

University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review


English, Department of

1996

Music as a Sign in Daniel Deronda

Phyllis Weliver

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Weliver, Phyllis, "Music as a Sign in Daniel Deronda" (1996). *The George Eliot Review*. 286.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/286>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

MUSIC AS A SIGN IN DANIEL DERONDA

by Phyllis Weliver

The language of music communicates and contributes to spiritual transformation in *Daniel Deronda*. It expresses non-verbal truths about humanity's connection to the world, and unifies the novel with a continuous vocabulary since sound and silence are frequently described in musical terms. George Eliot specifies meaning in non-verbal mediums. For instance, since the narrator says that Gwendolen blushes as a result of surprise, the reader can decipher an encoded meaning in situations where she blushes, although the characters must still interpret via deduction: 'A blush is no language: only a dubious flag-signal which may mean either of two contradictories.'¹ In order for Gwendolen to understand the world, she must learn to interpret it through non-verbal languages. Music is non-verbal, except when combined with texts in vocal music.

Each art form adds a layer of understanding to the moral theme. Visual art is non-verbal communication, and its moral counterpart is 'the vision'. Mordecai's visions expand the dimensions of the current world, suggesting potential achievement. Alison Byerly outlines a thesis of how the arts relate to the self in George Eliot's novels:

Visual art is used to expose the detached and groundless fantasies of characters the pictures they create for and of themselves are circumscribed by their own egoistic desires, and have no connection with the world outside the frame. Theatrical art is also linked to a dangerous deception of self and others Music, however, represents a pure, authentic expression of self: it does not count as an 'art' at all.²

Actually, the text carefully delineates the demands of professional music, thereby treating it as an art. However, sound is indeed more truth-leading than vision. Mirah's singing is introduced by painting her picture: 'Imagine her' (314), the narrator begins, then depicts her appearance. However, when Mirah begins to sing, Daniel responds most to the music (315). This sharply contrasts with Gwendolen's first performance. English society is charmed by her pretty performance, but Klesmer responds by saying that although he dislikes her sound 'It is always acceptable to *see* you sing' (38) [*italics mine*]. Klesmer opens Gwendolen's horizons, beginning a process that progresses through the novel. When Gwendolen stops judging herself on beauty and social rank, she learns how to be happy. Music traces this process.

There are two components of music in *Daniel Deronda*. Music is realistically portrayed in the empirical world, and it indicates the level of characters' spiritual awareness. Elizabeth Sara Sheppard's *Charles Auchester*, begun in 1846 and published in 1853, concerns a boy's indoctrination into a musical world largely populated by Jewish characters.³ It conveys similar beliefs to *Daniel Deronda* about the aesthetic and spiritual meaning of music. I have not found reference to this novel in George Eliot's reading, but the number of par-

allels makes it likely that she either read it,⁴ or that these aesthetic theories of music were extremely current in Victorian England. Both novels certainly draw on the Platonic sense of the ideal: earth's poor representations of what is in heaven yearn to reach their divine state. Occasionally, I will be comparing these novels to assist in understanding the role of music in *Daniel Deronda*.

George Eliot's novel carefully separates romantic ideals of art from professional realities. Klesmer details its rigors to Gwendolen, and Mirah narrates her professional experiences. Music is a serious, hard-earned career. Perhaps this is one reason why Klesmer appears so real. Henry James's *Constantius* asserts that George Eliot succeeds when describing observed life (English), not studied life (Jewish).⁵ Klesmer stands in a unique relationship to the idealized characters because critics such as Leavis do not include him in their categorization of the ideal. Yet Klesmer's opinion is the ultimate judge of true music. As Beryl Gray points out, many critics equate Klesmer's artistic criticisms with authorial moral disapproval,⁶ and both Leavis⁷ and Byerly (10) suggest that he and his music are used to place the philistinism of English society. However, if he were merely a moralistic tool, he would appear two-dimensional, which he is not. There is an assumption that Klesmer, unlike the other non-English characters, must spring from observed life. Much criticism is preoccupied with discovering whom Klesmer was modelled upon, perhaps needing to ascribe him to a living prototype because of the complexity of his character. Regardless of whether he was inspired by someone or not, Klesmer's realism helps to root music in the professional world of disciplined practice and vocational hardship.

