

Musical Responses to Joyce: A Selection of Poetry and Prose Settings

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The interest shown by Joyce in music and musicians has been amply repaid by the fascination of composers for his texts as subjects for music. While musicians setting Joyce's modernist counterpart, T. S. Eliot, have tended to look towards the later works, settings of Joyce are more evenly spread. *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* have generated a number of settings in styles which are very distant from Joyce's own musical predilections, and his first volume of poetry, *Chamber Music*, has had especially wide-ranging appeal. Although the same composers have set very early and later Joyce, settings tend to form two distinct groups—those of poetry and those of prose. The settings of poetry are generally straightforward in matching notes to individual words, even those by Luciano Berio, whereas Joyce's prose has elicited a wider and more experimental variety of responses. Besides its documentary function in exploring and comparing some little known settings of Joyce, this paper aims to show, through analysis of a selection of settings and their backgrounds, how the transmission of a verbal structure through a musical one can intensify and widen a reader's response to the original form. I also attempt to

demonstrate how Joyce's notably idiosyncratic verbal craft prompts a musician to employ procedures which are similar, or at least comparable, to these techniques in order to accommodate the text. Thus the responses of musicians to Joyce's use of language provide an alternative viewpoint from which to chart the trajectory of his literary career. It is, of course, impractical to present an analysis of every musical setting of words by Joyce, or pieces occasioned by his work, for there are, literally, hundreds of such pieces. I will select examples which are firstly, settings of actual words (excepting Boulez), secondly by composers whose work has been, or still is, broadly influential in many areas of the arts, and thirdly pieces which may enrich a reader's knowledge or appreciation of the poem or prose passage concerned.

I. Settings of Joyce's *Chamber Music* —Molyneux Palmer and Others

Chamber Music (1907), Joyce's earliest volume of poetry, was always considered by Joyce himself as suitable for musical treatment. T.S. Eliot, writing of Joyce's poems in an article for *The Listener* in 1943, said that "...they are the work of a man who conceived a lyric poem as something to be set to music" (Eliot, 446-7). The title says much about the extent to which music was a part of his life. It was not unusual for Joyce to compose melodies of his own and enlist friends to write out piano accompaniments for them—one example is "Bid Adieu," number 11 from *Chamber Music*, for which Edmund Pendleton, an American musician living in Paris, wrote the piano part. This was eventually published in Paris in 1949. The first music using a Joyce text to reach the public was from *Chamber Music*, a setting of 'O, it was out by Donnycarney' by Adolph Mann, published in 1910. Mann's setting of this poem is straightforward and restrained and, like Palmer's setting of the poem (see later in this article), suggests folk-song in the simplicity of its melody. Perhaps because of the careful attention to rhythm and the scrupulous

crafting of these poems, composers have generally responded with a respect for these elements and an awareness of the greater narrative which makes this collection a cycle of poems. The deceptive simplicity of the poems is an added difficulty for a composer wishing to set them to music. Otto Luening has also pointed out in his memories of Joyce that writing settings of *Chamber Music* was particularly challenging after a knowledge of such a different kind of writing as *Ulysses* (Martin, 35-48).

Among the examples of extensive settings from this collection two groups, those by Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer (1882-1957), and Samuel Barber (1910-1981), stand out. Palmer, an exact contemporary of Joyce, spent most of his adult life living in Ireland. The personal correspondence between Palmer and Joyce shows the latter's enthusiasm for the music, even though he never heard all of the pieces. Palmer's setting of these poems is almost the only one to be conceived as a full cycle (the American composer Ross Lee Finney has written a cycle for all 36 poems)—indeed, thirty two of the thirty six poems were set and the work divided into two parts with Joyce's thirteenth poem forming a bridge between them. This bi-partite structure, together with the narrative sequence given the poems by Joyce's brother, Stanislaus, places Palmer's setting within the great tradition of song-cycles by Schubert, Schumann and Brahms. The arrangement of the poems in *Chamber Music* which forms the narrative sequence was made by Stanislaus Joyce, as detailed in the letter of 09/10/06 (*Letters II*, 172).

However, the music did not begin life as a cycle but as five isolated songs, the composition of which followed a letter from Palmer to Joyce of 1907 asking permission to set the recently published poetry. The five songs were sent to Joyce in Trieste in 1909, and gained his approval: "I am much honoured by your setting of my five songs... I hope you will find a good singer for them as your music needs to be well sung" (*Letters II*, 227). The five poems set were 'Strings in the earth and air', 'I would in that sweet bosom be', 'Who goes amid the green wood', 'O cool is the valley' and 'Winds of May.' Settings of three more poems followed—'At that hour', 'Gentle lady' and 'O, it was out by Donnycarney'—which Joyce liked

even more, and there then began a long battle over the publication of the songs. Only a few of the songs had public performances and the cycle of thirty two was never published in Palmer's lifetime (he died in 1957), and without Joyce's expression of interest in them it is doubtful whether the music would have survived at all. Other letters follow in which Joyce tries to organise performances and insists on the quality of Palmer's work. Following the positive reception of the first eight poems, Joyce tried to organise performances of his personal favourites—in Zurich in 1919, at a concert of Irish music to be given by the baritone Augustus Milner, and in Paris by the renowned tenor, John McCormack, for whose voice Joyce wanted future songs to be written in the tenor range (see *Letters* III, 35). He also wrote to Palmer asking him to set the whole of *Chamber Music*, claiming he had conceived them as a "suite of songs" and that, had he been a musician, he would have set them himself (*Letters* I, 67). Nearly twenty years later Joyce asked Palmer if he had set any of *Pomes Penyeach* (*Letters* III, 167) Palmer was to spend almost thirty years on the composition of the cycle and, next to three cantatas and two operas based on Irish folklore, it became a major opus. Yet publication never occurred, Joyce failing to persuade Palmer to publish (possibly through the latter's lack of funds) and eventually losing contact. The two never met, communicating only by letter. Joyce probably never knew of the completion of the cycle.

