

Karen Anton

The Audible in Joyce's Texts

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Language in itself is a development of aural cues. Every written word has an audible pronunciation to accompany it. However, much prose writing is created with only the meanings of the terms and not the meanings of the sounds in mind. While this aural or musical quality is innate within language, it is often overlooked or only paid attention to in poetic texts. Language's roots are firmly placed in music, and any attempt to make literature into music is simply emphasizing a link that has always been there. James Joyce, being well-versed in the language of music, pays close attention to not only appropriate musical allusions but the sound and structure of his texts. While his early works simply mention music, as his writing style progresses, his language is clearly affected by a formally structured musical influence. Oddly enough, while rejecting concepts of form within words, Joyce began to embrace the standardized forms of very specific types of music. Joyce's writing throughout his career seems to enforce the points that language is intended to be aural. Therefore, language and sound should be reintegrated, musical allusions may be liberally used to add depth, and that forms for literature and music may be interchangeable or borrowed from each other. Perhaps this was his attempt to emphasize in language that which never should have been forgotten: the audible.

Joyce's early poems, such as those found in *Chamber Music*, simply mention music. While poetry in its very essence has some type of meter and attention to the sounds of speech, this collection of poems lacks anything that might make poetry sound like music, nor do the mentions of music call up any specific feeling. Simple lines such as: "The

old piano plays an air” (Chamber II.5) give the reader no insight into the mood of the piece and only serves as a mention of music to play off of the title of the collection. Joyce attempts to combine music with the idea of love, but he simply states this fact instead of utilizing any of the form or convention of music to get the point across: “There’s music along the river/For Love wanders there” (I. 6-7). No clear analysis of what makes love music-like or what kind of music he is referring to can be made. Near the end of the collection this association progresses: “Where love did so sweet music make” (XXXIII. 2). By adding the descriptor “sweet,” the reader is able to get some idea of the musical qualities Joyce is alluding to, but it is very inexact. Only in the last poem of the collection does music begin to combine with the words in form as described in the line, “Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil” (XXXVI. 8). This line nicely combines the rising tension of the words with the tension of a loudly clanging and articulate anvil before the poem ends with the speaker alone, denoting a silence. While the words themselves do not strongly imply a musical connection, they may be seen as the beginnings of Joyce’s integration of music into language.

Oddly enough, even Joyce’s early prose work contains more poetic use of music through language than his collection of poems. Joyce’s short story “The Dead,” from *Dubliners* exhibits musical allusions that actually add to the story line as well as scenes displaying the emotion of music. Joyce depicts this connection between language arts and music through Gabriel as he contemplates this very link: “He repeated to himself a phrase he had written in his review: One feels that one is listening to a thought-tormented music” (Dead 208). In this scene, Gabriel realizes the juxtaposition that one can make between text and music to provoke an emotional response. After Gabriel’s viewing of his wife listening to music, he is reminded of verse that he had written and compares their recollection to the way in which music travels through a space: “Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name? Like distant music these words that he had written years before were borne towards him from the past” (232). This passage connects words of the past to

music from a distance, drawing an excellent parallel between the sound of language and the sound of music. It also provokes an emotional response by mentioning how the past and memories are similar to music drifting across space.

In addition to the link that Joyce begins to draw between the mention of music and its actual emotional function, his allusions in “The Dead” serve to clarify the plot. This differs from his earlier works in that the music is no longer simply acting as filler with minimal purpose, aside from the integration of other art forms. One Joyce critic suggests that “music...dominates the fabric of Joyce’s prose to such an extent that it becomes indispensable to those representations of sensibility, place and circumstance which seem to justify the fable in the first place” (White 115). Without allusions to music in “The Dead,” Joyce would have been forced to bluntly state the traits of the hosts of the party rather than slowly exposing them to the reader through their musical performances. The musically informed reader may pick up on connotations in the story that are minimally evident without referencing the musical allusions. “The Dead” contains many references to the magnitude of the show that is being put on, and Joyce emphasizes this display even through the musical performances of the hostesses:

Gabriel could not listen while Mary Jane was playing her Academy piece, full of runs and difficult passages, to the hushed drawing-room. He liked music but the piece she was playing had no melody for him and he doubted whether it had any melody for the other listeners, though they had begged Mary Jane to play something [. . .] The most vigorous clapping came from the four young men in the doorway who had gone away to the refreshment-room at the beginning of the piece but had come back when the piano had stopped. (202-3)

In choosing to perform an Academy piece when all of the previous music had been specifically for dancing, Mary Jane takes the attention away from the merry-making of the guests so as to focus it completely upon herself. Not only that, but she seems to have picked a piece purely for its technical merit and not for a beautiful melody, which

is a quality that most non-musicians would quite appreciate. Even a piece that requires such technicality should have a melody beneath the ornamentation; implying that none of the listeners can hear a melody shows that Mary Jane is wrapped up in the details while ignoring the heart of the piece. Aunt Julia chooses a very difficult piece as well, and Joyce gives more depth to the allusion by actually naming the aria that she sings: “Her voice, strong and clear in tone, attacked with great spirit the runs which embellish the air and though she sang very rapidly she did not miss even the smallest of the grace notes...[The applause] sounded so genuine that a little colour struggled into Aunt Julia’s face” (209). This aria, which is rather light-hearted and praises the beauty of a young bride-to-be, proves a stark contrast to Aunt Julia. Gabriel even notes later that he “had caught that haggard look upon her face for a moment when she was singing *Arrayed for the Bridal*” (241). This contrast emphasizes the disparity between their intent of hosting a charming dinner party and the “boxed” nature of the party itself. Both Mary Jane and Aunt Julia’s performances are met with enthusiastic applause, but it appears to be only to keep the progression of events moving so that they can eat their extravagant dinner. By using these musical allusions, Joyce was able to reticently point out an undertone of discontent to the informed reader without having to spell out the point.

Joyce ends this story with an allusion to a traditional song in a performance that is not nearly as flawless but more genuine than those of the hostesses: “The song seemed to be in the old Irish tonality and the singer seemed uncertain both of his words and of his voice. The voice, made plaintive by distance and by the singer’s hoarseness, faintly illuminated the cadence of the air with words expressing grief” (228). D’Arcy’s performance is the least showy yet most emotionally effective, spurring the touching ending of the short story as the language itself becomes less showy and more poetic. Perhaps a certain Joyce critic is correct in asserting that “the poetics of music are as nothing to the story, at least not in any literal sense. It is the condition of music regained in language, recaptured in prose but not imitated that distinguishes Joyce’s technique in ‘The Dead’” (White 119). It is this addition of

musicality that propels Joyce's later works forward as sound plays a greater role in his texts. The closing lines of "The Dead," while they do not specifically mention music, clearly refer to aural perceptions: "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead" (Dead 242). Certainly, few readers would be able to imagine the sound of softly falling snow as it is almost, if not completely, imperceptible to the human ear. However, these lines are stated so beautifully that one might imagine a slowly descending line of music with a soft diminuendo at the end of a heavily ornamented movement of music.

Joyce continues to appeal to the musical aspects of language in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Often it is forgotten that silences are as audibly important as actual sounds. A silence properly utilized in music can successfully yield the same type of emotional response as an actual tone: "They would be alone, surrounded by darkness and silence: and in that moment of supreme tenderness he would be transfigured" (Portrait 311). In this passage, Stephen's feelings for a girl combined with an aural description yield a beautiful depiction of his love for her. Transfiguration is a dominating theme of operatic music of the time, including the aria referred to as "Liebestod" or "Love-death" perhaps the best-known aria in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. This aria was called by Wagner "Verklärung" or "Transfiguration." Since Joyce was quite a fan of Wagner, it is not outrageous to suggest that this dichotomy of death and transfiguration in terms of love is being hinted at in this passage. In a later passage, Stephen begins to associate groupings of the visible with musical equivalents:

A quartet of young men were striding along with linked arms, swaying their heads and stepping to the agile melody of their leader's concertina. The music passed in an instant, as the first bars of sudden music always did, over the fantastic fabrics of his mind, dissolving them painlessly and noiselessly" (420-1).

