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"'Join us'": Musical Style and Identity in "My Dear Palestrina"

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Introduction

A particularly odious joke did the rounds at my secondary school in Dublin during the late 1970s: a man walking home from the pub in Belfast one night is hauled into an alleyway by another man who points a pistol at his head. "Catholic or Protestant?" asks the gunman. "Actually, I'm Jewish," says the first man. "I must be the luckiest Arab in Belfast," says the other, and pulls the trigger.

The "humor" here depends on the listener's knowledge of two contexts: first, the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland which, by the time I heard the joke, had been a part of Irish life (north and south of the border) for a decade or so; secondly, contemporary Middle Eastern politics and the bitter ethno-religious conflict consequent upon the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948. Ostensibly oriented towards the first, the joke "turns" on the incongruous invocation of the second; we "get" it; the tension resolves; the Jew dies.

Bernard MacLaverty's long short story "My Dear Palestrina" (*A Time to Dance*) also introduces a Jewish presence—in the form of the exiled Polish music teacher Marysia Schwartz—into the context of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland. Both her religion and her profession throw into relief certain aspects of Northern Irish society in the pre-"Troubles" era. The story also serves as an early indication of the role played by art—and particularly music—in MacLaverty's work and the function of music in relation to the sectarian society in which he grew up.

MacLaverty's music

> My father had an old gramophone on which he played Schubert piano with pine needles. Huge shellac records, with a red circle and a white dog singing

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> into a horn, which whirred with static but which induced a calm in me, as a child, which I have not known since. When they were finished, after about two minutes, the tick of the over-run seemed the vilest sound in the world. The clack of teeth after divine music.[1]

This description by the unnamed narrator of "Hugo" (*Secrets and Other Stories*) initiates two recurring aspects of MacLaverty's engagement with music: its material and technological presence within late twentieth-century (Northern) Irish society; and the inherently positive impact that music—or at least *some* forms of music—can have on those who hear it.

Time and again throughout his stories, MacLaverty makes reference to the material tools of music-making: to the piano, the radio and the record player; and although they perform different functions in relation to the various characters and situations of which he writes, it is their presence—so simple yet so remarkable—that is significant. A "child monotonously played single notes on a piano" in "Anodyne" (*Secrets* 114), although the piano in "Matters of Life and Death I: Learning to Dance" is reserved "for visitors who can play" (*Matters of Life and Death* 32); a transistor radio soundtracks the inexorable tragedy of Michael and Owen in *Lamb* (1980), while a young boy listens to Radio Luxembourg on the "wireless" in "The Beginnings of a Sin" (*A Time to Dance* 140); the inhabitants of an old folks' home dance to the music of a record player in "No Joke" (129), while the eponymous protagonist of *Cal* "[puts] on an LP of the Rolling Stones to drown the silence" (10).

Pianos, radios and records represent just some of the means whereby music makes its way into the everyday lives of MacLaverty's characters. Each "thing" represents a moment in the community's ongoing quest to incorporate music as a meaningful part of their lives. The technology it describes may be of a relatively simple kind; yet a signifier such as "LP" locates Cal in a very specific set of circumstances, while also implicating him in an incredibly complex array of physical practices and mental attitudes. A crucial element of the reader's response to his character derives from his choice of music, and in the appreciation of the technological means he uses to reproduce it.

Related to this is the realisation that music serves as an extremely sensitive index of emotional experience, whether that emotion derives from "normal" human interaction or from the energies generated by living in a politically divided society. But what kind of music? Different styles, it seems, are capable of generating different emotional charges in relation to the different situations in which various characters find themselves. In the early story "Hugo," again, the music of Schubert represents

valuable cultural capital, whereas the "popular melodies and country and western tunes" (*Secrets* 74) played by another of his mother's lodgers do not meet with the approval of the narrator. In "Hugo" and "Anodyne", popular music—a "pop group playing the hymns very badly" at an open-air mass (*Secrets* 88) and "a sing-song in the bar" (112) —is invoked in symbolic opposition to the high artistic pretensions of self-deluded characters. Popular music retains its negative connotations in *Lamb* when it forms the soundtrack to Michael's realisation that his attempt to forge a life for himself and Owen in London has failed (*Lamb* 131–2).

