

**Quaerendo Invenietis: the Contrapuntal Artistry of “Sirens”**

That *Ulysses* contains an episode which brilliantly applies musical forms to its writing should come as no surprise – the novel is peppered not only with references to pieces of classical music, but also with songs which surface repeatedly and unexpectedly, imparting a lyrical quality to the narrative. The application of actual music-compositional techniques is most noticeable, however, in “Sirens”, the episode which according to the Linati schema was conceived as a “fuga per canonem”. Just as J.S. Bach cheekily inscribed “*Quaerendo invenietis*” (“Seek and ye shall find”) on the theoretically complex puzzle canons of his *Musical Offering*, so does Joyce here present a challenge which rewards a vigorous theoretical reading of “Sirens”. He does so, however, on terms which differ wildly from those of the classical tradition, reinterpreting basic compositional concepts in a framework which is built on the noises of everyday life.

It quickly becomes apparent that the episode does not mirror traditional fugue form in any straightforward way. Rather, lines 1-64 begin the action with a jarring, dense cluster of “motivic material”, some phrases of which are recognizable from past episodes (the jingling bed-quoits in line 15, from 4.59), while many others introduce new sounds or motives which will be incorporated into the narrative to come. For instance, “Bronze by gold” appears throughout “Sirens” after appearing in this introduction, the bootsnout’s sniffing noises (100) are anticipated in line 2 (“Imperthnthn”) and “Wait while you wait. Hee hee” (40) anticipates the bizarre interjection at 11.915-919.

Several parallels with musical form can be drawn to this unique introductory passage. While it could hardly be seen as the standard exposition of a fugue subject,<sup>1</sup> it does serve essentially the same function of introducing motivic material. Another possible interpretation is that this section is meant to create an effect similar to the slow introduction often used in symphonic works: compare these short, disjointed phrases with the short and startling musical phrases found in the opening bars of Beethoven's first symphony, for instance.

There are, however, several signs that point to a more playful intention: perhaps they mimic the cacophony that so often occurs *before* a musical performance begins! The "husky fifenote" (5) is evocative of an orchestral wind section tuning, while perhaps a singer is "trilling, trilling" (9), and a percussionist "jingling" (15) his varied apparatus and "tympnum" (20). While the audience makes noise of all sorts, the orchestra is both tuning and warming up by playing the sundry themes which appear in the evening's featured piece of music. Perhaps the "baton" at line 47 represents that of a conductor – one who steps before his orchestra at line 63 and declares, "Begin!"

Immediately following this declaration, the text plunges into action involving such a wide cast of characters and so many sounds and thoughts that it possesses more than a little of that character of *perpetuum mobile* typical of complex contrapuntal music. This fugal rhythmic propulsion is highlighted by the metronomic sounds of the clock, which appear in the introductory passage (16) and later on (380-386).

This rhythmic element is very much in accordance with the idea of "music as number", which is mentioned explicitly by Bloom around line 830. In his own words, "Time makes the tune" (841). The fundamentally mathematical perception of music is

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<sup>1</sup> The exposition section of a fugue introduces its subject in each voice.

not only at the center of contrapuntal theory, but also traditionally ties its invocant to its Hellenic origins.<sup>2</sup> Besides creating yet another point of contact between the settings of turn-of-the-century Dublin and the Greece of the epics, this section of internal monologue further establishes the link between “Sirens” and contrapuntal music.

Bloom’s reflection on “musemathematics” (834) is a key to understanding the use of augmentation,<sup>3</sup> which appears as a narrative technique for both of the episode’s song performances. Ben Dollard’s rendition of “Croppy Boy” lasts from 998 to 1141, and the way it is interpolated with Bloom’s thoughts is similar to how contrapuntists of the Baroque period would often delight in harmonizing a well-known chorale melody, played very slowly but overlaid with complex embellishments. Similarly, Simon Dedalus’ performance of “M’appari, tutt’amor” (in English) from 663 to 751 is interpolated with both Bloom’s thoughts (like 686-692) and third-person narration (like 668-672). Since, in this case, the lyrics are actually printed as Simon sings them, the result is a texture of three voices – a trio of sorts.

This polyphonic effect is mirrored by the relationship between the two barmaids throughout the episode. This pair, surfacing everywhere, together and with a very consistent dynamic between them, seems to be enacting a sort of canon, or perhaps an imitative duo, mainly through their brisk conversational rhythms. Occasionally a more virtuosic section in the duet texture may break out, as in lines 174-176: “Shrill, with deep laughter, after, gold after bronze, they urged each to peal after peal, ringing in changes, bronzegold, goldbronze, shrilldeep, to laughter after laughter.”