Music, combining real craft with romantic ideal, expresses the inexpressible process by which ordinary human beings achieve happiness. Daniel and Mirah have professional dedication, but would choose not to be performers. They resent singing for others on command, as if they were toys. Although their vocation lies elsewhere, Daniel's and Mirah's musical understanding invaluablely contributes to the rest of their lives. Music and suffering are connected, and it spiritually enriches them. Music is no randomly chosen parallel to spiritual life. It occupied a privileged place in nineteenth-century philosophy and aesthetics: it was considered the best communication of one's inner self, 'the one art capable of mirroring human emotions – in Hegel's words, "the language of the soul"' (Byerly, 2). Music is also considered heavenly. Mirah enthuses:

Is it not wonderful how I remember the voices better than anything else? I think they must go deeper into us than other things. I have often fancied heaven might be made of voices. (314)

In *Charles Auchester*, music is both a means to reach the divine and a part of heaven. By simultaneously being the best expression of self and a link with the heavenly, music in *Daniel Deronda* is uniquely capable of voicing a person's inner, spiritual growth. When an individual has sympathy and the ability to express it verbally, to hear it in silence, and to sense timeless community through sound, then he/she comes close to expressing or hearing the divine in music. Spiritual growth unifies the novel:

it is this correlation between feelings that are held to be sacred and the power of musical sound that above all else sustains and unifies the important themes of the novel. It defines, as no other terms of reference define ... the capacity for spiritual sympathy. (Gray, 118)

Sympathy is an essential component of music for it requires both hearing and response. This expresses a relationship between self and the world.⁸ Music can also help one to *attain* an awareness of the divine. Significantly, in a book which contrasts two religions, most of the musical characters are Jewish. This is because moral growth stems from suffering in *Daniel Deronda*. One of the chapter epigraphs claims that Jews have suffered more than other races:

If there are ranks in suffering, Israel takes precedence of all the nations – if the duration of sorrows and the patience with which they are borne ennobles, the Jews are among the aristocracy of every land – if a literature is called rich in the possession of a few classic tragedies, what shall we say to a National Tragedy lasting for fifteen hundred years, in which the poets and actors were also the heroes? (441, translation of Zunz)

Mirah associates music with her heritage of sorrow: ‘it comforted me to believe that my suffering was part of the affliction of my people, my part in the long song of mourning that has been going on through ages and ages’ (183). Gwendolen’s suffering is also closely tied to music. Because she was spoiled, Gwendolen must learn discipline and sympathy late in life. The discipline she lacks is described by Klesmer in musical terms. He is the first to rip Gwendolen’s self-esteem: ‘The belief that to present herself in public on the stage must produce an effect such as she had been used to feel certain of in private life, was like a bit of her flesh – it was not to be peeled off readily, but must come with blood and pain’ (217).

Suffering is a necessary component of music. In fact, music’s reward is to suffer for its sake, states Sheppard’s novel (Sheppard, 175). Shirley Frank Levenson maintains that Gwendolen’s egoism makes her attitude toward life wrong and that it is because she is so constricted within her individual self that she cannot become a real musician.⁹ Actually, Gwendolen does have real musical potential because, from the beginning, she perceives Catherine Arrowpoint’s accomplishments as different from her own. Daniel’s use of musical metaphors with her is particularly apt. He stresses a use for excellence that is not rooted in individual superiority:

I can bear to think my own music not good for much, but the world would be more dismal if I thought music itself not good for much. Excellence encourages one about life generally; it shows the spiritual wealth of the world. (374)

Music is a continuing, valid power in the world, as are its sister forces, poetry and

romance:

perhaps poetry and romance are as plentiful as ever in the world except for those phlegmatic natures who I suspect would in any age have regarded them as a dull form of erroneous thinking. They exist very easily in the same room with the microscope.... (175)

Music represents the universal capability of human beings to make life poetic and beautiful regardless of the present moment. The process of finding spiritual significance in life was especially important in the nineteenth century when religious belief was shaken by scientific discoveries. Without this sense of the universal, Gwendolen feels life's mutability instead of its permanence: 'I suppose the old generations must be angry with us because we have altered things so much,' (350) she states after Sir Hugo suggests that the monks' presence continues in the Abbey's dining hall. Gwendolen concentrates on appearance rather than the permanence of unalterable spirituality. Sympathetic beauty is an ongoing truth, as Mirah recognizes:

'... you always take what is beautiful as if it were true'.
'So it is,' said Mirah, gently. 'If people have thought what is the most beautiful and the best thing, it must be true. It is always there'. (399)

Beauty is a crucial subject throughout the text. *Charles Auchester* also focuses on beauty as an immense force of good. It is an idealistic, romantic vision, similar to poetry and music.