In this scene, Stephen associates the observable grouping of four men walking with a standardized rhythmic pulse with the sound of the

beginning bars of music in a piece. This association adds considerable depth to the mere perception of seeing a group of men walking down the street. Like many references to music this one comes and goes quickly, yet here time is taken to describe the way in which the music leaves—“noiselessly.” The music dissipates in the way that any sound should, leaving a distinct absence of music in the silence, yet some remnant of it must remain as it has been “dissolved” into Stephen’s mind.

Allusions to actual melodies, not just situations that call music to mind, also abound in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. While listening to dance music, Stephen’s emotions are made clear to him. “The sentiment of the opening bars, their languor and supple movement, evoked the incommunicable emotion which had been the cause of all his day’s unrest and of his impatient movement of a moment before. His unrest issued from him like a wave of sound” (Portrait 323). In this passage, audible music, not just a reference to music, causes Stephen to feel an emotion that he cannot even convey to others. While in this case, the music is audible but not labeled as a specific work. Near the conclusion of the book, Joyce writes in an easily recognizable operatic theme: “The birdcall from Siegfried whistled softly followed them from the steps of the porch” (508). In addition to using the bird symbolically as it will reappear throughout the final chapter, this reference is significant because in the Wagner opera this call immediately precedes Siegfried’s encounter with the dragon Fafner. This alerts the reader that Stephen will soon be confronting an inevitable issue, which turns out to be his struggle for independence.

It is in the integration of Joyce’s pairing the feelings of music with visual occurrences and his allusion to musical themes that he truly begins to amalgamate his text and the audible. Stephen’s creative process itself is described as taking on musicality: “He spoke the verses aloud from the first lines till the music and rhythm suffused his mind, turning it to quiet indulgence” (Portrait 490). This passage very clearly depicts the strong link between the words of verses and the music that may hide within verse. This link is further illustrated directly following Stephen’s misquoting of the verses in a piece by Nashe: “But why? Her

passage through the darkening air of the verse with its black vowels and its opening sound, rich and lutelike?” (503). Here, the formation of vowels is excellently juxtaposed with the open, dark sound that musicians strive to create on solo instruments. This fascination with the combination of spoken language and its musical qualities continues to grow in Joyce’s later works.

Inevitably, Stephen’s view of the world begins to revolve more and more around the form itself of music until eventually he seems to develop some type of musical aesthetic that involves the combining of music, words, and form. Stephen even begins to link his immediate surroundings with the form in which music is written: “His prayer... ended in a trail of foolish words which he made to fit the insistent rhythm of the train; and silently, at intervals of four seconds, the telegraphpoles held the galloping notes of the music between punctual bars...He sang softly to himself with quaint accent and phrasing” (Portrait 337). This description clearly describes the staff on which music is notated. Not only does the speaker imply the form of the staff but also the tempo by stating at what rate the bars are passing. Perhaps one of the most clearly and beautifully stated passages in this novel occurs as Stephen realizes and asserts the connection between words and the other arts:

The phrase and the day and the scene harmonised in a chord. Words. Was it their colours? He allowed them to glow and fade, hue after hue: sunrise gold, the russet and green of apple orchards, azure of waves, the grey-fringed fleece of clouds. No, it was not their colours: it was the poise and balance of the period itself. Did he then love the rhythmic rise and fall of words better than their associations of legend and colour? (428)

Of course, Stephen never tells the reader if he prefers the “rhythmic” aspects of words or their “associations,” but the comparison is now exposed for the reader to contemplate. This passage opens by depicting a harmonization of “the phrase and the day and the scene.” This harmonized chord is an aural combination of multiple pitches tuned until distracting waves are removed from the sound and the distinct pitches become no longer separate but part of a bigger, fuller

whole. After beginning his thought with a musical sentiment and briefly exploring the range of the visual, Stephen determines that it is this “poise and balance” found in harmony that gives satisfaction in the writing or reading of words. In other words, the very form of music is not only conducive to writing but the very essence of what makes it enjoyable.

