

CHAPTER 14

Music

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De la musique avant toute chose [music above everything]

(Paul Verlaine, 'Art Poétique')

Beethoven, Wagner, Stravinsky: these are the composers most obviously in, behind and around T. S. Eliot's poetry. Beethoven, the apogee of Classicism; Wagner, the epitome, zenith and in embryo the decadence of Romanticism; Stravinsky, a Proteus of modernism, myth-and-motors, pastiche, jazz and neoclassicism: Beethoven, behind *Four Quartets*; Wagner, in *The Waste Land*; Stravinsky, a contemporary with whom Eliot was in dialogue. Together they are an index of Classical and Romantic legacies in modernist eclecticism. But music is more to Eliot than three composers, however broadly representative. The Wagnerian backgrounds of French Symbolism mean that music is fundamental to Eliot's aesthetics. And although he had no technical training, music was the art that personally affected Eliot most deeply.

Stravinsky commented on their connection from his own point of view:

Were Eliot and myself merely trying to refit old ships while the other side – Joyce, Schoenberg – sought new forms of travel? I believe that this distinction, much traded on a generation ago, has disappeared. (An era is shaped only by hindsight, of course, and hindsight reduces to convenient unities, but all artists know that they are part of the same thing.) Of course we seemed, Eliot and myself, to have exploited an apparent discontinuity, to have made art out of the *dissecta membra*, the quotations from other poets and composers, the references to earlier styles ('hints of earlier and other creation'), the detritus that betokened a wreck. But we used it, and anything that came to hand, to rebuild, and we did not pretend to have invented new conveyors or new means of travel. But the true business of the artist *is* to refit old ships. He can say again, in his way, only what has already been said.¹

Leaving aside the justness of associating James Joyce with Arnold Schoenberg, and the question of whether in art a new way of saying does not rather constitute a new thing said, Stravinsky identifies real

correspondences: quotation from others (there is more of this in Eliot than Stravinsky) and reference to earlier styles (there is more of this in Stravinsky than Eliot). But as for refitting old ships, Eliot's 1923 review of *Ulysses* indicates that he saw Joyce as doing this, and in ways that others might imitate. Stravinsky would agree that, however revolutionary some of Schoenberg's methods, he continued to compose preludes, songs and string quartets – to write, that is, in musical forms that Eliot imitated. It is, of course, Stravinsky's point that beneath the distinctions created by hindsight poets and composers working as contemporaries in broadly similar cultural conditions face some common problems, and in his own work and in Eliot's these gave rise to some common solutions. Stravinsky's rewritings – pastiche of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi in the ballet *Pulcinella*, reworking of Carlo Gesualdo's *Tres sacrae cantiones*, reconstitution of an eighteenth-century opera in *The Rake's Progress* or the *concerto grosso* in *Dumbarton Oaks* – may differ from Eliot's – highly varied reworkings of Ovid, Shakespeare, Goldsmith and others in *The Waste Land*, or (again variously) of Dante in *Ash-Wednesday* and 'Little Gidding' (see [Chapter 18](#) below). But there are common elements, from simple pastiche to a more profound novelty derived from a thorough-going contemporary reconstitution of earlier methods and materials – refitting old ships.

Stravinsky was looking back. Eliot's main comments on Stravinsky – on a production of *Le Sacre du printemps* in a 1921 'London Letter' for the *Dial* – come from a time when their artistic identities were being established. While Eliot registered some disappointment with *Le Sacre* as a whole, he praised Stravinsky's music as being truly modern: it gave 'the sense of the present . . . it did seem to transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery . . . and the other barbaric cries of modern life; and to transform these despairing noises into music'.² The effect of music and choreography together, however, Eliot compared to that of '*Ulysses* with illustrations by the best contemporary illustrator'³ – who would fail, it is implied, adequately to match the modernity of the text. But Stravinsky is the Joyce of music, a true exemplar of modernity. Appearing in the *Dial* exactly a year before *The Waste Land* appeared there, this praise of music for a mythic subject made to resonate with the 'cries of modern life' may suggest more than Joycean analogies. The unexpressed hope that he might be the Stravinsky of poetry is the view of Eliot that Stravinsky formulated forty years later.

