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Liminal Encounters between Literature and Music in Contemporary British Women’s Short Stories¹

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Introduction

The contemporary relevance of transnational and transcultural exchanges is accompanied by a growing interest in interartistic and transdisciplinary processes, with different discourses placing the liminal, the hybrid and the relational as key concepts (Carvalho Homem and Lambert 2006, 11). Such exercises of relationality bring to the fore the fruitful possibilities opened up by the dialogue between literature and other arts and fields of knowledge, including music as a case in point. After periods of uneven creative and critical reception, the interaction between literature and music has acquired tremendous relevance since the last decades of the twentieth century, with a proliferation of fictional and critical works incorporating the musical referent.

The short story emerges as an inspiring genre for the exploration of this literary-musical dialogue, thanks to its liminal quality. Being “the liminal genre *par excellence*” (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 4), the short story offers a fertile ground not just for the depiction of the crossing of national, ethnic and cultural boundaries, but also for the challenge to the barriers traditionally dividing different arts and discourses. In light of this, the present chapter aims to approach liminality as the overlapping of artistic borders, articulated in terms of the cross-

fertilisation between the short story and music. These encounters between the literary and the musical are examined in a selection of narratives from the collection *Fanfare: Fourteen Stories on a Musical Theme* (1999), edited by Duncan Minshull and Helen Wallace. I will analyse those short stories written by contemporary British women that explore gender relationships through the musical referent, from the female perspectives of, respectively, the musician-creator (Candia McWilliam's "Theory and Practice"), and the audience-recipient (Helen Simpson's "Corporate Entertainment").

References to Alison MacLeod's "The Heart of Denis Noble" (2013) are included in a preliminary section that explores the literary dialogue with music and the characteristics of the short story that make it a particularly apt genre for the development of this dialogue. My contention is that liminality, in the wake of Victor Turner's ground-breaking model and Claire Drewery's application of the "liminal trope" to the short story, provides a useful critical tool for exploring the challenge to the literary-musical boundary in this genre. Interartistic border-crossing is here examined as a transitional process that revolves around a moment of revelation in the story triggered by the encounter with music. This approach enriches other analytical frameworks applied to the literature-music dyad (most notably, the concept of musical *ekphrasis* or *melophrasis*, as surveyed below), and proves how, despite the scant critical attention paid to the short story as a melophrastic genre, it offers a fertile ground for the meaningful and fruitful engagement with the musical referent.

The Interartistic Dialogue with Music and the Short Story in the Context of Liminality

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, an increasing number of narrative works of fiction have engaged in an interartistic dialogue that subverts generic and discursive boundaries, taking arts such as painting and music as structural, thematic and stylistic referents. Significantly, and despite music's alleged non-representationality, the musical referent is acquiring major significance in this field of relationships—to the point that the confluence

between literature and music is becoming not only one of the most fruitful strategies in contemporary fiction, but also an appealing area of critical analysis. A growing number of contemporary writers have become “word musicians” (Meyer 2002, 6) and have explored the musical medium in novels such as Rose Tremain’s *Music & Silence* (1999), Conrad Williams’s *The Concert Pianist* (2006) or Alexander Chee’s *The Queen of the Night* (2016), and in short-story collections such as Kazuo Ishiguro’s first incursion into the genre, *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009).

One of these recent works in the context of the short story is “The Heart of Denis Noble”, by the British-Canadian author Alison MacLeod (b. 1964). It was shortlisted for the BBC National Short Story Award in 2011 and longlisted for the Sunday Times EFG Private Bank Short Story Award in 2012. Originally published as a contribution to *Litmus: Short Stories from Modern Science* (2011), “The Heart of Denis Noble” was later anthologised by Victoria Hislop in *The Story: Love, Loss & The Lives of Women. 100 Great Short Stories* (2013) as one of the stories on love. The background of the narrative is scientific rather than musical, as it fictionalises the life and discoveries of the British biologist and Professor of Cardiovascular Physiology, Denis Noble (b.1936); however, music plays a key role since it presides over the revelatory moments in the story. Noble is a specialist in the mechanisms of the heart, and his lifelong interest in music resonates in the titles of his latest publications: *The Music of Life* (2006) and *Dance to the Tune of Life* (2016).

