

Playing the Devil: An Essay on Musical Form in *Ulysses*

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Of the many aphorisms, axioms, and old adages that build the framework of common rationale, more often than not, the antithetical may also be true; stringent guidelines, rules like “i before e” or “Q is always followed by a u,” the exception rather than the rule often proves to be more true. Thus, prodding and testing these sayings to excess is key. In the musical counterpoint textbook *Gradus Ad Parnassum*, Johann Joseph Fux codified one of the most widely held axioms of western music theory: the devil’s interval. The rule states that “*mi contra fa, est diabolus in Musica.*”<sup>1</sup> In other words, when scale degree *mi* (mediant or the third) is played in harmony with *fa* (subdominant or the fourth), it is the devil in music. This interval may not appear to be a tritone, because it’s a minor second, but when considering the medieval hexachord, the first six notes of the major scale, that was utilized to build vocal parts, singing both *mi* and *fa* between different hexachords would create a harsh interval for performers. Many have taken this to mean that interval is somehow cursed or evil—it is impossible to blame anyone for this due to both the dissonant sound of a tritone and the diabolic sounding aphorism attached to it—yet, this was never the intent; rather than a strict warning against the demonic, the phrase cautions against an interval that is a real devil to perform. The tritone is a strange puzzle piece in music, one that bedevils many, but when utilized properly, it can foster a wide range of emotions. Puzzles like these have intrigued scholars from an increasingly growing range of disciplines throughout the centuries.

The reason for bringing up puzzles is simply that one could not speak of James Joyce without them. Joyce once stated that within his writings he “put so many enigmas that it will keep professors busy for centuries,”<sup>2</sup> and this paper will attempt to decode a few lurking within

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Joseph Fux, *Gradus Ad Parnassum* (Mardaga, 1725) 94.

<sup>2</sup> Michael André Bernstein, and Gary Saul Morson, *Five Portraits: Modernity and the Imagination in Twentieth-century German Writing* (Northwestern University Press, 2000) 5.

the pages of *Ulysses*. In “Sirens,” Joyce composes a cacophony of sound that explores the full range of human tonality, encompassing even the most bedeviling intervals, dynamics, and tunings; thusly, exploring relations between the narration and the narrative, the numeric and the physical, and form and the word within the chapter can illuminate where a few of these puzzle pieces fall into place.

The first piece to manage is the nature of the narration and the narrative in this chapter. Opening with a prelude, the motifs that will sound later in the text find their first enunciation—or in this case, annunciation. A seemingly innocuous question, “who is the narrator?” might not even register in this opening but pursuing this omniscient observer of sound, the conductor of the orchestral arrangement on the page, the maestro metrically moving along with the words, is to pursue this key puzzle piece. The best place for this piece to reside is the title of the chapter. As Zimmerman posits:

As if Joyce intuited the potential of musical form itself to narrative, he inverts the relationship between words and music: musical form in “Sirens” becomes the narrator, while the words set that narrative into motion... Joyce, however, employs a fugal structure to question autonomy and simulates simultaneity in order to reveal a multi-vocal interiority.<sup>3</sup>

While the vocal interiority will be discussed later, noting how the musical form itself leads and this leads to the “Sirens” themselves, is the current objective. The best evidence to support this placement of the first puzzle piece is found in the last lines of the prelude. Only one line is not repeated again in the chapter which sets it against the motifs that came before it and the large

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<sup>3</sup> Nadya Zimmerman, *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no. 1 (2002) 109.

spacing that follows it. The last line of the opening reads, “Begin!”<sup>4</sup> which acts much like a conductor surveying his orchestra and then counting in time. Both the metricality of this line and the clear omnipotence is a manifestation of the direction by the quintessential Sirens who narrate the fugue. Other instantiations of these Sirens conducting can be found in the kernel paragraphs that mimic dynamic markings. The explicit commands to change in timbre and volume such as “Jingle”<sup>5</sup> or “Strongly”<sup>6</sup> further expresses this relationship between narrative and narration.