What Stravinsky might have added is that his work shared with Eliot's the incorporation of popular materials, especially jazz – the most

obviously American element in the poetry of Eliot the adopted European, and a mark of Stravinsky's adopted American identity. Stravinsky may have judged that it indicated as much a difference as a similarity: Eliot's jazz is native to him. What Stravinsky learned from Jack Hilton, Woody Herman and Benny Goodman sounds in his *Ragtime*, *Preludium for Jazz Ensemble*, *Tango* or *Ebony Concerto* more hybrid and acquired. In *The Waste Land*, and above all in *Sweeney Agonistes*, the rhythms of ragtime came naturally to a native of St Louis (see [Chapter 1](#)).

Much that Eliot shared with Stravinsky – as Stravinsky's account implies – he shared with other contemporary composers. What Eliot described as the inevitable difficulty for the contemporary poet, the need 'to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning' (*SE*, 289), is reflected in the analogous difficulty of much contemporary music, which often employed radically new compositional techniques – dissolution of a sense of key and continuous use of unresolved dissonance; experiments (including the introduction of mechanically produced sounds) which challenged the whole idea of what constitutes music; an avant-garde consciously assaulting its audience; uncompromising address to an elite, implying that art can communicate only to a suitably educated intelligence; all kinds of elements that made music difficult to follow because traditional aids to listening, defined melodic structures, harmonic expectations, rhythmic patterns, formal procedures, were radically violated. These are all versions of the 'language' of music dislocated into meaning, equivalents of the situation thrust on poets, in Eliot's account, by the condition of their culture.

Quite different from this congruence of contemporaries is Eliot's creative struggle with Wagnerism. Wagner was the most important and controversial artist of late nineteenth-century Europe. He dominated music: a powerful influence on the most advanced forms on modernism in music and every composer who did not militantly resist him. In France and Germany he also dominated the arts more generally. In France, from the admiration of Charles Baudelaire's 1861 essay on *Tannhäuser* and the cult of Wagner that flowed from it, to the *Revue Wagnerienne* (1885–7), a home for poetic manifestos and the poetry of Jules Laforgue⁴ and Stéphane Mallarmé; in Germany, from the admiration and later excommunications of Friedrich Nietzsche (see *Der Fall Wagner*, 1888) to the numerous writings (both for and against Wagner) of Thomas Mann. Amongst many other things, Wagner showed how myth could be used in modern art, and he brought together all the arts in his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art].

Eliot's attitude was divided: the Classicist deplored, the Romantic resonated. 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry' (1928) encapsulates this ambivalence: speaker B (the nearest to Eliot) is said to have railed against Wagner as 'pernicious' (*SE*, 54), but he would not willingly resign his experiences of Wagner. The draft poem 'Opera' (1909) is congruent with Eliot's critique of Romanticism: Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* shows music 'Flinging itself at the last / Limits of self-expression' (*IMH*, 17). But at their first meeting in 1956, Stravinsky thought 'Eliot's Wagner nostalgia . . . apparent' and recalled Eliot as implying that '*Tristan* must have been one of the most passionate experiences in his life'.⁵ Nor can Eliot have been wholly out of tune with the dedicatee of *Prufrock and Other Observations*, Jean Verdenal, who in 1911 described to him the close of *Götterdämmerung* as 'un des points les plus hauts où l'homme se soit élevé' ['one of the highest points ever reached by man'] (*LI*, 24).