Although the manuscript was thought to be lost, following Palmer's death it was traced and bought from the composer's sisters by an American Joyce scholar in 1958. It then joined the university library at Carbondale at the University of Southern Illinois and was resurrected for performance as part of the Joyce centenary celebrations in 1982, and again for a BBC Radio Three broadcast in 1987, before eventual publication by the American scholar Myra Russel in 1991.

Joyce's own reactions to musical settings of his work show a particular sensitivity to the way a composer responds to the detail of words. In one letter to Palmer of 1909 he admires the "setting of the parentheses in the first one and the way you reproduce the change of stress in the second one" (*Letters* II, 227). He praises Palmer's attention to the detail of the poems—both within them and the

thematic relationships between them—and singles out ‘At That Hour’ for its sensitivity to the poet’s intentions—“The rendering of ‘Play on, invisible harps’, & c. follows the change of the verse splendidly” (*Letters* I, 67). These kinds of organic relationships of parts to a whole, to be seen in all of *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, are a trademark of Joyce’s increasing tendency to employ complex and dense structures, and suggest an indebtedness to musical structures and procedures he was always fascinated by. It was also Joyce’s own intention to effect an ideal marriage of words with their implied music in these poems in the manner of a renaissance ayre—the word “air” in its repetitions forms a kind of motif running through the poetry. Joyce once asked for a lute to be made for him by Arnold Dolmetsch, the instrument-maker, but a harpsichord was suggested instead as being more practical. The title page of the first edition of *Chamber Music* features a design incorporating a harpsichord on a classical stage set with columns, around which is wrapped fabric with a musical stave motif. The harpsichord suggests a throwback to earlier music, perhaps to the Elizabethan period of domestic music making, whilst the classical architecture suggests balance and proportion. These seem to be important attributes of these poems, which Joyce and composers who have set them have responded to.

Another favourite was the setting of ‘O, it was out by Donneycarney’ (Joyce admired its “delicacy”), which he wanted sung at the 1919 Zurich concert and which he compared favourably to settings by Eugene Goossens (*Letters* III, 344). One other reason behind Joyce’s enthusiasm for a complete cycle was the poor fortune of the poems themselves—in the first ten years following composition, fewer than 100 copies of *Chamber Music* sold. It is no surprise that Joyce wished to be kept informed of the public response to Palmer’s settings.

The music Palmer wrote for these poems is simple and direct, and mirrors the charm achieved through simplicity of Joyce’s originals. The tunes are undemanding and the idiom traditional and, at times, such as in ‘O sweetheart, hear you’, and ‘O, it was out by Donneycarney,’ the sounds produced are akin to those of folk-song. It is likely that for this quality in his music, Palmer was influenced by Charles

Villiers Stanford, who made extensive use of Irish folk tunes in his own music and who was Palmer's teacher at the Royal College of Music. The mood of the music follows the order of the poems, as arranged by Stanislaus Joyce, moving from the unknowing delight at falling in love, to the troubles which the outside world brings to that love. Youthful optimism, in the manner of the sunnier side of Schubert, ends in isolation and despair, in both the simple major-key accompaniment of the Brahmsian 'Sleep now, O sleep now,' and in the unexpectedly nightmarish menace of the final two songs, in which a G major tonality turns to G minor, and the final question, 'Why have you left me alone?' hangs hauntingly over minimal accompaniment. The movement through the seasons which characterises the cycle is audible in the changing moods of Palmer's settings.

Palmer also responds to Joyce's fascination with physical sound, so much a part of *Ulysses*. Besides the recognition of the wintry waters and winds in the piano part in 'All day I hear the noise of waters,' and the obvious thundering and clanging in 'I hear an army,' Palmer sensitively evokes the sounds of the harp's plucked strings in 'At that hour when all things have repose' in the piano's arpeggiated chords. Other details include the lightly skipping sounds of nature in 'Who goes amid the green wood,' and the sighing of the trees in descending arpeggiated figures in 'From dewy dreams, my soul, arise,' as well as the composer sharing Joyce's own amusement at the chamber pot joke (said to be behind the title of the collection) alluded to through the tinkling piano in 'Thou leanest to the shell of night.'