Between these instantiations and the plethora of musical references immersed within the text, identifying the Homeric correspondence between the sirens and Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy becomes less clear; often the text itself takes on the role of the siren song and leads the reader deeper and deeper—it is important to note that reading the chapter is not fatal or at least not proven to be so. The chapter as a whole is begotten through an estranged yet familiar annunciation where many faces both new and old pop in and out of a chasm of sound as if some angelic figure utters them into existence. This figure, while never present, does interject as evidenced by the discussed instantiations. Yet, there is another figure who sings his own seductive, or at least attempts to be, song: Bloom. In the act of mailing his letter to Martha, Bloom is the third figure to embody the role of the sirens. As for the place of this first puzzle piece, while the Homeric correspondence is shared, the narration wholly rests within the musicality of the chapter.

The next puzzle piece, the nature of the instrumentation and tunings, requires a small amount of exposition. In the late 16th century, renaissance mathematician Giovanni Battista Benedetti wrote a series of letters which contained puzzles that highlighted flaws in the system

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<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Books, 1986) 211, line 63.

<sup>5</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Books, 1986) 215, line 212.

<sup>6</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Books, 1986) 223, line 585.

of just intonation and pure intervals. These quandaries attempted to demonstrate and hopefully resolve the machinations behind the phenomenon known as the “comma pump” or “sympathetic resonance”<sup>7</sup> wherein, pitch seems to migrate even though the performers are perfectly in tune; i.e., they can either keep the same pitch and be out of tune or vice versa. However, Benedetti was not the only figure to catch on to the limits of ratios. Grant comments that not only Benedetti was—excuse the pun—in tune with this phenomenon, both “Marin Mersenne, and later Leonhard Euler even claimed to be able to account for the phenomenon.”<sup>8</sup> Just as western tuning systems moved away from just intonation and to systems of equal temperament, the way in which music was understood fundamentally changed. This epistemological shift is both conceptual and practical in the sense that music moved away from the numerical to the physical.<sup>9</sup>

Joyce gives music this physicality. The unconventional and partly atonal instrumentation has an immense sense of tactility and fleshiness which is due to the animated nature of his instruments. One example of this can be heard when listening to the chapter’s rhythm section, specifically the percussion which persists within the chapter: Lenehan, the patron chanting “*sonnez la cloche!*” repeatedly. The percussive nature of this chanting, the droning timpani of the ensemble, is coupled with the release and chiming of the bells “Smack.”<sup>10</sup> As much as Joyce enriched the text with mathematics, there is almost none present in a chapter about music, no circle of fifths, no ratios, and no calculations of temperament; yet, quite methodically, Joyce employs a myriad of literary devices which stands to replace the calculus of intonation. This can be found in the endless alliterations and informal contractions such as in the spelling of

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<sup>7</sup> Roger Mathew Grant, *Music Theory Spectrum* 35, no. 1 (2013) 62.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Mathew Grant, *Music Theory Spectrum* 35, no. 1 (2013) 62.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Mathew Grant, *Music Theory Spectrum* 35, no. 1 (2013) 63.

<sup>10</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Books, 1986) 219, line 413.

impertinent insolence as “Impertthnthn thnthnthn...”<sup>11</sup> which in turn portrays the sound as the fumbling of lips, a physical act.

From lewd to crude, all bodily sounds imaginable contribute to this growing flurry of sounds. As for the tuning of the bodily instrumentation, the best place for this puzzle piece is in the key of Joyce: each scale degree is tempered to how Joyce composed them. In a sense, it is not atonal but rather not tuned conventionally. The equal temperament is not based on a system of calculable wavelengths but instead emotional responses. The frequencies of these emotional moments are the intonation for the ensemble to follow; and in this system, no matter what pitch is sustained or terminated, it is perfectly in tune with the key signature of James Joyce.