The subjects of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Götterdämmerung* are both relevant to *The Waste Land*: *Tristan* – Romantic passion as a channel of the deepest knowledge and at odds with the world; *Götterdämmerung* – an epic of redemptive love and apocalypse. No contextual limits can be set to how much of these dramas the fragments in *The Waste Land* evoke. For somebody for whom – as for Eliot – *Tristan* was an overwhelming experience, any part of the poem will be resonant with the fundamental feelings of the whole. A reader may be reminded of the precise dramatic situations of the two fragments (although these can be construed quite differently: the first leads directly to Isolde's rage, indirectly to the release of passion; the second directly to Tristan's waking to loss, indirectly to fulfilment in death). Or a reader may feel the fragments as keynotes from acts 1 and 3, framing the act of romantic fulfilment and disaster. '*Frisch weht der Wind*' ['Fresh blows the wind'] (*CPP*, 61): Tristan has behaved like this mocking seducer, but another Tristan will soon be released by Isolde's magic. '*Oed' und leer das Meer*' ['Desolate and empty the sea'] (*CPP*, 62): the sea is empty at that moment, but the healing beloved will soon appear there. Between these moments Wagner depicts 'blood shaking [the] heart / The awful daring of a moment's surrender' (*CPP*, 74) with a force never before heard in music, and in terms so beautiful as to render the cataclysm compellingly attractive. 'I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light' (*CPP*, 62): Wagner's imagery is not of light but of Night, but this Night is the light – the world made so new that all previous knowledge is superseded. Knowing 'nothing' may mean not that the lovers are spiritually null, but that, as a result of their overwhelming experience, they have to begin again from deeper levels of

being. It is an interruption from the world of daylight morality that checks the progress of Tristan and Isolde into their Night of knowledge. Which stage of this experience the reader encounters in *The Waste Land*, not the hyacinth girl episode itself, nor the framing quotations from *Tristan*, nor any view of Wagner that Eliot expressed outside the poem decides.

This is also the case with the song of the Rhine maidens, nature spirits whose ululations ('Weialala' [CPP, 70]) suggest the first shimmering flow of their great river. In citing their song from *Götterdämmerung*, Eliot points to the episode preceding apocalypse. There is a contrast: far from being, like Eliot's Thames daughters, passive victims undone by men, Wagner's Rhine maidens are undoers. They began the struggle between love and power of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* by rejecting the Nibelung, Alberich. Now they warn the hero, Siegfried, of the death that will generate the apocalypse of Wagner's title of the final part of the cycle – 'Dusk Falls on the Gods', as George Bernard Shaw rendered it. But Wagner's apocalypse is an end that is a beginning: as the Rhine obliterates the old world of corruption, the leitmotif of redemption through love shows the tone of the world renewed (one of Verdenal's 'highest points'). More affirmative than a gathering of fragments or any purely personal setting in order, *Götterdämmerung's* final bars are congruent with at least part of what the thunder says: 'Datta' (CPP, 74), give. How much of this is made present, and in what ways, by the song of the Rhine maidens is once again left to the reader to decide.

With the allusions to Wagner and to Verlaine's poem 'Parsifal', some have felt that Eliot would like the reader to hear Wagner's *Parsifal* in *The Waste Land*. With its Fisher King, Grail chalice and spear, and Waste Land it is obviously the work by Wagner most relevant to Eliot's theme. There have been ingenuous and imaginative attempts to read it in, but Eliot left it out.

'Burnt Norton' (1936) articulated analogies between music and poetry, but the overall musical title of the sequence 'quartet' appeared first in a letter of September 1942 – that is, when *Four Quartets* was all but completed. After expressing a doubt about the application of vague musical analogies, and rejecting 'sonata' as too musical, Eliot explained that he meant 'quartet' to indicate that the poems were in a particular set form, which he had elaborated, and to suggest a poem 'weaving in together three or four superficially unrelated themes: the "poem" being the degree of success in making a new whole out of them' (CFQ, 26). The title, that is, indicated elements of both form and method.