In the course of the narration, the protagonist is having a heart transplant, during which he reviews some moments of his life in which the working of his heart was involved (literally, or metaphorically in connection with the story’s question about the physical location of love). Significantly, this process of life review is imbued with the sense of hearing and the presence of music: Denis’s incipient existence in his mother’s womb is described as “a living stream of sound and sensation”, moved by “the manifold sound waves of passers-by” (MacLeod 2013, 244), and references to sounds and to the exercises of hearing and listening recur constantly in

the story, with the pervasive presence of Schubert's Piano Trio in E-Flat Major. Chosen by the protagonist as the piece to be played in the course of his surgery, this composition exerts a mnemonic power for Denis as it awakens his memories of his love relationship with his wife-to-be (Ella) when they were young.

Schubert's music takes Denis's mind back to his days as a doctoral student, when every evening he is eager to go back to his London room. There, with the music of the piano trio permeating the student hall, Denis meets Ella and listens to the beat of her heart, "as if he is the body of a violin or cello that exists only to amplify her voice" (252). The centrality of the musical referent hinted at in this simile emerges powerfully in the climax of the story, with the protagonist's revolutionary discovery of the holistic working of the heart. When Denis suddenly realises that the parts of the heart work together, his mind resorts to a musical image that equates the heart with an orchestra where "[t]he parts of the heart listen to each other as surely as musicians in an ensemble listen to each other" (255).

In this way, the protagonist's discovery, like the reader's insight into the history of Denis's emotional life, is mediated by the presence of music, thus exemplifying the relevance of the musical referent for the configuration of a contemporary piece of (short) fiction. In parallel, current critical approaches in the field of interart poetics are broadening the limited focus of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition to incorporate other arts and disciplines into the analysis of literary interconnectivity. While "the confluence between literature and music [...] is recently established as a dynamic field of critical enquiry" (Da Sousa 2006, 1), classical concepts in relational studies like *ekphrasis* are undergoing a process of revision and expansion. As I have argued elsewhere (Lara-Rallo 2012, 97–98), in the context of the ongoing semiotic turn in intermediality, there have been different attempts at revising *ekphrasis* from its simplest definition as the literary (dynamic) evocation of an artistic (static) object. One of such lines of reformulation is the one aimed at including music as a potentially ekphrastic discourse, as developed in pioneering publications by Rodney S. Edgecombe (1993) and Lydia Goehr (2010).

Although both studies have contributed to the expansion of the interartistic approach, and to the reconsideration of the place of music in this context by querying the borders of *ekphrasis*, they show some limitations in the application of musical *ekphrasis* as an analytical tool.

Edgecombe coined the concept of *melophrasis* as “any verbal effort to evoke the experience of externally apprehended music” (1993, 2), offering a systematic typology of different categories of this practice; however, when he explores such categories, he provides examples from poetry and some novels, while ignoring the melophrastic potential of the short story. Similarly, the short story is overlooked in Goehr’s article, which focuses on the representation of poetry, painting and sculpture *in* music. Although Goehr’s main interest lies in this line of research, which has recently been expanded by Thomas C. Connolly (2018), she also acknowledges the potential of musical *ekphrasis* as applied to literature. Goehr describes those instances of the literary dialogue with music as “moments when music is brought to aesthetic presence through imaginary performance or through the sheer power of description” (2010, 407), but like Edgecombe, she only examines such moments in poetry, with some references to plays and to novels, and without reference to the short story.

This limitation in the use of musical *ekphrasis* is particularly remarkable when considering the flexibility of the short story for interdiscursive practices (Basseler 2015, 88) and in the light of the fertility of the genre for the intersection with music, as shown in the present chapter. This melophrastic potential becomes already noticeable when considering some of the inherent traits of music as a mode of creation and expression in connection with some of the defining characteristics of the short story, as outlined in two classical essays on the genre: Norman Friedman’s “What Makes a Short Story Short?” (1958) and Suzanne C. Ferguson’s “Defining the Short Story” (1982). On the one hand, the fact that music is an art in time, whose configuration and reception depend on the insertion and release of climactic points of tension in the smooth flow of sound, connects with the possibilities offered by the short story in terms of the treatment of time and temporal pace. According to Friedman, a short story may

be either static or dynamic, and this potential is enhanced by multiple options on the level of expansion and contraction of time scale and span (Friedman 1996, 106, 112). All this resonates with special significance when dealing with the verbalisation of musical rhythm and tempo, and when approaching the literary treatment of the compositional techniques of contraction and expansion of the motif, subject or theme, which are characteristic of the structural arrangement of musical patterns like the fugue or the theme and variations form.

