

The Power of Music and the Rhythm of Time

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If music be the food of love, play on:
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.¹

(Shakespeare -*Twelfth Night* I,i)

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* opens with the words of Duke Orsino who is passionately in love with Countess Olivia. As all romantic lovers, he believes that music has the power to enhance this feeling of exhilaration and he commands his musicians to play on. It is food for the soul and he wants to feast on it till he is so satiated that he will hunger for it no more. He seems more in love with being in love rather than in love with Olivia. For when Valentine informs him that Olivia will abjure the society of men to mourn the death of her brother, for seven years, Duke Orsino is unaffected. He hopes one day that she too will be bewitched by love as he is. The scene ends with Orsino going to sleep in a bed of flowers. It is important to note that we have here a case of synaesthesia, a trope that refers to the mixing of sensations. In this case, one hears music one does not eat it. This figure of speech emphasizes Orsino's restlessness because of love.

The title of the play *Twelfth Night* refers to the Feast of the Epiphany, the twelfth day after Christmas when the three wise men go with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to visit the new born Baby Jesus. This is deeply symbolic, for it represents the manifestation of Christ as Light, or Truth, to those who believe and understand. This revelation of Light, or Truth, is the subject of the play. In Shakespeare's England, the feast of the *Twelfth Night* was also time of cakes and ale, great revelry and mirth, wine flowed freely and chaos and anarchy reigned. Malvolio, the die-heart Puritan is ill at ease and becomes the wet blanket and stops the rowdy and boisterous singing of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Feste and Maria. He is censorious when he says: — "Do ye

make an ale-house of my lady's house?" (II.iii.80–81). But Sir Toby snaps back: "Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" (II.iii.103–104). Sir Toby has judged rightly, he knows that Malvolio detests revelry, music and alcohol entirely.

Feste, the clown often sings songs about love in order to entertain others in the play.

O mistress mine, where are you roaming?
O stay and hear, your true love's coming,
That can sing both high and low.
Trip no further, pretty sweeting.
Journeys end in lovers meeting,
Every wise man's son doth now.

(Act II, iii)

Conclusively, we may say that music plays an important role in the play because it is often linked with lovesickness, one of the main themes of the play.

John Dryden in his poem "Alexander's Feast" beautifully articulates the power that music has on one of the greatest kings of Macedonia – Alexander the Great, the man who said: I want to conquer the world. The ode was written to commemorate the feast of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music. His court singer Timotheus while entertaining his great master, very skilfully takes control of his feelings, at a banquet to celebrate Alexander's victory over the Persian King Darius III. Timotheus is able to inspire and arouse in his listeners a range of intense emotions: sense of sublime divinity, bacchanalian joy, martial zeal, heartfelt pity, tender love, and even fiery revenge. Alexander sits with Thais, the young and attractive Athenian courtesan as he listens to this performance. Timotheus while praising the 'godlike hero' adds, "None but the brave deserves the fair!"

Timotheus soon takes his hero one notch higher and while the “trembling notes ascend the sky” he flatters Alexander into believing that he is in fact the son of Jove, King of the gods and supreme in Olympia. The king of the gods has begotten the conqueror of the world. The crowds grow wild and hail him as “a present deity”. The monarch hears this, is filled with vainglorious pride, “Assumes the god; / Affects to nod, /And seems to shake the sphere.”

Timotheus then sings in praise of Bacchus, the God of wine and merrymaking, and the scene is filled with drunken revelry. “Drinking is a soldier’s pleasure”. Alexander indulges his vanity and fights all his battles again in his mind. “And thrice he routed all his foes, and thrice he slew the slain!” Seeing the madness in Alexander’s eyes, Timotheus changes his song to check Alexander’s pride and create a mood of pity. He sings of the fall of Darius, the Persian king, “Fallen from his high estate... And weltering in his blood;” What is even worse, is that “On the bare earth exposed he lies / With not a friend to close his eyes”. The Greeks believed that those who were left exposed and not buried properly were doomed to wander by the river Styx, the entrance to the Underworld, for eternity; their souls could never be at rest. Thus, denying burial to a corpse not only insulted the body, but also damned his soul for all time. The joy of victory fades and a pall of gloom descends on the scene: Alexander sighs and “tears began to flow”.