Although Eliot's comments on *Four Quartets* give no direct warrant for this, it has often been supposed that he had specifically in mind the late quartets of Beethoven. Few artists have modelled better than Beethoven the injunction of 'East Coker', 'Old men ought to be explorers' (*CPP*, 182): in terms of harmony and counterpoint, the techniques of writing for string quartet as these were then conceived, and formal organisation within individual movements and overall, these acknowledged summits of the quartet repertoire are some of the most experimental works ever written. Some facts support the conjecture that Eliot had these quartets particularly in mind. In 1931, in a letter to Stephen Spender, he remarked of Beethoven's A minor quartet (opus 132): 'I find it quite inexhaustible to study. There is a sort of heavenly or at least more than human gaiety about some of his later things which one imagines might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering. I should like to get something of that into verse before I die'.⁶ Eliot apparently aimed to get something of Beethoven into verse at this time in the unfinished 'Coriolan' (1931) – though without the title this would scarcely be obvious.⁷ Beethoven's *Coriolan* overture is made up of three elements – a dramatic chordal sequence, minor, heroic (evocative of Coriolanus), and two contrasting themes, the first minor, non-heroic (the Roman populace), the second major, noble and warmly human (Volumnia, Virgilia). The relation of this to Eliot's poem is at most a broad analogy: the wakeful life of the ego and other perspectives from which the demands of a public world appear empty (first theme) contrast with the personal perspectives of the second theme ('O mother') and the eternal ones of the prophet's 'What shall I cry?' (*CPP*, 130), the chordal sequence. But however the title is construed 'Coriolan' is a poem related to Beethoven. Then, in a 1933 lecture Eliot described his aim 'to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it ... poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not on the poetry ... To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music*'.⁸ He apparently sensed in Beethoven's late works some congruence with his fundamental aim of experiment that pressed against the limits of what had theretofore been conceivable, so as to constitute a radical new transparency of expression.

What this might mean is easier to see with poetry than with music. It may well reflect a view of Beethoven derived from J. W. N. Sullivan's *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development* (recommended by the music chronicler J. B. Trend to readers of the *Criterion* in 1928). Sullivan, who was known to Eliot, writes about 'Beethoven the explorer' ('Old men ought

to be explorers'); he quotes as crucial paragraphs from Beethoven's journals on the need for 'strength and submission' ('submission' is a crucial term for Sullivan); and his whole focus is towards Beethoven's late quartets as the supreme exemplification of his genius. But what is most suggestive for understanding Eliot's comments on Beethoven is Sullivan's underlying thesis: Beethoven's music is a record of spiritual development, a mode of revelation and a form of wisdom – it points to extra-musical meanings, goes 'beyond music'. 'God the Companion' is Sullivan's introduction to the late work: writing in a Christian tradition, Beethoven also drew on eastern mystical literature and key personal experiences to embody his sense of the divine. All this may have influenced the way Eliot heard and thought about Beethoven, who on this view might plausibly seem a model *alter ego*.⁹

The presence of Beethoven in *Four Quartets* is not (as has sometimes been suggested) a matter of precise parallels: for example, that Beethoven's A minor quartet is in five movements, with a central third and a short fourth movement (a form Eliot had already discovered in *The Waste Land*); or that Beethoven's late quartets were the first to develop a fully equal conversation between the four instruments, which might be thought of as comparable to the interactions of Eliot's poetic 'voices' – prosaic, lyrical, didactic, visionary (in a religious or philosophical sense). Eliot's voices are far from self-contained – the lyric may be didactic or visionary; the prosaic may be didactic or philosophical; and within a single voice there are many shades (the prose of journalism, science, liturgy, the Bible; the lyric of rhyme and emphatic rhythm, of assonance and rhetorical parallels). The analogy with Beethoven is not precise; it is fundamental. Eliot expressed a desire to reproduce in poetry some of the states of experience he heard in Beethoven's music. To achieve this he needed to press against the boundaries of how words can be expressive in poetry, which includes a heightened feeling for the movement of verse and the structural patterns built up by that movement. Experiments with texture and structure in Beethoven's late quartets model in music congruent possibilities.

