



TEXTUALISING MUSIC IN LIBERAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

In this article, I want to use various perspectives of reading and hearing different literary texts in terms of the relation between music, literature and language. By so doing, I hope to bring a better understanding towards the true meaning of these selected literary forms and texts for a specific educational purpose. These literary genres and texts are selected, as these texts come to show the readers certain ways in which human relations can be analysed through understanding the condition of these characters in the contexts of music and language. Through these very contexts, the readers can see the way in which each character in these selected literary texts comes to express his or her desires, memories and emotions. Together with each character in the selected literary texts, linguistically speaking, the readers can see the way in which signifier comes to shape the identity of a speaking subject – to name a few – the narrator ‘I’, or a third person narrator in a particular literary text. Through recognition, the signifier would come to redefine what has been signified, in the way in which non-meanings would be able to, eventually, come to a point of making senses.

Keywords

Literature, Music, Emotion, Language, Education

Introduction

Different sounds come to represent a variety of emotional power. As each character comes to hear, in the literary texts that I selected in this research, the very act of listening, indeed, is able to communicate all kinds of strength in the characters themselves. This research, as it is particularly focusing on the effect of sounds in the targeted texts, comes to show the perspectives in terms of music and language. One may be interested in the answers of the following questions: How do words sound? Who says them? What kinds of emotion these words come to communicate?

How does music sound? Do different kinds of song communicate different kinds of emotion? In what way – does it matter who is listening? By focusing on musical and linguistic concerns, the readers can see the way in which these literary texts come to stress on the acoustic, aiming to reveal a better understanding towards psychological, educational and emotional aspects of reading and the appreciation of literature.

In this article, I want to use various perspectives of reading and hearing different literary texts in terms of the relation between music, literature and language. By so doing, I hope to bring a better understanding towards the true meaning of these selected literary forms and texts. These literary genres and texts are selected, as these texts come to show the readers certain ways in which human relations can be analysed through understanding the condition of these characters in the contexts of music and language. Through these very contexts, the readers can see the way in which each character in these selected literary texts comes to express his or her desires, memories and emotions. Together with each character in the selected literary texts, linguistically speaking, the readers can see the way in which signifier comes to shape the identity of a speaking subject – to name a few – the narrator ‘I’, or a third person narrator in a particular literary text. Through recognition, the signifier would come to redefine what has been signified, in the way in which non-meanings would be able to, eventually, come to a point of making senses.

I. Music, Sound and Literary Education

Let’s start with reading a short story, in order to demonstrate the significant relation among music, literature and education. In E. M. Forster’s short story, *Co-ordination*, Raphael, the Angel, confronted to Mephistopheles, towards the end of the story, maintaining that the characters in this textual world have achieved ‘Victory’ and

‘Melody’, simply because of the reason that ‘these people have co-ordinated’ (Forster, 1985, p. 168). The ultimate evil, as those who were represented by Mephistopheles, deserved to be called ‘candid’, ‘infernal soul’ (Forster, 1985, p. 168), as it is a metaphor of the kind which failed to recognise the connection between music and the human hearts.

It was the sunset to be seen, the end of a day. The schoolgirls laughed, after all. In the eye of the evil, Mephistopheles could only see all sorts of charges, as if all the school teachers and schoolgirls just went through a farce for no reason. Indeed – those charges – non of them, match with crimes. In fact there is no crime. There is only a slight difference in perspectives.

In the story, Beethoven, ‘high up in heaven’ (Forster, 1985, p. 163), decreed that those schoolgirls should listen to his *A minor quartette* because it will help them to be inspired to be a little bit more musical, by hearing a bit more, as they could not practice Beethoven’s ‘Eroica’ Symphony properly. The clerk of Beethoven’s was not ‘dishonest’ (Forster, 1985, p. 168), actually. He was just keeping his silence because he needed to be mutual without effecting Beethoven’s judgement. Beethoven was deaf, as everyone knew so, the clerk ‘could’ (Forster, 1985, p. 163) easily reply to him in a careless way. And yet, he did not.

While Napoleon and Beethoven came to approve the deeds, in their ways of honouring the school teachers and the schoolgirls, Miss Haddon heard the shell, in a way in which the childhood memory about her father comes back to her mind. The sound of the shell, as Forster depicted, Miss Haddon

heard the sea; at first it was the tide whispering over mud-flats or chattering against stones, or the short, crisp break of a wave on sand, or the long echoing roar of a wave against rocks, or the sounds of the central ocean, where the waters pile themselves into mountains and part into ravines; or when fog descends and the deep rises and falls gently; or when the air is so fresh that the big waves and the little waves that live in the big waves all sing of joy, and send one another kisses of white foam. She heard them all, but in the end she heard the sea itself, and knew that it was hers for ever (Forster, 1985, p. 165).

