Neohelicon (2012) 39:89–103
DOI 10.1007/s11059-012-0134-0

Wagner or Beethoven?

Shifts in the Musical Taste of Virginia Woolf

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Published online: 3 May 2012

Abstract The essay focuses on the role music played in Virginia Woolf's life and writings. By relying on information gleaned from her diaries, correspondence, essays, and fiction, on Leonard Woolf's autobiography and his reviews of gramophone recordings, as well as on the critical and autobiographical works of their contemporaries, the author gives a detailed analysis of Virginia Woolf's musical background and education. He sees continuity between her early opera-going experiences and her later interest in the string quartets and piano sonatas of Beethoven, arguing that a major artist never forgets the inspiration of early, formative years. Furthermore, this essay addresses complex questions of whether and how a comparison of music and literature can lead to a better understanding of Virginia Woolf's works.

Keywords The "presence" of music in literary works · Musical life in Great Britain in the early twentieth century · The role of music in the life of Virginia and Leonard Woolf (attending opera performances, concerts, and recitals, listening to gramophone records) · The impact of the works of Beethoven, Wagner, and other composers on Virginia Woolf's fiction · Rhythm in music and narrative prose

All descriptions of music are quite worthless (Woolf 1979a, p. 33).

Although Virginia Woolf was skeptical of the merits of any verbal approach to music, she was fascinated by the ideal of "ut musica poesis". "Its odd, for I'm not regularly musical, but I always think of my books as music before I write them", she remarked towards the end of her life. "I want to investigate the influence of music on literature", she added a few months before her death (Woolf 1980, p. 450).

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Can a comparison of music and literature lead to a better understanding of her works? The issues involved are complex; one must move carefully and tentatively in this area. A comparison of the two arts might mean a number of different things.

How can the sister arts "appear" in a work of literature? One could begin by drawing a distinction between the ideal types of "use" and "mention". Gérard Genette gives the following examples: "In the sentence 'Paris is a great city', the word Paris is used transitively […]; in 'Paris consists of two syllables', the name of the city is mentioned (cited)" (Genette 1999, pp. 235–236). The actual presence of the sister arts in a literary work can never be a clear-cut case of use or mention. Having made that general statement, I would risk the hypothesis that the verbal description of a painting is more feasible than the literary imitation of a musical structure. Whether this is true or not, it cannot be denied that Virginia Woolf was surrounded by visual artists (such as her sister Vanessa and the painter Duncan Grant), and the two theoreticians whose aesthetic views exerted a profound influence on her, Roger Fry and Clive Bell, focused on the visual arts. That may be a partial explanation for the fact that an imaginary landscape plays a more important role than the tune played by an old fiddler in the story entitled "A Simple Melody" (written around 1925).

How can one characterize the impact of music on her writing? "We do not have much of a factual base to start from," as one of the critics who has attempted to address this question has noted (Jacobs 1993, p. 228). The information one can collect from the diaries, the essays, the correspondence, and other publications is so fragmentary that only tentative conclusions can be drawn. Let it suffice to mention one example. On 16 January 1929 she and her husband went for a week to Berlin, where they were joined by her sister, the painter Duncan Grant, and her younger nephew Quentin Bell. "We spent most of our time at the opera," she wrote to a cousin first removed (Woolf 1978a, p. 126), but her diary and correspondence contain no reference to any performance, and Quentin Bell's biography describes the Berlin holiday as a dismal failure and makes no mention of any operatic experience. Given such gaps in our knowledge, it is difficult to assess Virginia Woolf's musical culture.

In the late nineteenth century children in an upper middle class English family were expected to acquire some knowledge of the visual arts and music. The author's mother "could play the piano and was musical" (Woolf 1978b, p. 100). "Last night we went to the first of our four operas", Virginia Stephen informed her elder brother Thoby in June 1898. A letter to a friend dated 12 August 1899 indicates that the children "perform Fugues on the Harmonium." "I draw for hours every evening after dinner", she wrote to another friend in December 1904 (Woolf 1975, pp. 17, 27, 170). "My old piano" is mentioned as early as 1901. A year later there is a reference to a pianola recently purchased. Her younger brother Adrian seemed to be the most musical in the family; he brought sheet music into the household by J. S. Bach, Händel, and Schumann (Woolf 1975, pp. 41, 55, 88). After she had started reviewing books, Virginia devoted some attention to works on music: in 1905 she reviewed the fifth volume of *The Oxford History of Music* in the *Guardian*, and in 1909 her article "The Opera" appeared in *The Times* (Woolf 1986, pp. 373–374, 269–272). She continued to be very critical of the shortcomings of

musical life in Britain: in 1918 she dismissed the "incredible, pathetic stupidity of the music hall" (Woolf 1979a, p. 144) and attacked those who regarded the oratorio as the "only permissible form of art" (Woolf 1987, p. 262). As late as 1932 her friend Dame Ethel Mary Smyth, speaking of someone with musical talent, complained about the inferiority of the status of music in British culture in comparison with Germany: "he's a phenomenon. How I pity him! Forced to live in England with that gift—you don't know the loneliness" (Woolf 1983, p. 69).