On the other hand, the denotative possibilities of music find an apt mode of articulation in the short story. Traditionally, music has been considered an art of expression, but not of representation, supposedly lacking semantic and mimetic referentiality. Due to the ambiguity of its signs, music has been neglected by semiotics, considering that musical signs have no semiotic value (Erspamer 2002, 146). This state of affairs, which left music out the *beaux arts* when the category was created in the eighteenth century, has been assiduously challenged not only by composers of programme music such as Claude Debussy, Paul Dukas or Leroy Anderson, but also by theorists of music. One of them, Nicholas Cook, has contended that the semantics of a musical piece is rendered in terms of its form, which becomes the focus of aesthetic attention (2007, 258). Such claims prove the existence of a sustained effort to destabilise the view of music as an arbitrary sign system, with no semantic potential, and argue instead for the semiotic value of music, in the form of both musical lyrics and musical instrumentation (Erspamer 2002, 145–146). The revision of the semantic and semiotic status of music has gained a strong ally in the confluence of literature and music in the short story. This genre gives prominence to the “theme” or “semantic aspect”, which in Suzanne Ferguson’s view emerges as the major cohesive constituent of short fiction, in the sense that the process of differentiating it from other types of narrative is based on the readers’ abstraction of theme (1996, 298).

The relevance of the semantic dimension of the short story, in correlation with its intrinsic combination of brevity and complexity (Hunter 2007, 2; Basseler 2015, 87), brings to the fore

the centrality of the illuminating moment in the narrative (Head 2016, 7), which in its revelatory or epiphanic quality, opens up different levels of meaning for the interpretation of the immediate and ultimate effects of the characters' experiences. Indeed, the meaning of the story as a whole is illuminated by the focus "on a single, intense, and existential moment rather than a longer sequence of events" (Basseler 2015, 80). Significantly, the existence of a defining moment or interlude in modernist short fiction has been associated by Claire Drewery with the transcendence of boundaries (psychological, social, thematic or theoretical) and therefore with liminality, especially in fiction by women. This connection between the short story and what Drewery describes as the liminal trope, "through which modernist short fiction by women explores crises of identity encapsulated in moments or interludes of transition" (2011, 1), can be extrapolated to contemporary short fiction crossing the borders between literature and music.

Liminality derives from *limen*, the Latin word for "threshold", and it was initially applied in the field of anthropology by Victor Turner, who, following Arnold van Gennep, argued that any transition or rite of passage follows a three-step process, as the ritual subject or passenger goes through the phases of separation, *limen* and aggregation. If the separation implies the passenger's detachment from a state or earlier fixed point in the social structure (1969, 94), and the aggregation means the reincorporation of the passenger as a stable subject into the social structure or *communitas*, the key phase that makes that reincorporation possible is the liminal period, during which the characteristics of the passenger are ambiguous: "he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (1969, 94). When examining social dramas in later works, Turner introduced the possibility that the final stage of the transition may result not in the reintegration of the subject or social group, but in the social recognition of irreparable schism (1974, 41). Although the image of the threshold is spatial in origin, Turner imbued it with temporal attributes (Thomassen 2014, 9), and he emphasised the temporal dimension of liminality by focusing not on the threshold itself, but on the sequential action of passing through the threshold. The liminal is essentially dynamic, and

so fluid and open to change (Aguirre 2004, 13, 16), since it captures the processual sequence of the transition between the phase of break and the phase of reintegration (Ellis 2004, 34, 49). Therefore, liminality appeals to temporality in its marking not just a beginning and an end, but also “duration in the unfolding of a spatio-temporal process” (Andrews and Roberts 2012, 1), consequently emerging as a chronological formation (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 7).