During this hearing experience, Miss Haddon came across to all kinds of sound from the sea itself. The variations of the sound of the sea were heard by her, as all kinds of sound of the waves. All these polyphonic expressions come to indicate the choral volume of the central ocean itself – which could be heard by Miss Haddon from the shallow wave on sand, to the deep mountains under the sea level. The sound of the waves comes to parallel the train of her memory, unconsciously. The sea is hers, just as the life itself is hers. Under a shell, Miss Haddon, indeed, had her whole life heard, from youth until her present. All her emotions came out and heard, as the wave broke on sand. All these sounds explained the way she felt before: ‘I am stupid and tired and old; I wish that I was dead (Forster, 1985, p. 165)’. The ‘sound of pianos’ (Forster, 1985, p. 166) in the classroom, through all these years, apparently comes to mean something else, for Miss Haddon – ‘I am not musical. I have deceived the pupils and the parents [...]. I am not musical, [...].’ (Forster, 1985, p. 166).

But somehow, in a way, what Miss Haddon heard in the shell is more than her own life, bigger than her life – she actually heard, just like the school Principle heard – that is eternity, as ‘for ever’ (Forster, 1985, p. 166). Miss Haddon’s school Principle heard the shell. It was like ‘the rusting of trees in a wood’ (Forster, 1985, p. 165). The sound she heard comes to stimulate her imagination. It feels like she is not a school Principle but a hunter, hunting with all the people she had known, ‘penetrating the wood in every direction’ (Forster, 1985, p. 166). For Miss Haddon’s school Principle, as she heard in the shell, the alternative life as a hunter symbolises a journey of exploration and adventure. In many ways, this alternative life still resembles her leadership and her courage as the Principle of a girls’ school.

The multiple intelligences approach towards education is perfectly shown in Forster’s *Co-ordination*. The essence of this short story is exactly in the way in which different kinds of school subjects shall come together. Each one of them has a part to play, in order to construct a ‘new co-ordinative system’ (Forster, 1985, p. 162): to name a few – among them (under the big term, ‘Napoleon’), ‘French and History’, the literature class through ‘Wordsworth’s political poems’, ‘*War and Peace*’, the drawing class through ‘something of David’s’, the needlework class through ‘Empire gowns’, and the last but not the least, music through ‘Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony (Forster, 1985, pp. 162 – 163).

This new sort of co-ordination represents a system of education, in a way in which multiple aspects of a society can be seen, practiced and learnt by the schoolgirls: a foreign language, music, fashion, literature, history. And yet, all these important subjects which come to construct the true meaning of humanity, in this particular literary text, has to be brought together, synthesised in harmony and unity, through music and the sense of hearing. Hearing can come to transform all the signs from their sensory appearances into a deeper realisation, recognition and appreciation (Sprinker 1985, Towell 2000, Bellver 2008, Lin and Chen 2025). Through a certain educational

progress, different elements and perspectives in the classroom would be able to co-ordinate themselves in terms of the relation between teachers and students. As the readers can see in this short story of Forster's, hearing plays a significant role in a way in which humanity can achieve its own triumph and glory.

Marcel Proust's way of using music and hearing as metaphors in his writing is significant. If Miss Haddon in Forster's short story heard in a shell – the sea and her own while life as a certain forms of memory – then, we can eventually come to notice that Proust's narrator 'I', on the other hand, comes to show the readers 'the open sea' in between 'two impressions' of hearing (Proust, 2023, p. 180). Once again, Miss Haddon's cry out loud in Forster's short story has an indication of her deepest fear as a music teacher – she is simply 'not musical' (Forster, 1985, p. 166). As Miss Haddon says herself, to the school Principle, that

I am not return to my duties. I have neglected them ever since I came here, and once more will make little difference. I am not musical. I have deceived the pupils and the parents and you. I am not musical, but pretended that I was to make money. What will happen to me now I do not know, but I can pretend no longer. I give notice (Forster, 1985, p. 166).

That is exactly why Miss Haddon refuses to do her work. She is not musical, so that she cannot feel any sense of satisfaction while tutoring her students. She has her soul lost in other things (money, house, etc.), rather than concentrating on her music and her duty as an educator. The sound of sea that she heard in the shell can be seen as a wake-up call. Through talking to the Principle, she is able to let her epiphany out.

