manner of contemporary compositional techniques (Frisch 1990). Almost Mendelssohnian in its construction, the piece’s theme features arpeggiated chords and a modal top line. The use of modality firmly codes Victor’s musical gesture within film music genres as pastoral and English, and indeed the theme will return when Victor goes into the woods outside of his village to practice his vows among the snow-covered trees. Anahid Kassabian notes that pastorality, to most listeners, is heard as feminine, white, and virtuous, and is associated with high culture, suggesting that Victor is a gentle hero whose character helps him rise above his origins (Kassabian 2001, 31-2). For the remainder of the film, this theme is used to identify Victor, even when he is not on screen, such as when Victoria, locked in her room, waits for his return. It also associates Victor and those tied to him with the Victorian time period in the living world; as Kassabian (2001, 57) writes, “setting is often identified by quoted source [diegetic] music.” Victor’s performance of his theme on the Everglots’ piano places it within the diegesis of the film and gives it a role as a signifier of the era.

Victor’s theme, which was written before the film was animated so that the clay figure’s hand motions could be matched to the music is very open in its construction and lends itself well to variation (Video Clip 2). The somber version first heard in the film represents the present situation. As the clip demonstrates, there is a large gap in register between the left hand, playing a plain and common accompanimental figure low in the bass, and the right hand, which has the melody, mirroring the enormous difference in social status between the two families. The melody—Victor’s ambition and interests—continually ascends, but is harmonically compelled to remain in the same key as the bass. As high as the melody climbs while Victor plays in the Everglots’ home, it is still forced by harmonic rules to end with a cadence at a lower pitch. Victor feels understandably trapped by both his parents’ desires for upward mobility and by this arranged marriage that will facilitate their ascent; only Victor knows his own desires for intellectual cultivation, shown by his study of a butterfly in the opening credits. Just before Victoria interrupts Victor’s playing, the theme is varied for the first time, moving
into more interesting harmonic territory while retaining the Mendelssohnian style with which it began. The theme will need to be relocated to the world of the dead before Victor can break out of the strict stylistic confines of the Victorian land of the living.

The theme also provides Victor with an emotional and educational backstory: like Gilbert and Sullivan’s young heroes, he is sensitive and appreciative of music. He has also been taught to play the piano with some skill, a point that becomes important later in the film. Although Victoria’s statement that her mother prevents her from playing the piano because it is not appropriate for young ladies is not, generally speaking, historically accurate (almost all young women of the day had musical training at the piano and, if their families could afford it, in voice), the scene between the two of them at the piano nonetheless establishes both of them—despite class differences—as having sophisticated aesthetic tastes. This scene also further places the audience aurally in the time period the filmmakers have sought to portray, establishing a convention that will be turned upside-down—another hat tip to Gilbert and Sullivan’s topsy-turvy style—by the vastly different aural world of the dead.

Victor’s theme is also used in variation when Victor practices his vows alone in the woods. Dark and shadowy, filled with dead trees, hooting owls, and ominously croaking crows, the woods are the Gothic pastoral response to the dismal Victorian town that is home to the Van Dorts and Everglots; and appropriate his pastoral, modal tune to convey this. When Victor enters the woods, the music is suitable creepy in the style of old horror films: violins and high winds provide fragments of his theme and eerie sighs and tremolos. The use of the piano recalls Victor’s playing at the Everglots’, and interpolates more recognizable elements of the theme beneath the atmospheric orchestral scoring.
As Victor recites his vows without problems, the tempo quickens into a march. Later, the march genre used later to propel the dead into the land of the living. Here, however, the march thrusts Victor toward his destiny with the Corpse Bride. When Emily rises from her grave into the land of the living, the music pays homage again to traditional horror film scores with repeated motifs à la Psycho and violin chords reminiscent of Saint-Saëns’ programmatic tone-poem Danse Macabre, in which the devil leads the dead in a furious waltz just before cockcrow. At the end of the sequence, Victor’s theme is played by the full orchestra, replete with trills, a ghostly wordless chorus, and other orchestrations designed to make it foreboding and dramatic. The woods, once just dank and common, are now musically constructed as a gateway to other lands. When Victor next opens his eyes, he is in the land of the dead, complete with a very different musical landscape.

“Downstairs:” the land of the dead

Just as music and color scheme establish the living world of the film, so too do they also create the world of the dead. The afterlife is situated in direct contrast with the Victorian living realm in matters visual, musical, and temporal: new arrivals find themselves in a rollicking bar complete with affable patrons in various states of decay, representing a number of historical periods, not just the Victorian era of the “upstairs.” Bright and bold colors—including the cyanotically bright blue faces of the deceased—indicate that the afterlife is a place of merriment, wackiness, and casual behavior across those of all classes not allowed in the more reserved world “upstairs.” For these dearly departed, death is the great leveler: ladies in middle-class garb bump elbows with Napoleonic soldiers as dandies in frock-coats carouse with the corpseless heads of serving staff. The bar itself is decked out with a piano made from a coffin, a well-stocked liquor cabinet and plenty of room for all—arrivals both new and old. In contrast to the living world, Victor is the nonconformist here in his muted suit; most of the dead are clothed in shocking pinks and greens, red and blue uniforms, and a palette of intense hues more at home in the neon signs of the twentieth century than Victorian fashion.