Cal is probably the most musicalized of all MacLaverty's characters, a quality that is closely associated with the tragedy of his situation. Cal is a musician himself, albeit (as befits his passive nature) of a fairly desultory kind. Throughout the novel he engages in a number of music-making activities, including buying records and cassettes of rock and blues music, playing his guitar and singing—the latter both for pleasure and as an accompaniment to work—and remembering his mother's penchant for rebel ballads. Cal is a romantic (and, although he does not realize it, a Romantic) who associates music with freedom and love, as when he imagines using his guitar to serenade Marcella (*Cal* 83). Such positive associations are increasingly belied, however, over the course of a narrative in which music, along with everything else, becomes poisoned by a toxic sectarianism. Cal hears a jukebox as he waits for the IRA gunman Crilly to emerge from a shop he is robbing (61); a showband provides music for dancing as the same two men establish alibis for the murder they are about to commit (84). Marcella is implicated in this romantic discourse; a diary entry reveals the fact that she prefers the silence and birdsong on Slieve Gallon to the "shatteringly loud" Country and Western band to which she is exposed when accompanying her bitterly sectarian husband to a club (126).

When Cal's house is the object of a fire attack, more is destroyed than just his cassettes:

> In his own room he paused and picked out his guitar with the torch. The tuning knobs had melted. He picked the instrument up and the back banged away from the top with a faint grating chord, the way the sole of a shoe splits from its upper.
>
> "Aw Jesus no."
>
> He threw the guitar on to the floor, where it boomed and repeated the chord thinly, and he eased himself out of the window. (77)

This "faint grating chord" signals more than just the destruction of a young man's guitar: it deprives that young man—*and* the community which he

represents—of a creative means for emotional expression. Where, the text implicitly asks, will this energy relocate? How will it be organized in relation to the community? The answer is already there, inasmuch as the description of musical failure ("boomed and repeated") anticipates the echo of the bombs which constitute the failure of the community itself.

We observe, then, that different genres of music—popular, folk and art music—feature throughout MacLaverty's work, and that these different genres function in different ways in relation to the various characters and contexts which the author creates. Sometimes music has positive connotations, as when Hugo uses a singing technique to help cure the narrator's stammer (*Secrets* 78–9)—literally giving the young man a voice; or the various styles (jazz, blues, rock'n'roll, pop) that provide the soundtrack for Martin's sexual adventures in the latter sections of *The Anatomy School* (2001). Sometimes music seems symbolically attuned with a range of negative emotions—regret, failure, fear, betrayal, prejudice; we observe this in the suicidal flautist and depressed narrator from "Across the Street" (*The Great Profundo* 130–43), or in the exploitative policeman from "A Trusted Neighbour" (*Matters of Life and Death* 63–87) whose unquestioned love for Elvis leaves him with no time for Miles Davis or what he dismisses as "'Diddley-di music'" (72).

All these associations, moreover, accrue extra resonance in the context of a politically divided community in which every value, every preference, every gesture registers at one and the same time as a political value, a political preference, and a political gesture. Because of its quasi-universal qualities, music is eminently symbolic—available for re-narrativisation in relation to any given context; and this facility renders music eminently exploitable in situations of heightened political consciousness. As a writer emerging from just such a situation and as someone self-conscious with regard to his role within a literary tradition in which music features so strongly, it is perhaps no wonder that MacLaverty engages with music so frequently and so sensitively.

"My Name is Danny McErlane"

Like Catherine McKenna in *Grace Notes*, Danny McErlane's principal mode of engagement with the world in "My Dear Palestrina" is auditory. "He liked listening to things" (*A Time to Dance* 39); he hears the world more than he sees it, and this both anticipates and symbolizes his "natural" facility for music. We notice this from the opening scene as Danny and his mother walk towards the house of the woman who will be his piano teacher: the "slow, raucous

cawing" of the rooks, the cinders that "spat and cracked" beneath their feet; the "high pinging of the blacksmith's hammer" as they pass the forge, the "deep [resonance]" of Miss Schwartz's door knocker (31).