While noticing that Forster's character Miss Haddon is 'not musical', we come to realise that the act of hearing can, again, show about one's talent. Just like what the Principle heard – all those music, 'the sound of pianos' (Forster, 1985, p. 166) – indeed comes to mean that how lack of talent Miss Haddon is. Here, what Proust has noticed in the act of hearing comes to show the dual characters of the narrator 'I' in terms of the use language: one could be 'a man of genius', while the other would be the man's 'banal self' (Proust, 2023, p. 181).

These two seem to be the same self. And yet, this self can be heard, as Michael Lucey comes to categorise in his understanding, in different ways, as 'learning to hear features of the sound form such as tone, accent, stress, or prosody' (Lucey, 2022, p. 45). Proust's narrator 'I' is apparently, a very good listener. He can even hear the literary texts and break through their silence by humming. In *Against Saint Beuve*, the readers can see that these two impressions caused by hearing – they actually belong to Proust's narrator 'I' and 'the boy' (Proust, 2023, p. 179) inside this narrator 'I'. Musical melodies can be heard, just like talks and conversations in their various verbal conditions, showing a context in which social meanings can be read through these patterns of syntactic forms. In his writing, Proust's narrator 'I' is able to *hear* the words, because the narrator 'I' takes literary reading in a musical way.

When it comes to reading, especially when it comes to read a particular 'author', the narrator 'I'

would quickly distinguish under the words the tune of the song, which in each author is different from what it is in all the others, and while reading, without realizing it, I would hum it, I would press the notes or slow them down or interrupt them, to mark the measure of the notes and their return, as one does when singing, and one often waits a long time, according to the measure of the tune, before saying the end of a word (Proust, 2023, p. 179).

According to the quotation above, the readers can come to an understanding that Proust's narrator 'I' *sounds* like a literary critic. As the title of this literary text comes to show, this literary critic, narrator 'I', has a different way of reading. While humming the verbal representations in from of him, this literary critic is very gifted, as he is able to know whether this piece of writing is worth reading or not. Before he expresses his critical perspectives, this literary critic would read a literary text in different measures: to name a few – among them, to slow it down, to read it repeatedly, to break the sentence structure down. The whole process of humming a literary text, instead of reading it, is to bring out the 'more accurate' (Proust, 2023, p. 179) sensory experience of reading – in order to use one's 'ear' (Proust, 2023, p. 179) to hear that 'deep connection between two ideas, two sensations' (Proust, 2023, p. 179).

The students could not practice well in music. All teachers and students 'were already bored to tears by the new system' (Forster, 1985, p. 164). Miss Haddon, however, took the blame on herself. She thought that 'I am no good at all, [...]. I am stupid and tired and old; I wish that I was dead' (Forster, 1985, p. 165). Miss Haddon's feeling, expressed in her words, comes to echo what Susan Sontag has claimed in her critical essay, 'The Double Standard of Aging'. Miss Haddon is to be seen as 'still "Miss"' (Sontag, 2023, p 11), because she literally falls into the pitiful catalogue. Women like her, especially the ones who have never been married, on top of aging, seem to

be considered once again their ‘unacceptability’ (Sontag, 2023, p. 11) when they are to be found unsuccessful in their profession. Miss Haddon, in Forster’s short story, seems to run out of excuses for not to be a successful music teacher, as she does not ‘have in family life’ (Sontag, 2023, p. 11) – those ‘servicing and nurturing roles’ (Sontag, 2023, p. 11) like other married women have.

And yet, it is somehow not so true. Not only teachers, even students found the new system – ‘the co-ordinative system’ (Forster, 1985, p. 167) – very hard to cope with, as the system itself comes to represent ‘two games at once’ (Forster, 1985, p. 167). It just feels like the two selves of the narrator ‘I’ of Proust’s – two in one – the boy and the adult, the talented self and the ordinary self. The system is like the self, it is ‘to be Clumps in one and Peter Pan in the other’ (Forster, 1985, p. 167).

