

Relationships of Text and Music in the Works of Berio

Luciano Berio - Thema (Omaggio a Joyce) - 1958

If the experience of electronic music is important, and I believe it is, its significance lies not in the discovery of “new” sounds but in the possibility it gives the composer of integrating a larger domain of sound phenomena into a musical thought. What has emerged from these last ten years is the suggestion that music does not constitute a category, that a dualistic conception of musical material can be overcome. Just as language is not words on the one hand and concepts on the other, but is rather a system of arbitrary symbols through which we give a certain form to our way of being in the world, so music is not always identifiable only with its conventionalised means. Verses, prosody and rhymes are no more an assurance of poetry than written notes are an assurance of music. We often seem, in fact, to discover more “poetry” in prose than in poetry itself and more “music” in speech and noise than in agreed-upon musical sounds. It is within this general perspective that *THEMA (Omaggio a Joyce)* must be approached. In it no use is made of electrically produced sounds; its only sound source is a speaking voice reading the beginning of the eleventh chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, as it is heard in the initial part of the piece:

The beginning of this chapter is a sort of overture, a prelude to the chapter itself. From the mass of sounds through which characters and events are disclosed, Joyce selects a series of main themes and isolates them from their contexts to form a sequence of *Leit-motiven* freed of discourse connections. These are phrases which can be grasped musically; they form a kind of *Klangfarbenmelodie* in which the author has used references to the most common artifices of musical performance:

Imperthnthn thnthnthn trill
 Chips, picking chips staccato
 Warbling. Ah, lure! appoggiatura
 Deaf bold Pat brought pad knife took up martellato
 A sail! A veil awake upon the waves glissando, portamento

A polyphonic intent characterises the entire chapter (entitled *Sirens* and dedicated to music). Here the narrative technique was in fact suggested to Joyce by a well-known procedure of polyphonic music: the *Fuga per canonem*. The point here is not to establish the extent to which Joyce was able to transpose a typically musical fact to a literary level; this could be done only by examining the development of the whole chapter. It is possible, however, by developing Joyce’s polyphonic intention, to reinterpret musically a reading of the text. Once accepted as a sound system, the text can gradually be detached from its frame of vocal delivery and evaluated in terms of electro-acoustical transformational possibilities. The text is thus broken down into sound families, groups of words or syllables organised in a scale of vocal colours (from [a] to [u]) and a scale of consonants (from voiced to unvoiced), the ordering of which is determined by noise content. The extreme points of the latter scale, for instance, are constituted by the “bl” grouping (from “Blew. Blue bloom...”) and by “s” (from the last line of this exposition, a real cadence on noise: “Pearls: when she. Liszt’s rhapsodies. Hissss”). The members of these sound families are placed in environments other than their original textual contexts, the varying length of the portions of context establishing a pattern of degree of intelligibility of the text. Twice, a language other than English is used: French, from the translation by Joyce and Larbaud for the phrase “Petites ripées, il picore les petites ripées d’un pouce reche, petites ripées”, (“Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips”) which serves as a modulating pattern for the transformation of continuous sounds

derived from the English text, and Italian, from the translation by Eugenio Montale et al, which allows development of periodic patterns from the rolled "r" of the words "morbida parola" ("soft word"). When highly elaborated, the vocal material is often not recognisable as such; transformations, however, are always related to the following scheme, based on three articulatory categories of the original material:

Discontinuous (as in "Goodgod, he never heard inall")	⇒	Periodic	⇒	Continuous
Continuous (as in sibilants)	⇒	Periodic	⇒	Discontinuous
Periodic (as in thnthnthn)	⇒	Continuous	⇒	Discontinuous

All transformations are accomplished by tape editing, through superimposition of identical elements with varying time relations (phase shifting, especially where Joyce is concerned with musical onomatopoeia), through wide frequency and time transpositions and through 1/3 octave filtering. Though at certain points it would have been a simple matter to extend the transformations by introducing electrically produced sounds, this was not done because the original intention was to develop a reading of Joyce's text within certain restrictions dictated by the text itself.

Finally, with *THEMA I* attempted 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 reorganisation and transformation of the phonetic and semantic elements of Joyce's text, *Mr Bloom's day in Dublin* (it is 4pm at the Ormond Bar) 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 and of the expressive character inherent in their changing functions.

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Text of Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)
from *Ulysses* by James Joyce

Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyrining imper-
thnthn thnthnthn.

Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips. Horrid! And gold flushed more.
A husky fifenote blew.

Blew. Blue bloom is on the
Gold pinnacled hair.

A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin, rose of Castille.

Trilling, trilling: Idolores.

Peep! Who's in the . . . peepofgold?

Tink cried to bronze in pity.

And a call, pure long and throbbing. Longindying call.

Decoy. Soft word. But look! The bright stars fade. O rose! Notes chirruring answer.

Castille. The morn is breaking.

Jingle jingle jaunted jingling.

Coin rang. Clock clacked.

Avowal. *Sonnez*. I could. Rebound of garter. Not leave thee. Smack. *La cloche!*

Thigh smack. Avowal. Warm. Sweetheart, goodbye!

Jingle. Bloo.

Boomed crashing chords. When love absorbs. War! War! The tympanum.

A sail! A veil awave upon the waves.

Lost. Throstle fluted. All is lost now.

Haw. Hawthorn.

When first he saw. Alas!

Full tup. Full throb.

Warbling. Ah, lure! Alluring.

Martha! Come!

Clapclop. Clipclap. Clappyclap.

Goodgod henev erheard inall.

Deaf bald Pat brought pad knife took up.

A moonlight nightcall: far: far.

I feel so sad. P. S. So lonely blooming.

Listen!

The spiked and winding cold seahorn. Have you the? Each and for other plash
and silent roar.

Pearls: when she. Liszt's rhapsodies. Hissss.