

‘I Have Left My Book’:

Setting Joyce’s *Chamber Music* Lyrics to Music

‘Jim should have stuck to music instead of bothering with writing.’

Nora Barnacle (quoted in Ellmann 1983: 169)

I

It’s a well-established fact of literary history that music was at the heart of James Joyce’s life and art. Although celebrated as one of the greatest *writers* of the twentieth century – certainly one of the most influential – Joyce’s inspiration was at least as musical as it was literary. He heard the world as much as he saw it – as Harry Levin wrote: ‘ultimately it is the sense of hearing that dominates and modulates his prose: what gets said and, not least, what gets sung’ (‘Foreword’ in Teicher-Russel 1993: xi). Joyce’s ideas about the world and how the human fits into it were shaped to a great extent by his own musical imagination, which in turn was largely determined by the general cultural atmosphere in which he was born and raised. Put simply, Ireland in the late nineteenth century was a musical country, Dublin was a musical city, and the Joyces were a musical family. In his memoir of their undergraduate days together at the National University, Joyce’s university friend Con Curran wrote that ‘Music ... was an abiding passion. It was a heritage from both sides of his family. His mother as well as his father was a singer, and also a pianist’ (1968: 40-1).

It’s only fitting in light of this that the first book published by the ‘Young Man’ who was to go on to become such a celebrated ‘Artist’ should be one so thoroughly inspired by, and infused with, music. *Chamber Music* is a collection of thirty-six love lyrics first published in London in 1907. These short poems were composed by Joyce in the opening years of the century, and it’s clear (for

reasons that I shall presently explain) that musical considerations – in terms of theme, form and media – were uppermost in the author’s mind from the outset.

Even amongst Joyce scholars, however, *Chamber Music* remains something of an anomaly. Early reviews were by and large positive, with commentators such as Arthur Symons in London and Joyce’s old university friend Tom Kettle in Dublin commending the collection’s delicacy and beauty (Deming 1970: 37-45). As the canon of his work expanded, however, the position of *Chamber Music* was necessarily altered. Whereas ‘minor’ texts such as *Giacomo Joyce* and *Exiles* – and even *Pomes Penyeach* (1927) – might be incorporated within the general trajectory of the canon, such a manoeuvre is more difficult with a book that on first glance appears to be at odds with established Joycean concerns. The commendatory status of *Chamber Music* began to be eroded after the appearance of the major prose works, at which point ‘Joyce the Great European Modernist’ superseded ‘Joyce the Burgeoning Irish Artist’, and the early lyrics came to be regarded by some as little more than juvenilia. Herbert Gorman, for example, found them slight to the point of triviality (1924: 9, 15), whereas Levin (1941: 27, 37) initially thought the lyrics of *Chamber Music* to be ‘plaintive and cloying ... empty of meaning’.¹

The critical history of *Chamber Music* was unknown to me when I bought a second-hand copy in a small independent bookshop in Liverpool in 1993 (a 1985 reprint of an edition published by Jonathan Cape in 1971). I read the elusive short poems and wondered how to reconcile them with the prose writings which for me, both as a ‘lay’ reader and as a student, had always ‘represented’ Joyce. The more I read, however, and the more I became aware of the centrality of music within Joycean aesthetics, the more this slim little volume grew in significance.

My interest was further piqued by the fact that, as a former professional songwriter and musician, I was predisposed towards a consideration of the ‘musicality’ of these lyrics. In time I learned that Joyce had conceived of the collection as a coherent ‘suite’ – a song cycle, in fact – and that he had intended (or at least hoped) that the individual texts should be set to music at the earliest opportunity: only then would their initial musical conceptualisation be fully realised.² It was not a vain hope, as the musical history of the suite commenced soon after its appearance: in her book *James Joyce’s Chamber Music: The Lost Song Settings* (published, in 1993, as I was picking up my copy in Liverpool), the American scholar Myra Teicher Russel listed 161 composers who have set one or more of the lyrics (113-4); that number has certainly grown in the years since. Although these settings have been essayed in a variety of styles (some of which are described in Section III below), each represents an attempt to negotiate a relationship between Joyce’s words and some form of musical expression; each is thus implicated to a greater or lesser degree in Joyce’s wider musical imagination – from the minor song references and musical contexts introduced in *Dubliners* and *A Portrait* to the extremely complex musical effects attempted in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

In December 2011 I decided to make my own contribution to this tradition. Over a three-week period my daughter (a musician and trained singer) and I set each of Joyce’s lyrics to music. The result was an album (recorded in spring of the following year) entitled *James Joyce’s Chamber Music: New Folkish Settings of the 36 Lyrics*. In the later part of this essay I want to describe that process of composition with regard to a series of issues bearing upon language / music relations, lyric setting, instrumentation, vocal performance, and so on. I begin, however, with a brief overview of the background to Joyce’s first book and a consideration of its place within the overall canon of his work.

II

Like many of his more ‘arty’ contemporaries at Belvedere College and later at the Catholic University, the young James Joyce was an aspiring poet.³ His celebrated older contemporary W.B. Yeats provided an example of what a dedicated, talented Irish poet could achieve. Besides, plays and novels are relatively longer forms; they take time to plan and to write, whereas a poem – especially the short lyric style favoured by Joyce throughout his life – could be composed (as, according to Stanislaus Joyce, many of his brother’s were) in the head whilst walking around the streets of Dublin.⁴

In his autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) Joyce describes the development of Stephen Dedalus’s poetic imagination through a series of stages, including his early-morning composition of a poem beginning with the line ‘Are you not weary of ardent ways’ (1916: 183-8). The form of that poem is a villanelle – a quasi-medieval, nineteen-line form (five tercets followed by a quatrain) that was much in vogue in English ‘decadent’ circles during the 1890s.⁵ Closely read, this extended passage provides important information about Stephen’s artistic development and about his escape from the series of ‘nets’ which attempt to trap him. But the invocation of the villanelle form also tells us a good deal about Joyce’s understanding of the role of the poet and the range of his influences at this stage in his artistic development.

Joyce’s gathered his earliest serious attempts to write poetry into a collection (now lost) entitled *Moods* in around 1897 (Ellmann 1983: 50). Over the next few years the maturing artist maintained the sense of himself as a poet, but struggled to find an original voice amongst a conclave of influences, or to develop a coherent aesthetic programme within which to develop that voice. His reading was frighteningly eclectic, covering most of the major icons of Western literature and philosophy: Aristotle to Aquinas, Dante to Blake, Shakespeare to Tolstoy. A

number of key influences did emerge, however, from the first of whom – the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen – Joyce derived (amongst other things) a sense of the artist’s dissident mission with regard to prevailing social morality. From another, the late French poet Paul Verlaine, he learned of language’s inherent musicality and its ability to access emotional states above and beyond a merely communicative function.⁶ From each of these giants of European letters he developed an image of the artist as one who answers a sacred calling, and whose success could be calculated by the extent to which he was rejected by his own community.

In terms of the Anglophone tradition, the young Joyce was deeply impressed by the early English Romantics Blake and Shelley (having moved on from an earlier crush on Byron), although thereafter things had taken (in his view) somewhat of a downward turn. The 1890s had been an exciting time for English poetry, however, beginning with Yeats’s foundation of the Rhymers’ Club in London in 1890 and ending with the first edition of Arthur Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* in 1899. Although Joyce would eventually come to reject the characteristic aestheticism of the period (in some senses, indeed, it was his definitive move) as a young aspiring regional poet at the turn of the century he could hardly escape being influenced by developments across the water.

His disdain for Irish provincialism notwithstanding, Joyce’s own community had produced two poets whose example and influence he gladly accepted: James Clarence Mangan and William Butler Yeats. The first was the subject of a paper he read (on 1 February 1902) before the Literary and Historical Society in his final year at college. Mangan (he claimed) was a genius whose ‘moment’ (in the mid-nineteenth century) had been one of nationalist agitation – in which he was perforce caught up – but whose dark energy afforded much more compelling insights into human experience.⁷ Mangan’s reputation was for dissipation and

vice: the fact that this rendered him ‘a stranger in his own country’ (2000: 54-5) underpinned his heroic status for Joyce, elevating him to the Pantheon along with all the other *poètes maudits*.

Joyce’s relationship with Yeats has long been a focus for literary critics and historians, and need no rehearsal here. Despite an almost pathological compulsion to find fault with his fellow Irish artists, there’s no doubt that Joyce retained throughout his life a strong admiration for Yeats’s poetry, or that his own fledgling talent was deeply influenced by the work of his celebrated elder. As Ellmann points out (1983: 83), Joyce appears to have been especially impressed by *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), many elements of which are clearly echoed in the lyrics he began composing in earnest from about 1901 – the ones that would eventually be collected in *Chamber Music*.⁸

Another of the sovereign ghosts of James Joyce’s imagination was William Shakespeare, who, besides his achievements as a great popular dramatist, also happened to have composed an extended sonnet sequence in which issues of love, desire and betrayal were engaged throughout. This obsession with Shakespeare would last a lifetime and would emerge in many ways. The elaborate theory developed by Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* to account for Hamlet’s ‘madness’ and prevarication is probably the most obvious example (1922: 176-209); given the breadth of his predecessor’s frame of reference, however, it’s not surprising to find echoes of Shakespearean themes and language throughout the entire Joycean canon. With regard to *Chamber Music*, the very idea of a lyric cycle is in some senses Shakespearean in conception. Since their publication the *Sonnets* have created an anxiety of influence, but also an example, for any budding poet; and Joyce’s early poetry registers this influence in terms of its diction, its prosody and its complex array of tightly ordered images.

Arthur Symons was the first outside the Joycean circle to remark the ‘Elizabethan’ element in *Chamber Music*, something which has become a staple of critical responses to the volume ever since.⁹ In the first properly scholarly edition of the book, the American critic William York Tindall noted that ‘Joyce’s *fin-de-siècle* verses have something of an Elizabethan air’ (1954: 30); while Myra Teicher Russel opined that ‘the influence of more modern poets ... is slight compared to the overwhelming presence of the Elizabethans’ (1993: 16).

Amongst the less celebrated of the Early Modern English writers to whom Joyce was drawn was the poet and playwright Ben Jonson, of whose work he claimed to have read every word.¹⁰ Perhaps a more telling influence in the long term was the musician and composer John Dowland; even the titles of some of Dowland’s songs – ‘Now, O Now, I Must Needs Part’, ‘Come Away, Come Sweet Love’, ‘Away With These Self-Loving Lads’ – suggest the young Dubliner’s efforts of three centuries later.¹¹ In fact, Joyce credited the claim (first put forth by the Irish historian W.H. Grattan Flood) that Dowland had been born in Dublin before moving to England to pursue firstly a diplomatic, and thereafter a musical, career. Certainly, Dowland was in Joyce’s repertoire of party pieces (Ellmann 1983: 52), and the evidence of the prose (*Stephen Hero*, *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*) attests to Joyce’s continuing regard for the ‘dainty songs’ of his Elizabethan predecessor.¹²

Many literary critics and historians have speculated but none has produced a fully coherent explanation for Joyce’s turn to Early Modern English culture at this stage in his developing career. A number of possibilities suggest themselves: as a means of rejecting the culturally dominant ‘Celtic note’ with which he was surrounded;¹³ as a means of offsetting the influence of Yeats – probably the strongest contemporary English-language poet; as a means of showing off the eclecticism of his reading; as a honing of technique in terms of a recognised literary form – the lyric sequence; as a response to ‘a concerted Elizabethan

revival' (Paterson 2012: 118) in English letters; or as the literary postulation of emotions which he had not yet experienced in real life. Most suggestive from my perspective is the possibility that Joyce anticipates T.S. Eliot's theory of a 'dissociation of sensibility' (1921: 2305) overtaking poetry after the English Civil War, and the latter's celebration of Early Modern literature as a moment of pre-lapsarian integration between thought and feeling. The songs of Dowland and the poetry of Shakespeare were thus fully attuned – in a way that Enlightenment and Romantic literature were patently not – to that great Joycean touchstone: life.

Of course, one of the principal reasons why Joyce was drawn to Dowland in the first instance was a shared facility for, and love of, music. The centrality of Joyce's musical imagination has (as remarked at the outset) become an established element of his critical profile, with much research having been dedicated to its analysis in the years since his death (Bauerle 1982, 1993; Bowen 1974). In biographical terms there is Joyce the budding tenor, practising (reputedly) with John McCormack and considering a career as a professional singer; in critical terms we encounter Joyce the encyclopaedia, incorporating hundreds of musical allusions and effects into his writing, especially *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*; while in aesthetic terms there is Joyce the philosopher who finds in music a symbol of the flow and return that he discovers at the heart of human experience (Bucknell 2001). Regarded in these terms, *Chamber Music*, rather than standing as an anomaly within the extended Joycean canon, is perhaps his most representative literary endeavour: certainly it constitutes (as the author himself came to realise) the start from which every subsequent achievement flows.

Joyce appears to have lost patience with the idea of a poetry volume soon after he eloped from Dublin with Nora Barnacle in late 1904. He had by this time commenced *Stephen Hero* and was still working on the short stories that would

become *Dubliners*; he had, in other words, settled on prose as his preferred medium (although he retained a sense of himself as a dramatist and poet throughout his life). But it was clear even then that *Chamber Music* lyrics was more than just juvenilia, and Joyce eventually grasped the good sense (which was by and large the province of his brother Stanislaus) that suggested the lyrics were worth publishing (Ellmann 1983: 260).

Once such a decision had been made, two issues presented themselves: firstly, the musical status of the lyrics; and secondly, the extent to which this group of texts might be regarded as a coherent cycle. With regards to the first issue, it seems clear that Joyce intended from the outset that the lyrics should be set to music, and that this process was central to both the conceptualisation and the identity of the lyrics.¹⁴ There is a key difference, in other words, between a poem which is subsequently set to music and a poem which is deliberately and self-consciously written as a song – albeit a song for which no music as yet exists. The first represents the typical practice of the nineteenth-century art music: musicians such as Franz Schubert or Robert Schumann would take a pre-existing poetic text (their compatriot Heinrich Heine was a popular resource in this regard, for example) and set it to music in what they believed to be a sympathetic fashion; a number of these settings gathered together became a song cycle. This form of *post-facto* collaboration became extremely popular in the century or so before Joyce began writing his lyrics, and many of the most famous names of the classical tradition worked in the form: Beethoven (setting Jetteles) Berlioz (Gautier), Dvořák (Pfleger), Brahms (Tieck), Fauré (Verlaine), Chausson (Maeterlinck), and so on.¹⁵

In an essay entitled “‘After Music’: *Chamber Music*, Song, and the Blank Page’, Adrian Paterson has argued that by conflating its content (which, as we shall see, is significantly musical) with its form, generations of critics have missed the

essentially literary nature of *Chamber Music*. Despite appearances to the contrary, Patterson suggests, it is in essence ‘a volume written to be read and not sung’ (2012: 139). He goes on:

The insistent themes and bibliographic codes asking us to take the poems of *Chamber Music* musically disclose a potential for sonic and sexual interpretation, but we are abandoned naked and without music, leaving their musical and sexual nature suspended. They are *not* sung, innocently or knowingly, and must be read surrounded by the silent white page. So, despite its sonic insistence, *Chamber Music* is found by the skilful reader to be a book about the page and its possibilities (140-1, original emphasis).

Ingenious as such an analysis is, it seems counter-intuitive and a little beside the point to say that *Chamber Music* is in the final analysis more about its own textual nature than about anything in the world (sex or love or music, for example), and thence to infer its essentially unmusical status. Certainly, the lyrics comprising *Chamber Music* – individually and as a collection – may be regarded as proto-modernist exercises in artistic self-reflection; but then so can any text, if the critic is clever enough. To say so much is to ignore what seems most interesting – biographically, critically, philosophically and indeed literarily – about the collection. Joyce envisaged a suite of songs; he wrote the individual lyrics as songs; and he hoped that they would be set to music by competent composers so that both his fame and his pleasure might increase. ‘Without appropriate musical setting’, in short, ‘the lyrics are incomplete’ (Teicher Russel 1993: xvi).

A rather more practical problem attends the structure of the suite. To Tunbridge’s question – whether it is ‘within the scholar’s or performer’s rights to reorder [a collection of texts], in order to enhance its claims to being called a cycle’ (2010: 10) – my answer would be: Most certainly. In fact, many scholars have attempted to devise an ideal sequence for Joyce’s poems based on the various extant

versions. In his essay ‘The Woman Hidden in James Joyce’s *Chamber Music*’ the critic Robert Boyle tracked this process against various hints and pronouncements made by Joyce himself at different times before and after the volume was rather unexpectedly accepted for publication by Elkin Mathews in January 1907. This was the point at which Joyce’s brother Stanislaus was tasked (according to his own account) with pulling together a coherent copy (Nelson 1985; Tindall 1953: 44). In fact, Joyce produced two pre-publication sequences – one of thirty-three lyrics (the Gilvarry MS), one of thirty-four (the Yale MS) before eventually losing interest and passing the project over to his brother. That such a large number of lyrics lend themselves to various possible groupings is undeniable; that Joyce did conceive of them at various points as a coherent suite is incontrovertible;¹⁶ that there is, and is likely to remain, contention as to the ordering of the suite seems inevitable.

The arrangement proposed by Boyle is the one to which I have adhered in my version of the suite; this is because I accept his contention that the revised sequence furnishes the collected poems ‘with the kind of universal human context that Joyce found important in his works, as in his arrangement of *Dubliners* according to the development of human experience through childhood, adolescence, and maturity. In Joyce’s original conception’, Boyle goes on,

the relationship of the lovers (which begins with the appearance of the girl in 4 [III] gradually develops from the first hesitant approach up to the act of consummation (celebrated with religious tone in 17 [XIV] and declines (with a growing intellectualizing about the nature of love and a diminishing of passion) to the death of love in 34 [XXXIV] (1982: 7).

He also invokes Joyce’s letter to Stanislaus from early March 1907: ‘Yet I have certain ideas I would like to give form to: not as a doctrine but as a continuation

of the expression of myself which I now see I began in *Chamber Music*' (quoted in Ellmann 1966: 217). The suite, in short, represents an important element of the Joycean canon – 'the first trial', as Tindall noted in the introduction to his edition, 'of the themes and methods that were to preoccupy Joyce throughout his life' (1954: 3). It's certainly right to acknowledge the boredom, impatience and distraction which caused the author to abandon (or at least ignore) his original conception; but it's not wrong to try to retrieve that original conception as part of a wider understanding of the overall trajectory and impetus of the entire Joycean *oeuvre*.

Joyce composed the lyrics subsequently gathered together in *Chamber Music* as, amongst other things, a series of formal exercises – what the American critic Herbert Howarth called 'essays in style' (1966: 11). At one point, Joyce seems to have anticipated this judgement: 'It is not a book of love verses at all, I perceive' he wrote to Stanislaus in that same letter from March 1907, although 'some of them', he went on, 'are pretty enough to be put to music' (Ellmann 1966: 219). Most of them predate his meeting with Nora Barnacle on 10 June 1904; the Beloved who forms the object of love in the cycle is in this sense an archetype – the kind of beautiful, attractive, sexy, complex woman about whom a gauche young provincial might fantasise meeting. And yet *Chamber Music* does tell a story – a story (as Tindall puts it) 'of young love and failure' (1954: 41). The lonely Lover meets and falls in love with a girl; the arc of the suite moves upwards towards the climax of their relationship, then downwards towards sadness, irony and embittered exile. If this is in essence the story of *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist*, it also anticipates the 'stories' (in however abstract a fashion) related in *Dubliners*, *Giacomo Joyce*, *Exiles*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

Chamber Music is neither a random collection of juvenile love 'pomes', nor the 'elaborate dirty joke' (Scholes 1965: 258) suspected by Tindall (although it

contains elements which speak to each of those readings). Composition may not have commenced with a particular plan in mind; at some point during the process, however, Joyce came to regard these lyrics as part of an integrated creative endeavour – ‘as an attempt’, according to Boyle, ‘at a portrait of himself as artist, as a projection of the woman he desired to meet in the world outside himself ... and as a large philosophy dealing with human love’ (1982: 28).

Following Boyle, then, here is the revised structure of the suite that I worked with when coming to record my own version (the new positions are in Arabic numerals, their 1907 counterparts in Roman):

| | | | | | |
|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| 1 [XI] | 2 [I] | 3 [III] | 4 [II] | 5 [IV] | 6 [V] |
| 7 [VIII] | 8 [VII] | 9 [IX] | 10 [XVII] | 11 [XVIII] | 12 [VI] |
| 13 [X] | 14 [XX] | 15 [XIII] | 16 [XI] | 17 [XIV] | 18 [XIX] |
| 19 [XV] | 20 [XXIII] | 21 [XXIV] | 22 [XVI] | 23 [XXXI] | 24 [XXII] |
| 25 [XXVI] | 26 [XII] | 27 [XXVII] | 28 [XXVIII] | 29 [XXV] | 30 [XXIX] |
| 31 [XXXII] | 32 [XXX] | 33 [XXXIII] | 34 [XXXIV] | 35 [XXXV] | 36 [XXXVI] |

This version adheres to the classical structure of growth, climax and decline (or, in another register, commitment, consummation and alienation) that Joyce seems to have envisaged from an early point in his composition. Thus conceived, it also speaks meaningfully to what would subsequently emerge as a range of key Joycean themes: sex, love, betrayal, history and art – in particular (with reference to the last of these) the relations between literature and music. For if *Chamber Music* is, as I’m claiming here, first and foremost a musical endeavour – ‘a suite of songs’ – then an important question presents itself: What kind of music?

III

That James Joyce was possessed of a sweet tenor voice – ‘exact and pure in pitch and tone, and particularly notable for its clear articulation’ (Curran 1968: 42) – is well known; likewise, the fact that he seriously considered a musical career at various points throughout his early life. ‘Singing’, as Curran put it, ‘was [Joyce’s] release and, unlike other students, his talk was not of his reading’ (1968: 29). Also well established by now is the relentlessly musical nature of Joyce’s muse – the fact that ‘the ineluctable modality of the audible’ (1922: 37) emerges as first among equals in his sensory response to the world. Each of the major prose works is in fact inundated with musical matter at both a conceptual and (especially in the latter two) a formal level (Weaver 1998; Wolf 1999: 125-46). There is a sense, then, in which Joyce (like the Lover in ‘Goldenhair’, the sixth lyric from *Chamber Music*) experienced a career-long compulsion to leave his book and his study in favour of the music calling to him from outside.

Joyce’s writing is inundated with song references, certainly, and these usually engage in some way or other with the ‘meaning’ of the narrative itself (Hidgart and Worthington 1959). In *Ulysses*, for example, references to ‘The Croppy Boy’ – a ballad about a betrayed rebel of 1798 – recur throughout a chapter concerning fathers, sons and betrayal (Bowen 1974: 194-204). At the same time, that chapter (‘Sirens’) was Joyce’s famous attempt at a *fuga per canonem* – that is, an extended piece of writing in which he undertook to render written language according to the precepts of music – using a range of techniques (such as onomatopoeia, puns, neologism and extensive repetition) that militate against language’s dominant signifying function. The result, as Stuart Gilbert wrote in a perceptive early study, was a chapter ‘which both in structure and in diction goes far beyond all previous experiments in the adaptation of musical technique and timbres to a work of literature’ (1930: 239).

In respect of this second (formal) feature, Joyce was contributing to an international cultural sensibility in which a range of modernist writers (such as Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust) were

devising and executing their own separate approaches to literature at a time when ‘music’ for many writers refers obliquely to an art which transcends referential or lexical meaning, and which has the power of some kind of excessive, yet essential, element to which the literary may point, but which it can never fully encompass (Bucknell: 2001: 1).

Joyce’s attempt to engage with his beloved music in literary discourse, in other words, significantly overlapped with a heightened musical sensibility abroad throughout European culture in the decades on either side of the century. In this regard, one might observe that musical Joyce may account in no small part for the success of literary Joyce.

Joyce’s regard for music, then, renders *Chamber Music* far less of an anomaly when regarded in terms of his entire *oeuvre*, and in terms of the cultural milieu within which he was operating. For not only is it a suite of lyrics intended for musical adaptation; it is in large part a story about the power of music and the role it plays in human experience. Music is explicitly invoked in eighteen of the thirty-six lyrics, and its atmosphere prevails throughout. Music can be ‘sweet’ (2), ‘soft’ (3), ‘sedate and slow and gay’ (4), ‘merry’ (6), ‘bold’ (13), ‘courteous’ (15), ‘sighing’, ‘wise’ (19), and ‘sad’ (28); it is made by strings (2), harps (3), pianos (4), bugles (16), bells (19), and pipes (27). Nature itself is replete with music, nowhere more so than in the wind (audible in one fashion or another) which features in ten of the lyrics (3, 8, 9, 12, 15, 17, 23, 30, 33 and 35). Crucially, singing is ubiquitous: the Lover announces his suit in a song (5) only to become entranced in turn by the Beloved’s singing (6); he uses song to entice his Beloved

to consummate their love (13, 15); various choirs offer oblique commentary on the progress of the *affaire* (19, 22, 25); and the estranged lovers sing to each other towards the close of the cycle in ironic reprise (28).

Chamber Music appears to be an archetypal story about love found and lost, one that is locked in to a series of ‘natural’ discourses – weather, the seasons, time, colour, etc. In some respects, that is, it’s entirely typical of the nineteenth-century song cycles it looks to emulate – a form in which, as Laura Tunbridge puts it, ‘[lost] love, distant landscapes and consolation in nature are constant themes’ (2010: 7). But *Chamber Music* is also a reflection (the author’s first significant one) on the *cultural representation* of love, and indeed of human experience in general. Joyce was convinced from an early age that one of the principal forms of such representation is music – hence its prominent role in his artistic imagination. Not only does *Chamber Music* incorporate significant elements of the biblical ‘Song of Songs’; it is, in some respects, a ‘song of songs’ – that is, an extended musical reflection on the cultural power of song. In this, Joyce was once again following his Early Modern preceptors, for as Myra Teicher Russel points out: ‘Since music was so vital a part of life both for Joyce and in Elizabethan times, its frequency and emphasis in their poetry rivals the focus on love’ (1993: 17-18).

IV

Almost as soon as *Chamber Music* appeared composers began to set the lyrics. ‘His open vowels, his breath-conscious rhythms, and his apparent emptiness’, wrote Tindall, ‘were irresistible invitations to composers. It cannot be denied that his poems are songs’ (1954: 36). Harry Levin concurs, writing: ‘The style in general, with its familiar rhymes and assonances, its open vowels, alliterative consonants, and other repetitions, is sensitively aimed to provide the composer with sympathetic occasions for sound effects’ (Teicher Russel 1993: xii). Joyce’s

favourite treatments were by a relatively obscure Anglo-Irish composer named Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer, who eventually set thirty two of the thirty-six lyrics. According to Teicher Russel, Palmer ‘offers art songs at their finest: delicate, sophisticated, faithful to each text without belabouring it, with an appeal both emotional and intellectual’ (1993: 28). This rather staid Anglo-Irish figure remained strangely hesitant when it came to having his adaptations published or performed, however; his editor speculates that he may have been put off by Joyce’s reputation as a *risqué* author (1993: 11).

Others have not been so chary. Amongst the very many who have set one or more of the lyrics from *Chamber Music* in the years since their first publication are: Samuel Barber, Syd Barrett, Luciano Berio, Brian Boydell, Frank Bridge, Anthony Burgess, Ed Harcourt, Stanley Holloway, Ivan Pawle, Mercury Rev, and Gerard Victory.¹⁷ Musical settings of the lyrics from *Chamber Music* have been essayed in many different styles and traditions. Amongst all this material, however, it’s fair to say that treatments from the art tradition have predominated; given Joyce’s own background and tastes, such may indeed constitute the natural musical language with which to approach these lyrics. This is the language of Thomas Moore and Michael Balfe, of John McCormack and Bartell D’Arcy, where high sentiment meets high technique, and where Joyce’s artistry is tempered to a degree by his populism. Despite the depth and breadth of his musical experience (and despite also his wish to invoke the world of the Elizabethan lutanists), the piano-accompanied tenor and the ‘through-composed’ art song remained in many ways Joyce’s musical ideal. Such indeed formed the basis for his approval of Palmer’s settings (at least the ones with which he was familiar).

Nevertheless, the image of the Early Modern Lover accompanying himself on his lute as he sings to or about his Beloved remains a strong reference point

throughout *Chamber Music*. If the musical development of that image (as represented most readily in the figure of John Dowland) leads in one direction towards the through-composed art song, it also retains the possibility of other musical languages; and it was the possibility of exploring and expressing Joyce's lyrics with reference to those other languages that inspired the idea of a new adaptation.

I'm referring in particular to the folky, guitar-playing, singer-songwriter whose work and image feature so strongly within modern popular music.¹⁸ Clearly, that older model (singer and accompanist) hasn't been lost entirely: but the invocation of a more modern tradition (which itself draws heavily on the idea of the minstrel and the troubadour) brings a range of different things to the musical table. And it's the strength and the beauty of that tradition – one singer, one instrument, one song – which my musical partner and I attempted to invoke in our adaptation.

Our intention, in short, was to produce an early twenty-first-century rendering of the suite utilising the styles and idioms of the modern 'folky' singer-songwriter – in particular, that strand of the singer-songwriter tradition which is oriented towards songs of love and loss. The informing idea was thus to suggest a creative confluence between Joyce's highly mannered formal poetry of the early twentieth century and the popular love ballad of the later century; amongst other things, we felt that such an exercise might reveal some of the commonalities of these traditions – in particular, their shared basis in the image of the Elizabethan lutanist singing to / of his beloved.¹⁹

We were well aware that such an idea flies in the face of one established model of song composition: the individual who brings musical and lyrical discourses into perfect alignment so that each is sympathetically supported by the other, with the song itself standing as an expression of the composer's original genius. We

entertain no such pretensions to genius, observing, rather, that everything is connected to everything else; that we are all constantly absorbing influences in conscious and subconscious ways; and that originality (insofar as it may be identified at all) lies in the skill, imagination and vision brought to bear upon pre-existing phenomena. This was, after all, something Joyce himself was aware of, as *Chamber Music* so readily attests.

This idea determined in large part the process of composition. Whereas each individual treatment is ‘original’ (insofar as none is a direct replication of any individual song known to us – which is to say: plagiarised) each was consciously composed with intertextual reference to one or more of the discourses recognisable from a particular style of music popular over the previous half century. With the lyrics already taken care of, those links could be instrumental (as with the utilisation of a particular guitar style, tuning or chord progression, for example) or vocal (as in the utilisation of a particular timbre, phrasing or breathing technique, for example).

The fountainhead of that particular tradition is, of course, Bob Dylan. Especially in early songs such as ‘Girl from the North Country’ (written under the influence of the great English folk singer Martin Carthy), ‘One Too Many Mornings’ and ‘Tomorrow Is a Long Time’, Dylan revealed himself as a master of the bitterly reflective love ballad. We’re not aware of directly ‘quoting’ Dylan in any of the individual compositions on our setting of *Chamber Music*; like anyone over the last five decades who has composed and performed (on guitar) a love / loss ballad, however, we owe him a debt of some kind. Other ‘voices’ from the modern folk tradition who feature in one form or another on the album include: Leonard Cohen, Sandy Denny, Nic Jones, Gordon Lightfoot, Joni Mitchell, Stevie Nicks, Richard Shindell, Paul Simon, James Taylor, and Richard Thompson; listeners

will no doubt discern echoes of other performers whose influence we have inadvertently absorbed.

Another issue engaged during the compositional process was the idea of imposing some form of musical unity upon the suite, in the manner of the song cycle composers of the Romantic era. Tunbridge, for example, claims that Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* (*To the Distant Beloved*, 1816) – which in many ways stands as the fountainhead of the tradition – ‘is a cycle not only by virtue of its text, but also by virtue of the consistency and cross-referencing within its musical design’ (2010: 7).²⁰ This possibility was observed (albeit non-systematically) by the utilisation of a particular guitar tuning named (after its retuned strings) DADGAD. This tuning is popular with folk musicians, principally because it enables a range of effects and colours not readily available in standard tuning (EADGBE). Played by itself, DADGAD provides a sound (a sustained 4th chord) which hovers between major and minor modes; and because *Chamber Music* is in essence a story about failed love, we deliberately chose that tuning as a means to suggest the invariable inter-penetration of those modes, as well as the emotions (for example, happiness / sadness; light / dark; summer / winter, etc.) that are stereotypically associated with them.

Another important difference between our treatment and that which tends to dominate in the art tradition was our willingness to adapt Joyce's lyrics to the requirements of the music, rather than to modify the music to complement the lyric. The reason for this was the employment of strophic form – regular, repeated verses of equal length and stress (a form particularly associated with the folk ballad) – as opposed to through-composed form, in which the music follows the emotional and semantic contours of the lyric. Many of our adaptations feature repetitions of Joyce's material – individual words, lines, or in some cases even entire verses. Some people would no doubt demur at (mis) treating the words of

the master in such a cavalier fashion. Having once embraced the ballad as the prevailing musical language, however, we felt that repetition of those words – as and when warranted by the structure of the song – was perfectly valid. The informing idea is thus less a marriage of words and music, and more an adaptation of the first to the requirements of the second.

A final issue which emerged during the process of adaptation was the author's Irish identity and the extent to which this should (or should not) bear upon the music. There is in fact only one overt reference to Ireland in the entire suite – in No. 23: 'O, It Was Out by Donnycarney', referring to a small village (as was) on Dublin's northside, about four miles from the centre of the city. Such scant engagement with the milieu from which Joyce himself emerged seems to attest to a scepticism with regard to its role or influence on *Chamber Music*; nevertheless, given the obsession with Ireland and Irishness which characterised all Joyce's subsequent work, and given the fact that music looms so large in the cultural history of the nation, this was another potential strand within the suite to which we wished at least to allude.

One could argue that the atmosphere of decline and failure which predominates in the latter part of the cycle represents the author's implicit response to his political inheritance. In such an analysis, the figure of Thomas Moore comes into view, for, as Kevin Whelan argues:

Joyce learned from Moore the power of music to articulate the unspeakable. Moore's *Melodies* ache for a political impossibility, for a vanished world superior to the present, for all that loss and silence seeking again to come to presence and voice. Moore's music echoed across the Irish nineteenth century as a language of the politically unsayable, of the impossible public sphere (2002: 71).

That Joyce was familiar with Moore's *Melodies*, and that he was fully engaged with their cultural significance, is clear from both his biography and his creative output (Bowen 1974). And just as nineteenth-century Ireland ached (in Moore's music) for the lost pleasures of political plenitude, so Joyce's *Lover* aches for the lost pleasures of companionship and sexual fulfilment. If one entertains this analogy, the martial theme of the final song in Joyce's sequence assumes a more ominous resonance than it might otherwise possess, pointing forward to the violence that would dominate Irish experience over the next two decades.

Apart from this speculative link and the reference to 'Donnycarney', however, an identifiable Irish note is signally absent from the *Chamber Music* suite. Our adaptation implies the connection through the use of the DADGAD tuning mentioned above, which, besides the harmonic vacillation already mentioned, is also well set for the Mixolydian, Dorian and Aeolian modes commonly used in Irish traditional music. With its use of melodic ornamentation and rhythmic variation, No. 19 alludes to techniques associated with the traditional singing style commonly known as *sean nós*, whilst also recalling that perennial Irish standard, 'She Moves Through the Fair'. In fact, there are 'Irish' notes throughout our adaptation; but it would be up to the listener to decide where intentional allusion ends and unconscious influence begins.

V

There's no doubt that Joyce was correct in his assessment that *Chamber Music* was 'a young man's book' (Ellmann 1983: 232), full of anxiety and bluster and bluff; if nothing else they served a practical function in convincing him that his true *métier* was prose. Equally certain, however, is Matthew Campbell's assertion that the book stands 'as an illuminating place of origin for the very themes that will continue to occupy Joyce all the way to the end of his career' (2010: 116).²¹

Chamber Music is a remarkable document in a number of respects, not least as a colloquy of influences and traditions, and as a portrait of a great writer's developing technique. The 'fun' that William York Tindall had with the volume is not always kind (and does not reflect particularly well on his own approach). The inevitable question marks that remain as to the process of its composition, its integrity as a coherent endeavour, and the true nature of its concerns beneath all the Elizabethan frippery, should not detract from its status as Joyce's first serious artistic essay.

In writing a song cycle without music, moreover, Joyce has provided his audience an opportunity to engage creatively with his artistic vision. We admire the audacious technique of *Dubliners* and *A Portrait*; we enjoy the encyclopaedic scope of *Ulysses*; we marvel at the discipline and vision of the *Wake*: but these are all restricted engagements in which the reading subject functions as a kind of consumer – taking what the author has provided before attempting to transpose it (or not) into an array of critical, historical, or socio-political narratives. *Chamber Music* invites the consuming subject to exercise the creative imagination in a uniquely Joycean framework – to become, in effect, a collaborator rather than simply a consumer. The textual product of that collaboration is beside the point; what's important from both a critical and a creative point of view is the process itself, and the opportunities it provides to reflect on various aspects of Joyce's experience – including quite centrally his experience as an Irish writer.

Notes

- 1 Gorman had clearly changed his mind before agreeing to write the foreword to Myra Teicher-Russel's publication of 'the lost song settings' in 1993.
- 2 The contract between Joyce and Elkin Mathews (publisher of the first edition) covered rights for musical settings.

3 In an essay of 1965, Robert Scholes claimed ‘I think we can safely say that Joyce began and ended his literary career with a desire to be an Irish poet’ (256).

4 In a letter to William York Tindall (22 April 1953), Stanislaus Joyce said that his brother composed the *Chamber Music lyrics* ‘in his head first, during his wanderings around Dublin, and then wrote them out with corrections, often in odd places’ (Tindall 1954: 99). In a letter to Stanislaus from early March 1907, Joyce writes of wanting to acquire a copy of the volume so that ‘at the top of each page I [may] put an address, or a street so that when I open the book I can revisit the places where I wrote the different songs’ (Ellmann 1966: 219).