Among the members of the larger family there were some who could play instruments. "[When] we asked if she could play, […] she strummed through a Beethoven sonata, with the tramp of a regiment of dragons," the young Virginia wrote about her cousin Helen Stephen (1862–1908) (Woolf 1975, p. 343). Determined to make up for the lack of musical culture in London, Emma Vaughan (1874–1960), one of the early friends, spent several months studying in Dresden.

Although there are many publications about those who knew the young Virginia Stephen, they contain surprisingly little information on music, and indeed they are sometimes unreliable. One scholar, for instance, mentions that Oliver Strachey (1874–1960), Lytton's elder brother, "studied the piano with Lechititsky in Vienna" (Jacobs 1993, p. 229), and the reader may assume that the reference is to the highly influential Polish instrumentalist Teodor Leczetycki, known in the German-speaking countries as Theodor Leschetitzky (1830–1915), one of the few who established a highly original school of interpretation, an alternative to the tradition of Ferenc Liszt.

Among the Cambridge friends of Virginia's brothers there were amateur musicians. "It was characteristic of him that he was usually playing Chopin", Leonard Woolf wrote about Harry Gray, who in later life became a well-known surgeon (L. Woolf 1980, p. 112), and the philosopher G. E. Moore "sang Adelaide, Schubert songs, or the Dichterliebe, or […] played the Waldstein or the Hammerklavier sonata" (L. Woolf 1964, p. 42), works that demand considerable virtuosity.

While all these people may have helped the young girl acquire good taste in music, the most important influence must have been that of Saxon Sydney-Turner (1880–1962), a regular visitor to chamber music concerts who "kept a record, both on paper and in his head, of all the operas he had ever been to" (L. Woolf 1980). In fact, it is possible to argue that this Wagnerite played a major role in the musical education of the young writer until her future husband appeared on the scene and took a firm stand against the legacy of Wagner. Back from Ceylon, in 1911 Leonard Woolf discovered that the musical life of the British capital was dominated by foreigners. "Among the frequenters of the Russian Ballet there was, strangely enough, a vogue for Wagner—strangely, because one can hardly imagine two products of the human mind and soul more essentially hostile" (L. Woolf 1964, p. 49). These words, written two decades after the death of Virginia Woolf, express a deep-seated resentment of the cult of Wagner that had been built up by intellectuals and musicians such as George Bernard Shaw, Sir Thomas Beecham, Albert Coates, or the Hungarian-German János (Hans) Richter (1843–1916), the conductor of the first performances in Bayreuth and one of the musical directors of the Covent Garden in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The earliest references to Wagner in Virginia Stephen's written legacy are in "A Sketch of the Past", which contains a passage about a performance of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in June 1900 (Woolf 1978b, p. 155), and in a 1904 letter written in Paris to her closest friend Violet Dickinson. At a dinner with Clive Bell and the painter Gerald Kelly, Beatrice Thynner "expounded theories on Wagner", creating a hot debate (Woolf 1975, p. 140). At the beginning of the next year she reviewed a two-volume work on Wilhelmine Markgravine of Bayreuth, in which she remarked that the Markgravine not only founded a university but even "anticipated the present opera house", i.e. the Festspielhaus (Woolf 1986, p. 90). Two years later Virginia saw a performance of *Die Meistersinger* and listened to her younger brother Adrian spell out Wagner on the piano. Her affirmation that, "nothing will induce me to sacrifice my Richter" indicates that she valued the Wagner performances of the Covent Garden (Woolf 1975, pp. 294, 308, 312). In 1908 she praised a "very fairly satisfactory performance of *Götterdämmerung*" and declined an invitation from Lady Robert Cecil, because "our opera began at 4:30." In that year she went "almost nightly to the opera" and "in the afternoon" studied German (Woolf 1975, pp. 329, 330, 331, 333). Her obvious goal was to understand the texts of Wagner's works. Sydney-Turner sent her an authentic portrait of Hans Sachs, and she asked him to get tickets for her (Woolf 1975, pp. 352, 362).

In 1909 she visited Bayreuth, accompanied by Sydney-Turner and Adrian. "Now we are going to read *Parsifal*, and then lunch, and then we shall hear the immortal work", she wrote to her sister Vanessa on 7 August. The next day she summarized her impressions in the following terms: "Saxon and Adrian say that it was not a good performance, and that I shan't know anything about it until I have heard it 4 times. […] We have been discussing obscure points in *Parsifal* all the morning" (Woolf 1975, p. 404). On August 11 she saw another performance of Wagner's last work. On this occasion she felt "within a space of tears", and reached the conclusion that "it is the most remarkable of the operas; it slides from music to words almost imperceptibly" (Woolf 1975, p. 406). In that year Siegfried Wagner and Karl Muck were the conductors. The few available recordings with them suggest a fundamental difference between their interpretations: the composer's son (himself a composer) tended towards more transparency in orchestral playing (Archipel 02888-1 and 2), whereas Muck was instrumental in creating a long tradition of slow performances that stressed heaviness (Naxos Historical 8.110049-50). It would be interesting to know which of the two versions appealed more to Virginia Stephen.