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<sup>2</sup> Pythagoras and other Greeks, including Boethius, and also many medieval thinkers, considered music a “liberal art”, sometimes citing it as a branch of mathematics.

<sup>3</sup> A rhythmic manipulation common in fugue – one voice has a melody, in very long note-values, while other voices harmonize on top of it.

There is an interesting synaesthetic implication in Ms. Kennedy and Ms. Douce's respective associations with "gold" (71) and "bronze" (74): separated as they are in the classical hierarchy of precious metals (bronze, silver, gold) by a space of one, they form, as it were, the "interval" of a third, considered appropriate for contrapuntal purposes, though an "imperfect consonance". Naturally, it is possible to overestimate the importance of word selection, but the third is an imperfect consonance often described as "sweet" (or *douce*), which extends the synaesthetic musical vocabulary employed in the episode. Similarly, see "Miss gaze of Kennedy, heard, not seen, read on" at line 240 for further examples of synaesthesia expressed in "Sirens". The idea of perfect and imperfect consonances is also reflected in the recurring phrase "exquisite contrast" (68, 106), and later "inexquisite contrast, contrast inexquisite nonexquisite" (464-465). Finally, the implication of harmony by thirds reinforces the aforementioned idea of music as a numerical phenomenon (this time in terms of pitch instead of rhythm), expressed by Bloom around line 830.

These examples also serve as ideal illustrations of how music and counterpoint are reflected even in very small-scale wordplay throughout "Sirens". At 92, Ms. Kennedy 'transposes' a teatray, which will trigger a reaction from any musician.<sup>4</sup> However, it is not simply relevant that musical terms are reflected in these puns, but that contrapuntal form is sometimes present in them. For instance, in "inexquisite contrast, contrast inexquisite" (464), the use of chiasmus takes on a double meaning, as a musician might easily interpret this as a "retrograde inversion" of the motive – simply, the notes played backwards – which is a difficult contrapuntal maneuver with an often impressive effect.

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<sup>4</sup> Transposition is the process of changing a musical selection from one key to another, a process at which Bob Cowley is apparently quite adept! (see 996)

Chiasmus also appears in the aforementioned lines 174-176 (“bronzegold, goldbronze”), and in lines 82-83: “Sauntering sadly, gold no more, she twisted twined a hair. Sadly she twined in sauntering gold hair behind a curving ear.” Although less a straightforward reversal of the words than a rearrangement, it also reflects the ideal of motivic economy, or the exploration of as many possibilities within one musical motive as possible, which is carried out most admirably in this texture of the barmaids’ imitative duo. One might say that the arranger of the episode, ‘taking [their] motives... twined and turned them’ (633-634).

Another musical form or technique which is essential to the episode is quodlibet. Quodlibet, which involves the combination of several popular melodies in counterpoint, was considered the acme of first-class music by many medieval and Renaissance contrapuntists. All things considered, “quodlibet” may be the most accurate one-word musical description of “Sirens”, since the form is typically associated with the unexpected, often humorous juxtaposition of different melodies, and possesses no rigid form.

Popular song is an extremely potent force throughout *Ulysses*, and nowhere is it more important than in “Sirens”. To name a few of the songs which take part in this extensive literary quodlibet, “Croppy Boy” (998-1141) and “M’appari tutt’amor” (663-751) are performed and play particularly important roles. Because of their performance in entirety and the barroom discussion of and Bloom’s thoughts on both, either could be regarded as a “cantus firmus” for the episode. Other songs which appear several times and have an important role in forming the episode’s musical texture include “When love absorbs my ardent soul” by T. Cooke (20, 530, 551-552), “A Last Farewell” from Verdi’s

*Otello* (21, 588-592), certain strains from the light opera *Floradora* (226, 377-379, 734), and “Goodbye, Sweetheart, Goodbye” (11.13, 320-425), but the songs referred to by name only are too numerous to list here.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on song in particular (as opposed to instrumental music) throughout the episode highlights the relationship between music and text, which is the same relationship upon which the whole concept of “Sirens” is based.

Ideally, these quotations of lyrics function the same way a musical quotation of melody works, because the learned reader would, in theory, hear the tune in his head upon reading the lyrics. The effect is not as strong when it is only a title which is alluded to, as in “Daughter of the regiment” at 507, or “Last rose Castile of summer” at 54, the latter being a combination which could even inspire the reader to conflate two pieces of music, creating a small-scale quodlibet effect.