There is more to Palmer's work than just the detail of individual songs. Joyce's idea of a "suite" of songs, the organicism idea again, is honoured in the significant key relationships and thematic references between the songs. In 'At that hour' there is a brief recalling of the melodic material of the first song, simply because Joyce too revisits the same ideas—"Soft sweet music in the air above, / And in the earth below" (III) and "Strings in the earth and air / Make music sweet" (I). Evidence that this is a song-cycle, and not a collection of isolated pieces, appears at several points: the double setting of 'Go seek her out', at the end of Part One and at the

start of Part Two, though slightly modified the second time in the repetition of material from 'The twilight turns from amethyst' (Part One) in 'Love came to us in time gone by' (Part Two), as the protagonist recalls a happier past when love was new (reflecting the Blakean tendencies of the collection in Joyce's opposition of innocence and experience); and in the preference for through-composed settings in the second part. This latter feature, where several songs follow each other without a pause (examples are nos. 21-23, 24-27, and the final two songs), requires Palmer to write increasingly elaborate bridge passages in the piano accompaniment—notably the dramatic link between nos. 26 and 27, and that between the last two songs in which the sudden triplets set the scene for the violent conclusion in evoking the sound of approaching horses. This procedure suggests a Wagnerian sense of continuity, which is also present in the song-cycles of Othmar Schoeck, whose cycle *Lebendig Begraben* (much admired by Joyce) forms a continuous whole out of settings of many different poems. The vocal lines in these settings from the second half of Palmer's cycle are also more complex in shape and more troubled in mood.

Joyce's enthusiasm for these settings by Palmer clearly stems from their simplicity and suggestion of traditional elements of Irish folk-music. The poet's painstakingly accurate meters and rhyme schemes when writing these poems are perhaps behind Palmer's uncomplicated response to them and may also have prompted so many other composers after Palmer to set them—Eugene Goossens (who set six of the poems, not in narrative sequence, and concentrating on the latter end of the cycle), Samuel Barber, Karel Szymanowski (his *Four Songs*, op. 54 from 1949; short settings with no evident narrative), Luciano Berio, and David del Tredici among them. There is also a reduced "cycle" by the Dutch composer Rudolf Mengelberg, nephew of the conductor Willem Mengelberg, dating from the early 1950's. Nine poems are set in sequence and the cycle is dedicated to the conductor Bruno Walter. This wide range of musical responses to Joyce's poetry is perhaps remarkable in view of the fact that the poems contain little, a few portmanteau words excepted, which anticipates Joyce's later prose style. It is this later prose

writing which has attracted most musical attention from a structural perspective.

Another Anglo-Irish composer, E. J. Moeran, is one of the musicians who has responded to the cyclical element in *Chamber Music*. Although he only set seven poems, published in 1930 as *Seven Poems by James Joyce*, Moeran keeps Joyce's order, to maintain the narrative, writing songs which become progressively longer and more reflective. Indeed, as claimed in a letter to Palmer, it was partly Joyce's intention in writing the poems that they be set as a cycle (*Letters I*, 67), even though the eventual order was fixed by Stanislaus Joyce. A note in Moeran's score insists that if more than one song is performed, they must be done in sequence (Moeran ii). There is also a flashback to the first song in the last, 'Now, O now, in this brown land' (not set by Palmer), which recalls the simple rocking rhythm used in 'Strings in the earth and air'—6/8 in the first song, now in 6/4. This is the longest of the songs, and to mirror the more complex feelings associated with the end of the cycle, and the end of the love affair, Moeran breaks up the phrase lengths in the second stanza so they do not always correspond to the line lengths. As in Palmer's settings, the vocal lines of the later poems become more agitated, lingering over individual words, such as "kiss" in Moeran's setting of the fifth poem, and "heart" in the sixth. Even so, Moeran is not able to resist reacting to the picturesque details of nature in 'Rain has fallen' (neither is Barber in his setting) as the gently dripping accompaniment shows. The settings of 'O, it was out by Donnycarney' are quite different. In contrast to Palmer's folk-song approach, Moeran begins uncertainly with harmonic wandering in the piano part and a vocal line which sounds nearly atonal until joined by the accompaniment to confirm the harmony.

Samuel Barber set three poems from *Chamber Music* as a single group, published in 1939 as *Three Songs for Voice and Piano*, and chose to illustrate the restless, wintry end of the cycle in 'Rain has fallen,' 'Sleep now' and 'I hear an army.' The songs were written in two versions, one for "medium" and one for "high" voice. In the first song there is a build-up towards the word "heart," similar to that heard in the Moeran setting, and accompaniments are either stark and

minimal, or nightmarishly dramatic. Even though these songs do not form part of a cycle, they are worth mentioning for the striking setting of 'I hear an army.' Like Palmer, Barber sees this poem as a dramatic culmination and treats it accordingly. The violent language certainly distinguishes it from the rest of the poems in *Chamber Music*, perhaps what prompted Ezra Pound to anthologise the poem in *Des Imagistes* (1914). The last stanza of Barber's 'I hear an army' recalls a Schubertian journey of death in the headlong galloping effects of the piano part. There are frequent changes of metre in the first twelve bars and the music proceeds in a noisy and disturbed manner before relenting for the words "My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?" (marked "*p*[iano] with sudden intensity"), only to rise again for the final gruff *fortissimo* and *sforzando* assault on the final line. This is in brazen contrast to Palmer's sense of desolation here. However, in common with Palmer there is abundant contrast in the song, giving the impression of a very short cantata or operatic scene, as if many short movements have been put together. The escalation of emotions through Joyce's cycle seems to find expression in this setting, despite the fact that only two other songs precede it. Once again, the medium of music is seen to expose, or at least shortcut, hidden complexities in the apparently uncomplicated text.

It is likely that Barber read Joyce widely as he was attracted to more than just the early poems. The three songs from *Chamber Music* are not the only settings Barber made of Joyce texts. 'Solitary Hotel' (1968) is a short song with words from the Ithaca episode of *Ulysses*, more like a miniature scene with its harmonies suggesting jazz and dramatic contrasts in pace and dynamics. There are three further settings from *Chamber Music*, published posthumously, and two short settings from *Finnegans Wake*, *Nuvoletta* (1947), in which Barber seems to enjoy the puns with words as much as Joyce did, and *Fadograph of a Yestern Scene* (1971).

Perhaps it is to be expected that these composers have set *Chamber Music* in a conventional idiom—neither Palmer nor Moeran were radical experimentalists, and Barber was yet to write music with the avant-garde technique of his later

works. Luciano Berio's three songs from this collection are also early works, but although they adumbrate elements of his later, more experimental style and the idiom is serial, the matching of words to notes is straightforward, probably owing to Joyce's insistent rhythms. Dating from 1953 they are scored for voice (that of Berio's first wife, Cathy Berberian) and a small instrumental ensemble of harp, clarinet and cello. There is no cyclical element as the poems chosen are 'Strings in the earth' (number 1), 'All day I hear the noise of waters' (number 35) and then 'Winds of May' (number 9). It is clear that Berio is responding to physical sound in Joyce's poems—both to the idea of sound and the sounds of the words themselves. The first two poems contain many references to sound and the third has a strong rhythmic momentum. The "invisible harps" of Joyce's third poem are real here as that instrument opens the first song, followed by the voice, clarinet and then cello. At the words "fingers straying / Upon an instrument" the sounds are purely instrumental as the voice is instructed to hum along with the trio—'*quasi bocca chiusa*,' as if in blending with them the voice has become an extra instrument.

Berio entitles the next song 'Monotone' as the vocal line is, indeed, a monotone, apart from sudden glides up and downwards at "To and fro." Much is made of Joyce's alliterating "m" sounds in the first stanza (again '*bocca chiusa*'), which are the sounds within the poem, the more effective in the voice for being on one note. The accompanying slides on the cello are an illustration of the sounds outside the poem, those of the desolate waters which offer no solace to the dejected lover.

'Winds of May' is an alternation of speech and song and a response to the rhythmic elements of the poem. Berio evidently feels there is no other adequate way of presenting the first six lines other than as speech rhythms, so he composes a short instrumental prelude to compensate. Following these spoken lines, which are to be delivered in alternating bars of 3/4 and 5/4 rhythms, the next section—'Welladay! Welladay!...'—is sung, only to be succeeded by the final chuckling half-line, '... when love is away!' in half-speech. A brief instrumental postlude affirms the symmetry. It is significant that Berio is moving away from a conventional setting of words to notes at definite pitches, even in these poems.

Embedded in Joyce's apparently simple verses is a sensitivity to pure phonology which Berio responds to by foregrounding sound as opposed to sense in these settings. In his setting of text from *Ulysses*, discussed below, Berio adopts an utterly different approach to the problem of making music from words.

II. Settings of Major Joyce Texts—Seiber and Berio

It seems to be more useful to discuss settings of Joyce's poetry and settings of his prose separately, even if this means considering the same composer twice in different sections, simply because musical reaction to the prose has been significantly different in nearly every area. Two major figures of the musical avant-garde, Luciano Berio and Pierre Boulez, have used *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* as sources and/or texts for their music, together with John Cage, who worked with the latter novel. The reactions of these composers have been largely conceptual or acoustically focused, to the extent that the term "setting" can no longer be meaningfully applied to them. An attempt at more conventional settings has been made by the Hungarian composer, Mátyás Seiber (1905-1960). I will avoid too much reference to *Finnegans Wake* as music occasioned by this work requires its own separate article.

Seiber has found Joyce's prose to be pregnant with suggestion for the serialist composer. As well as writing a cantata based on passages from *Ulysses*, Seiber also published *Three Fragments from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1958), twelve-tone music for speaker, mixed (wordless) chorus and instrumental ensemble. The texts are lifted from poetic or dramatic sections of the novel—the vision on the beach ("A veiled sunlight lit up faintly the grey sheet of water...") and "He closed his eyes in the languor of sleep...") for the first and third movements, and the vision of Hell ("The last day had come...") for the second (*Portrait* 167, 173 and 113, respectively). It is not surprising that the scene on the beach should preoccupy the composer so much, as Joyce's writing is extremely sensitive both to

colour and to what it is like to be aware of the aesthetic significance of nature and to be articulating this at the same time.

As in Seiber's earlier cantata from *Ulysses*, the treatment of the words in these pieces from *Portrait* is conservative. The wordless chorus punctuates the speaker's lines in the first movement as the clarinet solo represents the sound of the "nebulous music" and the westward voyaging clouds. Choral shrieks are accompanied by violent and discordant percussion in the second movement ('Feroce'), and Seiber requires the speaker's delivery to be high-pitched and excited, and the woodwind to play shrilly as they imitate blasts on the angelical trumpet. The third movement returns to a slow tempo as Joyce's "distant pools" are reflected in the fading chorus. The result is a miniature cycle, slow-fast-slow, suggesting an A-B-A' structure, whereby the central section exists as a means of modifying the outer sections. In returning to the beach vision from Joyce's text, Seiber treats the hell-fire passage as interpolation, rather than separate episode, another angle from which to view the visionary material. Indeed, more than creating a structural whole from passages of text which inter-relate, or focusing on individual words for their significance in the novel, it seems to be the deliberate contrast in Joyce's style of language which interests Seiber most. Using contrasting styles of writing for different sections of a piece is one aspect of text-setting which ensures a satisfying musical whole, and a return to the opening material can reveal the contrasting section as a flashback in Stephen's mind, or as a means of reassessing the reflective text in the light of experience—here, extra knowledge given to the listener about Stephen's past.

Once again, a composer has used a narrative structure in setting Joyce, even though in this case the architecture is the composer's own. *Ulysses*, a cantata for tenor solo, chorus and orchestra, dates from a decade earlier (1948) and is a large-scale setting of prose, lasting around 45 minutes. There are five movements, suggesting an arch-form, and the text is taken exclusively from the 'Ithaca' episode of the novel. There is a part for tenor solo voice, which weaves in and out of the choral texture in a late-romantic manner, and the fourth movement even has the

nineteenth-century sounding title ‘Nocturne—Intermezzo,’ though Seiber may simply be playing along with Joyce’s sense of humour in employing elaborate language to describe Bloom and Stephen’s nocturnal street conversation.

In the first three movements the tenor solo performs the role of questioner in the mock-catechistic dialogue, the chorus providing the answers. Their roles are briefly transposed in the fourth movement, and there follows thereafter a blending together of soloist and chorus, significant if we are to notice the reappearance of the “heaventree” motif in Joyce’s text and the emergence of the theme of Utopia in the last section. Although Seiber cuts Joyce’s text slightly, the original narrative order is maintained. The piece has its own musical logic in the return of the opening material and dark atmosphere in the last movement (a technique also used in the later *Three Fragments*), suggesting the symmetry of the arch. There is also a repetition in this movement of a significant climax from the first movement—on “stars” in the first and on “Utopia” in the fifth, with similar musical material used for both—followed by a closing section for wordless chorus, as if the words have been subsumed by night. There are many examples of imitative and fugal writing in the piece, especially in the second and, apex-like, third movements, though there is nothing to suggest that this is born of anything in Joyce’s writing beyond the surface meanings of the words, denoting the disparateness of infinite matter in the universe. The ‘Nocturne’ fourth movement illustrates the words atmospherically (“Emergence of nocturnal crepuscular animals...”) with orchestration redolent of Bartók’s “night-music” sounds. Effects include high woodwind, string harmonics, harp and fragments of percussion. Overall, there is little that is radically experimental musically about this piece, contrary to what might have been expected from the choice of text.

As can be seen in an extract from *Music Survey* from 1951, Seiber was interested in Joyce’s method of construction and the recurrence of motifs within a text, qualities we have seen even in *Chamber Music*. His comments on *Ulysses* are testimony to the innate musicality of Joyce’s text: “The formal aspect of construction, the verbal virtuosity, the relevance of certain recurring motives which

reminded me of musical composition, fascinated me” (Seiber “A Note on *Ulysses*” 263). This particular section of *Ulysses* is an unusual and challenging text to choose—the experimentation with styles in recent episodes all but disappears as Joyce rejects description for cataloguing and analysing phenomena from the natural and scientific worlds. Then within this strange poetry of facts, the line “The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit” appears like a visitor from another style. This line, a reference to the Ascension of Christ into Heaven, represented by Stephen as he leaves Bloom’s house for his own, develops a theological parallel between the two main characters, and the Father and Son of Man. In the “Circe” episode there are parallels with the Crucifixion when Stephen is rejected by Lynch (Judas), and is knocked down by Privates Carr and Compton in front of the angry crowd. The Father-Son relationship is then pursued in the “Eumaeus” episode as Bloom takes responsibility for the wounded Stephen, and the two share discussions. The interaction develops into a fusion of identities in “Ithaca,” in which the names Stoom and Blephen are first used (*U* 17.529-31), and eventually to the passage set by Seiber in which the sky becomes Heaven (*U* 17.1040 onwards). It seems Seiber chose this section of the novel largely for the poetic quality of this line, yet what follows is symbolic of *Ulysses* as a whole. Bloom’s meditations on the vastness of the universe, the possibility of life existing on other planets, and man’s place within the totality of history, seem momentarily to normalise the analytical style and render it suitable to its subject. For a moment we are given a microcosm of the novel—two figures wandering around a large city over the course of hundreds of pages and happening to meet—within a macrocosmic frame of reference to geological periods, galaxies and constellations, and mathematical calculation. With the Ascension theme marking a significant point in the Christian symbolism of the novel also at this point, there is evidence to show that by progressively integrating the tenor solo into the vocal textures, as if mirroring the theme of man against an external mass of matter and man as part of that matter (the Utopia section), Seiber’s music is responding to and illuminating the importance of this passage in the novel as a whole.

If Seiber's cantata represents a relatively conventional way of setting text to music, and responds to the role of a specific passage within Joyce's overall scheme, Luciano Berio, in *Thema (Omaggio à Joyce)* from 1958, a musical rendering of words from the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses*, creates something more radical. However, the text that Berio chooses to "set," the opening 'overture' or prelude to the chapter, is problematic semantically as it only represents in contracted form meanings which will later become apparent in the body of the chapter. This is a response to the pure sonic effects of Joyce's writing and an attempt to exaggerate and reorder certain phonetic elements of the text for presentation as real sound. In his settings from *Chamber Music*, Berio showed interest in the physical sound of Joyce's words, and this work goes a stage further.

Thema (Omaggio à Joyce) is an electro-acoustic composition, assembled on tape from pre-recorded natural sounds. The natural sounds are the voice of the singer Cathy Berberian reading part of the prelude to the 'Sirens' episode, fragments of which are superimposed on themselves. Berio collects together similar sounds from different words and syllables, ordering them accordingly into scales of vowels and consonants, and then in terms of volume, so that the original text is completely broken up and distorted. This often makes Joyce's words hard to recognise. When they are decipherable, the words are meaningless because of the absence of context that Joyce later provides in the novel. The result is a continuous wash of sound.

The title is perhaps significant as the text selected is the ultimate choice to represent Joyce's interest in the links between sounds and words. This piece is a response to Joyce the musical writer, rather than to a particular text by Joyce. There is no interpretation of words or attention given to their semantic associations, but a recognition of the sound potential of Joyce's arrangement of words, once the composer is freed from their original contexts. The structure of this seven-minute piece is largely tri-partite, with a beginning and ending based around recognisable words as the basis of sound experiments, and a central section in which it is all but impossible to hear the original text. The sounds originate from words even though they cannot be heard as such. Although the piece sounds electronic at some

points, all the sounds—birds chirping, wind, insect vibrations, the flow of electricity—are in fact distortions of the human voice produced by accelerating, superimposing and looping. Syllables and phonemes are clustered together, single phonemes developed and merged into others. This is congruent with Joyce’s original—phonemes such as /s/ (“soft,” “stars,” “rose,” “*Sonmez*,” “sail,” “plash,” “Hiss”), /u:/ (“blew,” “Blue,” “Bloom”) and /c:/ (“absorbs,” “War,” “All,” “Horn”) are lengthened then abstracted into other sounds. Consonant clusters, such as /bl/, are also used (“Blue Bloom”). One of Berio’s compositional methods is to present one phoneme through a recognisable word, /s/ in “spiked,” and then merge it with another which then takes over as the dominant sound, /u:/ in “Bloom.” This latter sound is then developed into patterns divorced from the original. However, for the listener the sound often arrives before the recognisable word it is derived from—“Bloom” here starts as a vibration. This is a little like hearing a variation before the theme and adds to the complexity of the piece.

In *Thema*, Berio is questioning the distinction between sound and word. The piece is an exploration of the border ground between these two definitions: at what point does a word become pure sound, and vice versa? But this is, essentially, an extension of something Joyce has already suggested in the printed text. The prelude itself presents the abstract before the concrete, the essence before the whole, and focuses the reader’s attention on similarities of sound between words, rather than their meanings or associations. In a more detailed example, a fragment like “Goodgod henev erheard inall” (*U* 11.29) engages in a similar game with words and sounds. The grouping of words is unfamiliar to the reader, who is forced to “hear” them in order to catch the sense. Joyce has written sounds, not words, but sounds which have meaning. Berio extends this joke into actual sound.

It could be argued that the musical element has already been written by Joyce himself. *Thema* is really a *reading* of Joyce’s original words that is dissolved into sustained sound according to parameters which are already inherent in the text. Thus the reader of *Ulysses* is challenged by this piece to consider whether, by silent reading, he is truly reading the words, and whether “reading” and “words” can have

their full meaning without being heard. Berio makes a case for a deeper understanding of this section of *Ulysses*, often said to be nonsensical without the rest of the chapter. By turning it into music, he has given the words a temporal dimension, in which the relationships between the words may be better appreciated. The silent reader of this prelude is limited by his own (irregular) speed of reading and may thus miss certain sonic connections between words. Even someone reading aloud at a regular speed would not be able to sustain the sounds long enough for them to resonate towards the succeeding ones. Berio himself said he wished to

establish a new relationship between speech and music, in which a continuous metamorphosis of one into the other can be developed. Thus, through a reorganization and transformation of the phonetic and semantic elements of Joyce's text, Mr Bloom's day in Dublin... briefly takes another direction, where it is no longer possible to distinguish between word and sound, between sound and noise, between poetry and music, but where we once more become aware of the relative nature of these distinctions... (Murphy 6)

Berio also claims he is transforming a poetic experience into a musical one. Yet he may also be reinterpreting the poetry, provided we are to see the text thus, once the reader returns to the printed page after listening. Seiber, in his *Ulysses* cantata, enhances certain poetic sections of the text by focusing on the ideas which they suggest semantically. Berio, on the other hand, deliberately avoids the semantics of Joyce's text (as his choice of text reflects) and starts from a base which is purely phonological. If there are any semantic constructs built around these, they are questions about the nature of language derived from Joyce's verbal arrangement.