Even before he meets Miss Schwartz, Danny already has a heightened emotional relationship with music in general and with the inherited piano in particular:

> When he had visited Uncle George, Danny would slip into the front room on his own and climb up on the piano stool and single-finger notes. He liked to play the white ones because afterwards, when he struck a black note it was so sad that it gave him a funny feeling in his tummy. The piano stool had a padded seat which opened. Inside were wads of old sheet music with film stars' pictures on the front.
>
> Bing Crosby, Johnny Ray, Rosemary Clooney. He had heard her singing on the radio. (32)

The physical response to various note clusters signals Danny's aptitude for music; the ability of music to precipitate physical changes, and of certain people to experience those changes in a heightened form, have been a part of music theory since antiquity and became a cornerstone of Romantic musicology.[2] Questions remain, however: what kind of music? How is music encountered? And how does music relate to the world in which it is made and/or consumed? The allusion to various popular contemporary singers—as well as to the principal contemporary medium (radio) for encountering these singers—initiates a discourse of musical value which informs the story throughout. This discourse both instantiates and symbolizes Danny's predicament as a musically-gifted, working-class Catholic boy living in a society divided along sectarian lines.

The issue, then, is one of identity: "'My name is Danny McErlane'" (43) sounds like a declarative statement but the story is in fact a dramatization of the extent to which Danny must learn to "perform" that identity, and to find a kind of musical experience equal to the name.

There are three discursive centers operating within the story, each of which connotes a range of esthetic, social and technological values which are distinguishable from (although clearly related in some aspects to) the others, each of which is vying for the ownership rights over "Danny McErlane." These discursive centers relate to the three principal fields through which musical matter has been organized in the modern era: folk, popular and art.[3] For the remainder of this essay I would like to examine each of these in turn, considering what

MacLaverty's story implies with regard to the relations between them and what this in turn implies for life in pre-"Troubles" Northern Ireland.

"Am I Right or Am I Wrong?"

The McErlanes are a respectable working-class Catholic family living in a small town near Belfast. The story is set in 1957—the year in which the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I, an unmanned research satellite which features in the latter part of the story.[4] The state of Northern Ireland had been in existence since 1922, when the island was partitioned under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. In the three and a half decades since then the state's major constituent populations—Catholic and the majority Protestant—had lived for the most part in an uneasy truce. That truce was broken in December 1956, however, when, under pressure from internal hawkish elements, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) launched Operation Harvest, the so-called "Border Campaign" against the Northern Irish state.[5]

The IRA had spent the years since the end of World War Two attempting to reconstitute itself as a viable military and ideological presence throughout the island as a whole. The very existence of Northern Ireland was an affront to that ideology, as was the *de facto* constitution of Catholics as second-class citizens within that state. The campaign gathered some momentum after the deaths of two Volunteers—Seán South (aged 29) and Fergal O'Hanlon (aged 20)—in a botched raid on a police barracks on 1 January, 1957; apart from that it was a desultory affair, especially when compared in retrospect with the "Troubles" that commenced a decade later. Operation Harvest petered out in the early years of the new decade and was finally abandoned in February 1962.

The blacksmith in Danny's town represents a strain of opinion that has been active in Irish politics throughout the modern era—one which prioritizes class above nationalist or ethnic concerns. As he says to Danny:

> "This bloody country is full of yes-men and the most of them's working class." … "Yes, your honour, no, your honour. Dukes and bloody linen lords squeezing us for everything we've got, setting one side against the other. Divide and conquer. It's an old ploy and the Fenians and Orangemen of this godforsaken country have fallen for it again." (51)

The blacksmith's communistic leanings are established by his association with one of the recurring images of Soviet ideology: the hammer. Although the blacksmith cites the Great Lock Out of 1913 as an example to be learned from,

the fact is that nation, ethnicity and class have been ineradicably enmeshed throughout modern Irish history; and that ideologues such as James Connolly and James Larkin (whom he also invokes) were obliged throughout their careers to negotiate with ethnic politics of one form or another.