The music, too, is out of joint with the living world above. Instead of opting for aural continuity with the world above, Burton and Elfman shift the musical space of the world of the dead forward at least forty years to the jazz clubs of Harlem and Paris. Instead of the tragic—or at the very least melancholic—musical motifs of Victor’s theme, the music “downstairs” is bright and lively swing-dance music that encourages physical intimacy with and trust in a partner. In asking Elfman to write the cabaret-style music for this world, Burton referenced performances of Sammy Davis, Jr., saying that, “The Sammy Davis thing, well, there’s something about skeletons and that kind of music that seems to work well that way” (Salisbury 2006, 259). Elfman agreed in general, but made a slight change to the singer’s style when he deliberately conjured up the world of a 1930s nightclub through the use of torch songs and percussive novelty numbers.
Sung by Elfman himself, the musical star of the land of the dead is Bonejangles, a suave and skeletal bandleader. He is backed up by his own band at the bar, the talented and versatile Bone Boys, whose instruments are relics of their combined ossuary, and a Ray Charles figure, a piano-playing skeleton wearing dark glasses. “Bonejangles’ song,” Elfman says, referring to the jazzy underworld number “The Remains of the Day,” “is in fact like a 1930s Cab Calloway song” (Salisbury 2006, 259).

Just as Victor’s theme established the Victorian setting of the world above, so does the jazzy band music of the world of the dead place it in a vastly different era. Kassabian (2001, 58) suggests that by using music that audiences are familiar with, they are “addressed as members of the musical culture (Kassabian, 58).” Elfman’s use of swing and jazz, both of which are more familiar to most audiences than the parlor music of the nineteenth century, places the viewer as a member of the fun-loving “downstairs” crowd. This positioning helps to create dramatic tension when Victor must choose between the two worlds: audiences will understand and desire both outcomes for him, knowing that the Victorian world is the one to which he rightfully belongs, but enjoying the more familiar and musically exciting land of the dead at the same time.

This non-coeval existence of the two worlds is important in contrasting the world of the dead with “upstairs,” both on superficial and more serious levels. Initially, the slightly chronically advanced “downstairs” is odd and grotesque to Victor, but as he spends more time there, both he and the viewer come to understand that the restrictions that govern living society are removed here. Both literally and figuratively, things are more “progressive” in the land of the dead: as the variety of characters drinking at the bar demonstrates, segregation based on gender, class, and financial status are relics of the past. Emily, the Corpse Bride, does not need a chaperone anywhere, in comparison to Mrs. Everglot’s horror at finding Victor and Victoria at the piano unchaperoned; and soldiers, aristocrats, and working-class men and women mingle while drinks are served and Bonejangles’ band entertains.

Music, too, is less formal in this more modern world: the Bone Boys get to improvise in a way even the great pianists of the nineteenth century could not, riffing with their bodies and inventing new techniques with each new set of bones that comes their way. The variety of instrumentation, flamboyance, and rhythmic flexibility with which music is performed aurally create an aesthetic for the land of the dead that is in clear opposition to the more formal living world. The musical genres of the dead indicate an improvisatory quality to existence there: everyone adapts to new arrivals and events with aplomb, “living” in the moment.

Bonejangles and the Bone Boys’ featured number, “The Remains of the Day,” tells the story of the Corpse Bride and sets the musical tone for the world of the dead. The scandal of her tragic and violent death, combined with her youth and beauty, have made Emily the toast of the underworld. Everyone in the bar enjoys the song, which clearly they have heard before (video clip 3). Emily herself has a practiced shy pout she gives as
Bonejangles calls her out in his introduction.

Hey, give me a listen
You corpses of cheer
At least those of you
Who still got an ear
I'll tell you a story
Make a skeleton cry
Of our own jubiliciously
lovely Corpse Bride

Emily's story is as sad as it is predictable: seduced by a young man, she is murdered for her jewels and buried in a shallow and unmarked grave in the woods. The song explains Emily's vow to wait for her true love to appear and propose to her; Victor, at least, has done the proposing. In the end, the song's chorus is a succinct summation of life's ultimate end and offers Victor a reason to stay:

Die, die we all pass away
But don't wear a frown cuz it's really okay
And you might try 'n' hide
And you might try 'n' pray
But we all end up the remains of the day

Even as he tries to escape back "upstairs," Victor is snapping his fingers along with the rest of the audience. He is still somewhat horrified by the entire situation, but the snappy music—entirely new to him—has caught his interest, if only subconsciously.