The fact that she found *Lohengrin* "a very dull opera" (Woolf 1975, p. 409) may need some explanation. The impressions of a young and relatively inexperienced person should not be taken too seriously, but it is worth noting that *Parsifal* is not an easily accessible work, so she may have sensed some of the distinct qualities of Wagner's art if she enjoyed it. It must be borne in mind that she could give only the "impressions as an amateur" in her article published in *The Times* on 21 August. The remarkable thing is that she ascribed the superiority of *Parsifal* to *Lohengrin* to the fact that in the later work "the words are continued by the music so that we hardly notice the transition" (Woolf 1986, p. 288), a feature that echoes Wagner's own intentions. Needless to say, *Lohengrin* can be called an outstanding achievement from at least two perspectives, as the culmination of the German

Romantic opera represented by Hoffmann, Weber, Marschner, and Lortzing, or as a model for the Expressionism of Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, composed in 1911, a one-act opera with an opposition between light and darkness (an F sharp and C polarity) comparable to the contrast underlying the structure of *Lohengrin*, and a blood motif inspired by the music associated with Ortrud in Wagner's work. For different reasons, both of these contexts were unknown to Virginia Stephen.

From Bayreuth, Saxon-Turner, Adrian and Virginia Stephen went to Dresden, where they saw a performance of *Salome* by Richard Strauss. "I was much excited, and believe that it is a new discovery. He gets great emotion into his music, without any beauty" (Woolf 1975, p. 410). Once more, an insight might be detected beneath the surface of her statement: the realization that expressivity can be attained without an appeal to conventional beauty.

Back in London she may have heard a performance of *Tristan* in 1910 (Woolf 1975, p. 425), and may also have attended the *Ring* in 1911. It seems almost certain that she saw few Wagner performances after her marriage to Leonard in 1912. A letter to Katherine Cox written in May 1913 testifies to the influence of her husband: "We came up here 10 days ago to attend the *Ring*—and I hereby state that I will never go again […]. My eyes are bruised, my ears dulled, my brain a mere pudding of pulp—O the noise and the heat, and the bawling sentimentality, which used once to carry me away, and now leaves me sitting perfectly still. Everyone seems to have come to this opinion, though some pretend to believe still" (Woolf 1976, p. 26). In 1923 she wrote about her loss of enthusiasm to a younger woman in terms that suggest a focus on the action rather than on the music: "I went to *Tristan* the other night; but the love making bored me. When I was your age I thought it the most beautiful thing in the world—or was it only in deference to Saxon?" (Woolf 1977, p. 56). Two years later, in a letter addressed to Sydney-Turner she seemed to express a more qualified view: "I have been to the *Walküre*, and to Lords: at both places I looked for you in vain. […] *Walküre* completely triumphed, I thought; except for some boredom—I can't even enjoy those long arguments in music—when it is obviously mere conversation upon business matters between Wotan and Brunhilde: however, the rest was superb. The fire is terrible: I saw at once that it was made of red silk, and that used to be done quite satisfactorily. Also I missed the ride of the horses" (Woolf 1977, p. 186). Aside from the reservations that refer to the visual components of the production, the characterization of Act II, Scene 2 suggests an inability to recognize the turning point of the *Ring*, the dramatic function of Wotan's outburst of despair caused by the realization that he is unable to create a human being who could have the freedom of will that is denied to the gods. She failed to understand why the composer once described this as "the most important scene in the whole tetralogy" (Donington 1974, p. 155).

Although shortly after this performance of *Die Walküre* she conversed with the Jewish stockbroker Sydnes J. Loeb (1876–1964), who was an ardent Wagnerian (Woolf 1982, p. 26), in one of the stories composed around the same time she made a guest of Clarissa Dalloway refer to the *Meistersinger* (Woolf 1989, p. 194), and in 1931 she listened to Ethel Smyth's lengthy argument about *Parsifal* (Woolf 1983, p. 49), she missed the 1935 performance of *Tristan*, and the *Ring* of 1937 and 1938 conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler, with superb singers in the leading roles such as

Frida Leider, Kirsten Flagstad, Maria Müller, Tiana Lemnitz, Margarete Klose, Franz Völker, Max Lorenz, Lauritz Melchior, Herbert Janssen, and Ruldolf Bockelmann. The British press was enthusiastic, and the surviving recorded parts of the two cycles (Music & Arts CD-1035 and Eklipse EKR 62) suggest that these performances may have been the most powerful in history. It would perhaps not be far-fetched to conclude that she stopped learning German and lost her interest in Wagner under her husband's influence. She may have felt some loss; "there was a time when I went out to operas, evening concerts &c, at least 3 times a week", she noted with regret in 1915 (Woolf 1979a, p. 19). In her later years she rarely saw operas composed after 1800. In 1928 she saw Gluck's *Armide*, a work that she found not too interesting (Woolf 1977, p. 497), in 1931 she went to Cambridge for a performance of *The Fairy Queen*, Purcell's longest semi-opera, a work that she enjoyed (Woolf 1978a, pp. 290, 292), in 1932 she went to *Dido and Aeneas* at the Wells and thought it "absolutely and entirely satisfying", and in December to Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* at Sadler's Wells (possibly sung in English), which she described as "the loveliest opera ever written" (Woolf 1979b, pp. 135, 259). Her diary refers mainly to Mozart performances: in 1918 she saw *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte*, in 1926 *Le Nozze di Figaro*, in 1930 *La Finta Giardiniera*, in 1931 *Die Zauberflöte*, and in 1933 she took her niece Angelica Bell to *Don Giovanni* at Sadler's Wells. In 1934 she heard *Le Nozze di Figaro* in Glyndebourne, conducted by Fritz Busch, with Willi Domgraf-Fassbänder in the title role and Aulikki Rautawaara and Luise Helletsgruber as the Contessa and Cherubino, respectively. The next year she also went there to a concert and to *Die Zauberflöte*, conducted by the same music director.