It has also been claimed that Eliot reported having in mind Béla Bartók's Quartets numbers 2–6,¹⁰ although the sixth Quartet was not premiered until 1941 (in New York) and Eliot is unlikely to have heard it before *Four Quartets* was completed. However, the fifth Quartet (premiered in 1934) might have been drawn to his attention by the enthusiasm of Ezra Pound, who repeatedly praised it.¹¹ If Eliot followed up Pound's recommendation, he will have found a five-movement work, constructed

in an arch shape, in which the first and fifth and second and fourth movements draw on related themes – weaving diverse materials into a whole in a novel way, analogous to Eliot's revisitings and transformations both within different sections of each quartet and between the separate poems. If Eliot heard it, he could have recognised a congruity with his own wrestling with form and pattern.

Eliot liked to stress that the very nature of poetry is in part music. This is most obvious in his use of musical titles – quartets, song, prelude, rhapsody, 'Words for Music', five-finger exercises, invention, suite, caprice, nocturne and humoresque. And there are many other songs embedded in the poetry – from the euphoniously hypnotic singing of the dry grass and the hermit-thrush in *The Waste Land* to the jazz croonings of *Sweeney Agonistes*.¹²

Poetry must avail itself of musical resources because 'the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist' (*OPP*, 30); because poetry deals with 'feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus ... At such moments, we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express' (*OPP*, 86–7). Attempting to express the all but inexpressible, poetry aspires to the condition of music. To approach frontiers or borders of consciousness, the poet uses what Eliot calls the 'auditory imagination', that is, 'the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling' (*UPUC*, 118–19).

Eliot is most explicit about analogies between poetry and music in his writings about poetic drama. 'To work out a play in verse is to be working like a musician ... it is to see the whole thing as a musical pattern'. A verse play is like 'some musical form, like the sonata or fugue ... Underneath the action ... there should be a musical pattern which intensifies our excitement by reinforcing it with feeling from a deeper and less articulate level'.¹³ In a later essay, Eliot wrote: 'I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order' (*OPP*, 87). He wrote in similar terms about non-dramatic verse. Important as the music of rhyme, rhythm, assonance and alliteration may be, music is not only a matter of the local effects: in non-dramatic poetry too, music is structural. It is 'a question of the whole poem' (*OPP*, 36): 'a "musical poem" is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and that these two patterns are

indissoluble and one' (*OPP*, 33). As he expressed it in 'Burnt Norton': 'Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness' (*CPP*, 175). By 'secondary meanings' Eliot apparently means all the ways in which a word might signify apart from semantically – its sound qualities, the history of its meanings, the contextual flavours it carries, from its background in another language as well as from its characteristic uses in English, and how these elements interact with (to adopt a musical term) the overtones of other words in the line, the stanza, the paragraph, and ultimately the poem or group of poems as a whole. Alongside the more obvious elements of words considered as sounds, these are what, in Eliot's account, constitute a poem's 'music'.

One context of these views is transmuted Wagnerism, filtered to Eliot through late nineteenth-century French poets, intermediaries whose adoptive reactions incorporated scepticism and irony (see [Chapter 21](#) below). Nevertheless, it is a view of poetry that emerged from, was engaged with and in reaction to actual music, and, in critical writings and in verse, Eliot continued to relate it to music proper. The analogy between poetry and music also has implications for the engagement of the reader in the act of reading: 'you are the music / While the music lasts' (*CPP*, 190) implies a totally absorbed reading of poetry analogous to that fully concentrated listening to music which means the mind is completely taken up with, even taken over by, the aesthetic experience. Only in this way can the structural music of a poem have its proper effect.

