THE EDINBURGH COMPANION TO T. S. ELIOT AND THE ARTS

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EDINBURGH University Press


The Musical World of Eliot's Inventions

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From the start of Eliot's poetic career—to be precise, in 1909, when he began inscribing poems in the notebook he provisionally called Inventions of the March Hare—his poetry engaged a world of musical forms, sounds, and discourse. The notebook's table of contents indicates the breadth and intensity of his musical experimentation: his titles include three caprices, four preludes, two interludes, two love songs, an opera, a rhapsody, airs, and a suite. In addition to drawing analogies between poems and musical genres, Eliot alludes to specific works of music, such as Chopin's Preludes, Wagner's Tristan und Isolde and Götterdämmerung, Franz Lehár's The Merry Widow, Oskar Strauss's Chocolate Soldier, and popular songs such as "By the light of the silvery moon" and "the Cubanola Glide." The sounds of musical instruments often accompany the poet's thoughts: violins—passionate, winding, or broken—cracked cornets, an ominous clarinet, a dull tom-tom, a fatalistic drum, street pianos, broken flutes, the sandboard and bones, and of course the sound of singing, from Prufrock's mermaids and his Madness to the undergar Girls in "Suite Clownsque" and a female vocalist in "the smoke that gathers blue and sinks." While little correspondence or other documentation from Eliot's college days remains, these poems indicate his engagement with a contemporary world of music and musical discourse, and there is much we can learn about his poetry from recovering what was happening in that world.

As well as indicating Eliot's active participation in the music-listening culture of Boston and Cambridge circa 1909-10, Inventions shows Eliot's reception of and participation in contemporary debates about the relative merits and ideas of various composers—chiefly Wagner and Chopin—and the moral and psychological effects of music. Arthur Symons, James Huneker, Irving Babbitt, and Henri Bergson were among the contemporary critics and thinkers who contributed to Eliot's understanding of music and its influence. Behind them stands the larger-than-life figure of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose Birth of Tragedy first appeared in English translation in 1909, nine years after the author's death. Nietzsche's distinction between the Apolloian and the Dionysian impulses in music—rational and formal on the one hand; irrational, emotional, and chaotic on the other—may be discerned in Eliot's conflicted responses to music, especially Wagner's operas. Perhaps more familiar to Eliot, though less so to us, was "melanomia," a turn-of-the-century term used to describe an irrational enthusiasm for music. Whether called Dionysian ecstasy or melanomia, this state seems both the object of fear and desire in Eliot's notebook; moreover, the highly charged nature
of the debate corresponds with his anxious indecisiveness about how to respond to music. It is notable that in these poems, despite their investment in musical forms, the experience of hearing music hardly seems pleasurable and often illustrates moments of psychic distress. This chapter examines Eliot’s notebook, particularly “Opera” and other poems that include moments of explicit music-listening or music-making, in terms of the conflicting messages about music to which Eliot was exposed in his undergraduate career.

There is no simple formula to how Eliot responds to music in his early poetry; rather, he registers anxiety about melancholia and the mixing of the arts while experimenting with strategies that safely allow music into poetry. In discussions of Eliot’s relation to music, critics have bifurcated between those who explain his poetry by analogy to classical musical forms and those who see him responding (whether with anxiety or envy) to the siren-song of popular music. While there is validity in both approaches, it is important to note that these readings reflect two sides of a contemporary debate that the young Eliot himself was attempting to negotiate. In retrospect, the debate may seem only to be about taste, and thus about social alliances: what kind of music did Eliot feel he ought to, or did he in fact, enjoy? On which side of the musical railroad tracks did his loyalties lie? But as Morgenstern has also pointed out in the context of the visual arts (see Chapter 2), this was an aesthetic debate about how, if at all, music might be allowed to mingle with poetry.

To begin with, Eliot’s musical poetics were anything but unusual for the time. Arthur Symons, the critic whose Symbolist Movement in Literature introduced Eliot to Laforgue, was also a poet in his own right, with a reputation for writing about the London stage and music scene. Just to mention a few works obviously echoed in Eliot’s notebook, Symons wrote a “Caprice,” several songs, a “Prelude,” “The Barrel-Organ,” several dances, “The Silence,” “Chopin” and “Parsifal.” Such musically themed poems were standard fare in the 1890s. In an American verse anthology of 1895 called Victorian Songs, at least one-third of the poems are titled after kinds of music, mostly “song” but also specific genres such as “madrigal,” “serenade,” “lament,” “Rondel,” “symphony,” and so on. W. E. Henley’s 1893 London Voluntar-ies opens with a poetic sequence marked by musical tempos. American poets of the day gave such titles to their works as “Prelude to Lohengrin,” “Overture to Tannhäuser,” “Some Mazurkas,” and “A Chopin Fantasy.” Eliot did not have to go far afield for his basic model, and it is notable that these examples include references to both Wagner and Chopin, two composers featured in Inventions.

While his poems have obvious literary precedents, Inventions also reflects Eliot’s immersion in a rich musical world. Walter Pater’s oft-quoted injunction that all artists should aspire to the condition of music cannot do justice to the profound and widespread musical fervor of the late nineteenth century. Music rose to the top of the artistic charts throughout European and American society, at a similar rate on both sides of the Atlantic; the Vienna and New York Philharmonic orchestras were both established in 1842; the Boston Symphony and the Berlin Philharmonic followed in 1881 and 1882. Piano technology and manufacture leaped ahead in the 1840s with the Chickering cast-iron piano frame, which vastly strengthened the instrument and allowed faster, more efficient production. The increased availability and quality of pianos made this instrument the centerpiece of the middle-class home and put amateur music-making at the heart of its social life, a process also assisted by improved music-printing technology.
leaves him cold. Beginning with the title of the opera, “Tristan and Isolde,” the speaker works his way into the music, first describing its instrumentation (“the fatalistic horns/The passionate violins/And ominous clarinet”) and then the idea evoked by the music, combined perhaps with the scene appearing on stage before him: “love torturing itself... Writhing in and out/Contorted in paroxysms/Flinging itself at the last/Limits of self-expression.” A stanza break follows, and then the speaker evaluates his own response to the music, concluding: “These emotional experiences/Do not hold my own response to the music, of course, concluding: “These emotional experiences/Do not hold my own response to the music, of course, and not just for the listener, for the failure to be caught up by music seems equally undesired by the poet.

The poem “Opera” exemplifies this musical ambivalence. “Opera” is perplexing because Jean Verdenal’s letters to Eliot suggest that the two friends shared a passion for Wagner, and of course The Waste Land includes lines from Wagner’s operas, including Tristan und Isolde. In this poem dated November 1909, however, the same work
seems negative overall, we might find that the poem cannot be explained without some similar surge of forbidden feeling that the speaker then too well purges from himself, leaving him feeling like “the ghost of youth / At the undertakers’ ball.”

The ambivalence of the speaker in “Opera” makes more sense in the context of Wagner’s reputation and the public debate over his influence. Later to peak in the United States than in Europe, Wagner’s popularity was strong in Boston; Eliot’s fellow student Haniel Long reported that the city was gripped by a Wagner craze in March 1909. Moreover, as Horowitz shows, the American fervor over Wagner was less tinged by fears of decadence than in England; the composer was transformed by Gilded Age optimism into an agent of uplift: “Wagner offered an avenue of intense spiritual experience, a surrogacy for religion or romanticism, a song of redemption to set aside Emerson and Whitman. It was both intellectually and emotionally vitalizing.” As well as seeing the craze for himself, Eliot could not have avoided reading about Wagner; nearly every critic he consulted at this stage of his life had something to say about the composer. In Studies in Seven Arts (1906), Arthur Symons characterizes Wagner’s art as a form of extremity: “Wagner demanded, in the combination of the arts, two main factors: poetry, carried to its utmost limits in drama; and music carried to its utmost limits as the interpreter and deeper of dramatic action.” Like Symons, Eliot represents Wagner as pushing against the limits of his art, “Flinging itself at the last/Limits of self-expression.” But, while Symons represents this tendency as a positive value, Eliot switches the charges to negative.

Eliot’s resistance to the Wagner experience, at least in “Opera,” reflects the influence of another figure in the debate, Irving Babbitt. Eliot was taking Babbitt’s class on modern French criticism in fall 1909, just months before the publication of his New Aesthetic: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts (see Morgenstern in Chapter 2, this volume). There, Babbitt criticizes the Romantic tendency to elevate illusion and sensation over reason, resulting in what he calls “the phosphorescent slime of our modern decadents.” He objects to the erasure of genuine boundaries in search of ever more powerful sensations, leading to program music, sound-painting, color-painting, and literature that imitates other arts. Babbitt writes, “Possibly this whole side of romanticism finds its best expression in Richard Wagner and his theory of the music-drama. According to Wagner pure music and pure poetry ... become effective only when they are rid of an unprofitable restraint and self-limitation and melt together in a mystic erotic embrace.” Like Symons, Babbitt uses the language of limitation and transgression, suggesting that Wagner’s aesthetic choice to cross the medial limit between music and poetry equates or leads to the violation of social taboos, namely, to adultery, which is the subject of Tristan and was also a well-known scandal in Wagner’s own life.

In the first stanza of “Opera,” Eliot underscores the language of limits with the repetition of the words “in” and “it,” which prepare for or pre-echo the word “limit”: “love torturing itself / To emotion for all there is in it, / Writhing in and out / Contorted in paroxysms, / Flinging itself at the last / Limits of self-expression” (emphasis mine). As well as emphasizing the word “limit,” this repetition suggests that Wagner’s opera goes “in” where it ought not to. The first limit the opera crosses is medial, from music to the realm of poetic drama, and Eliot registers this crossing through the adjective-noun combinations in the opening lines: “fatalistic horns,” “passionate violins,” “ominous clarinet.” These pairings go beyond the qualities commonly attributed to the sounds of certain instruments (i.e., mournful, bright, sweet); the horns reflect the “fatalistic” action of the opera, set in motion by the drinking of a love potion. Wagner assigns to each instrument certain patterns that signify aspects of the plot, thus “mixing” the two media. However, Eliot’s repetitions of “in” and “it,” along with “writings” and “paroxysms,” obviously operate at a deeper level to imagine (while recoiling from) sexual acts that, of course, the opera Tristan und Isolde also implies. So far, Eliot’s response to the opera is all Babbitt, equating the mixing of genres with eroticism and immorality.

“Opera” goes on, however, in a spirit of disappointment that has little in common with Babbitt’s principled objections to Wagner: “We have the tragic? oh no! / Life departs with a feeble smile / Into the indifferent.” This rhetorical question ushers us into a different realm of criticism, presided over by Nietzsche, the modern theorist of tragedy. Eliot’s route to Nietzsche was most likely mediated by the American critic James Huneker, just as Symons introduced him to Laforgue. At least a month before composing “Opera,” Eliot opened his Harvard Advocate review of Huneker’s Egoists: A Book of Supermen with the statement, “Now that Arthur Symons is no longer active in English letters, Mr. James Huneker alone represents modernity in criticism.” Eliot later wrote— in marginal notes to his 1955 essay on Gordon Craig’s Socratic Dialogues—that as a young man he tried to get his hands on all the works of contemporary European writers mentioned by the critic of “the seven arts,” James Huneker. As he suggests by yoking the two authors together in both of these remarks made at opposite ends of his career, Symons and Huneker similarly served as guides and models for the young poet. Eliot’s review of Egoists and his acquaintance with Huneker’s work are significant for several reasons that will unfold gradually here.

Egoists consists of essays on ten nineteenth-century intellectual “supermen” including Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Nietzsche. Friedrich Nietzsche was Wagner’s most famous admirer, and later one of the composer’s harshest critics. In The Birth of Tragedy, first published in 1872 but not translated into English until 1909, Nietzsche makes Tristan und Isolde the occasion for developing the distinction between the Dionysian and Apollonian aspects of music. According to Nietzsche, Wagner rejected the rationalistic or “Apollonian” operatic tradition to let loose primordial “Dionysian” forces of joy and desire in his music. Nietzsche argued that in integrating this chaotic, emotional element with the mythical structure of Teutonic legend, Wagner created works that serve the psychic needs of modern Germans much as Attic tragedy served the Greeks. Huneker patiently explains Nietzsche to his American readership:

Music is the archetype of the arts. It is the essence of Greek tragedy and therefore pessimistic. Tragedy is pessimism. The two faces of the Greek art he calls the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses. One is the Classic, the other the Romantic; calm beauty as opposed to bacchanalian ecstasy. Wagner, Nietzsche identified with the Dionysian element, and he was not far wrong, but Greek? The passionate welters of this new music stirred Nietzsche’s excitable young nerves. He was, like many of his contemporaries, swept away in the boiling flood of the Wagnerian sea. It appeared to him . . . as a recrudescence of Dionysian joy. Instead, it was the topmost crest of the dying waves of Romanticism.

Eliot’s question, “We have the tragic? oh no!” recapitulates Huneker’s brief summary and refutation of Nietzsche’s claims for Tristan as classic tragedy, and it echoes Huneker’s rhetorical question, “he was not far wrong, but Greek?” With Huneker,
Eliot mocks Nietzsche's idea that Wagner's dramas rise to the level of Greek tragedy. Huneker dismisses Wagner's music as "the dying waves of Romanticism"; Eliot calls it "paroxysms."

Since Eliot used Huneker as a gateway to European writers, it is likely that he tracked down the new translation of The Birth of Tragedy and read it for himself after learning about it in Egoists. Even if Nietzsche's advocacy of Wagner contradicts Babbitt's teaching, the philosopher's condemnation of modern optimism and belief in progress has much in common with Babbitt's own attack on Romanticism. Nietzsche has particularly harsh words for the rise of a scientific, analytical mindset, for which he blames Socrates in the first instance. He sees the ascendancy of the music critic as a symptom of the Socratic mindset, and he complains that "the student, the school boy, yea, even the most harmless womanly creature" now experiences art critically rather than intuitively. As a result of this development, according to Nietzsche, "art degenerated into a topic of conversation of the most trivial kind, and aesthetic criticism was used as the cement of a vain, distracted, selfish and moreover piteously unoriginal sociality... so that there has never been so much gossip about art and so little esteem for it."34

The poet who would soon write "In the room, the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" obviously shares common ground with the philosopher here. Nietzsche characterizes the "Socratic-critical ear," with his "half-moral and half-learned pretensions," as, in essence, a walking corpse:

In his sphere hitherto everything has been artificial and merely glossed over with a semblance of life. The performing artist was in fact at a loss what to do with such a critically-comporting hearer, and hence he, as well as the dramatist or operatic composer who inspired him, searched anxiously for the last remains of life in a being so pretentiously barren and incapable of enjoyment.35

However, Nietzsche celebrates the coming of Wagner—the "birth of tragedy"—as the advent of a new Dionysian art capable of inspiring wonder, of giving access to "sublime ecstasy" and "the highest artistic primal joy."36 Tristan und Isolde is his case in point. He challenges the reader "to test himself rigorously as to how he is related to the true aesthetic hearer, or whether he belongs rather to the community of the Socratic-critical man" by attending a production of Tristan or Lohengrin and judging his own reactions.

Eliot's "Opera" records the results of such a test. The speaker attends Tristan und Isolde, and fails to experience wonder: "Life departs with a feeble smile / Into the indifferent. / These emotional experiences / Do not hold good at all." His reaction identifies him with the "Socratic-critical man"—"barren and incapable of enjoyment"—rather than the true aesthetic hearer. At the end of the poem he sees himself as a lifeless observer incapable of emotion: "I feel like the ghost of youth / At the undertakers' ball." These curious lines correspond closely to Nietzsche's description of the critic, in whom the musician seeks for "the last remains of life." The "undertakers' ball" brilliantly metaphorizes Nietzsche's idea of an audience of corpses "glossed over with a semblance of life" for show; the speaker, as a "ghost of youth," fits in perfectly here.

While Eliot does not specifically quote or verbally echo The Birth of Tragedy, an accumulation of likely associations strongly suggests a link between the two works: Nietzsche's negative characterization of contemporary aesthetic discourse, particularly by women and young people; the idea of testing oneself by attending a Wagner opera; and the figure of the critic as a corpse with a "semblance of life." All the relevant passages appear within a few pages of each other, where Nietzsche specifically takes Tristan as a case in point, referring to the Liebestod and quoting lines from Isolde. The presence of Nietzsche in the second half of the poem is important because it explains the source of emotional conflict that seems to lead across the stanza break from a criticism of the opera (in the first stanza) to the speaker's self-criticism (in the second). In this conflict over Wagner, we can begin to understand the anxiety that accompanies moments of music listening in Inventions of the March Hare. The ambivalence so marked in Eliot's representation of music reflects his position as a young poet trying to figure out his aesthetic principles, vacillating (or "pinned and wriggling on the wall") between two seemingly incompatible opinions about the desirability of mixing poetry with music.

Babbitt exerted enormous influence on Eliot as a student and throughout his life. Eliot wrote of him in 1941:

he remains permanently an active influence; his ideas are permanently with one, as a measurement and test of one's own. I cannot imagine anyone coming to react against Babbitt. Even in the convictions one may feel, the views one may hold, that seem to contradict most important convictions of Babbitt's own, one is aware that he himself was very largely the cause of them. The magnitude of the debt that some of us owe to him should be more obvious to posterity than to our contemporaries.37

It is interesting that Eliot speaks of Babbitt's ideas as a test, for this wording mirrors Nietzsche's challenge to attend Tristan as a test of one's sensibility, and it evokes an image of the young poet caught between two intellectual giants with mutually opposed opinions of Wagner's art.

Melomania

Whether Eliot's speaker feels untouched by music (as in "Opera"), uncomfortably invaded by it (when street pianos disturb his self-possession in "Portrait" or "Caprice"), or experiences his own thoughts as music (the dull tom-tom), he's not sure how he should feel when he hears music. Its influence is either too great or not great enough.

The psychology of Eliot's day held that music could invade and suspend the hearer's will. Henri Bergson, for example, viewed the hypnotic power of art, and particularly music, as a universal psychological phenomenon.38 But Babbitt, again, disagrees. He sees art's "power to enthral the individual sensibility" as a Romantic notion that poses a moral problem. Citing Bergson disparagingly, Babbitt writes: "the romanticist... rests in the hypnotic for the sake of the hypnotism, or... in illusion for the sake of illusion... [T]o accept this aestheticism as final would be to turn poetry into a sort of lotus-eating."39 Babbitt is particularly critical of the infiltration of music into the other arts. He diagnoses color audition, or "the habit of interpreting light or color in terms of sound" as the "sign of nervous disorder": "Color audition has found literary expression only in those who belong to what we may term the neurotic school. It manifests itself in connection with the melomania of the German romanticists, their tendency not only to worship music but to reduce to music all the other arts."40

Babbitt's use of the term "melomania" suggests the high stakes of the argument over music. "Melomania" entered the English language from French around 1880—the first
instance listed in the *OED* is from a work by Vernon Lee—and refers to an obsessive passion for music. However, harmless music-making and listening may seem to us now, fears that audiences could be hypnotized by music were widespread in the nineteenth century, following the psychological experiments of Mesmer, Charcot, and others. The practice of hypnosis directly challenged conceptions of selfhood and autonomy and was thought to dissolve sexual inhibitions. Critics of Wagner—including the later Nietzsche, in his *Case of Wagner* of 1888—accused him of being a hypnotist. In 1894 an American psychologist, Aldred Warthin, reported “self-induced hypnosis” in Wagner’s audiences, and in 1896 Max Nordau argued that Wagner’s “powerful orchestral effects create hypnosis. . . .” The formlessness of the endless melody corresponds to the sleeping wandering of the mind.”43 This is the context Babbitt has in mind when he refers to the melomania of the German Romantics. Melomania is a clinical diagnosis of what Nietzsche identified as an archetypal state, the Dionysian impulse.

Perhaps the most fascinating contemporary study of melomania was written by James Huneker, the author of *Egoists*, the work that introduced Eliot to Nietzsche. An advertisement for Huneker’s short story collection *Melomaniacs* (1902) appeared on the back of *Egoists*. While there is no positive evidence that Eliot read it, *Melomaniacs* explores a range of attitudes toward music similar to his own, and at the very least, it helps us to understand Eliot’s mindset at this time. The advertisement describes *Melomaniacs* as “playing on the boundary line that divides sanity of thought from intellectual chaos.” Each of Huneker’s twenty-four stories (the number of major and minor keys) dwell in a different musical milieu, such as Wagner’s Bayreuth or down-and-out urban dives sheltering the illegitimate sons of Chopin and Liszt. The plots mix science fiction, Edith Wharton–like sketches of high society, and hyper-realistic urban descriptions reminiscent of Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser. Unlike these fellow New York authors, however, Huneker focused on the hypnotic, consciousness-altering effects of music. In “Dusk of the Gods” (a translation of the title of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*), a listener hypnotized by piano playing sees scenes of the history of the earth from its creation to the present time, corresponding to works by composers from Bach to Richard Strauss. Another story, “A Spinner of Silence,” describes the influence of a famous pianist on his audiences: “As in sullen dreams one struggles to throw off the spell of hypnotic suggestion, so there were many who mutually fought his power, questioning with rebellious soul his right to conquer. But conquer he did.”44 When Belus plays, his audiences have supernatural visions of “Baby faces, withered faces, girls and mothers, the sweetest and the most fearful you ever saw. . . . And there were wings and devilish things. I couldn’t stand the air, it was alive. . . .”45 (Here it is impossible not to hear connections to *The Waste Land*’s “bats with baby faces in the violet light/Whistled, and beat their wings.”) In “The Piper of Dreams,” music composed by the anarchist Ilowski causes people to see visions of the end of the world; as one character explains, “It isn’t art. It’s science—the science of dangerous sounds. He discovered that sound-vibrations rule the universe.”46 When the audience exits the theater after a performance of Ilowski’s symphony entitled “Nietzsche,” Paris is being sacked and burned.

Huneker represents music as a threat to individual autonomy as well as social cohesion in these stories, such as the one in which a mad composer sends his orchestra members into the fourth dimension and can only retrieve them by playing his music backward on a player organ. In other, less hysterical stories, Huneker closely observes music performance in urban settings. “The Red-Headed Piano Player” opens with a local-color sketch of Coney Island:

The two young men left the trolley car that carried them from Bath Beach to the West End of Coney Island, and walked slowly up the Broad Avenue of Confusing Noises, smoked and gazed about them. . . . The clatter was striking; ardent whistling of peanut steam-roasters, vicious brass bands, hideous harps, wheezing organs, hoarse shoutings and the patient, monotonous cry of the fakirs and photographers were all blended in a dense, huge symphony.45

In all this noise the young men hear strains of Chopin being played and enter a bar to see a young man at the piano:

The B flat minor Prelude, with its dark, rich, rushing cascade of scales, its grim iteration and ceaseless questioning, spun through the room, and again came the curious silence. . . . The waiters paused midway in their desperate gaming with victuals, and for a moment the place was wholly given over to music. The mounting unison passage and the smashing chords at the close awakened the diners from the trance into which they had been thrown by the magnetic fluid at the tips of the pianist’s fingers; the bustle began, Harry and Billy ordered more beer and drew deep breaths.46

This story has multiple connections with moments in “Prufrock” and “Portrait of a Lady”; two men walk about the city hearing its sounds, including barrel-organs, otherwise known as street pianos; they enter a squalid city restaurant; they hear Chopin’s *Préludes* played, transmitted like magnetic fluid through the pianist’s finger-tips; they experience a moment of trance-like suspension from themselves; and they drink beer.

Huneker’s *Melomaniacs* seems like an important context for and analogue to Eliot’s *Inventions* notebook. Both books announce their theme in the musical titles of individual works; we encounter music in a mix of urban settings from the concert hall and the parlor to crowded or dingy street corners; and the characters’ responses to music are diverse, ranging from terrifying lapses of autonomy to boredom. Huneker, himself trained as a pianist, treats music less as entertainment than as an obsession leading to dissipation, madness, and murder, or to ecstatic pleasure. Eliot’s more muted responses range between hypnotic possession and an anxious resistance to music. Melomania lurks in the background of his notebook. We can perhaps best see it in “Prufrock’s Pervigilium,” the excited portion of “The Song Love”: “I fumbled to the window to experience the world/And to hear my Madness singing, sitting on the kerbstone/[A blind old drunken man who sings and mutters,/With broken boot heels stained in many gutters]/And as he sang the world began to fall apart.”47 This passage brings to a climax four stanzas of increasingly disturbing urban imagery that besets and threatens the speaker with the collapse of his autonomy and moral virtue; women spilling out of corsets, boys smoking cigarettes, evil houses that point a ribald finger at him, and the darkness stretching out its tentacles, prepared to leap. Though all of this is terrifying, the world only begins to fall apart when he hears his Madness *singing*. The sound of singing marks the moment when the speaker acknowledges his terrifying visions as madness, rather than simply aspects of “the world.” At this moment, the music he hears seems to come both outside from (he fumbles to the window), and from within (it is *his* madness).
While hearing your Madness singing is a special case of listening to music, it might also be a paradigm case, for music penetrates our heads, quite literally, becoming part of the rhythm of the body and texture of our thoughts. Perhaps therein lies its power to undo the fragile structures of identity.

From “Opera” to “Prufrock’s Pervigilium,” Eliot’s notebook poems range between apathy and madness in their response to music. When we place Eliot’s musical poetics in the context of melanomnia, I think we can see his own ambivalence more clearly. Music can overtake you and deplete your will; yet it promises a release from self and access to heightened emotional states. As the poem “Opera” suggests, Eliot was capable of feeling at the same time both repelled and drawn to the experiences offered by music. The most powerful art of the day, music was a force that Eliot had to reckon with. If music is hypnotic, the poet who taps into its ancient power becomes the hypnotist rather than the patient, the performer rather than the audience. Mad or sane, the singer is the archetype of the poet.

Invention and Musical Form

Given Babbitt’s disapproval of the mixing of genres and Eliot’s anxiety about musical madness, the question of how to tap into music as a poetic resource without losing control may have been a challenge for the young poet. But even at this early stage, his notebook shows that Eliot had a strategy, one that he continued to refine and develop throughout his career. In contrast to the poems that stage scenes of listening, to which the poet responds with anxiety, many others identify themselves with musical genres, adopting formal patterns derived from music. This is the side of Eliot’s musical poetics that he perfects in Four Quartets; as he wrote in “The Music of Poetry” at the time of finishing Little Gidding:

The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music. There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter. It is in the concert room, rather than in the opera house, that the germ of a poem may be quickened.44

Critics often point to this passage to explain Eliot’s approach to music throughout his career, but it is obviously an incomplete account. The limitations that Eliot places on musical inspiration—not the opera house, still less the jazz club, music hall, or dance floor—reflect not his actual experience, but an ideal state of musico-poetic relations. His late essay purges the Dionysian possibilities from this relationship, leaving musical form as the contact point of the two arts, a compositional strategy already in evidence in Inventions.

Eliot’s tentative title for his notebook, later crossed out, suggests a mixture of the Dionysian in his early poetry with something more Apollonian. Like the title the young poet settled on—The Complete Poems of T. S. Eliot—“Inventions of the March Hare” identifies a genre (inventions) and an author (the March hare). Yet what kind of poem is an “invention”? In one sense, the most common meaning, an invention is fiction, something made up. In combination with “March Hare”—recalling Lewis Carroll’s Mad Hatter and perhaps the courtship antics of the English hare, giving rise to the expression “mad as a March hare”—“inventions” suggest that the notebook contains fantasies, distortions, and other creations of the poet’s disturbed mind. Thus Eliot’s title nods at the theme of madness that runs through his notebook. The idea of artistic creation as a form of insanity is, of course, a common Romantic trope.

“Inventions” may also mean “discoveries” or “findings,” however. The idea of invention as a finding is connected to the word “inventory” and goes back to the rhetorical practice of “inventio.” In classical rhetoric, inventio was the development of a topic through various techniques, such as definition, amplification, and argumentation. Revived in the eighteenth century, inventio was still an important component of rhetoric instruction in Eliot’s primary-school days.45 The two meanings of invention—as fiction, on the one hand, and as finding and development on the other—are obviously somewhat at odds, a tension that probably appealed to Eliot because it left ambiguous whether his poems were mere figments of his imagination or developments of a subject.46

In the eighteenth century, the rediscovery of classical invention gave rise to a musical kind of invention, a short keyboard piece that elaborates a single idea through the use of counterpoint. This genre is most closely associated with the two- and three-part inventions of J. S. Bach, whose work was single-handedly revived in America by its first music professor, John Knowles Paine of Harvard University. Paine’s music appreciation course was a fixture of Harvard education for four decades up to the year Eliot matriculated, and probably as a result of Paine’s influence, Bach’s keyboard works had a presence in the musical life of the college (such as in the series of concerts by Arthur Whiting, mentioned above). So it is not far-fetched to think that Eliot might have had the musical meanings of this word in mind too when he tried out “Inventions” as the title of his book and the generic name for its contents.

Nothing could be farther from mania than Bach’s inventions. Written as composition exercises for his oldest son, they epitomize musical rationality. Each invention begins with a short motif, sometimes just a few notes, which Bach then subjects to a series of transformations: inverting the motif, starting it in different parts of the scale, repeating elements of it in combination with each other, and exchanging voices between the upper and lower registers of the keyboard, thoroughly exploiting the motif using all the available strategies of counterpoint. Paine wrote in his 1907 History of Music, “As a contrapunctist Bach is acknowledged as the foremost of all masters. . . . Within this sphere he shows infinite variety and originality . . . his music . . . is free from conventionalities.”47 For Paine, Bach’s orderly contrapuntal developments are compatible with, indeed make possible, the freedom, naturalness, and originality of his music. Eliot reflected this view of originality in his 1928 introduction to Ezra Pound’s Selected Poems:

When I say “invent,” I should use inverted commas, for invention would be irreproachable if it were possible. “Invention” is wrong only because it is impossible. . . . True originality is merely development; and if it is right development it may appear in the end so inevitable that we almost come to the point of view of denying all “original” virtue to the poet.48

Eliot’s resistance to Romantic ideas of originality and inspiration runs through his critical oeuvre—even if, at times, he seems more susceptible than most poets to a kind
of mad possession. In *Inventions*, musical development offers an alternative to inspiration and its cousin, musical madness, as the source of poetry.

While a full examination of the analogy between musical and poetic form in Eliot's notebook is probably a topic for another time, I will close with a few observations about how the principles of musical invention might inform a number of these poems, especially the earlier ones. Like Bach's Inventions, most of these poems are short exercises gathered together in sequences, such as the three caprices, four preludes, "Mandarins," "Goldfish," "Suite Clownesque," and "Easter: Sensations of April." Musical inventions, as well as preludes and caprices, were composed in a sequence of keys, either all twenty-four major and minor keys or a subset thereof. Eliot's early sequences similarly move through a progression either of time or space; "Preludes," for example, seems to take place over the course of twenty-four hours.

Within individual lyrics, Eliot develops simple themes through a variety of transformations. For example, his three Caprices present three similar urban scenes in different weather and moods. Each begins with a not-unpleasing image or auditory perception ("a street piano, garrulous and frail"; "this charm of vacant lots"; "a landscape grey with rain") and moves to a more aesthetically challenging detail ("bottles and broken glass"; "ashes and tins in piles"; "a mass of mud and sand"). This move might be thought of as the inversion of the motif. Each concludes with the attempt to find meaning in the cityscape, which seems somewhat thwarted, leaving the speaker with an inconsequent remark: "Oh, these minor considerations!"; "What: again?"; "But why are we so hard to please?" Rather than progressing through a narrative or developing a central character (the chief modes of development in Victorian poetry), the sequence returns to similar gestures, altered each time. Eliot is riffing on a theme, and the themes are familiar to readers of his poetry: the vacant lot, piles of rubbish, the undecided man hesitating, the rain, the "yellow and rose" evening. The musical model gives guidance on how to develop these themes in a poetically unconventional way.

The non-narrative, associative mode of development also gives these early sequences an improvisational air, which seems deliberately encouraged or cultivated by Eliot's choice of musical titles to guide his compositions. Not only inventions, but also (and more frequently) interludes and preludes were improvised at the keyboard. Preludes, for example, had a practical function in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century keyboard performance of allowing the musician to warm up, test out the instrument, and prepare the audience for a longer piece to follow. Chopin's *Twenty-four Preludes* of 1839—a work that bears an important relationship to Eliot's "Preludes"—marks a period of transition when the increasing technical difficulty of piano music led composers to write in a style that seemed improvised, though it was actually notated. As for Eliot, after publishing two perfect sonnets in the *Harvard Advocate*, he never returned to this form, but many of the free-verse poems in *Inventions* hover around fourteen lines in length and make some kind of volta two-thirds of the way through, as if a casual variation on the sonnet. The early notebook poems also lack traditional devices of closure, leaving us hanging with non sequiturs such as "Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;/The worlds revolve like ancient women/Gathering fuel in vacant lots." These devices create the impression of impromptu composition—just as, at the time of Chopin's composition of the *Preludes*, Clara Schumann introduced the practice of memorizing her repertoire to give the impression of improvisation.

The general principle of a musical model of invention thus stands behind many of the notebook poems, while a specific context of short, free-form solo piano works by various Romantic composers informs Eliot's sequences. While differing in many respects, the Baroque invention and the Romantic prelude, caprice, and interlude share three main qualities: brevity of individual movements, their sequential structure, and an element of improvisation or an impromptu quality. Chopin's *Preludes* were, after all, partly an homage to Bach, so likening them is not so far-fetched. Eliot's reference to Chopin in "Portrait of a Lady" has generally led readers to believe that, as John Xiros Cooper writes, Eliot found Chopin and Romantic music to be "exhausted," "chichéd," and "sectrolic." The reality of Eliot's attitude toward Romantic music, like the literature of the same period, is likely more complex. James Huneker again provides a guide. While exorcising what he sees as the feminized performances of Chopin's music ("Poor Chopin! /devoured by those ravensong wolves, the concert pianists, tortured by stupid pupils and smeared with the kisses of sentimentalists"), he wishes to recuperate the composer of the *Preludes*, those "modern," "immortal," and "masculine" pieces. His picture of Chopin as the composer of moody, spontaneous, unfinished "sketches" bears a striking likeness to the poet of *Inventions*.

