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JOYCE IN/AND ITALY

edited by

FRANCA RUGGIERI

ENRICO TERRINONI

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Address: James Joyce Italian Foundation
Dipartimento di Lingue, Culture e Letterature Straniere
Via Valco di San Paolo, 19
00146 Roma
joyce_found@os.uniroma3.it
franca.ruggieri@uniroma3.it

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BOOK REVIEWS

Mangialavori, Maria Domenica. 2012.
La memoria intermittente e la musica lontana. Joyce. Woolf, Berio
Roma: NEU – Nuova editrice universitaria

Other than being an essay on three famous authors / composers (Joyce, Woolf, Berio), the work by Maria Domenica Mangialavori is a book on the relationships between literature and music. It was very interesting for me – as a musicologist – to consider the point of view of a scholar in Comparative Literature on such a crucial subject in the history of music and arts. So I will start from this general topic before presenting in greater detail the three parts which compose her book.

Musicologists normally think of literature, and a verbal text in general, as a basis for musical composition (although there are cases – in the history of music – in which the composer writes a piece and then provides a text suitable to its inspiration). In such a perspective, the text can be considered a starting point which preexists, so to speak, the music itself. In other words, a musicologist usually pays attention to the following issue: how music can be inspired by literature or how the musician adapts sounds to a text, how he puts words in music. This can be done in many different forms: on the structural level, or on the expressive, narrative, phonic, metric-rhythmical level. The first autonomous forms of instrumental music, for example, followed the structure of vocal compositions. So the Baroque sonata developed from a Renaissance vocal genre, the canzone: playing it without human voices and without a verbal text, musicians transformed it into the *canzona da sonare*, an important precursor of the instrumental compositions of the 17th century. We also have many examples of musical structures following the classical expression of rhetorical discourse. And, if we think of theatrical music, arias and Italian opera music in general, there is the attempt to express passions and emotions pre-contained in the words of the libretto.

The book by Maria Domenica Mangialavori reverses this perspective and shows us how - in a particular moment of history, in the 1920s - literature strives for musical patterns. It was a great revolution if we compare this to the situation in the nineteenth century. Berlioz, in his *Symphonie Fantastique*, viewed the literary program as a descriptive verbal text which is part of the musical composition itself. Some years later Liszt created the so-called symphonic poem (*Symphonische Dichtung*), in which the composer had to grasp the poetic nucleus of a literary work and express it through sounds. In Joyce and Virginia Woolf, literature, on the contrary, assumes the architectural forms and expressive modes of music. This means that music is not only an important element of the tale, but also impresses the formal concept in the writing of many modernist authors. Based on this idea, Maria Domenica Mangialavori analyzes the structure of Joyce's "The Dead", to which the first part of her book is dedicated. Here music is the protagonist in several respects. Analysis highlights in particular the musical dimension of the story. The story itself becomes music, through the different rhythms of narration: allegro, adagio, rallentando, and some returns which are typical of a musical composition.

In this regard I would like to underline that the author also puts in evidence, with a wealth of references, the fundamental role of music in the entire work of Joyce. The presence of Joyce himself in the music of the second half of the twentieth century is very important. The third part of the book is addressed to this topic, considering especially Berio's relationship to Joyce, on the basis of the musical composition *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, which translates the "Sirens" episode from *Ulysses* into an electro-acoustic work. The analysis is carried out here on two levels. On the one hand, there is the formal problem of how writing tends to organize itself according to models of musical nature; on the other hand, the linguistic problem, the question of the boundary between music and the word and of the imaginary common origins of music and language. It is an ancient aesthetical-philosophical leitmotiv, of which Jean-Jacques Rousseau is one of the best interpreters.

Berio uses the form of a theme with variations and also multiple onomatopoeic structures. As Mangialavori suggests, these musical choices can illuminate the formal essence of Joyce's episode. At the same time they help us to understand the process of interpenetration between word and music: Joyce goes back to archaic word formations ranging from the meaningless to the transmutations of thought processes in a highly organized musical design.

I have purposely left to the end of my brief discussion the second part of the book, which deals with the novel *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. From a thematic point of view, this is the heart of the work: the relationships between music and literature relate to the themes of memory and time. In particular, a paragraph in this second part has the title *Time passes: il tempo che distrugge e la musica che ristora*. In the novel by Woolf, *Time passes* highlights the dialectic between the destructive power of time and the revelatory and therapeutic power of music. Music is a symbol of life, and is opposed to the devastation inflicted by the flow of time. I think that here we are faced with a typical theme of the early German Romantics. In his *Phantasien über die Kunst*, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder writes of *A Wondrous Oriental Tale of a Naked Saint*.¹ The story has the unreal element of the naked saint who is turning “the powerful rushing wheel” of time. The naked saint is also a rather mythical/uncommon character - he did not know how to act like a human being and is described as being “trapped in the whirlpool of his wild confusion”. He has the magic and symbolic task or quest of always having to turn the wheel of time. And although he tries to resist the pull, he cannot until he hears the enlightening element of music. The transformation overcomes the saint after hearing music for the first time. This means that music has the power to stop time. In this perspective we can consider music as the art which gives us access to the dimension of the absolute, of eternity: another important theme of German romantic philosophy (I am now thinking of Schopenhauer).

The same work by Wackenroder evokes the theme of memory. Music, states Wackenroder, is the last remaining trace of the original innocence of man; it is the only art which has remained pure throughout the ages. Music is also the voice of all the memories and feelings stored in the mind of mankind. It is a gift from God, which has enabled man to express and understand his feelings.

In the end, memory is the condition of music par excellence: something which exists, but something that you cannot touch. Something which exists in a precise instant, but which is immediately past. And the word becomes music in so much as it transcends itself in order to enter a preconceptual and presemantic dimension, where time and space do not exist.

¹ For an English version see, among others, Frank G. Ryder and Robert M. Browning (eds). 1983, 2002. *German Literary Fairy Tales*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 47-51.

Memory is the presence of a true lost meaning which words can only really recall when they become music.

In conclusion, I would like to say that this work by Maria Domenica Mangialavori is extremely stimulating and is rich in cultural references and penetrating analyzes. Whoever loves music and literature will read it to advantage, and with pleasure. I have also gleaned from it an idea that I would like to propose as a mere scholar. At least in terms of their relationships to music, and beyond their formal and expressive experimentalism, I think we could place Joyce and Woolf in a fully romantic dimension, which Wackenroder describes in the following way:

And sometimes, - what a magnificent fullness of images! - sometimes music is for me entirely a picture of our life: - a touchingly brief joy, which arises out of the void and vanishes into the void, - which commences and passes away, why one does not know: - a little merry, green island, with sunshine, with singing and rejoicing, - which floats upon the dark, unfathomable ocean.²

Luca Aversano

² W. H. Wackenroder, *The Marvels of the Musical Art*, quoted from an English version published in Donnachie, Ian, Carmen Lavin (eds). 2004. *From Enlightenment to Romanticism: Anthology II*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 230-231.