

James Joyce – the Slender Irish Tenor

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A photograph of James Joyce at the piano, 1939, by Gisèle Freund.

In 1904, a grand piano is delivered to number 60 Shelbourne Road in Dublin and it was carried up to the second floor which overlooked Beggars Bush Barracks, whose seasoned stone was no less weathered at the beginning of the last century. This piano was ordered from Piggott's of Grafton Street by one who was destined for greatness—although his fame would not be secured through the keys of a piano, but through the strokes of a pen.

The recipient, a young twenty-two year old pauper named James Joyce; trying to avoid paying the tip for the delivery, lingered around the corner while the piano was being placed in his hired room, undoubtedly wondering how long he would have use of this grand piano before it would be repossessed when he missed the first repayment. Indeed, he did miss that repayment, for he had no intention to ever pay for it. After six weeks the piano was taken away, but Joyce would be left a wealth of practice for the upcoming National Feis Ceoil competition.

As a tenor Joyce was limited by his

small stature, yet his talent was unmistakable. Friend, Oliver St. John Gogarty (or Buck Mulligan) recounted this chapter of the writer's tenebrous musical career and Joyce's remarkable ability to transpose lyrical style with tone; a talent he argued, that not many possess. 'Yeats [he believes] was tone deaf; so by deduction was Byron; so was Burns; but Joyce was gifted with a double ear, exquisite in both faculties.'

Perhaps this was a conjecture on the part of his former classmate, yet when the Feis came Joyce would come third place. Soon to be renowned Irish tenor John McCormack, who had befriended Joyce, trained with him and convinced him to perform at the Feis, came first in the competition. McCormack developed his career over the next forty years, receiving three Papal Knight-hoods, two statues were to be erected of him; one in Dublin and one in Athlone and a silver collectors coin minted in 2014. To make it into the running with such talent would be respectable position for most, not for Joyce though, who threw his bronze medal into the Liffey, as it 'wasn't worth the barter'.

Joyce would carry around clippings of his reviews in his pocket until they fell to dust and request more to be printed as a means to advertise himself. To pursue his musical career, Joyce had aspirations to travel to coastal towns in England during the Summer, to practice sea chanties and old ballads. Gogarty believed that his friend derived more happiness from his voice than from his writings. Perhaps, had his brilliance not been so evident on paper, he would be renowned today as the Slender Irish Tenor.

His first publication was a selection of poems, entitled *Chamber Music* (1907). They were written between 1901 and 1906; the same period that James endeavoured to develop his musical career with the guidance of John McCormack. This selection of short love poems are an embodiment of his commitment to music, as their prevalent cadence is an immortalised reflection on the mind of Joyce in his early career, for these poems

were not merely intended to be read, but they were to be set to music. It was after their publication that Joyce asked Irish composer Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer to facilitate this, which he did, transposing 32 of his 36 poems. However, *Chamber Music* would not be set to music in its entirety until 1952; completed by an admirer of Joyce, Ross Lee Finney. Even then, it was not published until 1985.

Joyce evidently had aspirations to develop his musical career and we do not need hindsight to experience the beautiful transposition of lyrical thought within *Chamber Music*. The words from the poem 'V' flow so delicately and sweetly it is as if they want to lift from the page. A manifestation perhaps of Joyce's desire to use his skill with words to mimic the stylings of music - to go beyond the reader and to create a shared atmosphere.

Lean out of the window,
Goldenhair,
I heard you singing
A merry air.
My book was closed;
I read no more,
Watching the fire dance
On the floor.
I have left my book,
I have left my room,
For I heard you singing
Through the gloom.

It would be over twenty years before Joyce would release his second and final collection of poems, entitled *Pomes Penyeach* (1927). These 13 poems were written between 1904 and 1927 and are quite different from the earlier *Chamber Music*; the poems facilitate a wealth of language that he developed over his career. Opposed to the loose and free flowing rhythm of the former, the latter creates concrete images such as 'He travels after the Winter sun, Urging cattle along a cold red road...'. Joyce's circle of friends and appreciators had grown exponentially over the previous two decades, after having released *Dubliners*, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* upon the world, so his work was readily

and eagerly transposed into music. This was done by Herbert Hughes and Arthur Bliss who conscripted eleven other composers to transform the 13 poems- their creation would be known as *The Joyce Book*.

Joyce was faithful to his love for music throughout his career and never abandoned his passion. Musical structure was not merely bound to *Chamber Music* and *Pomes Penyeach*. As his writing skills developed music became increasingly significant both structurally and thematically. He saturated his work with musical elements brilliantly. It is not always appreciated but from the outset music is in the very essence of Joyce's work and progressively his work becomes the transmogrification of music itself.

In 1914, seven years after the Feis, Joyce's *Dubliners* was published. At this stage of his development music was already a fundamental feature with which he created tangents and dimensions to the stories; the significance of this approach is evident throughout the novel.