Using musical form as an inspiration and guide became one of Eliot's most consistent habits of poetic composition in a career marked by radical changes in style and content. Developing this strategy in his earliest experiments, he continued to profit from it creatively in *Four Quartets*. His analogy between musical and poetic form—and what this analogy is designed to exclude—makes more sense when we see it emerging from a highly charged world of musical performance and discourse about music around 1910. In this world, music can capture and corrupt you; it can lift you to the skies or reveal you as a dried-up critic incapable of feeling. Music is everywhere, penetrating your consciousness. Eliot's recourse to invention as a poetic strategy, and to short, informal, impromptu keyboard pieces as the models for his poems, was an inspired way to deal with this musical double bind. Or, perhaps, the double bind itself was the source of his inspiration. The allure of music and fear of melancholia join together in Prufrock's memorable final words: "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each ... /I do not think that they will sing to me ... We have lingered in the chambers of the sea /By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown /Till human voices wake us and we drown."

**Notes**

1. The preponderance of criticism on Eliot and classical music has either concerned the musical structures of *Four Quartets* or the correspondences between *The Waste Land* and Wagner's operas, including the leitmotif technique. For an account of these approaches, see notes 6 and 16 to the Introduction to Part II, this volume. In a move that has become more commonplace since the publication of his *T. S. Eliot's Orchestra*, John Xiros Cooper portrays Eliot as a modernist scourge of Romantic music from as early as "Portrait of a Lady" ("Thinking with Your Ears," in Cooper, ed., *T. S. Eliot's Orchestra: Critical Essays on Poetry and Music* (New York: Garland, 2000), 85-108). For readings of Eliot as enjoying and/or envyng the appeal of popular music, see note 12 to the Introduction to Part II, this volume.

2. These poems appear across Symons's oeuvre, suggesting that Eliot was familiar with all his volumes, including *London Nights* (1895), *Silhouettes* (1892-96), *Amoris Vincta* (1897), *Images of Good and Evil* (1899), and *Fool of the World* (1906, not collected in Symons's *Poems*, 1906).
3. Mary Alice Viau, A Music Fancy and Other Verses (1899); Robert Underwood Johnson, The Winter Hour and Other Poems (1892) and Songs of Liberty and Other Poems (1897).


8. Performers and works mentioned in the “Music and Musicians” column of The Boston Globe on the following dates: Elman, January 10, 1909 and February 6, 1910; Kreisler, February 6, 1910; Hammerstein/Debusky, March 28, 1909; Dolmetsch, November 21, 1909 and January 23, 1910; Duncan, December 15, 1908 and November 28, 1909; Fuller, January 2, 1910.

9. The exact date of Eliot’s acquaintance with Gardner is not known, but Robert Crawford speculates that he may have come to know her through the Signet and Stylus societies at Harvard, whose members associated with Boston’s cultural elite (Young Eliot: From St. Louis to The Waste Land (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), 114). Gardner also held an annual open house for Harvard undergraduates. For a fascinating study of Gardner’s musical patrons, see Ralph P. Locke, “Living with Music: Isabella Stewart Gardner,” in Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860, ed. Locke and Cyrialla Barr (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 90–121.


11. Announced in The Harvard Crimson, May 5, 1908, for a performance the same evening.


16. “Try, if possible, to hear something by Wagner in Munich,” Verdenal writes in July 1911. “I went the other day to the Götterdämmerung... [T]he end must be one of the highest points ever reached by man” (L, 25); “I should be happy to know that you too are able to hear some Wagner in America... if you get the opportunity. This is what I am most interested in at the moment” (L, 32). For more on Eliot’s engagement with Wagner in The Waste Land, see Paterson and Hobbs in Chapter 6, this volume.

17. IMH, 17.


20. Christopher Ricks, annotations in IMH, 119.


22. Ricks, annotations in IMH, 119.

WAGNER IN THE WASTE LAND

“Try, If Possible, to Hear Something”: Mediating Wagners

Adrian Paterson

THE PROBLEM WHEN considering Wagner's place in The Waste Land is that not one, but many Wagners are at play. For a start, there are (at least) six conspicuous acknowledged intrusions in the poem, deriving from three different operas: Tristan und Isolde, Parsifal, and Götterdämmerung. In “The Burial of Dead,” Eliot quotes from the sailor's song that opens Act One of Tristan und Isolde:

Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein irisches Kind
Wo weilst du?

Then, following the “hyacinth girl” passage, he quotes the shepherd's report from Act Three, “Oed' und leer das Meer,” as the mortally wounded Tristan lies waiting for a ship carrying Isolde. Next, “The Fire Sermon” includes the closing line from Paul Verlaine's Wagnerian sonnet “Parsifal” —

Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole

—and, perhaps strangest of all, three sonic transcriptions emerging from Der Ring des Nibelungen, from Götterdämmerung Act III. Twice the Rhine-daughters intervene with

Weilala leia
Wallala leialala

before a final fading

la la

foretells the section's disintegration.

Of this motley of Wagners some preliminary observations might be made. In total they make up a small percentage of the poem, yet there are clear typographic indications of importance, or at least of difference, in the careful use of italics and indentation. All in some way concern love. All are in a language that is not English, which only partially explains the use of italics; the Götterdämmerung extracts appear to be syllable sounds. This comes before a consideration of any wider thematic resonances the poem shares with Wagner operas such as grail legends, musical forms, and indeed an obsession with ships and with the sea. What binds them, finally, is that all come to