It is almost certain that after her early experience of *Salome* she never heard any of the major operas of the post-Wagnerian era. In 1926 she may have seen a concert performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* (Woolf 1982, p. 72), and in 1931 she was taken to see Ethel Smyth's *The Wreckers* by Vita Sackville-West and the composer (Woolf 1983, p. 48), an opera she had seen for the first time conducted by Thomas Beecham in 1909, three years after the first performance in Leipzig. Neither of these works made a deep impression on her, not even the British composer's three-act opera, appreciated by such eminent conductors as Art(h)ur Nikisch and Bruno Walter, and based on the legends of Cornwall, the region where the Stephen family spent several summers. Her lack of familiarity with the music of her age may explain why she dismissed *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* as "a faded arty opera" when she heard it performed at Covent Garden by a French company conducted by Philippe Gaubert (Woolf 1985, p. 81). Paul Dukas's only opera, first performed in 1907, was highly regarded by Schönberg and Berg, who must have realized that although it contains quotes from *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *La mer*, it has elements that are closer to Expressionism than to Debussy's orchestral idiom. In 1936 Messiaen characterized it as "le chef-d'oeuvre incompris", and praised especially the central act, "ce génial crescendo de l'ombre à la lumière qui fait du 2e acte le chef-d'oeuvre de Paul Dukas et un des chefs-d'oeuvre de la musique" (Messiaen 1936, pp. 79, 84).

Although her relations with Sydney-Turner had cooled considerably over the years, her dependence on his expertise continued. In a letter written in January 1920

she asked him about an episode in *The Voyage Out*: "I wonder if you would once more tell me the number of the Beethoven sonata that Rachel plays in the *Voyage Out*—I sent the copy I marked to America, and now they're bringing out a new edition here—I can't remember what you told me—I say op. 112—It can't be that" (Woolf 1976, p. 418). The fact that she did not seem to remember that op. 112 was the cantata *Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt* clearly indicates that Sydney-Turner was her main source of information. He occasionally took her to concerts, and in 1923 they heard "a divine Bach", i.e. the secular cantata "Geschwinde, geschwinde ihr wirbelnden Winde" (BWV 201). It would be a mistake to deny the impact of Wagner on her formative years. "I doubt whether she really enjoyed the tense atmosphere of her Bayreuth holiday," remarked one of her critics (Jacobs 1993, p. 234). Such assumptions are in contradiction with the characterization of the activity of the public "between the acts" and the description of the site in the article "Impressions at Bayreuth". One might think of passages such as the following: "when the opera is over, it is quite late; and half way down the hill one looks back upon a dark torrent of carriages descending, their lamps wavering one above another, like irregular torches." In fact, the article refers also to the impact of the atmosphere of the city: "we wander with *Parsifal* in our heads through empty streets at night, where the gardens of the Hermitage glow with flowers like those other magic blossoms, and sound melts into colour, and colour calls out for words, where, in short, we are lifted out of the ordinary world and allowed merely to breathe and see" (Woolf 1986, pp. 289–292). One should avoid making the false assumption that early influences are obliterated by what comes later in an artist's career, for this may lead us to misinterpret the early works.

Let me illustrate with one example how commentaries may do the works a disservice. Rachel Vinrace, the heroine of *The Voyage Out*, is an amateur musician. In *Melymbrosia*, the first version of the novel, she has a late Beethoven sonata "spread upon the little piano," and she is reading an "engaging passage":

> Der zagend vor dem Streiche
> sich flüchtet, wo er kann,
> weil eine Braut er als Leiche
> für seinen Herrn gewann!
> Dünkt es dich dunkel,
> mein Gedicht? (Woolf 2002, p. 36).

Isolde's ironic and self-reflexive words in Act I, Scene 2 suggest that Tristan is reluctant to face Isolde, because he is taking her as a bride for another man. In the later version only the scene in which Rachel Vinrace is playing a Bach fugue is preserved. Mrs. Dalloway knocks at the door and enters. "The shape of the Bach fugue crashed to the ground" (Woolf 1965, p. 61). "Rachel's maturity reflects Woolf's own as she began to leave behind the popular Wagner for the older works of Beethoven, Bach and Mozart", argues a critic in a recent essay (Kelley 2010, p. 422). The relevance of this explanation can be questioned on at least three grounds. First, in the early version Wagner is presented as continuing the tradition of Beethoven, very much in the spirit of the later composer's influential essays on his predecessor. Second, before World War I Wagner's music was hardly more

popular than that of Mozart or Beethoven. Third, in *Melymbrosia* the focus is on the text and not the music. The passage quoted might have appealed to Virginia Woolf as poetry because of its somewhat enigmatic character.

Woolf's interest in the legend of Sir Tristram and the Lady Iseult can be traced back to her short fiction known as "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn", composed in August 1906. In what I would regard as her most interesting short narrative before "The Mark on the Wall" (1917), Master Richard tells the story, "in a high melodious voice". "He dropped his gay manner, and looked past us all, with straight fixed eyes, as though he drew his words from some sight not far from him. And as the story grew passionate his voice rose, and his fists clenched, and he raised his foot and stretched forth his arms; and then, when the lovers part, he seemed to see the Lady sink away from him, and his eye sought farther and farther till the vision was faded away; and his arms were empty. And then he is wounded in Brittany; and he hears the Princess coming across the seas to him" (Woolf 1989, pp. 55–56). *Melymbrosia* may indicate Virginia Stephen's interest in the way Wagner added to the complexity of the love story. Be that as it may, the focus is on the text rather than on the music.