In *Eveline* for instance, Joyce tells the story of the young Eveline sitting by her window lost in thought as to what the future may bring; whether to stay in Ireland and juggle jobs to support herself and her father or to travel to Buenos Aires with her suitor, Frank. Joyce uses musical association in this story as opposed to musical language to create another dimension to her situation. Frank is associated with the performance of the opera *The Bohemian Girl*, which initially portrays him as a cultured man with values: 'he took her to see *The Bohemian Girl* and she felt elated as she sat in an unaccustomed part of the theatre with him'. Eveline's new position in the theatre is a possible manifestation of a new place in society with Frank. Furthermore the theatre seems to be a new cultural experience for her; this strengthens the reader's belief that being with Frank would be beneficial for Eveline.

Contrary to this however, an understanding of what *The Bohemian Girl* entails adds a new sinister element: *The Bohemian Girl* being a ballad opera written by Michael William Balfe in 1843, the performance tells the tale of the daughter of a wealthy Ger-

man, Count Arnheim, who is kidnapped by gypsies as a child.

Joyce's choice of opera is a warning to Eveline regarding her possible future with Frank in Buenos Aires. The historical context of Buenos Aires is fundamental to appreciate the significance of her decision to move there. In the 19th century Buenos Aires was advertised to Irish women as a land of opportunity, although many who went there found themselves trapped and becoming maids. The kidnapping in *The Bohemian Girl* parodies the potential abduction of Eveline.

By musical association Joyce mocks this 'love' between Frank and Eveline, yet this is not conclusive as in a separate instance he uses music to harmonise their love; this is achieved through Frank's rendition of *The Lass that Loves a Sailor*. This song is a representation of Eveline, who is the lass that loves a sailor. Frank's rendition creates a harmony for their love; the song is adaptable to their situation and therefore compliments it. The song acts as a manifestation of their love.

Concluding the story, Eveline stands frozen in thought upon the dock, torn between whether to stay and fulfil her commitments as an Irish woman or to go with Frank into the unknown. Understanding how music is used as a thematic device enhances the experience for the reader. In conclusion, Joyce remarks that this feeling for Eveline was like 'a bell clang upon her heart'.

In *Ulysses*, Joyce presents his mastery of English, as he weaves music into the structure and fabric of the language. The layout of the 18 chapters, or 'episodes' takes on the sonata musical form; its structure is based around an exposition, a development and a recapitulation. This musical form is adapted to the novel through the chapters. Jack Weaver develops this concept in his book *Joyce's Music and Noise: Theme and Variation in his Writing*. He explains how Joyce used the chapters as representative of a poetic structure with chapters one through six functioning as the exposition. Chapters one to three introduces the first subject, Stephen Dedalus who 'laments the usurpation of his lodgings by Milligan'

and introduces the search for his mythical father. Bloom is the second subject, introduced through episodes four to six, who deals with similar issues yet through a parallel, he recognises that Blazes Boylan has usurped his rights and he is searching for his son.

The characters Dedalus and Bloom act as the exposition; episodes seven through fifteen then develop these subjects and themes related to them. Finally, episodes Eumaeus and Ithaca serve as the transposition to Penelope, which is the recapitulation. *Ulysses* is a journey with meticulous attention dedicated to the details, to references and to how it flows; it is one which typifies modernism. Yet despite this, it symbolically parallels its structure to Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*. Joyce saturated *Ulysses* in music, it is an integral element of the novel, firstly as the structuring device which then compliments the use of musical language, reference and rhetoric within the individual episodes.

For instance in episode four, Calypso, Joyce uses verbal augmentation to enhance the atmosphere of the opening scene in the kitchen: 'The cat walked stiffly round a leg of the table with tail on high. Mkynao!'. The spelling of 'mkynao' is done intentionally and repeatedly in an effort to make the scene more vivid and colourful. It is a thing of beautiful and reflection to appreciate, within the finer details, the growth of an artist. In 1904, Joyce's brother Stanislaus remarked how his brother had always had a unique gift of writing sounds on paper. This instance is an example of a well-tempered skill: one which is utilised to uplift the reader from the rigid language used in the previous chapters on Stephen Dedalus. This unrestrained creativity of language is used throughout the novel in order to facilitate the smooth transition between stream-of-conscious thought and reality.

Musical imagery is created by Bloom throughout the day; the music is often related back to Molly (who is herself a singer). 'Night sky, moon, violet, colour, of Molly's new garters. Strings. Listen. A girl playing one of those instruments'. In this instance Joyce uses music as a device to elevate

Molly without having to develop her as a character and also add to the expectancy of love. Bloom's interior monologue in *Lotus-Eaters* introduces us to his musical preference. They are quite inclusive comprising of ballads, lilt, music-hall songs and operas. This broad appreciation of music reflects onto how one perceives Bloom; through musical association he is presented as somewhat of an artist.