Reading towards the end of the story, the readers can see that Forster’s characters, in a way, come to cheer themselves up by singing. It is a song composed by a student, which ‘gives the first person enjoyment and makes the third person laugh’ (Freud, 1973, p. 100). Ellen, the student who could not do a sufficient practice, wrote a song to make fun of the new system. As the school girls expressed the comic aspect of co-ordination by singing out loud, ‘Silly old Boney / Sat on his Pony, Eating his Christmas Pie, / He put in his thumb / And pulled out a plum, / And said, “What a good boy am I”’ (Forster, 1985, p. 167), music and language come to synthesise their collective unconscious – both teachers’ and students’. As Sigmund Freud observed, only in ‘a society of a more refined education do the formal conditions’ (Freud, 1973, p. 100), jokes would be able to find their places to play a part in people’s life. For sure Ellen’s song can be heard as a brave joke. So do words like ‘the Board of Education’. As Freud came to suggest in his writing on jokes and the unconscious, these are examples of ‘the original yield of pleasure, produced by playing with words and thoughts’ (Freud, 1973, p. 156). Eventually, for the school teachers and school girls, words like ‘the Board of Education’ (Forster, 1985, p. 167) can be heard like jokes, as if it is a game for children which gives pleasure. The school itself, through practicing co-ordination as a new system for performing good education, comes to transform itself from an institute to an allusion. Through singing and laughing, all the singers become hearers too. All teachers and students of the school uplifted themselves by coming across to this experience of ‘obscurity’ (Freud, 1985, p. 100), in order to defeat what was *ideally* supposed to work.

II. Language and the Sound of Sentimentality

In the previous section of this research article, as the readers may still remember, in the literature class in the school of E. M. Forster’s short story *Co-ordination*, ‘reading extracts from *War and Peace*’ (Forster, 1985, p. 162) is quite essential. Here in this section, one can see that another writer also comes to address the importance of this novel in terms of visual representations in its narrative. Orhan Pamuk, in one of his collections of critical essays, *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*, gives good examples of the way in which our memory works while we read novels. All kinds of visual impressions are to be seen as a sort of key, in terms of reading, as ‘the reader gets the impression he is not among the words of a novel but standing before a landscape painting’ (Pamuk, 2011, p. 8).

Here, analysing literary texts in terms of the visual, Pamuk wants to engage the readers to pay attention to all kinds of visual representation in words, in order to use them as a key for reading. These visual impressions, as Pamuk points out, are including both big scale of landscape and the interior – just to name a few – ‘how Pierre watches the Battle of Borodino from a hilltop, in *War and Peace*’ (Pamuk, 2011, pp. 7 – 8), and the visualization of settings in rooms, such as the ‘atmospheres’ in ‘Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*’ (Pamuk, 2011, p. 8).

However, Pamuk’s quotation of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* attracts my attention not only visually speaking but also aurally speaking. When we try to understand this whole paragraph through sound, hearing and all kinds of aural stimulation, the readers can come to a whole new understanding of this paragraph, in a way in which Anna’s emotion can be understood in terms of hearing. As we read, the main character Anna, who

took a paper-knife and an English novel from her handbag. At first she was unable to read. To begin with, she was bothered by the bustle and movement; then, when the train started moving, she could not help listening to the noises; then the snow that beat against the left-hand window and stuck to the glass, and the sight of a conductor passing by, all bundled up and covered with snow on one side, and the talk about the terrible blizzard outside, distracted her attention (qtd. in Pamuk, 2011, p. 9).

Here as the readers can see, as we read, we can feel the significance of all kinds of aural stimulations in which Anna was situated in. It may not be a pleasant atmosphere – the noises from the train, the movements of gestures and their sounds, the sound of the snow ‘that beat against the left-hand window’ (qtd. in Pamuk, 2011, p.9). But one must notice that Anna, firstly, she started to *listen* – before anything else – touching her knife, reading, thinking, and touching her knife again. The noises make her anxious. And yet, after listening for a while,

she was able to calm herself down and eventually started to read. Under the enchantment of aural stimulation, 'Anna Arkadyevna read and understood' (qtd. in Pamuk, 2011, p. 9).

To listen is to focus. It may have psychological effects. But eventually it is something physical, in terms of understanding that as a way of engaging one's self to the surroundings. Mina Gorji, in the article 'Listening as Influence', points out that 'hearing was often associated with inspiration, a state that was both passive and productive' (Gorji, 2025, p. 1437). It may seem to be spiritual or intellectual, when we think about someone to be inspired by something that he or she heard. And yet, the understanding of hearing can be defined, initially, by physical and sensory terms. For example, In Chiang-Sheng Kuo's novel, *The Piano Tuner*, on the opening page there is this narrative about the relation between souls and bodies in terms of hearing. 'In the beginning', as Kou's narrator goes on,

we were souls without bodies. When God planned to give us souls a physical shape, we refused to enter into a concrete form that would fall ill and grow old, obstructing our free passage through time and space. God came up with a solution by having angels play enchanting music. We souls were so spellbound by the music we wanted to hear it more clearly, which was possible only through one channel, the human ear. God's trick worked and we souls gained a physical body (Kuo, 2020, p. 1).