To contradict the belief underlying the passage cited above from Leonard Woolf's autobiography, according to which Diaghilev's company represented a modernity different from that of Wagner, it has to be mentioned that before 1912 the Russians did not acquaint their London audience with the works of Debussy, Ravel, or Stravinsky, since Diaghilev was convinced that the British were too conservative to accept their compositions. The ballets they presented had music that represented a far more traditional and even sentimental romanticism than that of the Bayreuth master. "The London public were much excited at the prospect of seeing Pavlova in *Giselle*. […] The other 'sensation' of our autumn season in London was the début of Kchessinska in *Le Lac des Cygnes*" (Grigoriev 1960, p. 69). The musical idiom of Tchaikovsky is certainly very different from that of Wagner, but it can hardly be called more "advanced" in terms of harmony or structure, and it would be superfluous to compare Wagner and Adolphe Adam. Diaghilev continued to believe that the British public was unprepared for his more experimental productions. Because of this, in 1918 Virginia Woolf could see only the ballet-pantomime *Le Carnaval* and the one-act choreographic drama *Shéhérézade* (Woolf 1979a, pp. 222, 288), two of the earliest productions of the company, first performed in 1910, with music by Robert Schumann (orchestrated by Rimsky-Korsakov, Liadov, Glazounov, and Tchérépnine) and Rimsky-Korsakov, respectively. On the evidence of her correspondence (Woolf 1976, p. 367), it can be assumed that in 1919, when Diaghilev's company returned to London, what she saw was an eclectic production, *La Boutique Fantastique*, based on "a collection of odd pieces by Rossini", orchestrated by Respighi, and danced by Lydia Lopokova and Léonide Massine (Grigoriev 1960, pp. 154–155).

Unlike G. E. Moore, Sydney-Turner, or Virginia's younger brother Adrian, Leonard Woolf was not an amateur musician. He never tried to compose and played no instrument. He went to concerts, but his taste was limited by strong ideological considerations. As he admitted in his late autobiography, "In 1911 I knew nothing about Wagner, but I saw that it was time for me to set about him seriously.

I therefore took a box in Covent Garden for the *Ring* in October, and Virginia came to *Das Rheingold, Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*, with Adrian and Rupert Brooke to *Die Walküre*." Although his memory was overshadowed by later historical events, it can be safely assumed that he regarded the works of Wagner as detrimental from the outset. In his writings he almost seemed to avoid addressing the music itself and paid little attention to technical considerations: "I see that in its way the *Ring* is a masterpiece, but I dislike it and dislike Wagner and his art. […] The Germans in the nineteenth century developed a tradition, a philosophy of life and art, barbarous, grandiose, phoney. Wagner was both cause and effect of this repulsive process which ended in the apogee and apotheosis of human bestiality and degradation, Hitler and the Nazis" (Woolf 1964, p. 50).

In the later 1920s he reviewed gramophone records for *The Nation* and the *Athenaeum*. Some of the records selected were of considerable interest. He paid some attention to the activity of the Dolmetsch family, probably because he knew that Stella Duckworth, Virginia's half-sister who died in 1897, "was taught the violin by Arnold Dolmetsch" (Woolf 1978b, p. 113), and in 1917 Dolmetsch made a virginal for Roger Fry (today in the Courtauld Gallery), but he failed to see the importance of period instrument interpretation. It is hardly understandable why he limited his choice to five labels (Parlophone, Beltona, His Master's Voice, Columbia, and Decca) and ignored the products of important companies like Telefunken, Homocord, Odeon, Polydor, or Gramophone. In any case, some fifty per cent of the items he discussed were insignificant. The finale of Act I of *Lohengrin* and the King's prayer sung in English and conducted by Sir Hamilton Harty certainly do not represent a memorable contribution to the history of interpretation. Although the reviewer's short evaluations cannot be dismissed as entirely worthless, his remarks on the technical strengths and weaknesses of the recording (e.g. the emphasis on the balance between orchestra, chorus, and singers) dominate. The relatively long notice on Felix von Weingarten's Columbia version of the *Symphonie fantastique*, for instance, contains no characterization of the specific features of the art of the great conductor.

In addition to extra-musical considerations, Leonard Woolf's approach to music was hampered by misinformation and the impact of fashionable views. He attributed the song entitled *Die beiden Grenadiere* to Schubert (Woolf 1967, p. 201) and constantly praised the late string quartets of Beethoven. Since he reviewed the recordings of these works made by the Léner and Capet Quartets (L. Woolf 1929a, p. 252, 1929b, p. 1543), it seems likely that these were the versions known to Virginia Woolf. In his autobiography he insisted that she was especially fond of one of these quartets: "I had once said to her that, if there was to be music at one's cremation, it ought to be the cavatina from the *B flat major quartet*, op. 130, of Beethoven. There is a moment at cremations when the doors of the crematorium open and the coffin slides slowly in, and there is a moment in the middle of the cavatina when for a few bars the music, of incredible beauty, seems to hesitate with a gentle forward pulsing motion—if played at the moment it might seem to be gently propelling the dead into eternity of oblivion. Virginia agreed with me." Incidentally, "the music of the 'Blessed Spirits' from Gluck's *Orfeo* was played" at the cremation (L. Woolf 1975, pp. 95–96), but it is undeniable that the late

Beethoven quartets seemed to be the most important musical experience for the Woolf couple in the 1920s and 1930s.