This dynamic quality of liminality, which matches the dynamic essence of music as an art in time, has opened the way for the application of the concept in a wide variety of fields of knowledge, from religious studies and anthropology to marketing and consulting (Thomassen 2014, 7), including psychology and literature, among others. Moreover, the intersectional view of the threshold as a phase in the transitional process offers the possibility of implementing the liminal not just in different disciplines, but also across discourses, with the development of notions such as that of “liminal performance” (Broadhurst 2004, 57). Characterised as a hybrid artistic manifestation, the liminal performance blurs and collapses the boundaries between different arts and media technologies to produce an intertextual and intersemiotic creation (Broadhurst 2004, 58).

The association between the intersemiotic and liminality lies behind the possibility of analysing the crossing of the literary-musical borders from the perspective of a liminal encounter, in the context of the short story as a liminal genre. The liminality of the short story has been examined by Adrian Hunter in terms of the suitability of the genre for the representation of liminal or problematic identities (2007, 138), while Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann have argued that the genre’s in-betweenness places it as “an ideal terrain for mapping out liminality” (2015, 23), and so for the crossing of interartistic boundaries. If according to Ellen Burton Harrington, the short story, with its status of a historically marginalised genre, “invites other outlaws to plumb alienation and repression in the symbolic subtext” (2008, 8), the musical referent finds in it a fruitful means of literary expression, considering the problematic status of music in the history of the arts. As mentioned above, music’s alleged non-

representationality has tended to relegate it to the lowest level in different taxonomies and hierarchies of the arts, placing the musical discourse as an outsider in interartistic creativity and criticism, far away from the influence of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition.

The enriching intersection between music and the short story in the context of liminality can be illustrated in the stories that make up the volume *Fanfare*, which compiles different narratives broadcast and published in BBC *Radio 3/Music Magazine*. The volume brings together works by leading contemporary writers in English, and it approaches the musical discourse from such diverse perspectives as the fictionalisation of classical composers and musicians, the narrative embedding of compositional techniques and forms, and the evocation of the contrast between sound and silence, to name but a few. In general, the common goal of the collection is to examine the inspirational force of music for short story writers, thus disclosing different strategies whereby the interartistic dialogue is held; as the editors put it, “[b]y tradition, musicians have never been afraid to put pen to paper – be it journalism, memoirs, libretti, sometimes fiction”, but how can we expect storytellers to *use* the musical medium when they explore it? (Minshull and Wallace 1999, 5).

Candia McWilliam’s “Theory and Practice”

One of these stories is “Theory and Practice” by the Scottish writer Candia McWilliam (b. 1955), author of the short-story collection *Wait Till I Tell You* (1997). The story explores gender relationships through the musical referent, from the perspective of the female musician-creator, and by doing so, it foregrounds the deep affinity existing between female experience and short fiction (Head 2016, 10). Although narrated in the third-person omniscient mode, the story follows the perceptions and reflections of the protagonist, Anna, a violinist who is preparing for a performance of Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) in the company of the members of the orchestra and the chorus. As the musicians wait for the wind to fall, so that they can reach the house on an island where they are performing the opera, Anna’s thoughts revolve

around her love relationship with James, a singer and a member of the chorus, with whom she fell in love when “they had known each other for the lifespan of two operas” (McWilliam 1999, 118).

This chronological reference based on operas reflects the protagonist’s tendency to conceptualise life experiences in musical terms. As in “The Heart of Denis Noble”, musical similes and images appealing to the sense of hearing pervade the story: if the setting of McWilliam’s story (Scotland) is described as a land “where an inch of air had five lines to it” (119), suggesting a stave, the light is perceived by Anna as “flat like a white cymbal, blaring out brassy light” (122). Music is an intrinsic part of the protagonist’s identity, to the point that she feels the presence of her violin case reassuring, and the traits of her personality are revealed through the dialogue with music, in an exercise that would match Edgecombe’s category of characterising *melophrasis* (1993, 15–17).

Anna’s view of people is based on a musical dichotomy that mediates her experience as a woman and as a musician, and which distinguishes between two types of performers: singers and instrumentalists. Singers “noticed very little that distracted from the plot”, whereas instrumentalists “observed, vibrated, annotated, remembered, broke their hearts, and sank into reflection and nostalgia” (McWilliam 1999, 118). This division, which constitutes the “theory” of the title of the story, becomes blurred when Anna notices that she herself is changing, a process encapsulated once more in a musical opposition between hearing and silence: from “always hearing different shadings of silence, of sound about to arrive” (118), Anna finds herself “[n]o longer capable of spoiling true notes by over-attention, of listening a thing to extinction” (123), wondering whether she is becoming a singer.

Above all, Anna’s theory fails in the “practice” of her relationship with James, who far from displaying the self-centred behaviour of singers, shows attention and sympathy towards Anna. She admires James’s large, deep voice and intelligent diction, and his singing is explicitly evoked in the conclusion of the story. When Anna and James, together with other members of

the company, are crossing a loch in a dinghy to arrive at the house of the performance, James starts to sing “something English, ecclesiastical, stiff, ponderous, apposite to the darkness and the imminent light” (123). This evocation is crucial for the transcendence of interartistic borders in “Theory and Practice”, because apart from illustrating how the narrative is interspersed with references to instrumental-vocal pieces, it articulates the liminal transition into the revelatory moment of the story.

On the one hand, the story develops links with several operas, which subtly point to Anna’s concern for the experience of ageing as it affects her antagonist, the soloist soprano Verena. Verena’s situation mirrors that of the protagonist of *Der Rosenkavalier*, the Marschallin, whose name is applied to Verena herself, and who in Strauss’s opera is involved in a relationship with her young lover Octavian. Likewise, the story also alludes to Leoš Janáček’s opera *The Makropulos Case* (1926), where the central situation is the challenge to the passing of time issued by a celebrated singer, Emilia Marty, another parallel to Verena and her fear of ageing.

On the other hand, and alongside these operas, “Theory and Practice” incorporates among its musical referents Edward Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900), when James sings the Priest’s valediction to the Soul of Gerontius in the conclusion of the story: ““Go, in the name of the Holy Spirit, who hath been poured out on thee!”” (123). This explicit encounter with music presides over the revelatory episode in the story, a liminal transition that takes place during the literal passage through the loch. Being a passenger in the dinghy together with the other musicians, Anna becomes a liminal traveller in the course of an experience that, although not extraordinary in itself, triggers the protagonist’s transcendental reflection. In the phase of separation, Anna detaches herself from the fixed point of her theory, wondering whether she has become a singer, while at the same time she moves physically closer to James, “[l]eaning her head against him just as she leant her head in to her instrument” (123).

This proximity allows her to enter the liminal phase, with the listening to James as he unexpectedly begins to sing from *The Dream of Gerontius*, which significantly revolves around an allegorical journey. As her ears fill with James's voice, the dynamic unfolding of the music makes Anna realise how James counterbalances her theory by differing from the other singers. At that precise moment, Anna experiences an epiphanic feeling of belonging, which similarly to Guerino Mazzola's view of musical performance as the transformation of a score "into a physical entity composed of acoustic events and the embodiment of the score's symbols in the musicians' bodies" (2011, 3), marks the protagonist's reincorporation into the *communitas* of musicians: "It was as though that big fluctuating account of travail and arrival had not come solely from him, but from all of them" (McWilliam 1999, 124). In the phase of aggregation, Anna feels to be a part of the collectivity of musicians, while the liminal experience of music has opened her senses to a transcendental perception of the world. As she and the other musicians disembark at the other side of the lake, thus ending their literal journey, Anna has the impression of entering a new world, shrouded in light and frozen in time, through the effect of art, "as though time were for that night suspended by art in one cold house after a short journey" (McWilliam 1999, 124).

Helen Simpson's "Corporate Entertainment"

The liminal transition, developed in a specific moment of "Theory and Practice", can stretch along an extended episode of the narrative, as in "Corporate Entertainment" by the English writer Helen Simpson (b. 1959). Later retitled as "Opera" in Simpson's collection *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life* (2000), "Corporate Entertainment" was first published in *Fanfare*, and like McWilliam's story, it examines gender relationships by resorting to the musical referent, in this case from the female perspective of the audience-recipient. Reflecting once again how the short story offers women a place to explore different areas of experience (Coelsch-Foisner 2016, 288), this narrative illustrates Simpson's assiduous attention to women's experiences of

maternity and menopause (Crown 2015). The narrative follows the protagonist, middle-aged Janine, as she goes through a difficult stage of her married life. In a state of depression “since the children and then the loss of her job” (Simpson 1999, 151), Janine finds herself immersed in frustration and helplessness as she feels unloved by her husband, Christopher. The story takes place in the course of a gala performance of *Orfeo ed Euridice* attended by the couple, who are celebrating their wedding anniversary. Janine accompanies Christopher to the performance reluctantly, because although it is her favourite opera, the main purpose of going there is entertaining Christopher’s clients, something that Janine hates.

