

WORDS AND MUSIC: AN UNEASY LIAISON?

by *Alma Bennett*

“I have always known that there was something I disliked about singing . . .”

“Since I was a boy I have always longed to hear poems spoken to a harp, as I imagined Homer to have spoken his . . .”

“Music is the most impersonal of things, and words the most personal, and that is why musicians do not like words. They masticate them for a long time, being afraid they would not be able to digest them, and when the words are so broken and softened and mixed with spittle that they are not words any longer, they swallow them.”

W. B. Yeats



The Poet and His Muse (ivory diptych, 5th century; Winternitz, Plate 89b)

For millennia, our species’ pairing of words and music has been universal, but never uniform or static. The pairing, instead, has had a complex evolution of performative and compositional traditions that invariably have been challenged. That is to say, while what the words and music do together has often been described as a perfect marriage, their relationship has just as often been regarded as an uneasy, if not potentially dangerous, liaison.

The latter description brings me to Yeats's determination to find an appropriate way to subordinate music to words which could also reestablish an ancient bardic tradition of oral poetry and accompaniment. Because Yeats was not a trained musician or musicologist, his efforts have often been dismissed. Moreover, he seems not to have been able to distinguish the sounds of a piano from a fiddle or recognize the national anthem until others stood up. And yet his innovative quest marks him as one of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century visionaries whose searches continue to open up ancient achievements for modern consideration. Certainly, the seriousness of Yeats's quest was never in question. As a reviewer of one of his lectures on literature and music recognized:

Mr. Yeats has a mission. I am not sure how he would define it, but to me it seems to be this. He would restore what he called imaginative culture by bringing back the old art of telling and listening to stories. . . . Mr. Yeats now went on to speak of the special place of the reciter among the applied arts of literature. (*The Sphinx* [Liverpool University], Mar.-Apr. 1906, 146; qtd. in Schuchard 16-17)

Thus as a sort of overture to Ron Schuchard's presentation (which follows this paper), I would like to provide an overview of a few theoretical and performative practices that can inform our study of Yeats's search for a servant, not a mate, for his words.

Such a priority is nothing new. In Plato's *Republic*, a charming exchange between the Platonic Socrates and Glaucon has served as the Ur-text for a whole line of poets, critics, theorists, and theologians who have turned back to this exchange at various times during the subsequent centuries. Socrates begins, "You certainly, I presume, . . . have a sufficient understanding of this—that the melody is composed of three things, the words, the harmony, and the rhythm?" "Yes," said he [Glaucon], "that much." . . . "And again, the harmony and the rhythm must follow the words." "Of course" (Strunk 4).

This Apollonian subordination of music and rhythm to the words has never been as simple as an "Of course." There has always been a cad hanging around the Acropolis: the Dionysian threat of unleashed music and rhythm. In our century, the names of the threat have changed from jazz to rock and roll, rap, heavy metal, MTV, and the like. Regardless of label or era, the power of music and rhythm has never been underestimated.

Aurelius Augustinus, whom we know as St. Augustine, had a profound knowledge of Greco-Roman philosophy, especially Platonism, and he wrote a great deal about music and musical practices, as he did about every major Christian topic of his day. Like Plato, Augustine struggled with the power of music—a struggle that involved only the text and voices, since the Church's music from the start was unaccompanied, without instruments, a deliberate reaction against the Greco-Roman tradition. In a chapter from the *Confessions*, "The Pleasures Taken in Hearing," Augustine pours out that struggle. Music still has such power over him that at times, as he puts it, "I seem to myself to attribute more respect unto [the melodies] than is seemly." Irritated at losing himself in the music, he admits that sometimes he has forbidden vocal accompaniment of the Psalms in churches, but then further hearing has softened him. He continues, "Thus I float between peril of pleasure, and an approved custom. . . . See now in what a state I am! . . . But thou, O Lord my God, look upon me, hearken, and behold, and pity, and heal me, thou in whose eyes I am now become

a problem to myself; and that is my infirmity” (Strunk 74-5).

A native of North Africa, Augustine was converted to Christianity in Milan, Italy, by St. Ambrose, the fourth-century bishop of that city. Ambrose is also remembered for his hymns and for the liturgical chant he established. The Ambrosian chant is one of the four branches of liturgical plainsong that grew up in the first thousand years of Western Christianity. Of the four, the Gregorian or Roman chant was the most widely used chant tradition throughout the world until 1962. In that year, the Second Vatican Council decreed that the mass and the singing of psalms and canticles were to be celebrated in each congregation’s local language, rather than in Latin—a decision that provided access to the texts but decimated a 1700-year tradition of language and music. This most probably would not have been a welcomed change for Yeats, who insisted in his essay “Ireland and the Arts” that “The Catholic Church is not less the Church of the people because the Mass is spoken in Latin, and art is not less the art of the people because it does not always speak in the language they are used to” (*Essays and Introductions* 207).