Another complicating factor which accompanies the use of polytextual quodlibet (that is to say, a quodlibet in which the lyrics are quoted, not just the melodic material) is the relationship arising between these diverse voices and texts, which at moments approaches the figural-exegetical. The best example of this is the scene in which Bloom is listening to Simon Dedalus sing “M’ appari” (in “augmentation”, or slow motion to the reader, over several pages), and his thoughts are an emotional response which flows forth as each line of the song’s text is registered. He quickly becomes sentimental, meditating on his marital relations (678-680, 725-734), for the singer’s lament for a ‘lost, dear one’ with whom he is still in love reflects Bloom’s anxiety over Molly and Blazes Boylan. The “jingle” (of bed-quoits) motive fittingly accompanies the passage at points (687, 689), and the fragmentary question “What perfume does your wife?” (688-689) appears in

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<sup>5</sup> Gifford’s *Ulysses Annotated* was indispensable in tracing the appearances of all of these songs.

Bloom's thoughts for the fourth time (5.259, 5.500, 7.230), indicating Bloom's awareness of the hypocrisy of his own jealousy. More than simply a device for wordplay or the complication of the narrative, counterpoint expresses the thoughts and motivations which propel characters through *Ulysses*.

"Sirens" begins with a display of utter cacophony, a wildly heterogeneous mixture of sounds, and freely combines a huge number of popular melodies and strange sounds into a unique quodlibet. The ending is similar in its defiantly poetic treatment of those sounds which can only be described by the sensible musical ear as "dissonant": Bloom farts at line 1247, and builds to a fittingly virtuosic display of flatulence (incidentally, evocative of the bass pedal point ending a fugue) from line 1286 to the end. In a novel filled with charming codettas, this one distinguishes itself.

But what is most relevant here is the unique "treatment of the dissonance", which is emphasized at the beginning and end of the episode, but similar throughout. Consider the important role which everyday sounds play in the action, like the "steelhoofs ringhoof ringsteel" (113, later at 545), or the clock's workings and the ring of a coin against the cash register at 380-384. (To further illustrate the text's preference for motives based on everyday sounds rather than conventional music, an orchestral performance is hilariously satirized in Bloom's thoughts at 574-578.) Were such sounds to be organized into an actual musical composition, the result might be not unlike the works of living composers who apply repetition and musical form to unexpected sounds, like Philip Glass or Paul Lansky: a manipulation (and indeed a celebration) of the commonplace. But that would be an instance of music inspired by literature inspired by music!

The point is that the use of fugal techniques is accomplished in a way that could only occur in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the barriers separating consonance and dissonance had become virtually nonexistent. The use of the term “fuga per canonem” implies a composition based around one, two, three, or even four musical subjects, but one would be hard-pressed to say how the sounds of “Sirens” might fit into such a mold. It seems more likely that Joyce was more interested in evoking the dramatic effect of the contrapuntal art through small-scale “fugal” or “canonic” writing, coupled with a handful of novel ways of looking at musical concepts, than in the potentially crippling and pedantic formalism required to translate true fugue structure into literature. Instead of this, “Sirens” explores all the metaphorical avenues of interpretation offered by music theory.

Contemporaneously, the composer Charles Ives, who wrote songs in what is now called a “stream-of-consciousness” style, was also experimenting with fugue in ways that were no less dissonant, and such composers as Schoenberg, Webern and Berg were engaged in creating a new style based on the motivic economy of the classical fugue – one which rejected tonality and conventional notions of harmony and consonance. In this sense, “Sirens” really fits quite well into currents of aesthetic thought in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ultimately, “Sirens” is much more than the highly interesting but flat little étude which would probably result from structuring prose after musical form, note-for-note. This episode appropriates and employs contrapuntal techniques in a fashion which is both unashamedly inconsistent and exuberantly creative, making it one of the most successful of the novel’s unique narrative vehicles. As such, at its core is the same impressive effect

found in the most excellent fugal compositions; that is, it delights the ear, while its considerable complexity is subtle rather than imposing or intrusive. As Bloom says it best in his own musical musings at 836-837, “It’s on account of the sounds it is,” not because of some recondite trope superimposed on the narrative. Yet, these same sounds would not be what they are if they lacked the underlying complexity of their contrapuntal machinations. “And you think you’re listening to the ethereal” (835), indeed!

### **Works Cited**

Gifford, Don. *Ulysses Annotated*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

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