According to the quotation above, the readers can see that the triumph of the sound of the 'enchanting music' again reinforces the significance of the physical, rather than the psychological. The sound and the Melody roll. All of them are a part of aural stimulations, going on as if for ever and ever, just like the sound from the shell that Miss Haddon and the Principle both heard – indicates the triumph of the ear. The sonic effect in these literary texts, in a way, travelled through time and space, as if the characters in the fictional worlds somehow heard the echo – like a reply, like an epiphany – from the mighty precursor: Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony (in *Coordination*), Rachmaninoff's 'Song without Words' (in *The Piano Turner*), Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (in *The Piano Turner*), as if they all replied 'I approve'.

In the film, *The English Patient*, the scene in which Hana (played by Juliette Binoche) came to play the piano is crucial. In the war zone, the piano was still considering dangerous as it could have a hidden bomb, the Canadian nurse Hana played Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. For the audience and the viewers of this film, the sound of Bach's music feels like it comes from heaven. And yet, when we lead by our vision, through the heavenly piano music, we come to an understanding that the scene is a mis-match between heaven and hell on earth (war), between physical beauty (Hana) and ugliness (her patient, Almsay, played by Ralph Fiennes). For sure, visually speaking, the film can be seen as 'a mosaic of fractured images', as Anthony Minghella had already pointed out (Deer, 2008, p. 214). And yet, if we come to identify the importance of music and sound (as Katherine said to Almsay, 'you are always singing') with the key turning points of the scenes, throughout the film, it will bring a whole new understanding towards this film, aurally speaking.

And yet, in any case, the tone of this film as a whole, is a sentimental one. Freedom, as a concept aiming to be achieved in music, literary texts and works of art, turns into something to be negotiable. It is the most obvious when we see in the cinematic context, when Almsay came to exchange the map with the German soldiers, in order to get a car to go back to the Cave of the Swimmers to save Katherine, as he had promised her. The measure is, for sure, desperate. He found eventually Katherine's dead body, not to mention that he also put himself in danger through this negotiation.

To listen to Hana's play of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* not only help us to understand the essential point of the film, but also to restore our faith in humanity. She is a nurse, an amateur in terms of playing the piano (not a professional pianist in any sense). And yet, her play comes to remind us not the kind, like one of those 'dazzling performances' (Gardiner, 2014, p. 6) as we can hear in the concert halls. Hana's Bach, in the film, comes to indicate more when we comes to listen to it. In that play we can hear eternity. It feels just like what Rowland heard in Rome, in one of Henry James's early fictional writings, *Roderick Hudson*, in a way in which eternity, representing Rowland's mood in one of the 'brilliant' (James, 1994, p. 127) Roman winter days, sounds like, and can be verbally represented as a sense of 'a relaxed acceptance of the present, the actual, the sensuous – of existence on the terms of the moment' (James, 1994, p. 127).

In the film, as we can see, although Hana's playing the piano is only a random, momentarily joy, the whole weight of humanity seems to be heard, creating a magical atmosphere of serenity. The whole scene, with the sound of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, brings a sense of immortality 'in an atmosphere so heavily weighted with echoes and memories' (James, 1994, p. 127). When one can perfectly respond to what one heard in a particular place or a particular context, it would be, for sure, 'an education to the senses and the imagination' (James, 1994, p. 127).

Conclusion

By focusing on aural stimulations in the selected literary texts in this research, we come to an understanding of the way in which a new system of education can be designed and practiced, in order to see the importance of sensual experience in the interpretation of what one heard, as in E. M. Forster's short story *Co-ordination* would show. Following the emotion that one can hear, Marcel Proust, in his *Against Saint Beuve*, also comes to define the dual self through the first person narrative point of view – the talented self and the normal self. The definition of the dual self, in a way, comes from the experience of hearing the music in reading literary text, reinforcing the significance of aural stimulations in education, memory and reading.

Again, when we focus on aural stimulations in literary texts, we can come up with a different reading, when reading the part about Anna's experience on the train, in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Through focusing on the sense of hearing, Anna can calm herself down, in order to read a book to get rid of the sense of anxiety on her journey home, from Moscow to St. Petersburg. Along with this, the readers can see the way in which a visual representation, such as the film *The English Patient*, can be understood aurally, through the key moment when Hana, the Canadian nurse, started to play Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. The sound of sentimentality, as we can hear in the literary texts, echoes back to deliver our deepest emotion – a sense of longing for eternity and its meaning.

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