Chanting is, of course, a universal practice, but in the Western Christian traditions the words “chant,” “plainsong,” and “plainchant” refer to liturgical music that is unaccompanied, in free rhythm, and monophonic, that is, all the voices sing the same melody. Not until the tenth century at the Cathedral of Notre Dame were other simultaneous melodies added to the chant, an addition we call polyphony and one that has a much more ancient lineage.

For scholars of Irish literature and music, it has often been useful to keep the powerful, monophonic chant tradition in mind since, until 1962, Gregorian chant surrounded every Catholic in Ireland, from birth until death. Yeats, in fact, often mentioned chant when he tried to describe the process of his writing: “Like every other poet, I spoke verses in a kind of chant when I was making them; and sometimes, when I was alone on a country road, I would speak them in a loud chanting voice.” He went on to say, “I . . . did not often compose to a tune, though I sometimes did, yet always to notes that could be written down and played on my friend’s organ or turned into something like a Gregorian hymn if one sang them in the ordinary way” (“Speaking to the Psaltery” 14-15).

Two of Gregorian chant’s fundamental treatments of words and music are still crucial parts of any attempt to set words to music or music to words. They also help us listen more attentively to all types of music, from chant to rap. The first of these two treatments is called melismatic chant, chant in which several, and sometimes many, musical notes are sung on a single syllable of a word. These musical embellishments draw attention away from the words and to the musical line, its contouring, its atmospheric savoring of each syllable.

- **listening excerpt no. 1: example of melismatic chant**

“Kyrie” from the *Mass for Septuagesima Sunday*.

Sung by the monks of the Abbey of Saint-Pierre de Solesmes.

Kyrie eleison

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Christe eleison

Christ, have mercy upon us.

Kyrie eleison

Lord, have mercy upon us.

The second treatment of words and music is syllabic. In syllabic chant, a musical note or tone is sung with each syllable of a word, a pairing that gives dominance to the text.

- **listening excerpt no. 2: example of syllabic chant**

“Victimae paschali laudes” (Praises to the Paschal Victim).

Sequence for the Solemn Mass of Easter Sunday.

Sung by Choir of the Frati Minori (Franciscans) of Busto Arsizio.

<i>Victimae paschali laudes</i>	<i>To the Paschal Victim let Christians offer</i>
<i>innolent Christiani,</i>	<i>songs of praise.</i>
<i>Agnus redemit oves:</i>	<i>The Lamb has redeemed the sheep.</i>
<i>Christus innocens Patri</i>	<i>Sinless Christ has reconciled sinners</i>
<i>reconciliavit peccatores . . .</i>	<i>to the Father . . .</i>

Many chants use a syllabic and melismatic combination, which reflects a third and an especially effective and affective treatment of texts.

These three treatments of liturgical words and music as well as the limited range and free rhythm of their melodies had a profound influence on secular music of the medieval period. This is quite obvious in the works of the celebrated, aristocratic poet-musicians of Provence, the troubadours, and subsequently on the compositions of their counterparts, the trouveres of northern France and the meistersingers of Germany. As musicologist Gustave Reese puts it,

For the troubadour to model his songs directly [or indirectly] on ecclesiastical melodies was both natural and easy. He heard music in the churches, and he attended the churches frequently—who did not in those days? As we have noted, there was no sharp line of demarcation between sacred and secular music; to adapt a love-poem to a liturgical melody was not considered incongruous. (*Music in the Middle Ages* 218)

From the Provençal troubadours, according to Reese, some 2600 song texts and 264 melodies are extant; from the trouveres of northern France, some 4000 poems and 1400 melodies have survived (206). These manuscripts, as well as their illuminations and other art, indicate that the melodies were monophonic, without harmony; the treatment was most often syllabic; the range of their melodies was, at the most, an octave; instrumental accompaniment seems to have been used mainly as introduction, interlude, and postlude. Reese and many other musicologists suggest that the instrument (usually a lute) “did not, as a rule, actually accompany the voice” (203). Other musicologists, however, have suggested that they did, as demonstrated in a performance of an excerpt from the *Jeu de Robin et de Marion*, “Robins m’aime,” written about 1284 by Adam de la Halle, the last and greatest of all trouveres.

- **listening excerpt no. 3: example of performance treatments of the trouvere tradition**

“Robins m’aime” from *Jeu de Robin et de Marion*.