The master musician then smiles and artfully changes the tune and plays on the heart strings of love. Alexander the Great is rendered helpless again and is obliged to sigh and look and sigh again. Smitten by love Alexander falls upon the breast of Thais. The Conqueror of Persia lies vanquished by music.

Timotheus now strikes his golden lyre again and rouses Alexander like “a rattling peal of thunder” to feelings of revenge. The slain Greek

soldiers who lay unburied rise with “Each a *torch in his hand*” and seem to urge Alexander to avenge their death.

And the king seized a flambeau with zeal to destroy:
Thais led the way
To light him to his prey
And like another Helen, fired another Troy.

(John Dryden, *Alexander's Feast*, 1697)

Just as Helen was responsible for destroying the city of Troy so too Thais urges Alexander to burn Persepolis. Following this, text and music join hands again with the divine St. Cecilia's appearance. By giving mortals the instrument of heavenly harmony – the organ – she extends the benefits of music beyond those influences which Timotheus exerted. A rousing double fugue concludes Dryden's poem with “He raised a mortal to the skies, (she drew an Angel down.” This evocative image of Timotheus raising Alexander, creating the delusion of divine status, juxtaposed with St. Cecilia bringing an angel, or music, down from heaven supersedes humanity's (Alexander's) flawed nature.²

Where Timotheus starts out by celebrating Alexander's martial prowess, he reveals his own power in his ability to reverse his audience's evaluation of war by leading them to accept that the honour won in battle is never enough, as it is “Never ending, still beginning” (101), it has to be won again and again. His audience responds enthusiastically, but while it is love they celebrate, it is in fact “music [that] won the cause” (108). With this line which might embody the poem's theme as a whole Dryden makes music the victor as it displaces Alexander's victory in war.

On an entirely different note T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* invites attention. A Quartet is a musical composition for four voices or instruments. Like most modernist writers, Eliot was interested in the divide between high and low culture, which he symbolized using music. He believed

that high culture, including art, opera, and drama, was in decline while popular culture was on the rise. In his lecture on “The Music of Poetry”, Eliot states: “I believe that the properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure... The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music. There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transition in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet. There are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject matter. It is in the concert room, rather than in the opera house, that the germ of a poem may be quickened.”³

As Dame Helen Gardner indicates, each poem contains what are best described as five movements, each with its own necessary structure. The first movement suggests at once a musical analogy. In each poem it contains statements and counter-statements, or two contrasted but related themes, like the first and second subjects of a movement in strict sonata form... The second movement is constructed on the opposite principle of a single subject handled in two boldly contrasted ways. The effect is like that of hearing the same melody played on a different group of instruments. The third movement is the core of each poem, out of which reconciliation grows: it is an exploration with a twist of ideas of the first two movements. The ear is prepared for the lyric fourth movement. The fifth movement recapitulates the themes of the poem with personal and topical applications and makes a resolution of the contradictions of the first.⁴

The first quartet ‘Burnt Norton’ begins with four statements about Time, each spoken perhaps by a different voice. First, Time as a continuous chain of events:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable

(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 1943)

Second, Time as eternally present and therefore unredeemable. Third, Time as a continuum of events which might have been different. And lastly these possibilities are pointed toward a divine purpose not ours and therefore ‘the ground of our beseeching’:

What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 1943)

To disturb the fictive past is futile, but it will be disturbed, because we have filled the garden with our own echoes, and nothing is sweeter than our own deception. **It is a poem about air,**

The second quartet “East Coker” begins with the line:
“In my beginning is my end”

(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 1943)

This is the theme which dominates the whole work. Like a musical phrase it is woven back and forth through the entire texture of the composition, now stated in one key of meaning, now in another. The actual wording of the theme is possibly an echo of the inscription “*En ma fin est mon commencement*” embroidered upon the Chair of State of Mary Queen of Scots. Maurice Baring reports:

Her motto was symbolic in more ways than one. Putting aside the question of whether the death of Queen of Scots was, as some think, the triumph of a martyred saint awaiting canonization in the future, or a consummate piece of playacting, there is no doubt that practically and politically the end of the Queen of Scots was her beginning: for at her death her son, James Stuart, became heir to the crowns of England and Scotland and he lived to wear both crowns.⁵

The beginning and the end are common. Throughout the poem we find this theme given two contrasting interpretations: a spiritual one and a material or temporal one. In the spiritual interpretation the

beginning is seen as the highest type of knowledge or knowledge of God, which can only come by intuition, through love. ***East Coker* is a poem about earth.** The material or temporal interpretation stresses the cyclic nature of history, the temporality of material achievements, and the mortality of man in the spirit of the admonition: 'Remember, man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return'. Man as a physical being has his cycle of life, its opening predicates its close.

These two interpretations of the dominant theme are played back and forth until their final combination in that victorious reversal of the introductory statement that closes the poem: 'In my end is my beginning'.

The third section *The Dry Salvages* is a poem about water which some Greek thinkers thought was the primitive material out of which the world arose, and which man has always thought as surrounding and embracing the land, limiting the land and encroaching on it, itself illimitable.⁴ The first movement of the poem is a contrast between both the river, 'sullen, untamed and intractable', and the sea, vast and incomprehensible, on the one hand, and the mechanized pretences of man on the other hand. His mechanical accomplishments have allowed man to forget the river which is within him and the sea that is all about him: but the river remains, 'waiting, watching and waiting', and the sea, with its many gods and many voices, is a perpetual reminder of the ultimate destiny of man and his fancy creations.

We can regulate our watches, we can measure the time of our ordinary experiences, but we can never control the intractable, inevitable character of destruction, which is the real meaning of the flux, if we take it as the ultimate. This is the time that is measured by the tolling bell of the ground swell, 'that is and was from the beginning', which is Death:

And under the oppression of the silent fog
The tolling bell

Measures time not out time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometers, older
Than time counted by anxious worried women.

(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 1943)

In the final movement of this poem Eliot believes the highest moment of human achievement is reached when one understands everything *sub specie aeternitatis*. To apprehend the immanence of God in the temporal is not to deny the reality of the temporal or to proclaim its illusory character; but to comprehend its mode of reality for the first time as a creation of God, with its own characteristics of individuality.

His fourth quartet *Little Gidding* is a poem about fire, the purest of the elements, by which some have thought the world would end, fire which consumes and purifies. We could then say that the whole poem is about the four elements whose mysterious union makes life, pointing out that in each of the separate poems, all four are present.

Little Gidding is a grand recapitulation of the whole of the Quartets, so far as time is concerned, although the emphasis is now on the active or positive way of salvation. Detachment from things, persons and places is the proper position of man. It is in this condition we reflect on the nature of history, for history is a reflection of timeless moments; and no one can deny its ultimate significance and meaning which is God and his unconditional love for us.. We need not know the whole of history but only any one of its moments, for that moment will contain the whole meaning within it.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 1943)

And finally, it is in any of these moments that man can find his unity with God through the identification of his human love with the love of the Divine:

Quick now, here, now, always –
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well. When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowded knot of fire
And the fire and rose are one.

(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 1943)

It is evident from this discussion that music and poetry, has the potential to raise our spirits and take us to level of the sublime, it can also make us delve within to search for meaning of life and death, God and our place in the universe.

References

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- 3 T. S. Eliot, *The Music of Poetry* (Pennsylvania State University: Folcroft Press, 1969)
- 4 Helen Gardner, “The Music of Four Quartets”, *T.S Eliot : Four Quartets, Casebook Series*. General Editor A.E.Dyson. Ed. Bernard Bergonzi (New York : Palgrave. 1969)
- 5 Maurice Baring, *In the End Is My Beginning”* (House of Stratus, 2001)