As we have already observed, the forge is associated with sound—"the high pinging of the blacksmith's hammer"—from the outset. This association develops over the course of the story, so that the blacksmith's moral presence comes to register as an element of Danny's aural landscape. The boy's first encounter with the blacksmith comes directly after his first piano lesson, and a comparison between the two musical domains is made explicit when the narrative informs us that "[each] hammer blow pulsed through Danny's head like the record at Miss Schwartz's" (36). The comparison is then extended:

> "And what has you up this end of town?" Danny told him he was going to music.
>
> "To Miss Warts and all"? he shouted. "I wonder would she like this song?" He began to sing loudly, and bang his hammer to the rhythm, "If I was a blackbird." When he came to the line "And I'd bury my head on her lily white breast," he winked at Danny. He had a good voice and could get twirls into it—like Rosemary Clooney (36–7).

The three musical domains which will set the limits on Danny's world are invoked here in close proximity: the art music of "Miss Warts and all," the popular music signaled with reference to a contemporary American singer and the folk tradition represented both by the ballad "If I Was a Blackbird" and by the blacksmith himself, the living embodiment of a character who features widely throughout that tradition. In one celebrated family of songs "the blacksmith" features as a handsome dissembler who lies about his part in the ruination of a local village girl. Associated as he immediately is with the ballad tradition, the blacksmith in MacLaverty's story trails this inheritance, and there is as a consequence a question mark over his moral status within the text.

"If I Was a Blackbird" is popular in many different versions across the Atlantic Archipelago; here it has the status of a work song—rhythmical music performed (like shanties and field hollers) in order to facilitate demanding manual labor. This association is attuned to the blacksmith's political agenda, in which music provides aural testament to the history of a range of exploitative social systems. At the same time, the blacksmith's use of music here represents a bodily response to aural stimulation, thus initiating a discourse of physicality within the narrative. Danny's status as an adolescent who is becoming

increasingly aware of his body draws him away from the cerebral art music associated with "Miss Warts and all," but towards the "rhythmical" music beaten out by the blacksmith with the obviously phallic symbol of his trade. As the story progresses, however, Miss Schwartz's association with art music is increasingly offset by Danny's growing awareness of her sexual presence. Read from this perspective, we could say that Danny wishes to play the "lusty" blacksmith to her "village girl."[6]

We note also that the blacksmith's presence is established in this opening encounter by the repetition of a particular sentence: "Am I right or am I wrong?" This question becomes (along with the sound of the ringing hammer) the blacksmith's *leitmotif*—in musical practice, a short phrase with which a listener comes to associate a particular idea or personality.[7] Oscillating between playfulness and confrontation, the blacksmith's question retains a powerful rhetorical force inasmuch as it assumes an asymmetric relationship between questioner and respondent, while at the same time demanding the interlocutor's acknowledgement of the "reality" of the questioner's vision of the world and how it works. For all his attractive and sympathetic nature, the blacksmith's insistent question works to implicate the boy in a dualistic reality characterized by a series of related, symbiotic dyads: Soviet/American, class/nation, communist/capitalist, Catholic/Protestant, nationalist/unionist, male/female, mind/body, art/labor, blacksmith/father. "My Dear Palestrina" works to show that music, so far from providing an escape from this system, is fully implicated in it. That is the lesson Danny must learn.

The blacksmith's "music" (the principal characteristic of which is a strong rhythmical emphasis) comes to form a powerful presence in Danny's aural imagination—a robust, strident voice which the boy will struggle to harmonize with the other insistent voices in his life. His most significant contribution to Danny's development is the suggestion that the boy is of an age to find his own voice, his own rhythm. Once again, this is expressed in terms of a musical conceit: so, whereas after their first encounter "Danny tried to walk the road in step to the fading ring of his hammer" (37), after their final meeting "Danny waited for the hammer blows so that he could walk in step but none came and he had to choose his own rhythm" (61).

"Something with a Bit of a Tune to It"

If folk music represents one important dimension of Danny's musical imagination, the popular music of the 1950s represents another. Whereas the

blacksmith's music emerges from the clash of hammer and anvil, popular music is associated with the radio and (initially at least) with the piano, for it is in the inherited piano stool that he finds the sheet music for songs by popular contemporary artists such as Bing Crosby, Johnny Ray and Rosemary Clooney. His primary identification with this style of music is established when, asked by Miss Schwartz at their first meeting if he has a favorite singer, Danny cites Elvis Presley, to which she replies "'Rubbish'" (33–4).

Popular music has two characteristics which attract Danny in the first instance: lyrics and a memorable melody. The music to which Miss Schwartz is trying to introduce him, however, is different:

> She lifted the lid on one of the pieces of furniture and put on a record. She turned it up so loud that the music bulged in the room. Danny had never heard anything like it and he hated it. It had no tune and he kept waiting for somebody to sing but nobody did. (35)

The reference to "tune" is immediately picked up by the blacksmith who, as observed above, "had a good voice and could get twirls into it—like Rosemary Clooney." Soon after, Danny's mother passes a damning verdict on his practice scales: "'There's not much of a tune to that'" (39). Danny will learn in time that art music does in fact feature melodic elements; and later in the story his training will enable him to "hum the melody" (41) of the piece of music that initially so baffles him.

For the uninitiated, however, the problem remains. Popular music's roots in folk music bring these two fields into temporary alliance against a form of music which by this point in its evolution tended to disdain popularity or accessibility as relevant criteria. If folk music was for the "folk" and popular music was about being "popular", art music distinguished itself by being neither of those; its pleasures and rewards were oriented elsewhere and otherwise.

Despite his "good voice," the blacksmith's music is principally defined by its rhythmic qualities—the steady beat of his hammer symbolising the onward march of time as humanity struggles to harness nature's resources. The principal attractive feature of the popular music favored by Danny (at the outset) and his family, however, is melody—the "tune." What is interesting is the manner in which the idea of "tune," as with the blacksmith's rhythm, takes on symbolic overtones over the course of the story. Danny's developing response to tunefulness comes to represent the process of negotiation between his own developing sense of identity and his changing relationship with the community from which he has emerged.

At the reception for his sister's wedding, some members of that same community conduct a conversation on the relevant merits of various musical genres. A neighbor, Red Tam, extols the virtues of Winifred Atwell, an extremely popular and successful West Indian pianist who made her name and fame during the 1950s with a string of light jazz recordings. Rock n' roll fares less well, described by Harry (Danny's father, in a direct echo of Miss Schwartz's verdict) as "'rubbish'"—"'[it'll] not be heard of in another year's time'" he prophesizes (48). Tam's idea of "classic" music is Mantovani, an Anglo-Italian conductor and arranger who achieved phenomenal international success during this period with his lush orchestral arrangements of popular songs and light classical pieces. Even as he dismisses rock 'n' roll, Harry covets a job for his son in a "'dance band,'" which, as he puts it, "'is the place where the money is'" (48).[8] Finally, he puts his finger on it: "'I like good music—something with a bit of a tune to it … Bing's my man'" (48).

The reader is provided here with a description of a highly stratified musical array, as heard from the perspective of Danny's working-class, Ulster Catholic background. Music is judged according to its accessibility, its economic viability and, ultimately, its inherent value—whether it is "good" or not. Contemporary rock 'n' roll is culpable insofar as it is associated with rhythm rather than melody; value is explicitly linked to "tune," with the music of Bing Crosby providing (for Harry at least) a clear example. Atwell, Mantovani and the "dance bands" represent a different kind of value: the financial reward accruing from the transposition of musical skill into an economically viable product.

Into this musical world Danny introduces his "highfalutin'" (47) Haydn sonata—representative of a form of music which adheres (ostensibly at least) to a radically different value system. More than this, Danny is literally "out of tune" with the prevailing soundscape, for even as he performs the piece, alternative melodies vie for attention: "the noise of somebody in the kitchen washing dishes," the "notes [rung by Red Tam] on his empty whiskey glass with a horny fingernail," the hiss of his Aunt Letty asking if Danny's father "'will … have another stout'" (47). To put it in musical terms, the party is characterized by a complex, discordant harmony, with different musical traditions, genres and values vying with each other in order to dominate the meaning and character of the sound.

Precisely because of his specialized training, Danny is, ironically, highly discordant in relation to the "natural" musical context from which he comes, alienated from its values and its characteristic sounds. In symbolic terms, Danny himself is "a bit out of tune," albeit one that no one from his "natural"

milieu can hear or understand. While this sets him apart from his family and his culture, it qualifies the criterion of "tunefulness" so prized by his father: for the "tune" only comes into musical focus in terms of the harmonization that it attracts, and the same tune (as Danny's training reveals over the course of the story) can mean very different things when harmonized differently.

(No) Art after Auschwitz

Miss Schwartz explains her philosophy of music to Danny during their first lesson:

> "Music is the most beautiful thing in the world. Today beautiful is a word that has been dirtied but I mean it truly … Music is why I do not die. Other people—they have blood put in their arms," she stabbed a fingernail at the inside of her elbow, "I am kept alive by music. … Rilke says that music begins where speech ends—and he should know." (34)

Impressive claims—none more so than the final one that prioritizes music above spoken language. But to what kind of music is Miss Schwartz alluding here? Not the folk music associated with the blacksmith, it emerges, and certainly not the various "pop" styles discussed by Danny's father and Red Tam. Rather, she is referring to "art music," a very specific array of cultural attitudes and practices comprising specialized techniques of composition, training, performing, listening and explication. This form of music tends to be produced by individuals who have the training, the leisure and the desire to produce complex pieces of art which reflect or engage in some way with the question of what it means to be human. Art music is as a rule demanding and difficult; to make these works requires time, energy and focus; to listen and understand how they work requires more of the same. The promise of the artwork, however, is that all such effort will be rewarded by a deeper understanding of the human condition than would otherwise be available.

None of these particular attributes is in ready supply for a person from Danny's background, however, where time and energy are devoted in large part to survival, and such focus as remains tends to be taken up by less demanding practices. Danny's growing engagement with Miss Schwartz's idea of music serves to alienate him from his "natural" milieu, where the piano can only ever be "the old Joanna" (46)—a vehicle for popular amusement rather than a key to the human spirit. Danny is in fact a classic example of the 1950s grammar school boy, marooned between the lifestyle from which he has emerged and the

lifestyle to which specialized education has exposed him. And like all grammar school boys, he has to negotiate all the feelings of angst and guilt that ensue from that putative "betrayal."[9]

Over the course of the story Miss Schwartz introduces Danny to a range of ideas associated with the discourse of art music. After her intense opening statement regarding the absolute importance of music, she goes on to discuss "the black marks"—that is, the sophisticated notation system used in art music (35). The history of this system and its relation to the concept of "the performance" is complex and contested; but it remains a powerful element of art music's philosophy—the idea that "the text" constitutes a coherent statement on the part of an individual creator, and that one must master the language of such texts before one is in a position to understand the creator's intentions, or to transpose those intentions into a sound.[10]

Mastering technique is not enough, however, as Miss Schwartz will insist: "'[Your] heart must be right. Without it technique is useless'" (64). She criticizes Danny for playing mechanically and tries to teach him by example: "She sat on the stool and began to play. Danny listened, watching her closed eyes, the almost imperceptible sway of her body as she stroked music from the notes" (40). The literary language here retreats into a register that is both mystifying ("closed eyes … imperceptible sway") and metaphorical ("stroked"). This process suggests two insights: the first relating to Danny's experience within the story, the second relating to the way in which that story is related by MacLaverty. First, this description enables us to observe that the quality of "interpretation" is ultimately, and despite the premium placed on it in musicological discourse, impervious to rational description. Danny will have to *feel* what Miss Schwartz is feeling before he can authentically replicate or understand her performance; and while technique is teachable, emotional response is not. And secondly, because of their fundamental differences as signifying media, literature tends to revert to metaphor when it attempts to describe specific musical sounds or effects.[11]

All these elements coalesce at the climax of the story, during Danny's final lesson. As he plays for his disgraced, soon to be former, teacher, Danny attempts "[t]o feel, as she had so often urged him, the heart and soul of what Schubert had heard when he wrote down the music" (63). As his performance, and her response, intensifies, so too does the language used by MacLaverty to describe them:

> The melody, more sombre than he had played it before, flowed out over the rippling left hand. Then came the heavy base [sic] like a dross, holding the piece

> to earth. The right hand moved easily into the melody again, the highest note seeming never to reach high enough, pinioned by a ceiling Schubert had set on it … The piece reached its full development and swung into its lovely main melody for the last time. It ended quietly, dying into a hush. Both were silent, afraid to break the spell that had come with the music (63).

Finally, Miss Schwartz invokes the composer Palestrina as an example of music's beautiful, mysterious, salvific power and she nominates Danny as a member of an unspecified group—"'one of us'" (65)—enabled, through some indeterminate combination of training and intuition, to recognize that power.

The specialized group postulated by Miss Schwartz is challenged in the final line of the story when Danny's mother, coaxing her son from the garden where he has been sulking because of the termination of his piano lessons, invites him to "'Join us'" (67). Of course, the invocation to belong to a specific group—especially when invoked via the rhetoric of "joining"—resonates ominously within a society so deeply divided along sectarian lines. Miss Schwartz is implicated in this insofar as her "sect" (art music)—always suspect to some degree because of her ethnicity and her unusual social status as a single working woman—becomes ostracized after her extramarital pregnancy flouts the established moral order.[12] As a woman, a Jew, a refugee and a trafficker in elitist cultural capital, this is a role for which she is eminently qualified.

Miss Schwartz's "unnatural" status throws into relief what is regarded as "normality"; as in the schoolboy joke with which I commenced this essay, her *different* "difference" (her Jewishness) exposes the economy of difference and sameness which underpins the established system of Northern Irish sectarianism.

MacLaverty does not eschew sectarianism in "My Dear Palestrina," then; but he does attempt to replace two culpable local sects with one that appears to be essentially more valuable and more deserving. Like all sects, however, Miss Schwartz's is founded upon a profoundly partial view of the world and how it operates. This view is encapsulated in her impassioned description of the power of art music to transcend suffering and to engender altruistic, empathetic emotions in the listening subject: "People are like the beasts of the field. They know nothing of music or tenderness. Anyone whom music has spoken to—really spoken to—must be gentle, must be kind—could not be guilty of a cruelty" (64).[13] This is the "sect" to which she offers Danny membership—those capable of hearing the language of music as it truly is. Spoken by a Polish Jewish refugee from the Nazi terror, such words are deeply ironic. In fact, the

Nazis took great pride in Germany's glorious musical history; indeed, the image of the refined, sophisticated SS officer enjoying a symphony (or novel or painting) between acts of inhuman cruelty has become a cliché of the post-war imagination.[14] Music functioned as a fully incorporated element of the Third Reich's cultural programme, including, most sinisterly, its attitude towards and treatment of those perceived to be enemies. Holocaust historian Shirli Gilbert describes the specially constructed prisoner orchestras of Auschwitz (a few miles to the south of Miss Schwartz's hometown of Praszka)

> which played at the camp gates each morning and evening as the labour contingents marched to and from work, and regularly accompanied executions. These orchestras played a valuable role in the extermination process, helping the operation to run smoothly and assisting in the maintenance of discipline and order. As in Sachsenhausen, the SS also imposed frequent forced singing sessions, and torture sessions in which music was used in inventive and sadistic ways (145).

One might argue that the Nazis did not "really" hear the music—that they incorporated it as part of an instrumentalist rationale which was in itself a perversion of the music's true communicative essence. That they could do so, however, militates against the notion of an essence *per se*.[15] Auschwitz gives the lie to the notion of art's inherent civilising nature; and for all her convictions regarding (art) music's positive effects, Miss Schwartz's "sect" is revealed to be as contingent and as corruptible as those with which it vies for Danny's identity.

Music's vulnerability vis-à-vis this instrumental rationale is then compounded by the text's categorical inability to reproduce that music, and by its reliance on language to try to describe music's affective powers. "'Listen to this,'" (65) demands Miss Schwartz as she puts on a record of music by Palestrina. But of course the reader cannot "'listen to this'"; he can only read the author's interpretation of what the music sounds like and what that sound means to the character of Danny.[16] As the climax of a story about the power of music, the resolute silence of this moment is striking.[17]

MacLaverty utilizes music's deeply affective powers in order to explore the formation of a representative Irish identity at an important moment in the wider political history of the island. His particular mode of musical engagement, however, exposes (as it does in *Grace Notes*) the limitations of that turn. "My Dear Palestrina" instantiates an esthetic impasse comprising two inter-related elements: the first concerns the unwarranted privileging of art music as a superior "sect" with the wider musical community; the second derives from

prose fiction's inadequacy before the musical event—the fact that no language can ever describe musical experience, precisely because such experience is incorporated within the literary text as the very sign of a pre-, post-, or simply non-linguistic presence. As with *Grace Notes*, the surprise is that, despite these problems, MacLaverty manages to produce such an effective and affecting narrative.