In this way, music figures prominently in “Corporate Entertainment”, which takes as its main referent Christoph Willibald Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), in its French version by Hector Berlioz, *Orphée et Eurydice* (1859). This opera, considered Gluck’s most popular work, is categorised in the genre of the *azione teatrale* because it combines a mythological subject with choruses and dancing. The opera works as the backbone of Simpson’s story since the mixed feelings invading the protagonist in the course of the performance reveal her dissatisfaction with her marriage, a circumstance that becomes the centre of the story through the parallels existing between Janine’s personal situation and that of the myth narrated in the opera. The development of these parallels is based on the dialogue with music, and from the perspective of *melophrasis*, the story puts into practice several categories of Edgecombe’s model, including characterising *melophrasis*, and above all, programmatic *melophrasis*, described by Edgecombe as that creating an “associative flow of images” when “a specific piece of music flow[s] through the mind and pull[s] associations into its current” (Edgecombe 1993, 12–13).

Indeed, the story visually evokes Gluck’s opera through the empathic perspective of the protagonist, who feels deeply moved by the performance of the tragic myth of Orpheus and his wife Eurydice. By doing so, the narrative illustrates how the process of intense visualisation characteristic of the short-story genre compensates brevity in its production of narrativity or

storyness (Brosch 2015, 96–97). The narrativity of “Corporate Entertainment” relies on the recreation of the opera by appealing to the sense of sight and above all, to the sense of hearing, in a dynamic exercise of listening from Janine’s point of view that foregrounds the semantic and structural implications of the story when exploring it through the liminal trope.

The performance of the opera, which punctuates Janine’s emotional response, can be examined as a liminal process that results in the protagonist’s ultimate reaction in the open ending of the story. From this perspective, the liminal phase spans the whole experience of visualising and listening to the musical piece, and it is preceded by a phase of separation that already reveals the existence of a dysfunction in Janine and Christopher’s relationship. Interestingly, Janine’s inability to understand Christopher’s indifference towards her is rendered in musical terms by creating a parallel with the protagonists of Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* (1791), Tamino and Pamina, who like Orpheus and Eurydice are involved in a pattern of rescue, with Pamina’s recurrent feeling of abandonment by Tamino: “she regarded it as a temporary madness in his life which she would have to put up with, like Pamina walking through the fire with Tamino, and have faith that they would be together again once he was over it” (Simpson 1999, 152).

In this phase of separation, which lasts until the beginning of the performance, the unsympathetic portrait of Janine’s company in the course of the opera is mediated by music: if Christopher displays a materialistic attitude in his view of music as business, the superficiality of his clients is reflected in their disrespectful comments about Janine’s knowledge of the opera, and in their assessment of Claude Debussy’s *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1902) in terms of its length and the consequent shortness of the interval. For them, the opera is a pretext, in the same way as their social interaction is a conscious performance, “inverting the relationship between stage and audience” (Cox 2008, 4).

With the first chords of the opera, Janine enters the liminal phase, feeling completely detached from the rest of the audience, “lifted away from the world of people and things”

(Simpson 1999, 154). Like Turner's passengers, who are "betwixt and between", "neither here nor there" (1969, 95) as they undergo the transitional crossing of the threshold, Janine finds herself in an intermediate position between two realities: that of the opera and that of her failed married life, labelled as "the other world" and "not here" (Simpson 1999, 155, 158). Each of the events in the opera elicits an emotional response in the protagonist, who immerses herself in the evocative power of music: "'Eurydice!' cried Orpheus, and she felt the frisson in her flesh. 'Eurydice!' he cried again, [...] and she sighed. Then for a third time he cried out 'Eurydice!' and this time she jumped" (155). Janine's emotional plunge into the distressing quality of the opera results from her identification with the mood of irretrievable loss pervading the myth, when Orpheus is given the opportunity to rescue Eurydice from the underworld and then loses her forever. In this sense, as the opera progresses and Simpson renders it verbally, the protagonist reflects on her personal situation of marital unhappiness and frustration, in such a way that "the onstage performance enacts Janine's private narrative" (Cox 2008, 5).