Several documents demonstrate that his gestures of praise for these works were far from original in the interwar period. One of them is the reminiscences of Stravinsky. Here is his somewhat malicious description of his meeting with a writer for whom Virginia Woolf had great admiration: "After the premières of *Mavra* and *Renard* in June 1922, I went to a party […]. Marcel Proust was there also. Most of the people came to that party from my première at the Grand Opera, but Proust came directly from his bed […]. I talked to him about music and he expressed much enthusiasm for the late Beethoven quartets—enthusiasm I would have shared were it not a commonplace among the intellectuals of that time and not a musical judgment but a literary pose" (Stravinsky 1962, p. 102).

At any rate, if the prewar years for Virginia Woolf were marked by operatic experiences, the next decades were dominated by concerts and recordings. "There was a concert where they played Mozart", says the narrator of "Sympathy" (written in 1919), and the name of the same composer occurs in "The String Quartet" (1920) (Woolf 1989, pp. 108, 140). In the second of these stories a character refers to Mozart as the composer of the work performed. Since (s)he may be wrong, there is no contradiction with the diary entry that suggests that the notes for this text were taken during a performance of a quintet by Schubert (Woolf 1981, p. 24).

Although an afternoon concert she attended at the Queen's Hall in 1915, conducted by Sir Henry Wood (1869–1944), included some Wagner, and on another occasion César Franck's *Symphony* and three movements of Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole* were performed (Woolf 1979a, pp. 5, 20), Wood's programs focused on the Viennese classics. The most remarkable feature of his Promenade concerts was an emphasis on works by J. S. Bach, an approach that could be considered outdated from the perspective of the twenty-first century. Woolf also regularly attended the chamber concerts held at Shelley House (the Chelsea house belonging to St John Hornby). In 1919 she heard the Allied String Quartet in Wigmore Hall (Woolf 1979a, p. 307). During a Beethoven Festival Week, pp. 25–30 April 1921, at the Aeolian Hall she heard all the Beethoven string quartets played by the London String Quartet (Woolf 1981, p. 113). Two of Schubert's chamber works, the *Octet* and the *String Quintet*, also made a deep impression on her (Woolf 1979a, p. 63; Woolf 1981, p. 24).

With some exaggeration it could be argued that the conservative eclecticism of the British music of the period might be blamed for the weaknesses of her taste. Although she found the music of Ethel Smyth "too literary—too stressed—too didactic" (Woolf 1983, p. 12), she felt an obligation to listen on the wireless to a Promenade Concert conducted by Smyth in 1930 that included the *Anacreontic Ode* composed in 1908 and some of her songs. Woolf described them as "very satisfying" in a letter addressed to Smyth (Woolf 1978a, p. 209). Furthermore, at the beginning of 1931 the Woolfs were present at the first performance of her oratorio, *The Prison*. Two years later she listened to a "Serenade Concert" that included some of Ethel Smyth's music broadcast from the Canterbury Festival of Music and Drama, and she assured her friend that she liked her music "very much". At the beginning of 1934 she sent her congratulations to the composer after a concert

devoted entirely to her music conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham. "And then I hope the Smyth festival is over", she expressed her relief in a letter to her nephew Quentin Bell on 10 January. On 3 March 1934 she attended a performance of Smyth's late Romantic *Mass in D*, premiered in 1893 and later revised (Woolf 1979b, pp. 193, 267, 269, 280). Virginia Woolf's reluctance to attend a concert that included the Prelude to Ethel Smyth's *The Wreckers* at the Queen's Hall in 1935 can be felt in the opening words of a letter addressed to the composer: "Yes, I'll come if I can, on the 3rd, but I cant [sic!] be dead sure; and oh Lord how I hate afternoon concerts. But as I say, if I can, from love of you, I'll come" (Woolf 1979b, p. 370).

Since Virginia Woolf was related to Vaughan Williams by marriage, she went to concerts with his works on the program. Lord Berners was an acquaintance, so she tried to appreciate his music, and similarly personal reasons made her attend the first performances of *Façade*, a collaborative effort of the Sitwells and William Walton (Woolf 1981, pp. 245–246), or *Pomona*, a twenty-minute ballet by Leonard Constant Lambert (1905–1951), with set and costumes designed by Vanessa Bell (Woolf 1983, p. 144). In 1934 the Woolfs were taken to the première of an opera by Lawrence Collingwood (1887–1982), the principal conductor of Sadler's Wells Opera, by Mary Hutchinson, a cousin once-removed of Lytton Strachey and a lover of Clive Bell (Woolf 1983, p. 207).