Notes

1 MacLaverty, "Hugo" (*Secrets and Other Stories* 72–92); all subsequent references to MacLaverty's work will be given parenthetically in the text.
2 The literature is vast, but see Cook, *passim*. On the ability of music to arouse deep and significant emotion in those who interact with it see Sloboda.
3 Both Haslam and Russell (57–9) identify Miss Schwartz, the blacksmith and his parents as the three principal forces operating in Danny's life; my purpose here is to explore the musical associations of these forces.
4 This date was confirmed in correspondence with the author.
5 See the chapter "The Border Campaign: 1956–62" in Coogan, 377–418.
6 Danny's name and age implicate him in the blacksmith's musical discourse, inasmuch as he is the living embodiment of the archetypal Northern Irish folk song popularly known as "Danny Boy." The blacksmith sings this on the occasion of their final meeting.
7 The employment of a linguistic *leitmotif* in this fashion signals the quasi-musical status of MacLaverty's technique—the fact that he is deploying language here to achieve a particular kind of musical effect. This effect might be described as "difference-in-repetition"—what in *Grace Notes* he would describe as "the same sound but with a different meaning" (275). On the wider use of the *leitmotif* as a literary device see Smyth, *Music in Irish Cultural History,* 75–7.
8 By "dance band" Harry is referring here to the "showband" phenomenon which by the late 1950s was extremely popular across the entire island. In 1958, Danny's slightly older contemporary—one Ivan Paul Morrison—was playing in just such a dance band: The Monarchs. For accounts of this potentially lucrative business see Power and also Smyth, *Noisy Island: A Short History of Irish Popular Music,* 11–18.
9 See Hoggart's description of the alienation assailing the post-war scholarship boy in his book *The Uses of Literacy*—published (in 1957) in the same year in which MacLaverty's story is set. The artist Liam Diamond from "Life Drawing" (the story following "My Dear Palestrina") provides a devastating example of a similar character (*A Time to Dance*, 69–82).

10 On the significance of notated score in relation to art music see Shepherd. For an analysis of the deference to the idea of the score in fiction about music see Benson, 106–17.

11 I say "tends to" because there are many examples in which writers have attempted to resist the turn to metaphor, and to develop different ways to represent music. For a description and analysis of some of these experiments see Benson, Smyth, *Music in Irish Cultural History,* and Wolf.

12 Miss Schwartz's condition anticipates Catherine McKenna's in *Grace Notes*, whose pregnancy likewise engenders a narrative crisis.

13 Miss Schwartz's phrase ("the beasts of the fields") is a direct repetition of Harry McElhone's description of those who engage in extramarital sex (47). This technique—in which the same phrase is shown to mean very different things—is essentially musical in derivation, as the difference in meaning is produced not by the phrase itself but the way it is "harmonized" in different contexts.

14 Dennis, *passim*.

15 Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz?, passim*. Eagleton, "Art after Auschwitz: Theodor Adorno," 341–65. Adorno's profile in *Philosophy of Modern Music* as one of the twentieth century's leading music theorists is also of interest here.

16 The paragraph which describes Danny's response to the Palestrina recording anticipates the seven-page section at the end of *Grace Notes*, insofar as each comprises "a patchwork of memory, affect, metaphor and narrative, the representation of a mind and a body idiosyncratically responding to musical stimuli in all their (mind, body, music) worldliness" (Benson, 136).

17 Danny's experience is "tragic" insofar as it instantiates what Joseph Cleary refers to as "the deadlock or stalemate of a blocked and apparently static period" (259). Discussing the tragic mode in relation to Northern Irish drama, Cleary goes on to say:

> "[A] certain grieving for the failure of the new to emerge is audible. However, what cannot be overlooked is the contrapuntal movement in which this grief for the obstruction of the new can also modulate into a sense of mourning for the old that is perceived to be dying" (259). Given the focus of the present essay, the musical register of this analysis is suggestive.

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