Being (in part) music, 'Good poetry ought to be read aloud'.¹⁴ But how, and what does Eliot's own mode of reading poetry imply? He made recordings of all his major and many of his minor poems. The poems, that is, were published as sound structures to be heard as well as printed texts to be read. In doing this Eliot drew an analogy with music: the author's recorded reading is like the composer's recorded performance of a score – just one way of realising it, but a way that gives something the score alone cannot provide. With poetry it is 'a guide to the rhythms'.¹⁵ Although Eliot often stressed the importance of the relation of the language of poetry to the spoken language, except in unusually colloquial fragments he did not read with inflections from spoken language. In *The Rock* (1934) he stressed 'the beauty of incantation' (*CPP*, 164), and he made the same point in an interview shortly after recording *Four Quartets*. Asked about his 'instinct to chant verse in a monotone', he replied: 'A great deal of the melodic arrangement is intuitive. As for chanting verse, for me the incantatory element is very important ... When I read poetry myself I put myself in a kind of trance and move in rhythm to the rhythm of the

piece in question'.¹⁶ It is a mode of reading more in keeping with traditions of French verse, and the quasi-singing style of French classical acting, than with the closeness of English poetry to the spoken language. The effect is that intonation emphasises formal structure (all aspects of euphony, but especially the structure of the line and patterns of rhyme), and does this at the expense of syntax. It adds to the intensity of effect by bringing out more strongly the rhythms, but it is also impersonal. Although Eliot's vocal tone is so sharply individual, his incantatory mode suppresses the inflections that are so important a part of what characterises the individual speaking voice. In a liturgical context chant is music's equivalent of the priest's robes: the individual is absorbed into the office, whether of priest or cantor. Incantation is the robe of the voice. For readers who are distracted by the surface difficulties of Eliot's poetry, allowing oneself to receive it in terms of its 'beauty of incantation' directs attention to the verbal music that was, for Eliot, so crucial an aspect of the poetry's meanings. As Paul Valéry puts it, if the reader approaches the meaning of a poem through its music, 'you will finally introduce [the meaning] as the supreme nuance which will transfigure your piece without altering it'.¹⁷

NOTES

1. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), p. 30.
2. 'London Letter', *Dial* (October 1921), 453.
3. *Ibid.*, 452.
4. Eliot compared Laforgue and Wagner as exemplars (albeit from different perspectives) of 'the philosophy of the unconscious and of annihilation' (*VMP*, 215).
5. Igor Stravinsky, 'Memories of Eliot', *Esquire* (August 1965), 92.
6. Quoted in Stephen Spender, 'Remembering Eliot', *T. S. Eliot: The Man and his Work*, ed. Allen Tate (New York: Delacorte Press, 1966), p. 54.
7. Eliot told G. Wilson Knight the poem was 'inspired by Beethoven'; quoted Tate, ed., *Eliot: Man and Work*, p. 247.
8. Quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 90.
9. See J. W. N. Sullivan, *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927).
10. See Hugh Kenner, *T. S. Eliot: The Invisible Poet* (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 261.
11. Pound described Bartók's 5th Quartet as 'the record of a personal struggle, possible only to a man born in the 1880s. It has the defects or disadvantages of my Cantos. It has the defects and disadvantages of Beethoven's music . . . the defects inherent in a record of struggle.' *Guide to Kulchur* (London: Faber & Faber, 1938), p. 135.

12. Notable musical settings of Eliot's work include Alan Rawsthorne's *Practical Cats* (1954), Stravinsky's *The Dove Descending* (1962), John Dankworth's *Sweeney Agonistes* (1965), Benjamin Britten's *The Journey of the Magi* (1972) and *The Death of St Narcissus* (1977), and Thomas Adès's *Five Eliot Landscapes* (1990). Ildebrando Pizzetti's opera *Assassinio nella Cattedrale* (1958) is based on Alberto Castelli's authorised Italian translation of *Murder in the Cathedral*.
13. 'The Need for Poetic Drama', *Listener* (25 November 1936), 994.
14. *Ibid.*, 995.
15. Author's note, HMV recording of *Four Quartets*, 1947.
16. Ranjee Shahani, 'T. S. Eliot Answers Questions', *John O'London's Weekly* (19 August 1949), 497.
17. Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot, intro. T. S. Eliot (New York: Pantheon, 1958), p. 165.