The less upbeat songs in the land of the dead are also richer and more musically complex than those "upstairs." In a poignant musical scene between Emily and the Black
Widow Spider (“Tears to Shed”) who inhabits her casket bed, the Spider tries to cheer Emily up by comparing her favorably to the living Victoria in regard to a number of factors, chief among them artistic ability:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{If he only knew} \\
&\text{The you that we know} \\
&\text{And that silly little creature} \\
&\text{Isn’t wearing his ring} \\
&\text{And she doesn’t play piano} \\
&\text{Or dance, or sing} \\
&\text{No, she doesn’t compare}
\end{align*}
\]

The song is backed by harpsichords and contains melancholy interpolations sung by the Corpse Bride herself. Despite its minor key tonality, the tune—like that of Bonejangles and the Bone Boys—is highly syncopated and rhythmically infectious, reflecting the overall ethos of the land of the dead. Like Bonejangles’ earlier number, the song emphasizes that life is a “temporary state,” but that dead—here a fun and companionable realm and state of being that lacks the social and moral pettiness of the living Victorian world—is forever, so it may as well be enjoyable.

It is clear that through the color and music, and the less subtle indicators of equality and laisser-faire attitudes seen “downstairs,” Burton intends to make the world of the dead appear more alive than that of the living; certainly no one “downstairs” is as unhappy as the majority of the characters we have just seen “upstairs.” As co-producer Allison Abbate has noted, “The people in the land of the living are pretty much dead and the people in the land of the dead are pretty lively” (quoted in T. Burton 2005). Indeed, Elder Gutknecht asks, not completely ironically, “Why go up there when people are dying to get down here?”

At the film’s first turning point, Victor and Emily play a duet together on her piano, show in the next video clip. Victor, who has given up on returning to Victoria and the land of the living, finds Emily alone in the bar, playing the melody of “Tears to Shed.” At first she uses her skeletal left hand only, then adds her still-fleshy right after Victor begins to improvise with her. Victor introduces his theme into their duet, and after some moments, Emily joins in with a variation of “Tears to Shed” that combines with Victor’s theme. Her skeletal hand detaches from her body and carouses up the keyboard on its own, adding a jazzy riff to the mix. She apologizes, “Pardon my enthusiasm,” to which Victor responds, “I like your enthusiasm.”
With this duet and the combining of their themes, Emily and Victor appear to have reached a point of agreement; this is the cumulative scene showing how well matched they are to one another, intellectually, musically, and in terms of personality. Emily is the well-educated musician and dancer that Victoria is not allowed to be. The richness produced by the counterpoint of their themes would indicate that this is the better romantic pairing, were it not interrupted by the arrival of Mayhew, recently deceased, at the bar. Still, this musically auspicious moment is singular: it brings together both realms within a sole medium, and presents an unexpected plot twist, the intimation that Victor may well stay with Emily rather than continue to try to return “upstairs.” This interaction can convincingly be read that Victor later makes the wrong choice in reuniting with Victoria; without Emily to partner with him, his musical representation can only have a single theme on his return to the world of the living. Although Victoria will share that theme, it will always lack the improvisatory, imaginative, and wholly complementary feel of Emily’s contribution.

In the final ensemble song of the film, “A Wedding,” the denizens of the dead sing a merry march as they prepare to go “upstairs” for the ceremony. The music is in the happy, major-key tonality of the land of the dead, although the tempo and form that move the action incessantly forward as the dead bake a cake and repair Victor’s suit is unmistakably that of the Victorian music hall. As film music critic Ryan Keaveney has commented on the song, which blends musical aspects of both worlds as the characters intermingle, “Written in Gilbert & Sullivan mode, it is busy and boisterous and goddamned rousing! When’s the last time you heard ‘Huzzah!’ in a song?” (Keaveney 2005).

The “Huzzah!”s are sprinkled through the lyrics, and the entire song has the feel of a happy Gilbert and Sullivan finale in which all of the problems of the plot are wrapped
up with marriage and contentment. A female chorus serenades the Bride through a gentle waltz into the party and into her veil, and the song ends with a quote from Mendelssohn’s well-known Wedding March, which was composed in 1842 as incidental music for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and became hugely popular when used at the wedding of Victoria, the Princess Royal, to Prince Frederick William of Prussia in 1858, again echoing the “upstairs” location of the wedding and the time period evoked. The celebratory activities—especially the wedding cake, decorated with bones and skulls—are additional conscious reminders of Burton’s own preferences for cultures that embrace the darker side of life.

**Conclusion**

In the final scene of the film, Emily blesses the union of Victor and Victoria in the chapel “upstairs,” and her body dissipates into a cloud of butterflies, accompanied by a variation in which Victor’s theme is set as a chorale employing wordless voices, yet another common genre and technique of orchestration used extensively by British composers of the Victorian period. Victor is back where he belongs, musically, chronologically, and geographically, and—according to the original story—is with the woman he should wed. Ultimately, the combination of Elfman’s interpretation of Burton’s own aesthetic and penchant for the subversive and the topsy-turvy of Gilbert and Sullivan create a unique sonic landscape for *Corpse Bride*. Both the land of the living and the land of the dead contain their own musical markers, which in turn construct surprising commentaries on the film’s outlook and character development and choices. Although the visual elements of the film are strong signifiers on their own, it is the creative and telling uses of music that put the realms of *Corpse Bride* on the map.

**References**