All in all, the most innovative examples of twentieth-century music may have been virtually unknown to her. Two performances of Ravel's *String Quartet*, composed in 1903 and revised in 1910 (Woolf 1979a, pp. 226; 1981, p. 39), an early performance of Debussy's *Sonata for flute, viola, and harp*, inspired by Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin en concerts* and composed in 1915–1916 (Woolf 1976, p. 140), a theatrical production of Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* held in 1928 (Woolf 1994, p. 564), and the performance of some excerpt(s) from *Petruchka*, during Sir Thomas Beecham's "Season of the Russian Opera and Ballet" (Woolf 1983, p. 31) were among the very few exceptions. A letter addressed to Clive Bell suggests that she planned to see *Petruchka* in 1919 (Woolf 1976, p. 375), but, as far as I know, there is no evidence proving that she actually went to the performance at the Alhambra Theatre. In view of the fact that the "season at the Alhambra ended on 30 July" (Grigoriev 1960, p. 157), and on the 27 October Virginia Woolf was still hesitating to see "the Russian dancers" because they "were so expensive" (Woolf 1976, p. 393), it seems likely that she had no chance to see Stravinsky's second folk-infuenced ballet.

"Do you like folk music?" she asked Ethel Smyth, and her own answer to that question suggested that she was reluctant to see the benefits of the folk culture revival both in music and in literature: "To my thinking they're the ruin of all modern music—just as Synge and Yeats ruined themselves with keening Celtic dirges" (Woolf 1978a, p. 406). In a letter written in 1934 she called a work by Ethel Smyth "cacophonous" (Woolf 1979b, p. 360). One may even suppose that the neo-classicism of Walton and Lambert might have made some impact on the work of Virginia Woolf in the 1930s, when she turned back to what she herself called "the representational form", "fact recording", "objective, realistic, in the manner of Jane Austen: carrying the story on all the time" (Woolf 1983, pp. 142, 147, 168). Lambert took a firm stand against both Schönberg and Stravinsky, and Virginia

Woolf repeatedly asked Ethel Smyth to let her publish an essay in which she discussed his music (Woolf 1978a, pp. 214, 215, 226). *Pomona*, consisting of pastiches entitled Prelude, Corante, Pastorale, Menuetto, Passacaglia, Rigadoon, Siciliana, and Marcia, was the work of an artist for whom "the true guardian of the music of the future" was Sibelius, the Finnish composer "whose shadow strides across Walton's *First Symphony* (1935)" (Wood 1961, p. 156). Lambert's ballet was composed in 1927, but the performance Virginia Woolf attended was given in January 1933, when she was trying to finish *Flush* and was struggling with *The Pargiters*, the first version of *The Years*, works which she herself called "cuckoos in my nest" (Woolf 1983, p. 143).

Although Virginia Woolf missed the most outstanding operatic performances of the interwar period, she heard some celebrated instrumentalists: in 1919 she heard Alfred Cortot (1877–1962) perform, both as pianist and as chamber musician, in 1924 she became acquainted with Brahms Lieder in the interpretation of the great German mezzo-soprano Elena Gerhardt (1883–1961) and heard the famous Portuguese cellist Guilhermina Suggia (1888–1950). In 1932 she went to the Wigmore Hall concert of the Busch Quartet, who played Brahms, Dvořák and Beethoven, and the following year she heard four concerts by the same ensemble (Woolf 1979a, p. 311, Woolf 1981, pp. 298, 320, Woolf 1983, pp. 78, 147) and listened to Jelly Arányi (1893–1966) (the artist to whom Ravel dedicated *Tzigane*, Bartók his two sonatas for violin and piano, Holst his *Double Concerto*, and Vaughan-Williams his *Concerto Academico*), playing J. S. Bach in Westminster Abbey. In 1934, the first year of the Glyndebourne Festival, she also heard an afternoon concert conducted by Fritz Busch, and in 1939 she heard another recital by the Busch Quartet at the Wigmore Hall that included Schubert's early *Quartet in B flat major* (D. 112), Mozart's *G minor quintet* (K. 516), and Beethoven's op. 131 in C sharp Minor, the quartet that Wagner regarded as one of his main sources of inspiration, in which "das innerste Traumbild wird in einer lieblichsten Erinnerung wach" (Wagner n. d., p. 97).

She was often far from enthusiastic, and indeed at times was quite critical of the quality of the music heard. In 1918 she disliked Mozart's great *Symphony in G minor* (K. 550) as conducted by Julian Clifford (1877–1921), finding it slow and sentimental, "with a lugubrious stickiness", and she disapproved of the "vulgarity" of Henry Wood's rendering of works by J. S. Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Gluck, and Dvořák (Woolf 1979a, pp. 142, 206). She found the theatrics of conductors, for example the "grimaces, attenuations, dancings, swingings" of Sir Thomas Beecham superfluous and disturbing (Woolf 1983, p. 284). She expressed reservations about some of the performances heard on the radio; "they play too slowly", she remarked about the all-female Mcnaghten quartet playing Haydn (Woolf 1980, p. 54).