<i>Robins m’aime, Robin m’a</i>	<i>Robin loves me, Robin has me,</i>
<i>Robins m’a demandée Si m’ara</i>	<i>Robin asked me if he can have me.</i>
<i>Robins m’acata cotele</i>	<i>Robin took off my skirt</i>
<i>D’escarlate bonnet et belle,</i>	<i>of scarlet, good and pretty,</i>
<i>Souskanie et chainturele.</i>	<i>my bodice and girdle.</i>
<i>Aleuriva!</i>	<i>Hurray!</i>

Not surprisingly, such compositions were as fascinating to Arnold Dolmetsch, Yeats, Ezra Pound, and Florence Farr as they were to the musicologists and philologists who first rediscovered this extraordinary medieval tradition during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, as those scholars also recognized, the performative practices of the troubadours were not for everyone. Major struggles between words and music had broken out within the polyphonic complexities of medieval compositions. A typical example from the late thirteenth century would be a three-voice motet in which each line is given a different tune—one of which would be a sacred Latin text and each of the other two would be different, secular French poems, usually amorous, even lascivious—and the lines would often be given different rhythmic patterns. The texture is a joy for a musician, a nightmare for a defendant of the text's value. But such problems paled before those that began to surface after 1597, the year in which a new art-form appeared.

The new genre was the direct result of Giovanni de' Bardi's bringing together the most prominent scholars and artists of Florence to collaborate on a conscious imitation of ancient Greek tragedy. We have come to know the group as the Camerata and the result of their collaboration as the first *opera in music*, work in music, that is to say, opera. Some eighteen years earlier, Bardi had published an indignant "Discourse on Ancient Music and Good Singing," although it may in fact have been written for him by Vincenzo Galilei, a member of the Camerata and the father of one of our scientific heroes, Galileo Galilei. Whatever the case, the discourse (loaded with support from Pythagorus, Plato, Aristotle, and others) rails against complex polyphony and highly embellished vocal lines that obscure the text. Bardi insists on a new approach that will put music in its place:

For the present, the little food that we shall give to Music shall be to endeavor not to spoil the verse, not imitating the musicians of today, who think nothing of spoiling it to pursue their ideas or of cutting it to bits to make nonsense of the words, like the man who does not mind that the robe made from the cloth that he has is short and ill-fitting or even that his large and conspicuous slippers happen to have been cut from it. (Strunk 294)

Bardi's complaint sounds quite similar to Yeats's insistence that

when I heard anything sung I did not hear the words, or if I did their natural pronunciation was altered and their natural music was altered, or it was drowned in another music which I did not understand. What was the good of writing a love-song if the singer pronounced love "lo-o-o-o-o-ve," or even if he said "love," but did not give it its exact place and weight in the rhythm? ("Speaking to the Psaltery" 14)

The first published opera, *Euridice*, which was dedicated to Bardi in 1600, shows that the poetry of Rinuccini has been carefully considered by Guilio Caccini, the composer and one of the inventors of opera as well as of a new style of music, *stile rappresentativo*, in which the melody enhances the emotional import of the words. Eighty-nine years later, the English composer Henry Purcell showed how well he had mastered the new style as well as the new

art-form. The following aria from his opera *Dido and Aeneas* remains one of the most expressive and perfect balances of text, melody, rhythm, and harmonies in operatic history.

- **listening excerpt no. 4: example of *stile rappresentivo*.**

Aria, “When I Am Laid in Earth,” from *Dido and Aeneas* (c. 1689).

Leontyne Price, soprano.

[Dido is singing to her lady-in-waiting, Belinda.]

*When I am laid in earth,
may my wrongs create no trouble in thy breast!
Remember me! But ah! forget my fate!*

In later operas, however, the overshadowing of the text by melodic ornamentations, melismas, and repetitions, gradually laid the battle lines of a fight that continued for centuries between opera’s music and words. The pleasure that comes from their marrying instead of killing each other on stage is what makes a wonderful opera or operatic aria a thing to be reckoned with.

- **video excerpt no. 1: example of an expertly integrated aria**

Final encore from 3 *TENORS* concert, Los Angeles Dodgers Stadium, 1994.

Aria, “Nessun dorma,” from Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Turandot* (1926).

Sung by Plácido Domingo, José Carreras, and Luciano Pavarotti.

Prince Calaf:

Nessun dorma!
Tu pure, O Principessa nella tua fredda
stanza guardi le stelle che tremano d’amore
e di speranza!
Ma il mio misterio è chiuso in me,
il nome mio nessun saprà!
No, no, sulla tua bocca lo dirò,
quando la luce splenderà!
Ed il mio bacio scioglierà il silenzio
che ti fa mia!