The last puzzle piece to be analyzed will be the nature of the arrangement and structure of Joyce’s *fuga per canonem*. In a letter to Harriet Weaver, Joyce revealed that there are “eight regular parts”<sup>12</sup> who carry the siren song, which includes the following: Miss Douce, Miss Kennedy, Bloom, Simon Dedalus, Lenehan, the blind man, Ben Dollard, and Pat the waiter. While there is much debate on the nature of the voices, going forward, the intent of musical form will not be the primary focus, the effect of its presence within both fugal and canonical structure will be assessed. Returning to the role of musical form within the chapter, Joyce is not attempting to complicate linguistic signification but instead conflating the two into a form of musico-linguistic<sup>13</sup> signification. With the established presence of metrical and poetic techniques employed, the evolution of this musico-linguistic method is achieved by breaking from conceptions of meaning and from as separate and leading with this sense of musicality. Resigning to this—please excuse another pun—vamping method allows Joyce to arrange his

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<sup>11</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Books, 1986) 212, line 100.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford University Press, 1982) 492.

<sup>13</sup> Moshe Gold, and Philip Sicker, *Joyce Studies Annual 2016* (Fordham University Press, 2016) 175.

composition within a new medium of expression:

A narrative shaped into a *fuga per canonem* runs counter to the intuition that narrative must adhere to a temporally sequential structure, or *nacheinander*. To build a chapter out of the fugal form of subject, answer, and countersubject is to approximate the simultaneity and harmony of multiple events perceived within the same interval of time. Joyce's harmonic simultaneity stretches beyond narrative parallelism and furthers the goals of pulsebeat poetry and iconic words, but it also strives to approximate the *nebeneinander* of overlapping sensory experience before it is transposed into language.<sup>14</sup>

Unpacking the octupling fugue in this manner, one of subject, counterpoint, and answer, requires listening to the harmonies juxtaposed against the dissonances. Unlike the in-depth charting of motifs, these pairings of voices are plainly audible when sounding Joyce work. Comparing the lines "She poured in a teacup tea, then back in the teapot tea..."<sup>15</sup> and "... bronze from anear, by gold from afar, heard steel from anear, hoofs ring from afar..."<sup>16</sup> creates a resonance between the voices of Miss Kennedy and Miss Douce where they form a harmony in the sounding of the text. Contrastingly, the dissonance of the lines "Tink to her pity cried a dinner bell,"<sup>17</sup> and "With patience Lenehan waited for Boylan with impatience..."<sup>18</sup> have the opposite effect when sounded. The product of these voices is the musicality that precedes the written word.

Furthermore, the simultaneity of the many motifs is an intricate aspect of the chapter which is difficult to translate from the musico-linguistic; peeling back the veil on Joyce's method

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<sup>14</sup> Moshe Gold, and Philip Sicker, *Joyce Studies Annual 2016* (Fordham University Press, 2016) 187.

<sup>15</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Books, 1986) 212, line 108.

<sup>16</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Books, 1986) 212, line 112-13.

<sup>17</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Books, 1986) 216, line 286.

<sup>18</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Books, 1986) 216, line 289.

is done so by reading and therefore converting it back to one of separate acoustics and linguistics. Sounding the words internally achieves this deconstruction. Much like letting one's ear drift between sections while listening to an orchestral arrangement, each reading embodies the sounds of the reader's acoustical interpretation. Some will pick up or home in on certain aspects, others will not register these specific acoustic moments internally, and still others will have a completely different experience. This simultaneity allows for an individual's interpretation to create a unique cacophony of sound in their mind.

Upon revisiting Fux's devil in music, and "Sirens" being the eleventh chapter in *Ulysses*, it is interesting to note that the eleventh scale degree, in a diatonic scale, is equivalent to the subdominant and forms the diabolic interval that was to be avoided in hexachordal performances. With three identifiable Sirens in this eleventh chapter, the harmony sounding to the reader is one of a truly bedeviling and puzzling listening. By exploring relations between the narration and the narrative, the numeric and the physical, and form and the word within "Sirens," the cacophony of sound that encompasses the full range of human tonality is better understood when considering how Joyce employs his musico-linguistic method and the puzzles immersed within.

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