Joyce’s commitment to the form of music truly becomes noticeable in *Ulysses*, particularly “The Sirens” episode. From the opening line, the reader knows that the chapter will be based on the aural: “Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyrining imperthnthn thnthnthn” (*Ulysses* 256). This line sets up a percussive rhythm which may be followed throughout the chapter. Rhythm is not the only structural device that Joyce had in mind for this chapter. In fact, Joyce labeled “The Sirens” a “fuga per canonem” (Weaver 70), a musical form used predominately in the 16th century. This seems an oddly restrictive form to choose while experimenting with its use in prose, yet Joyce made a valiant effort to show the comparison, even though the chapter may be more easily fit into a different musical structure. In fact, Joyce is said to have asked a friend while watching *Die Walküre* if the “musical effect of [his] Sirens episode [was] better than Wagner’s” and was quite upset upon finding out that his friend did not agree (White 116). It is rather impossible to imitate in writing the pervading polyphony and imitation found in a fugue, and fugues are not even that prevalent in operatic works.

While Joyce was rather successful in imitating as much of the form as he could, his writing is no comparison to actual audible music. Joyce’s reaction to the operatic form adds to the disconnect between his actual formal techniques and those of the fugue. In the chapter itself, Joyce mentions and makes use of an operatic aria technique: “Waken the dead. Pom. Dignam. Poor little nominedomine. Pom. It is music, I mean of course it’s all pom pom pom very much what they call da capo. Still you can hear. As we march we march along, march along. Pom” (*Ulysses* 289). The term “A da capo aria” refers to a song in which the performer “returns to the head” or main theme. In this section, the rhythm of the term “pom” is liberally returned to. This operatic form

fits very well with the structure of the chapter as a whole, as the form of “The Sirens” nicely imitates the exposition of a larger work complete with development and recapitulation of the fragmented phrases that had been introduced in the exposition.

Despite Joyce’s liberal use of form in this chapter, he did not neglect the musical allusions that he had been implementing more and more seamlessly in his books. Along with allusions, distinctions are made between what is merely audible and what is musical: “There’s music everywhere. Ruttledge’s door: ee creaking. No, that’s noise. Minuet of *Don Giovanni* he’s playing now” (Ulysses 282). In addition to the defining of non-aesthetic sound as noise, the reference to the minuet from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* cues in the informed reader to a relationship between Boylan and Molly, similar to the relationship between Giovanni and Zerlina, as the woman succumbs to the man offstage and out of sight. The chapter ends with strings of interspersed “taps” (282-9). According to the storyline, these taps are the cane of a blind man finding his way down the street, but they could also be another reference to Giovanni. As the taps increase in number, they show themselves to be very similar in form to the drum hits symbolizing the Commandant who tries to save the purity of his daughter, even from beyond the grave. One critic even attempts to claim that allusions such as these are what may make Joyce’s chapter polyphonic enough for the form to be interpreted as music: “Can we call the many allusions to other music music? If so, Simon’s singing of ‘Martha’ as Bloom writes a letter to Martha Clifford should contribute some counterpoint” (Weaver 73). While musical allusions certainly bring specific pieces and sounds to mind, this critic is mistaken in identifying it as counterpoint. In music, there are strict conventions about the exact timing and intervallic relationships between two melodies in counterpoint, and no consideration of the exact way the melodies line up are evident in Joyce’s text. The text undoubtedly contains musical forms, but the allusions remain multifaceted and not part of this form.

Inevitably, all of Joyce’s complex work with translating musical form to literary form ultimately lends itself to the simpler relationship

between the spoken word and musicality. Dynamic contrasts within the vocal inflections of the characters are certainly evident in the chapter: “Growl angry, then shriek cursing [. . .] then all of a soft sudden wee little wee little pippy wind” (Ulysses 288). This one sentence gives the impression of a fortissimo followed by a subito piano, which is a frequently used dynamic pattern in dramatic music. The ending of the chapter rings true to an actual performance as well: “Ppprrffrrppff. Done” (291). While this final sound is commonly associated by critics with Bloom’s flatulence or a vocal imitation of flatulence, it is also reminiscent of the sound of a stage of musicians breathing together at the finish of a piece. Perhaps the train of thought behind all of the structural formation is best stated earlier in the chapter: “Words? Music? No: it’s what’s behind” (274). This short passage once again alludes to the close relationship between the spoken word and the rhythm and tonality of music. Clearly, both words and music are considered to be integral parts of getting a point across. However, this time it bypasses both as the leading form and points to something beyond words and music.