Characters in *Ulysses* are etched with musical association. He uses Bloom's comic performance of *God Save the King* to express Bloom's irreverence for the institutions of the monarchy. His fatalism is expressed through reference to *Every Bullet has its Billet*, which is a connotation of the proverb every bullet has its billet fate; meaning everyone is destined to die. His Jewish beliefs are made more evident through his rendition of *Shema Israel* and *Hatikvah*. His association with this music develops him as a character and expresses aspects of his personality; a personality that can almost be entirely quantified by musical references with *Ulysses*.

Molly is associated with simple, romantic and sensual songs, This is reflected in her character. Association to songs such as *Loves Old Sweet Song*, *Waiting* and *In Old Madrid* for example portray her as a romantic and add anticipation of the love affair between her and Boylan. As previously discussed, for Bloom, music is often related back to Molly which elevates her as a character. Bloom uses music not only to elevate Molly, but also as an expression of his own sexuality and frustration. He remarks on how Boylan will visit Molly during the day to bring the program *La ci Darem* and they will produce *Love's Old Sweet Song* on the jangled bed springs. In the details one can see how musical language and association is used by Joyce to develop our understanding of Molly, and Bloom's sexual frustration; as well as develop the anticipation of love and adultery between Molly and Boylan.

Joyce the tenor, who became Joyce the poet and novelist, merged his passion for music into his literary career to present them both to the world. Had he have been a composer, the episode 'Sirens' would have been

the crescendo. This episode in particular has been debated extensively over the last eighty years The crux of the discussion lies in Joyce's use of the musical form he entitled, *fuga per canonem*. Joyce remarked in 1919 that this technique would utilise the fugue form, a musical style particularly used by Johann Sebastian Bach which would divide the episode into 'eight regular parts'. He was ambiguous in regard to what determined a 'part', and the claim of 'eight regular parts' has engendered a critical free for all, these 'parts' being interpreted as voices, themes, or physical functions.

Tackling literary horizons, provoking critics and risking his reputation Joyce created a coppice of music within *Ulysses*. Some would argue that music can flow from the pages of 'Sirens' unrestrained, facilitated by the genius of a poet, whilst others, would not. The debate continues today with many for and against this literary prototype. There are numerous takes on how Joyce uses *fuga per canonem* as a musical form; Weaver for instance argues that the characters of 'Sirens' become the parts and that their musical voices 'play against one another'. These eight musical voices are created through different characters; Boylan, Lenahan, Dollard, Molly, Bloom, Douce, Kennedy and Dedalus.

The latter's performance of *Martha* is in D-major. *Martha* is significant because each line is compared to an event in Bloom and Molly's history through Bloom's stream of conscious thought. Fitting with Bloom's state of despair, his contribution is in B-flat to coincide with his sadness. Weaver also notes that this facilitates the musical lygian mode, which entails a rising pattern of pitches. F-sharp is the major key in Ben Dollard's rendition of *The Croppy Boy*. This song is too pretentious to be sung as a ballad so Father Crowley sings in a grandiose fashion as a transposition for Dollard.

These four voices are the major keys in the episode while the remaining four characters engage in other forms of musical language as a transition between the singing. Examples of such forms of musical language are verbal augmentation, 'clapclapclap', and inversions, 'like lady, ladylike'. Joyce also

uses onomatopoeia, alliteration and assonance; 'tipping her tepping her tapping her topping her. Tup'. This particular extract is an example of conversation which fills the breaks in Dollard and Crowley's rendition of *The Croppy Boy*; and is used to keep the musical tone of the piece during these intermissions. This is also achieved through the use of technical musical language, 'Miss Kennedy with manners 'transposed' the teatray...'. This use of musical language and terminologies are merely interludes between the performances of Dedalus, Crowley, Dollard and Bloom and help support the music content.

Ulysses is a remarkable piece of literature which has baffled professors and delighted readers for decades. Literary academics have gone so far to say *Ulysses* and most notably 'Sirens' is the 'literary recreation of opera'. By appreciating the life and passions of James Joyce one is drawn to the idea that he had an unrequited love for mu-

sic, an artistry he never quite managed to manifest conventionally; so it simply burst from him through the medium of writing. His efforts have assured that he will always be synonymous with music, if perhaps not in the way a younger James envisioned it while he practiced on a grand piano he'd borrowed in *Beggars Bush* in 1907.

Whether renowned tenor or not, Joyce retained his passion for music and it spilled onto his pages - unmissable, like streaks of gold through rock. However, it is the *fuga per canonem* structure of 'Sirens' that will be regarded as Joyce's most interesting use of music, and has given substantial substance to his statement.

I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality.