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Reading Music: Further Adventures in Creative Musicology

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ABSTRACT: This article considers words and music in close proximity: how 'words about music' might occupy themselves in ways other than as 'mere' exegesis, and how 'music about words' might challenge music's assumed self-sufficiency. Through examples of my work in 'creative musicology', I explore that hinterland where literary-poetic writing borders musicology. An underlying premise of the article is that the products of musical creation are always already 'critical work done'.

KEYWORDS: narratology, fiction, creative musicology, theory, composition

CAFE MUSIC

*Before entering, she awaits the headspring where the music tightens and the compressed horns unfurl. Her voice is a bread stall – rosemary, rock salt, raisin, sour dough, olive ciabbata. The choir is a Mediterranean spa product line in green, turquoise, black, orange and mauve: uniform chocolates wearing cummerbunds. Through the padded closure of a storage vault and the dental sorting of cutlery, comes a troupe of Bulgarian folk dancers (actually misheard Vivaldi), and Enya, oozing international travel. The Exocutor glows neon atop the dessert fridge. Cappuccino steam makes a bold incision, and in the rift there stands a Mediterranean choir, waving, as if it had always been standing there waving. The compressed horns form a dripstone. The soprano enters the choir's cave with a voice like bread. The choir is the cave of a cathedral. (John Kefala-Kerr, *Café Music*, 2006)*

IN attempting to capture the background music of a city centre café, the above writing makes no attempt to filter out the laminar acoustics of the indoor environment, nor the various 'interferences' that make the horns appear to 'unfurl' and the soprano's voice become a 'bread stall'. Even the momentary misidentification of the music is admitted to here because it was one of the many contingent elements that conspired to engender this particular *moment musical*.

An encounter with music in-situ prompted the above piece of writing. But what of this writing? Dare I call it musicology? Certainly not with a capital M because, if anything, this writing strives to remain clear of what

Valentine Cunningham calls the “vast grasp” of Theory (Cunningham 2002: 122).

Writing about music in a literary-poetic vein bespeaks a certain scepticism about the neutrality of analytic discourse, a scepticism currently being voiced from a number of quarters.¹ At the risk of sounding melodramatic, I might say that my ‘adventures’ (as I call them) are an attempt to evade the imperialisms of Theory; a modest countermeasure, perhaps, against the overbearing capital T that Cunningham cautions against, and which he says threatens to erase “all the mishmash of notions and assumptions garnered in from [...] upbringing and education and just being-in-the-world” (Cunningham 2002: 4).

Similar sentiments underpin Stephen Benson’s regard for what he calls “the fumbling attempts of the everyday listener”. I myself am happy to practice such ‘fumbblings’, not least because, when viewed from the standpoint of creative practice, critical work done in forms other than the written word (musical compositions for instance) seem too often subjected to the second rinse cycle of theoretical scrutiny, the result being ‘shrinkage’ – the reduction of texts “to formulae, to the formulaic, to the status only of the model” (Benson 2006: 122).

Creative musicians have long understood, if only by dint of their choice of medium, that “no work of musicology can in a fundamental sense transcend the musical preconceptions of its author” (Cook 1990: 9). It is this congenital bias that has, in part, led me to pursue not so much ‘writing about’ music, in the anchored sense, but rather writing ‘about’ – in and around, so to speak, within the ambitus of it. In this way I see Cunningham’s ‘mishmash’ and Benson’s ‘fumbling’ (indicators of the personal, idiosyncratic, immediate and particular) being retained and preserved.

Perspectives such as these – necessarily outlawed by mainstream musicology in the name of an objectivity that (if ‘sceptical’ theorists are to be believed) may do little more than “reflect more of ourselves than [...] the phenomena we are attempting to explain” (Benson 2002: 28) – underpin my own musicological efforts. These attempt to bring ‘words about music’ into closer proximity with the object of its affections than is usually the case: so close, in fact, that the subject-object divide is often blurred and what emerges is perhaps better thought of as a *process* – something more akin to a love affair than the military conquest of formal analysis.

With phenomenologists asserting the ideological ‘graveness’ of theory (cf. Benson 2002), musicologists upholding the “intuitive edge” of the layperson (Cook 1990: 2) and literary theorists endorsing the musico-critical appositeness of the literary-poetic mode (cf. Benson 2006), I am heartened by both the timeliness and the orientation of my project, which for the past eight years has involved an exploration of words-about-music that would

¹ Bruce Ellis Benson (2002) from the field of phenomenology, Valentine Cunningham (2002) from literary criticism, and Marion Guck (1998) from musicology, to give three examples.

treat seriously Stephen Benson's 'everyday listener'. I have been curious to know what might happen if I were to adopt such a listening position, and whether in doing so my efforts would breach the "proper language of the professional" (Benson 2006: 3). I have been wondering too what might be getting lost in the achievement of that 'proper language', and whether its foil – the literary-poetic mode – might count as a viable musicological register: a valid medium to serve as "earwitness to the role of music in everyday life, a record of why, where and how music is made, heard and received" (Benson 2006: 4).² Benson's suggestion is that literary texts have the capacity to act like ears. Here is another such 'ear':

²Benson here acknowledges Raymond Murray Schafer's earlier use of the term 'earwitness' in *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1994).

For some reason I can't bring to mind the name of that egg-shaped fruit with the brown hairy skin and the green flesh that's spoked with black seeds. My attempts at recall are frustrated by the persistent appearance of the word 'passion'—as in passion fruit. I know this to be incorrect but can't distract myself from the inaccuracy, not even with red wine, Doritos or stroking your pregnant belly. Later, I'm still struggling. I can feel them, taste them, cut the top off them like a boiled egg and spoon out the potassium-rich juice, yet still be dodged by the name, which I think might begin with a 'p'. It's definitely not A or B or C or D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K...Aha! Kiwi! (Kefala-Kerr 2004).

Erik Satie might have approved of this little sketch, which likens the music³ to the morphology of a fruit: the kiwi's 'spoked' innards suggesting the spectral aspect of the music's electronic tones, the implied forgetfulness (arising out of the simple, mnemonic-like repetitions in the music) narrated via the list-like arrangement of the words and the narrator's inability to recall the name of said fruit.

³ *An Electroascetic's Prayerbook*, Vol. 1, No. 3. A recording can be accessed at: <http://johnkefalakerr.com/an-electroascetics-prayerbook-vol-1-no-s-1-8>

WKD2

WKD2 takes a different approach to capturing the moment musicaux of the everyday. This piece, rendered in the form of a 'critical story', was inspired by a chance hearing of Sergei Rachmaninov's Vocalise on the car radio as I was driving home one night. The story engineers correspondences between a nocturnal journey and aspects of Rachmaninov's music. En route a critique is developed of that cult of 'relaxing classical music' as promulgated by classical music broadcasters, such as Classic FM. (This UK radio station has developed a 'creative musicology' all its own, an imaginative lexicon of phrases such as 'patent leather music' and 'the sound of luxury cruising', which help co-opt the station's output to its commercial agenda.)

Lights on each wingtip identify the airliner as it passes overhead. Erased by the black night, it cruises over the radiant cityscape, lights tipping as it banks with an eloquent surge from Rachmaninov. His Vocalise is playing on Maestro FM. Cadences pipe buttercream swirls. Chords make shallow steps. A trill seems to prompt the pilot aloft to coax his stick to port.

The driver of the car harbours special feelings about being at the wheel. He follows the plane, arcing left with the motorway, then right, then left again, his seat tilting him right thigh high, the car's whispered propulsion oblivious to the dip and rise of the road, the adverse camber, that moment of weightlessness on the cusp of a bump. There's hardly any traffic, which allows the driver to eyeball the unconstrained northbound plane as it descends towards the city's airport, the flyover's slip ascending, the road ahead like pulled licorice.

The two vehicles are now in formation, distance's illusion having the car keeping up with the plane – one-fifty knots, zero headwind. But then the driver needs to pull in for fuel because the amber gauge is telling him to.

Stepping out of the sports coupe, the driver is convinced his legs are thinning towards the old man within. Preventative squats have been the order of the day. So has assertive walking: muscular walking, including muscular walking from the pump to the night hatch to pay.

Earlier that evening, at the concert, seated on his left with one arm aligned with his own bespoke sleeve, sat that couture drama in racing leather. On his right, a slender female arm in lilac mohair, resting close but not touching. He'd tried to imagine a home for these sartorial collisions: something avant-garde, something marketed to the demon within.

Another airliner floats in. It crosses the road at ninety degrees: not as high as the first plane because the car is nearer to the airport. The plane's lights tilt and slip behind the driver's right shoulder, entering the blind spot, from where a vehicle suddenly appears...overtaking close, very close, furious, not sedate, not sitting on a bed of air.

The driver is startled but Rachmaninov remains calm, nurturing that stable, consistent moment, that singular trajectory that yields curvaceous orchestral edifices. There were no stoppings for gas in this music, no automotive shocks, no leather and mohair sandwiches. In the morning, back at the agency, he would return to the WKD2 account with a fresh mind, an airborne mind, a 'classical' mind, the added surge of strings buoying his imagination, giving it lift. He is impressed with the ease of his inventiveness. No wonder they called them Creatives.

The driver loses sight of the plane, but then spots it again out the corner of his right eye, its double dots forming a colon in the punctuated sky. He turns his head for a better view and feels like he is the one on the flight deck with the warm, sweat-less hands finger-tipping the control yoke, the

circuit board city laid out below, illuminated everywhere except for where the black line of the unlit river runs, a bottle of WKD2 strapped to the co-pilot's seat in case of emergency.

Still eyeing the plane as it ducks below the terrestrial sub-roof plateau, he realises he's inadvertently taken a wrong turning – the painful turning he's been ignoring for years. He proceeds to the roundabout, passing the stanchions of the underpass, the traction-less music now conjuring an elderly woman in an overheated care home, sitting, twisted as a bonsai, awaiting a visit that will never come (Kefala-Kerr 2010b).

Paralleling the music, the story conjures expensive vehicles in sight of the orchestra's mediating role, the twin trajectories of motion articulating the tessitura of orchestral motion, the motorway tracing the gently veering turns-and-straightens of Rachmaninov's melody, till the point is reached where an unexpected turn-off heralds the music's revenge on the smug driver and the semantic rug is pulled out from under his feet. The pleasure of self-endorsement, which the driver gains from listening to the music, is driven off, so to speak, when he is suddenly exposed to the music's latent morbidity. The impulsive, opportunistic creativity of the ad man is contrasted ironically with the kind of sustained compositional effort required to produce works like *Vocalise*. Together, these elements marshal a critique, which could equally have been articulated in a more conventional form, but as a fiction both the originating experience and the 'reflexive subjectivity' of writing (the 'autobiographical', if you will) is acknowledged and the 'colonising' tendency of 'Theory' ameliorated.

134

NEW START

New Start is a more ambitious musico-literary endeavour: a 350-page fiction exploring the novel as musical entity. Taking my own work for orchestra and mixed chorus, *Panagia*, as its interlocutor, the novel attempts to explore several approaches to 'musical fictionality' – a "quality", Peter Rabinowitz reminds us, that is not to be "found in the text itself but [...] rather, a perspective brought to bear on the music by the listener" (Rabinowitz 2004: 318). The novel conducts its exploration in dialogue with the aforementioned music – on the one hand acting as the music's literary doppelgänger and on the other as the musicological 'perspective brought to bear'.

The central character in *New Start* is Fish, an idealistic young composer who is trying to write a symphony. With his adoptive parents both dead and his life in meltdown, Fish leaves England for Greece with his archaeologist girlfriend, Gabrielle. What Fish doesn't know is that Gabrielle is a tortured soul, running scared of a dead body she uncovered in a Belfast landfill

and which she is convinced is stalking her. The two characters' adventures in Greece take them to a remote house on the Aegean coast, where Fish becomes more and more delusional about the utopian possibilities of his music. When the seawater in the vicinity of the house turns sweet enough to drink and the life-giving talents of his unpredictable girlfriend come to light, Fish suddenly finds himself dealing with symphonic dilemmas of a supra-musical kind.

In his symphony there's an acoustic shower. The shower sprinkles a palace whose rooms are audible chambers. The audible chambers are gilded with sonic leaf and dressed in chords that hang, lush as drapes. Around the palace is a lagoon with boats in. The boats glide over the waters of the lagoon. The floors of the palace are blue seawater, the pillars carved motifs. The palace starts the day facing east then turns to track the sun. When darkness falls it is only temporary, like an eclipse, and when the sun returns it is in the form of a harp that paints daytime shapes along the friezes of the palace, and when there is no more wall space left, the harp paints the floors and terraces and gardens and waters of the lagoon (Kefala-Kerr 2010a: 301).

The above evocation is an extrapolation from the 2nd movement of *Panagia*.⁴ This, and other similarly italicized passages, allow the reader of the novel to 'hear' Fish's symphony.

Fish's relationship with the sounds of his environment and the musical inspiration he derives from them are represented in the following extract, which uses onomatopoeic language to construct an orchestral figment out of the sound of dripping water.

Gazing out the window, he tuned into the sound of dripping water and the noise of the heating system, traipsing around the house like a charivari. Sounds were his loyal companions. They'd helped him through. The dripping sound was from the thawing snow landing on the upturned bucket in the back yard. Water was an uninventive drummer, Fish realised, its beats more interesting for their regularity than their ingenuity. Occasionally a "plip" coincided with the movement of the second hand of his alarm clock and a "plop" synchronised with the beat of his heart.

"Plop" following "plip" also alerted the orchestra seated in permanent readiness in his imagination. No lying on mattresses for them! The strings held their bows in a perpetual hover, the woodwind inhaled continually and the harpists sat like Grecian goddesses, their fingers poised above the strings. The brass and percussion were not so dutiful. Being always just back from the pub, they needed a good fortissimo to keep them interested.

Re-opening his manuscript pad, Fish set about notating the scene; arresting each "plip-plop" with a trickle of a temple block and a splash of brush upon a snare, his two devoted harpists rendering the spillage with an atomizing spray of arpeggios. The result was: "insecurity",

⁴ The reader is invited to read this extract whilst listening to the music to which it relates. A recording can be accessed at: www.johnkefalakerr.com/panagia

“disorientation”, “confusion”, feelings as unstable as the snow now slipping from the roof, which he quickly captured with a bass drum and a suspended cymbal, as if it were some neatly executed circus trick: Bakoomphsh! (Kefala-Kerr 2010a: 24)

⁵ Stephen Benson's *Literary Music: Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction* (2006: 129–140) contains a discussion of representations of composers in works of fiction.

Other strategies employed in *New Start* include an attempt to challenge the conservative and anachronistic ways in which composer figures are portrayed.⁵ An account of composerly representations is beyond the scope of this discussion, but suffice it to say that Fish departs from the norm. Although he lives up to the stereotype of the romantic, penniless musician who believes in the redemptive force of his art, Fish is not deferential towards the Western art music tradition. For him 'The Greats' are defined as much by their personal weaknesses as by their musical strengths:

He'd learned all about "The Greats". He'd read about their lives and their foibles: Beethoven (deaf!), Mozart (scatological), Schubert (unemployable), Wagner (bigoted), Sibelius (spendthrift), Debussy (unfaithful). He knew the Greats had only become great because they'd dedicated themselves, ignored petty interruptions and the suffocating demands of their mothers. These things Fish had done too, finding private time at five in the morning with the practise pedal down, thinking up foibles for himself (Kefala-Kerr 2010a: 28).

Music, for Fish, is a thing with real world power and relevance, implicated in, and able to comment upon, the major events of the day. Uniquely, the character attributes such high-minded properties to all music, even music not normally considered so directed – commercial pop, for instance, and karaoke. This stylistic ecumenicalness runs counter to the conservative values normally associated with art music composers. In *New Start* the results of Fish's lack of snobbery are often comedic:

He didn't know why he was bothering trying to write a symphony, seeing as how symphony writing was the least trendy thing to do on the entire planet and the chances his future masterpiece would ever get played were virtually zero. He was probably bothering with it because he needed it. Apart from the piano taking up most of his room, and the symphony taking up most of his head, he was alone in the world.

In Jimmy's café he tore off the end of a sugar sachet and stared at the posy of fake ice cream cones displayed in the window: the seminar replaying in his head and the composition professor holding up his score as if it were a dirty pair of underpants and mocking him for admitting that Britney had been his inspiration. Her Toxic had been pounding the woodchip every night in the house and the song's chemical overtones had grooved their way into his thoughts, so he'd decided to conscript the diva because she said pertinent things like "Oh baby you're so toxic". It didn't take a genius to work out which of the World Leaders Britney was referring to, he'd said, though knowing her she was probably playing them both off

against one another, giving them each a taste of that green slime stuff she puts into the guy's mouth in the video.

Only a philistine would fault Britney for her timing, he'd said, because it took months, years sometimes, to create something artistically credible, and in the case of his symphony Fish knew it would probably be the back end of 2005 before it would get finished, and that the war would most likely be over by then, though that didn't mean he shouldn't bother with it. He had a point to make, after all. An important point! He didn't know where Britney stood on the war, but in his book she was the mistress of ironic deprecation and between bars 56 and 104 he had her striding down the aisle in her flight attendant's outfit, like a transcontinental Amazon, all sexed up and ready for invasion (Kefala-Kerr 2010a: 13).

A further musico-literary strategy employed in *New Start* is exemplified in the way the mixed chorus (which 'ooooaaeee's' and 'oooooh's' its way wordlessly throughout the first movement of *Panagia*) becomes, in literary guise, Fish's 'mindchoir' – a sometimes pejorative, sometimes consoling presence, voicing the main character's thoughts and feelings.

In *Panagia*, the mixed chorus is joined by a Balkan-flavoured violin, which plays rising arpeggio figures – a stock rhetorical gesture derived from Greek demotic music and commonly used to mark the ending of a song. The ironic placement of these arpeggios (at the beginning of *Panagia*) bespeaks a 'violin-identity' that might be characterised in terms of an unstable, incomplete, or aberrant ethnicity: one that has its corollary in the novel in the character of Fish himself, whose indeterminate cultural background motivates his search for his true parentage.

In storied form, the chorus (Fish's 'mindchoir') exists as part of the fictional composer's inner life – dramatising his thoughts and feelings. When the music (*Panagia*) is mediated through the narratological hermeneutic of the novel, an unusual musicological effect is instated, namely that the chorus of voices might be understood (and therefore heard) as an innate characteristic of the violin. This is in contradistinction to the kind of reading a 'non-narratological' approach might elicit.

'SHOWER'

The final strategy in the novel's pseudo-musical construction I'd like to highlight on this whistle-stop tour of 'creative musicology', is the use of formal or structural analogies. One such analogy uses recurring motifs. These are dotted throughout the novel and are intended to mimic the ways in which melodies and themes might appear, combine and develop in a musical composition. The main occurrences of one such motif – the 'shower' – are as follows:

"[...] *she'd showered him [...] with edible treats*" (Kefala-Kerr 2010a: 104).

"[...] *a multi-coloured shower of controllable illumination*" (*ibid.*: 135).

"[...] *no bath, no shower, ziltch*" (*ibid.*: 182).

"*The shower had come suddenly [...]*" (*ibid.*: 217).

"[...] *the freshwater showers located at intervals along the foreshore path*" (*ibid.*: 255).

"[...] *stepping under the shower and gasping*" (*ibid.*: 256).

"[...] *running non-violently for the showers...*" (*ibid.*: 266).

"*In his symphony there's an acoustic shower*" (*ibid.*: 299).

In *New Start* this varied collection of 'showers' undergoes symbolic transformation – one that might be likened to a musical modulation or similar perceptual shift whereby a new perspective is achieved on a given piece of material. This shift is made possible by the surrounding context in which the shower motif occurs, namely the network of plot events and settings in the novel that refer to religious faith. The 'modulation' in question occurs when the various 'showerings' are seen to cohere as a symbol of baptism – the synthesis confirmed and amplified in pseudo-musical terms by the audible ontology of the shower motif itself.

This idea of a modulating, 'audible' word challenges the self-sufficiency of music – a phenomenon we routinely supplement with words (or 'stories of involvement' as Marion Guck calls them). Even the least promising of them – the prosaically functional 'note' and 'chord', for instance – have been shown to be significantly figurative, reassuringly 'story-telling' (cf. Guck 1998).⁶

By promoting such symbioses and ambiguities as described above, and by allowing music and words to each act as interpreter to the other, what emerges is a provisional condition wherein the question, 'Are the words talking about the music or is the music talking about the words?', remains deliberately unresolved. The concept of 'intermedia'⁷ might go some way towards defining the poetics of such a condition, but the 'fumbling, everyday listener' in me prefers to think in terms of the astronomical phenomenon of the binary star – two celestial bodies, each caught in the other's gravitational field and orbiting about a common centre of mass whose locus is some oblique point in space beyond the bodies themselves. For me, this 'oblique point' identifies the elusive centre of a dynamic yet elliptical relationship, one that I have tried to discuss here without replicating the very thing I've been decrying.⁸

⁶ For a discussion on the story-telling dimension of technical musical vocabulary see Guck (1998).

⁷ A 'syncretic' approach to interdisciplinary practice in the arts that blurs distinctions between different media.

⁸ I am sensitive to the irony in my having to marshal further words here in order to explain those very words for which I am claiming a certain adequacy.

Arising out of such ambivalence is the idea that, taken together, 'the music' and the 'words-about-the-music' yield not so much 'works' in the memorialising sense, but a kind of mutual annotation, an interlinear gloss: the elements of a fluid, continuously revising, self-interrupting 'process'.

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