5 See Benstock (1976) and McFarland (1987). Stephen was following in the footsteps of recent practitioners such as Edmund Gosse, Austin Dobson and Oscar Wilde. Arthur Symons (who features elsewhere in this account) would go on to edit *A Pageant of Elizabethan Poetry* in 1906.

6 Con Curran writes that ‘Verlaine strongly influenced the verse he was writing’ at this time (1968: 38). Joyce’s translation of ‘*Les Sanglots longs*’ (reproduced in Ellmann [1983], 76) features many of the structural and linguistic characteristics of the *Chamber Music* lyrics.

7 According to Ellmann, Joyce had already set two of Mangan’s poems to music before he read his paper on the nineteenth-century poet before the Literary and Historical Society on 1 February 1902. Curran noted that ‘Stanislaus Joyce says that his brother made settings for some of Mangan’s as well as Yeats’s poems, when living in Glengariff Parade. Thus would have been in 1901 or 1902’ (1968: 14). Elsewhere in his account (41) Curran identifies the poems as ‘Who Will Go Drive With Fergus Now’, Aleel’s song from *The Countess Cathleen*, ‘Impetuous Heart, Be Still, Be Still’, and ‘Had I the Heavens’ Embroidered Cloths’.

8 ‘Like other Irish and English poets of the time,’ Ellmann points out, ‘[Joyce] could not quite keep away from the vocabulary which Yeats had virtually patented, so that words like “dew,” “pale,” and “light footfall” often intrude, though in contexts less ponderable than Yeats’s’ (1967: 454).

9 Symons recommended the book to Elkin Mathews in a letter of 9 October 1906, describing the lyrics as ‘almost Elizabethan in their freshness’ (Ellmann 1983: 232). He repeated this opinion in a favourable review in the *Nation* on 22 June 1907 (Deming 1970: 38-9). In fact Joyce’s influences extend to the Jacobean and Carolingian periods also, which is why I favour the designation ‘Early Modern’ whenever possible.

10 Various authorities have discerned echoes within *Chamber Music* of the work of many poets from the period, including Philip Sidney, Thomas Nashe, Walter Raleigh, Thomas Campion, Robert Herrick, Edmund Waller, Robert Crashaw and Richard Lovelace.

11 Dowland (1976); in particular the last of these titles introduces some of the racier symbolism underpinning Tindall's analysis of *Chamber Music*.

12 In *My Brother's Keeper*, Stanislaus Joyce writes: [My] brother sought out whatever Elizabethan song-books he could find in the National Library and copied out many of Dowland's songs and also one or two by Henry VIII' (1958: 161-2).

13 His former university friend Tom Kettle picked up on this when he wrote (in a review of 1 June 1907) that '[the] inspiration of the book is almost entirely literary. No trace of folklore, folk dialect, or even the national feeling that have coloured the work of practically every writer in contemporary Ireland' (Deming 1970: 37). Note Richard Ellmann's remark, however, that the short stories of *Dubliners*, 'with their grim exactitude and submerged lyricism, had broken away from the Irish literary movement in which, though he denied the fact, his poems fitted pretty well (1983: 166).

14 Joyce refers to '[my] book of songs' in a letter to his mother on 20 March 1903 (Ellmann 1966: 38); and also describes 'Bid Adieu, Adieu, Adieu' as a 'song' in a letter to Stanislaus on 7 February 1905 (80). In another letter he expressed a wish that the lyrics be set to music by '[someone] that knows old English music such as I like' (1966: 219); while in a series of letters to the Anglo-Irish composer Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer throughout 1909 (13 February, 26 April, 19 July, 3 September, 9 November) Joyce consistently referred to *Chamber Music* as a suite and to the individual poems as 'songs' (Ellmann 1966: 227, 244, 261; the April letter is reproduced in Gilbert 1957: 66).

15 On the evolution of the song cycle during the nineteenth century see Tunbridge (2010), 1-23. In 1901 the Dublin-based Italian composer Michele Esposito published *Roseen Dhu*, a song cycle featuring seven poems by the Anglo-Irish poet and folklorist Alfred Perceval Graves. Joyce subsequently met Esposito (in June 1904; the Italian was impressed by the young man's voice, and encouraged him to consider a career) and may have been influenced by his example.

16 When Joyce was encouraged (by the publisher B.W. Huebsch) to add more poems for an American edition, he pointedly refused to do so.

17 So far as I can tell, the prolific American Ross Lee Finney (who specialised in lyric adaptation) remains the only composer to set the entire suite before the present project

18 The definition of 'folk music' is far too complex an issue to be broached here; for some of the Irish contexts see Smyth (2005), 18-24. I use the term loosely in this instance to refer to a broad swathe of post-1960s music which is predominantly acoustic in sound and traditional in orientation.

19 The choice was not entirely without precedent; Tunbridge describes a vogue for ‘folkish’ (2010: 102) song cycles in the late nineteenth century, including work by Grieg, Janáček and Ravel. She also remarks that some of Schubert’s early *lieder* compositions were scored for guitar as well as piano, and that this contributed in no small measure to their popularity (41).

20 In his essay ‘The Romantic Song Cycle as Literary Genre’, Cyrus Hamlin discusses the practice of allegorising ‘the various musical keys in such a way that the mood or manner of every song is judged in terms of its key and the supposed value or significance of that key by association’ (1994: 120).

21 It might be interesting to compare Joyce’s re-visitation of the themes first broached in *Chamber Music* with the ways in which a composer such as Mahler absorbed some of his songs into longer symphonic forms.

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