This something beyond words and music, if it can be found anywhere, may be found in *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce also had a specific musical structure in mind for this book as he “referred to [. . .] *Finnegans Wake* as a ‘suite’ in the key of E-flat,” (Weaver 4). In fact, some critics have gone so far as to translate all of the characters into respective note names that modulate as they fall or rise, creating a literary circle of fifths complete with tonic to dominant movement (104-5). While this interpretation does bear mentioning, it seems to be taking the comparison to a bit of an extreme, as one can play around with letters long enough to create any type of root movement. Many of Joyce’s texts have been set to music, including a piece called “Roaratorio” by John Cage. However, Cage particularly seems to be creating his own interpretation rather than being true to Joyce’s intentions with the piece. First of all, Cage’s score is not limited to a performance of *Finnegans Wake* but to any piece of literature the performer may want to convert into music. Cage wanted to create a composition “free of melody and free of harmony and free of counterpoint and free of musical theory”

(Cage 107), while Joyce himself paid very close attention to music theory in creating the form and structure of his text. Nevertheless, one can certainly take to heart a certain critic's description of the new role of music in this book: "In *Finnegans Wake* [. . .] the presence of music is so powerful that it is no longer a symbolic resource or descriptive technique but a rival to language (White 119). Joyce is not creating music from language or simply inserting music, however skillfully into the text; he is allowing the music to stand side by side with the words themselves.

However, the extent to which the words in the book are manipulated sometimes makes the musical allusions even harder to notice. On the other hand, by eliminating common words, the reader is forced to listen carefully to the aural qualities of the words that Joyce is creating, as "the eye often notes cacophony that the ear silently translates into sound" (Weaver 97). This cacophony is easily noted in just about any passage from the book: "Didn't you spot her in her windaug, wobbling up on an osiery chair, with a meusic before her all cunniform letters, pretending to ribble a reedy derg on a fiddle she bogan without a band on? Sure she can't fiddan a dee, with bow or abandon!" (Finnegan 198). However, this passage contains musical allusions as well as a musical quality within the text. Here, Anna Plurabelle Lee is being gossiped about as the washerwomen speculate that she cannot even read the cuneiform-like notation of music. If this is not insult enough, "derg" may imply "dirge," indicating that Anna cannot play a slow, death-like piece, let alone the high-spirited fiddle tunes that one normally associates with the violin.

The cuneiform reference remains significant through the book as music is addressed almost as a language of its own. The following phrase may seem to be referring merely to time, but Joyce adds a marginal note translating it to music: "Please stop if you're a B.C. minding missy, please do. But should you prefer A.D. stepplease" (Finnegan 272). In the margin is a treble clef depicting the notes B, C, A, and D, as if this sheds light on the meaning of this excerpt. Many of the marginal notes are in different languages, and certainly this note brings musical notation into that collection of written language. Joyce even composes something of

his own in this “musical language:”

“THE BALLAD OF PERSSE O’REILLY.”

The image shows a musical score for a song. It consists of four staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The lyrics are written below the notes. The lyrics are: "Have you heard of one Hump-ty Dump-ty how he fell with a roll and a rum-ble and curled up like Lord O-la-fa Crum-ple by the butt of the Mag-a-zine Wall of the Mag-a-zine Wall Hump, hel-met and all. Da Capo".

“Music cue” (44)

This song entails that combination of language and music. An author can try to combine forms within the language as much as he wants, but real harmony between the two is found most obviously in vocal work such as “The Ballad of Persse O’Reilly.” Through this song, Joyce was able to exactly articulate pitch and rhythm of the text, which is often extremely variable in prose. In addition, this piece is another example of operatic form known as the da capo aria. This form was extensively used in opera seria, of which Joyce was quite fond as well as appearing in “The Sirens” in *Ulysses*.

Through his career, Joyce became increasingly sophisticated in his merger of music and literature in his texts. While Joyce never attains literature that is music as some critics would like to claim, he certainly promoted the language of music, even leading musicians to pay attention to his work as well as literature enthusiasts. Ultimately, Joyce seems to focus upon sounds of language, allusions to music, and the strongly linked organizational forms of words and music. In his own words: “Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible” (*Ulysses* 37).

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