Listening to Eurydice's songs of sorrow, Janine has the impression that the music and the words apply to her own feelings and thoughts, as she believes that Christopher no longer loves her. This reinforces Janine's suffering, which comes to a climactic point with the performance of the scene of Orpheus's final loss of Eurydice when he looks back at her and she dies instantly. The cathartic effect of this scene, as Janine realises that tears are streaming down her face while Orpheus sings his aria "J'ai perdu mon Eurydice", marks her passage into the aggregation phase. Unlike the liminal transition of "Theory and Practice", this phase does not imply Janine's reincorporation into the *communitas* of her married life, but a schism, with the implicit allusion to an insurmountable breach in the marriage in the open ending of the story. Although changed in the opera to a happy conclusion of reunion of the couple, the tragic atmosphere of the myth remains with Janine, who perceives that "[t]he final two scenes were as unconvincing as ever" (Simpson 1999, 159), having concluded before that "unlike in operas,

we grow old while waiting in silence” (156). This thought resonates in the open ending of the story, whose implicit meaning is provided by the parallel with the events in *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

As Janine and Christopher leave the concert hall, they replicate the central scene in the opera with Orpheus’s attempted rescue of Eurydice. Becoming “a dark figure about to melt into the blackness” (160), Christopher walks ahead of Janine indifferent to her presence and to her three calls, until eventually, he turns to look back at her. In the light of the myth behind Gluck’s work, this action signals the end of Janine and Christopher’s marriage, bringing to mind Janine’s thoughts on the irreversibility of the situation in the opera and in her own personal circumstances, as both in the opera and in the story, “from the start something terrible has happened; [...] The line has been crossed and everything has changed” (155).

Conclusion

This crossing of the line is dramatised in the story as a liminal passage mediated by the opera and its emotional effects on the protagonist. Transformed into a liminal subject, in-between the worlds of the opera and of her unhappy married life, Janine is able to give inner voice to her frustration and misery through her immersion into the musical performance. In the course of this liminal transition, Janine’s reflections and cathartic release of her emotions empower her for the eventual breach in her marriage, a schism implied through the parallel with the fate of Orpheus and Eurydice, thus revealing the centrality of Gluck’s opera for the meaning and interpretation of “Corporate Entertainment”.

Similarly, *The Dream of Gerontius* articulates Anna’s transcendental reflection in “Theory and Practice”, where the protagonist’s worldview is rendered in musical terms with the division of people into instrumentalists and singers. Such a dichotomy becomes blurred in the course of Anna’s liminal experience, a literal and metaphorical journey which, through the contact with James’s singing, reinforces the protagonist’s identity in her love relationship and in her place in the community of musicians. Like “Corporate Entertainment”, “Theory and

Practice” also incorporates other musical referents that enrich the semantic dimension of the narrative, and which contribute to the exploration of gender relationships developed in the stories.

This exploration, from the perspectives of, respectively, the musician-creator and the audience-recipient, is mediated by the liminal encounter with music, which can also be traced in stories that, although not primarily musical, resort to the musical referent, such as “The Heart of Denis Noble”. Like the narratives by McWilliam and Simpson, MacLeod’s story offers the possibility of examining the dialogue with music (in this case, Schubert’s piano trio) through the concept of liminality. Understood as a trope conceptualising the transitional (dynamic) passage into moments of revelation marked by the presence of music, liminality emerges as an apt critical tool to explore the interdisciplinary dialogue with music in contemporary fiction, particularly in the short-story genre. Indeed, as this chapter has demonstrated, the short story offers a fertile ground for the enactment of the ekphrastic dialogue with music, both vocal and instrumental, and the melophrastic analysis is enriched by the application of the liminal trope, whether in particular passages like the ones of “Theory and Practice”, or spanning a whole story as in “Corporate Entertainment”. All in all, this approach to the interaction with music as a liminal encounter reveals the aesthetic and artistic possibilities opened up by the contemporary short story in its crossing of the borders between musical sound and the literary text.

Notes

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