Berio's *Thema* is a dissolution of text into sound, or an intensification of sound already implied. Pierre Boulez, a composer who has attempted to incorporate the dense syntax of Mallarmé's poetry into his own work, has also reacted to mathematical and structural issues in Joyce's prose. Although he was interested principally in *Finnegans Wake*, a text beyond the scope of this article, Boulez's ideas are relevant in a small way to some of the procedures used in *Ulysses*. His

preoccupation with theoretical models such as the twelve-tone system, which he adopted in 1945, and interest in a variety of styles has made his music impenetrable for many, yet the Joyce reader may find an affinity with the frequent games with sounds and numbers in his music. Boulez has not, to date, used any specific Joyce text in his music but since being introduced to *Finnegans Wake* in 1949 by John Cage, another Joyce enthusiast, has admired its self-awareness, structural complexity and open-endedness (Samuels 46). This latter feature relates to the circularity of the whole text and the extent to which a reader's interpretation of a particular word or phrase may determine or influence the meaning of subsequent material. Similar choices are open to the performer of Boulez's music in examples where the piece is not a fully-finished structure totally controlled by its author, but open to reorganisation and reordering:

I find the concept of works as independent fragments increasingly alien, and I have a marked preference for large structural groups centred on a cluster of determinate possibilities (Joyce's influence again). (Nattiez 148)

This procedure is in evidence in the *Third Piano Sonata*, a composition also influenced by the visual arts, and whose five sections and their sub-sections may be performed in several different combinations according to preference. Although all of the musical material is fully worked-out, the conclusion of the piece is determined by the performer's choice of beginning. Each performance must differ according to choices made spontaneously by the performer. Boulez's deliberate delay in completing the piece after its initial 1958 appearance has resonances with the original *Work in Progress* title for *Finnegans Wake*. The 'open-work' aesthetic, previously alien to Boulez, may have been a reaction to the music of John Cage, himself highly influenced by Joyce.

The number of permutations for performance of this sonata is practically infinite, for the third movement—'Constellation'—is made up of many short fragments, none more than half a minute in duration, which must all be performed without repetition, but in any order. In the sonata as a whole one may choose to

move from complexity to simplicity, or vice-versa, or any other combination which could yield a radically different interpretation of the work. In a further clarification of this idea Boulez has commented:

It must be our concern in the future to follow the examples of Joyce and Mallarmé and to jettison the concept of a work as a simple journey starting with a departure and ending with an arrival... As against this classical procedure the idea of a maze seems to me the most important recent innovation in the creative sphere... The modern conception of a maze in a work of art is certainly one of the most considerable advances in Western thought, and one upon which it is impossible to go back. (Nattiez 144-5)

Musicians long before Boulez have attempted to break away from the directional mode of composing, and Boulez's remarks recall the modernist interest in compositional models from non-western sources. But the fact that literary structures have here prompted an interest in chance procedures, even if they are "organised" chances, is reflected in the titles of some sections of Boulez's sonata – 'Glose,' 'Commentaire,' 'Texte.' Its composer has actually commented that in the writing of the sonata "It may well be that literary affiliations played a more important part than purely musical considerations" (Nattiez 143). The value of literature here is not its existence as a referential source, or as text to be set to music, an exercise which Boulez considers superficial, but in its architecture: "...I believe that some writers at the present time have gone much further than composers in the organisation, the actual mental structure, of their works" (Nattiez 142).

Joyce does not directly offer such possibilities of open-endedness in *Ulysses* as Boulez does in the Third Sonata, but comes close to suggesting them in the 'Wandering Rocks' episode. This also has something of the labyrinth about it: Joyce even bought and played a game called "Labyrinth" during the composition of the episode in Zurich (Budgen 125). The order of this chapter's nineteen fragments is not especially important since they often tell the same story from different

viewpoints. However, although the reader to an extent has freedom of movement here, in theory being able, if not instructed, to read in any order, this does not change the interpretation of the action or offer variant meanings of the entire episode. Frank Budgen's description of Joyce's working methods in 'Wandering Rocks' suggest the mathematical precision of design rather than literary crafting: "To see Joyce at work on the *Wandering Rocks* was to see an engineer at work with compass and slide-rule, a surveyor with theodolite and measuring chain..." (Budgen 123). The question of circularity, and the extent to which the order of the written material is exclusively within the author's control, are issues which become more relevant in *Finnegans Wake*.

III. Joyce, Schoeck and Antheil

It is perhaps inevitable that composers have reacted to Joyce's later work through more complex and abstract compositional methods than were used for the early poems. But what of Joyce's own response? There is only limited evidence of Joyce's reactions to the settings of early works. Joyce was not, of course, alive at the time of the serial compositions to respond to them, and even his reactions to the early settings seem more like enthusiasm tempered with diplomacy, than carefully considered criticism. His musical interests and opinions regarding word setting are perhaps better represented by what is known about his association with the Swiss composer Othmar Schoeck, and with George Antheil, both of whom he admired.

In 1935, in Zurich, Joyce attended a performance of a lengthy suite of 14 songs for solo baritone and large orchestra, set by Othmar Schoeck (1886-1954). The piece was entitled *Lebendig Begraben* (1926), the text of which narrated the macabre experience of a man buried alive and his vain struggle for life, based on poems by Gottfried Keller. Schoeck set many leading poets to music, including Mörike, Hesse and Eichendorff, and was the last of the major nineteenth-century

lieder composers to write song-cycles. Joyce so admired Schoeck's handling of the texts in *Lebendig Begraben* that he was moved to translate one of Keller's more bizarre poems, 'Da hab' ich gar die Rose aufgegessen' (no. 8 in Schoeck's cycle), in which the buried man eats a rose thrown into his coffin. This translation was itself later set by Samuel Barber (Knowles 107-49). From Joyce's letters there is truly lavish praise heaped on Schoeck as a writer of vocal music—"... he stands head and shoulders over Stravinsky and Antheil as composer for orchestra and voice ..." (*Letters I*, 356) The two met in Zurich, Schoeck being a figure who attracted attention more from writers around him than from other composers. The piece, whose publication post-dates *Ulysses* by only four years, may have attracted Joyce because of its stream-of-consciousness-like construction. All the songs run into each other without a break, giving the effect of a sustained monologue with orchestra. There is no real organicism in the piece as the motifs develop within the songs rather than between them, yet the long spell of continuous music sung by the same singer gives the impression of a single mental narrative.