Music literally awakens Gwendolen to needing others. When she plays Hermione, Klesmer strikes a chord and the dreadful panel opens. Gwendolen feels fear, which can be positive.¹⁰ Like anger, fear suggests an awareness of outside situations that injure the self. Daniel suggests: 'Turn your fear into a safeguard' (388). Fear makes one feel helpless and in need of others rather than wanting to control them. Daniel helps Gwendolen choose to live compassionately. Eventually, she will be capable of love, which was an early concern of hers. Alcharisi, a woman similar to Gwendolen in her regality, defines what love is:

'I know very well what love makes of men and women – it is subjection. It takes another for a larger self, enclosing this one', – she pointed to her own bosom. (571)

Similarly, being receptive to music requires sympathetic awareness. The musical characters demonstrate their assimilation of this by placing love above reason in their relationships (Levenson, 323).

Music focuses commentary on English society as well as individuals. Society suggests its spiritual depravity by preferring Gwendolen's performance to Catherine's and Klesmer's. In *Charles Auchester*, the British aristocracy is also musically ignorant (Sheppard, 90).

Something is amiss with English society, which both *Daniel Deronda* and *Charles Auchester* recognize and counter by asserting the continual presence of music and beauty. Significantly, both end with the triumph of messianic figures. In George Eliot's novel, Daniel ventures to create a new society born out of an enduring culture. The vehement Jewish debate on the creation of a Zionist state centred upon contrasting interpretations. Israel was to come into being when the Messiah arrived. Some felt that the Messiah was to build it; others thought that by people building the state, they were assisting the Messiah's arrival. Daniel belongs to the group that believed that spiritual rebirth was not only possible, but that it must be a human creation. He actively promotes a wedding between heaven and earth. Music is an undeniable part of this process as a signifier of sympathetic participation in the human world and of spiritual awareness that is universally present.

Music exists in the empirical world as well as representing an aesthetic ideal which parallels and contributes to Daniel's, Mirah's and Mordecai's cherished ideals. It is both a means to reach those ideals and is used in evaluating people who aspire to the empirical thing without the spiritual awareness, as Gwendolen does when she wants to use music as a means to achieve economic freedom: 'we find the defect, as well as its cure, expressed in terms of music' (Levenson, 329). 'Idealized' characters are not flaws in this novel. I define 'idealized characters' as figures created to personify specific ideas or a certain life trajectory. In *Daniel Deronda*, 'idealistic characters' demonstrate an effort to deal with realistic human problems, which is underrated by critics. Daniel struggles when he tells Gwendolen of his decision to marry and go East, and Mirah has difficulty coping with her father. These characters portray a way of combining human difficulties with an over-arching awareness of the divine. In *Daniel Deronda*, music is the language that communicates this combination. Expressing human souls and their spiritual qualities is difficult in a verbal medium. George Eliot wrote, 'music will be great and ultimately triumphant over men's ears and souls in proportion as it is less a studied than an involuntary symbol.'¹¹ This statement refers to music composition, but it also seems to be George Eliot's perception of all creative processes. She may have created unintentional symbols, yet this does not deny their existence or effect. In *Daniel Deronda*, music creates a pattern of linkage between the non-verbal languages of the novel. Great concepts and feelings such as love are often expressed in terms of musical vocabulary (Mann, 87-88). Music provides a means of cohesion in George Eliot's novelistic world. In its expression of the enduring qualities of poeticism in the human soul, music helps to unite the present moment with humanity's indestructible qualities.

Notes

1. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, *The World's Classics*, ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 360. Further page references to this edition are given in the text.
2. Alison Byerly, "'The Language of the Soul": George Eliot and Music', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 44 (1989), 2. Further page references to this article are given in

the text.

3. Elizabeth Sara Sheppard, *Charles Auchester: A Memorial* (1853; London: Everyman, 1911). All citations refer to this edition and page references are given in the text.
4. *Charles Auchester* was immensely popular on publication in Britain and America.
5. Henry James, 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation', in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 100-1.
6. Beryl Gray, *George Eliot and Music* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 102. Further page references to this work are given in the text.
7. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948; London: Chatto, 1962), p. 118. Further page references to this edition are given in the text.
8. Karen B. Mann, *The Language that Makes George Eliot's Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983), p. 71. Further page references to this work are given in the text.
9. Shirley Frank Levenson, 'The Use of Music in *Daniel Deronda*', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 24 (1969), 317-34. Further page references to this article are given in the text.
10. Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983; London: Ark, 1985), p. 228.
11. George Eliot, 'Liszt, Wagner, and Weimar', in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia UP, 1967), p. 104.