No one is sleeping!
Princess, you too in your lonely room
are looking at the stars which tremble
with love and longing!
But my secret is hidden within me:
no one will know my name!
No, no, only to your lips will I tell it
when the dawn breaks!
And my kiss will break the silence
that makes you mine!

Chorus:

Il nome suo nuo nessun saprà
E noi dovrem, ahimè, morir, morir!

No one will find out his name, and so
all of us, alas, will die, will die!

Prince Calaf:

Dilegua, o notte!
tramontate, stelle!
Al l’alba vincerò!
Vincerò! Vincerò!

Depart, O night!
Grow pale, stars!
At daybreak, I will win [her]!
I will win! I will win!

Tenor James Joyce would probably have been delighted by this aria’s fusion of text, melody, rhythm, and accompaniment, but not Yeats. He would have preferred hearing an example of an innovation that emerged simultaneously with opera: *basso continuo*, also known as *thorough-bass* in English. This is a stenographic system first devised in 1600 by Giulio Caccini and Jacopo Peri, another opera composer of the Camerata. In basso continuo, the instrumental accompaniment, usually on a harpsichord, is indicated only by a bass note with numbers above it that designate the chord that is to be played above the bass note. Even

if the harpsichordist improvises on the chords, the system clearly subordinates the accompaniment.

The innovation was a conscious attempt to emulate ancient traditions of musical accompaniment by harps, citharas, lyres, and psalteries—accompaniment styles that have survived in many bardic and folk traditions and which Yeats hoped to revive with the instruments (half-harp, half-psaltery) that Arnold Dolmetsch had made for him and Florence Farr. Even though the early Baroque imitation of the ancient tradition gradually became less apparent in operas, we enjoy it every Christmas in the recitatives of Handel's oratorio, *The Messiah*, which was first performed in Dublin in 1742. In a recitative, both the harpsichord accompaniment and the melodic line are simplified. The priority is its text.

- **listening excerpt no. 5: example of a recitative (with basso continuo accompaniment on a harpichord)**

Recitative, "Behold a virgin shall conceive," from *The Messiah* (1742).

Sung by Margaret Cable, alto, with the Taverner Consort, choir, and players.

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
And they shall call his name, Emmanuel,
God-with-us.

To listen to a half-dozen rap artists is to know what to expect from that genre's text and accompaniment. The same is true when one listens to or performs a few recitatives. Without any help from an expert, we can recognize that the recitatives are highly stylized, that their spartan chordal patterns and melodies are almost formulaic. We also know that our attention is fixed on the verbal information. Such stylized accompaniments for words, such minimalist intensifications, are not a western invention. That achievement belongs to much older civilizations throughout Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, and Asia whose art, architecture, drama, poetry, and music took Europe by storm in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In these encounters, every discipline in the arts of the western world experienced a sea-change. For Yeats and for Ezra Pound, who played a pivotal role in Yeats's discoveries, these ancient ways of seeing, hearing, representing, and performing opened up revolutionary options which each pursued in distinctive ways.

Yeats discovered rich possibilities in a 600-year-old dramatic tradition from Japan, the Noh plays. His attraction to the Noh informed his subsequent work in ways no one could have predicted. But then a playwright who is primarily a poet is, by trade, a master of compression, of highly selective intensification and nuance of personae, voices, and sounds—all of which characterize every aspect of a Noh play, including its actors' and chorus' distinctive narrative chanting of the story and its minimalist instrumental accompaniment.

- **video excerpt no. 2: example of Noh theatre**

Excerpt from a performance of the Noh play, *Dojoji*, Tokyo, Japan.

Yeats was deeply drawn to this Asian genre in which poetry, music, and drama fuse to suggest an image of ideal beauty, of *yugen*, that connotation of a half-revealed beauty, at once elusive and meaningful. In addition, the stylized sounds and accompaniment of Noh

would offer ways to avoid the melodic and rhythmic sirens that habitually try to seduce western poetry. Yeats had additional protection in some of our culture's own evolutionary innovations: for example, in liturgical chant, in the music of the troubadours, in recitative, and in extant or reinvented bardic traditions.

Whatever and however Yeats drew from all these traditions, he remained faithful to words. And music? He approached it like a jealous husband warding off music's advances toward his mate. At the end of the twentieth century, such an approach may seem "obscure, exasperating, delightful," to borrow three adjectives Yeats used to defend the poetry of Edith Sitwell. Nevertheless, in light of more venerable traditions, a wiser response to Yeats's innovative quest would echo Plato's Glaucon: "Of course."



J.B. Yeats, Illustration for "King Goll, An Irish Legend," by W.B. Yeats.
From *The Leisure Hour*, September 1887.

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