Despite the above dismissal of George Antheil, Joyce was closely connected with this American composer living in Paris. It is even claimed by Antheil that Joyce wrote articles for French magazines about his music (Knowles 94). Joyce and Antheil worked for some time on an 'electric opera,' "Mr. Bloom and the Cyclops," which was to be based on the 'Cyclops' episode in *Ulysses*, but the project was later abandoned. The idea may have come from discussions with Philipp Jarnach, Joyce's neighbour and musical secretary to Ferruccio Busoni, and an influential figure on the musical content in *Ulysses*, and with Busoni himself, whilst Joyce was in Zurich, a period in which his reading and social activities were particularly rich and varied (Luening 194-7). Unusually for Joyce the sound world was percussive rather than melodic, the piece being scored for 16 mechanical pianos, 8 xylophones, gramophone recordings of orchestral music, 4 bass drums, 4 buzzers, 2 electric motors and amplified voice with chorus. This seems to reflect Antheil's fascination with technology more than Joyce's opinions on word-setting, and recalls the composer's earlier *Ballet Mécanique*. The singers were to be directed off-stage,

their words mimed by dancers. Indeed, one of the reasons the opera was unfinished may have concerned the lack of suitable technology at the time to realise Antheil's ambitions. In the three pages of score which survive, there are only three bars of music and one sentence of text (some seven seconds' worth in total), a situation which makes any useful commentary on how the words were set impractical.

IV. Conclusion

Readily identifiable in the work of composers who have set texts by Joyce is a definite pattern to the choices of text and methods of setting. Responses to the early poetry respect Joyce's concern for metre and simplicity, as well as any narrative element, and these have been particularly wide-ranging, detailed and sensitive. They also pick up on Joyce's predilection for organicism in even the simplest forms. Settings of Joyce's prose are divided between the camps of Seiber and Berio (one might also include John Cage if *Finnegans Wake* is to be considered), the latter's engagement with more abstract methods of setting a text to musical sounds questioning whether the words on the page are contained solely within a literary identity.

If a general conclusion is to be reached in terms of the suitability of literature for musical treatment, it is perhaps that the more evident it is that the text for setting has a structure in which individual parts form a whole, by organic development, the more transparent the music will be for analysis. A composer setting more than seven or eight poems from *Chamber Music*, as Palmer did for example, will have a framework of a progressing narrative with which to work, and opportunities to re-use early material later on to indicate development, or to link songs together where there is a clear continuity of action or mood. It is, obviously, a much more arbitrary and subjective task to analyse a setting of a single poem or lyric abstracted from a larger work, or of short prose extracts from a novel. For a musical setting of a text to have meaning beyond that intended by the author of

the words, the possibilities are greatly multiplied when the composer employs the kind of self-referentiality practised by authors themselves (Joyce in *Ulysses* is a prime example), by setting up patterns of musical material and breaking them, or by assigning material to specific words, characters or themes and using them in new combinations.

Perhaps because post-modern musical composition has more completely severed its roots from historical models, there is more of a trade in abstract ideas and the language to describe these, than in materials between literature, music and art. Olivier Messiaen, in *Couleurs de la cite céleste* (1963), even directs the performers to play certain “colours,” suggesting that music has gone beyond just analogy with another discipline, but has absorbed its language and ideas to the degree that the music’s identity as music is no longer unquestioned. This has been seen to be partly the case with Berio’s setting from *Ulysses*. The novel maintains a firm grip on its identity as literature, the music less so. This is, perhaps, a noticeable difference between modernist and post-modernist aesthetics, besides also marking a distinction between *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, the former keen to retain the tradition it inherited whilst creating radically new structures to stretch the identity of the genre, but always managing to contain this identity. Even so, the fact that *Ulysses* is so often treated as a set of words to be listened to and interpreted by the ear (by ubiquitous reading groups), seems to suggest that Joyce had already set himself to music.

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Abstract

Musical Responses to Joyce: A Selection of Poetry and Prose Settings

Julian Hall

Setting Joyce's poetry and prose to music is an activity which has occupied composers not only since his death, but also during Joyce's lifetime. By selecting a representative sample of settings of Joyce's poetry and prose for discussion, this paper attempts to show how a setting of a text addresses some of the difficulties a reader encounters concerning its composition and interpretation, as well as how a musical setting might enrich literary understanding. *Chamber Music* has been chosen as the most generally representative poetry text, and settings in which Joyce had an active role in assessing (mainly those by Palmer) have been considered, as well as later ones unknown to him. Settings from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* (those of *Finnegans Wake* are beyond the scope of this paper) provide an opportunity for showing how Joyce's experiments in prose parallel, or even anticipate, some of the procedures used in a musical language, and begin to question the identity of the text itself as literature. Besides addressing these more abstract issues, the paper is also intended as a chance to expose musical settings which are worthwhile in themselves, and which the author feels both reflect Joyce's achievements in each literary genre and demonstrate his wide-ranging musical knowledge and interests.

■ **Key words** : James Joyce, Music, *Ulysses*, *Chamber Music* settings, Music and Literature, Music and Poetry

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