With the rise of the recording industry, the Woolfs listened more to music at home instead of going to concerts. A reference to Artur Schnabel's Beethoven recitals in a letter written on 8 November 1932 may suggest that the risk of fainting in the heat, heart troubles, and an intermittent pulse may have prevented her from attending concerts (Woolf 1979b, p. 122). "Home to music". "And soon the bell will ring, and we shall dine & then we shall have some music […]." "delightful as this letter is, I must go and put my pie in the oven […]. Then we turn on the loud

speaker—Bach tonight". "Black clouds while we played Brahms." "Bach at night"; "we'll play bowls; then I shall read Sévigné; then have grilled ham and mushrooms for dinner; then Mozart" (Woolf 1982, pp. 108, 247; Woolf 1979b, p. 887; Woolf 1983, pp. 241, 336; Woolf 1980, p. 286). Such words in her diary and correspondence may give one some idea of their daily routine. In the acutely troubled period of the late 1930s, under the influence of preparations for war and her husband's growing involvement in the activity of the Labour Party, she came to view music as "our one resource against politics" (Woolf 1980, p. 19). Even during the air raids they used their gramophone in the evenings, as the last words of the diary entry of 22 October 1940 suggest: "reading, music, bed" (Woolf 1984, p. 333). The string quartets of Mozart and Beethoven represented the core of their repertoire.

Her working method changed gradually. "I do a little work on it in the evening when the gramophone is playing late Beethoven sonatas." "It occurred to me last night while listening to a Beethoven quartet that I would merge all the interjected passages into Bernard's final speech". Such statements may suggest that listening to music may have helped her in the writing of *The Waves* (Woolf 1982, pp. 139, 339). Whatever the case, it is certainly true that in the final decades of her life she regarded the string quartets of Beethoven as masterpieces comparable to the greatest works by Shakespeare. "*Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world", she wrote at the end of her life (Woolf 1978b, p. 84).

Though I would by no means deny the inspiration drawn from music in her works composed from the mid-1920s, I nonetheless would be somewhat reluctant to accept E. M. Forster's claim that *To the Lighthouse* is "a novel in sonata form" (Noble 1972, p. 189), the assumption that Virginia Woolf's biography of Roger Fry has a "sonata structure" (Jacobs 1993, p. 253), or even the somewhat fanciful suggestion that "the conception of the long-lived *Orlando*" was inspired by *The Rite of Spring* (Haller 1993, p. 226). One of the numerous articles attempting to link her work to music suggests that more caution might be needed. At the outset of his essay, Gerald Levin asserted that in *The Waves* Virginia Woolf achieved "contrapunctal style", but later he himself pointed out the fundamental weakness in this argument by stating that "Voices in the novel cannot be heard simultaneously" (Levin 1983, pp. 165, 166). The monologues of the six characters can be read only consecutively, so the comparison with a fugue would be a little presumptuous. Some of those who insist that her later works can be explained with the help of the thesis that Wagner's influence had been replaced by that of Beethoven try to find British sources for Virginia Woolf's interest in the late string quartets of the earlier master. They may not realize that such works as, for instance, *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development* (1927) by the mathematician J. W. Sullivan (1886–1937) may have been inspired by Wagner's longest essay on Beethoven (1870), a much more professional discussion of these works that contains a profound analysis of the *C sharp minor quartet* (op. 131).

"I am writing *The Waves* to a rhythm not to a plot", Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary (Woolf 1982, p. 316). In a letter to Ethel Smyth she even revealed her awareness that such an approach to writing represented a radical departure from the generic conventions of the novel: "my difficulty is that I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot. Does this convey anything? And thus though the rhythmical is more

natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction" (Woolf 1978a, p. 204). While working on *Between the Acts* (provisionally entitled *Pointz Hall*), she observed "that it is the rhythm of a book that, by running in the head, winds one into a ball: and so jades one. The rhythm of PH. (the last chapter) became so obsessive that I heard it, perhaps used it, in every sentence I spoke" (Woolf 1984, p. 339). In a letter to Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf remarked with regret that there were no "accents to convey tone of voice" (Woolf 1978a, pp. 225–226). Undoubtedly, tone and voice play a major role in *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves,* and *Between the Acts,*but it would be an exaggeration to link them to specific musical genres or structures. Tentative explanations might be attempted in more general terms. Lily Briscoe is driven by "some rhythm which was dictated to her", but this rhythm is at least as spatial as musical. In her painting she "attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related" (Woolf 1963, pp. 184, 182).

Contrary to what some may believe, a major artist never forgets the inspirations of her early years. In the case of Virginia Woolf, it is an exaggeration to believe that there was a rift between her early experiences of Wagner's stage works and her later interest in the works of Beethoven. In 1926 the sight of the burning of the gorse on the moor reminded her of the death of the hero in *Götterdämmerung* (Woolf 1977, p. 309). In a letter written to Ethel Smyth five years later, she refers to rhythm as the most distinctive element of the "Waldweben" ("forest murmurs") section of Act II of *Siegfried*: "the loudspeaker is pouring forth Wagner from Paris. His rhythm destroys my rhythm [..]. All writing is nothing but putting words on the backs of rhythm" (Woolf 1978a, p. 303). In *The Years Siegfried* is called Kitty's "favourite opera" (Woolf 1937, p. 196). Although the reader of the Covent Garden scene of her longest novel may not refute the argument that in presenting a performance the focus is on the audience rather than on the music, since observations "on the latter outnumber appreciations of music and performers" (Jacobs 1993, p. 241), in a more general sense music may have helped her realize that a "sense of rhythm", a quality the significance of which she pointed out in her early essay "Street Music", published in 1905 (Woolf 1986, p. 30), was a sine qua non of prose writing. The only possible conclusion is that it was at least partly thanks to the inspiration drawn from music that she was able to become a major artist.

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