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Strings in the earth and air

Make music sweet;

Strings by the river where

The willows meet.

There's music along the river

For Love wanders there,

Pale flowers on his mantle,

Dark leaves on his hair.

All softly playing,

With head to the music bent,

And fingers straying

Upon an instrument.

*

Notes

This was No. 1 in the 1907 edition.

Love wanders alone by the river.

First introduction of music, linked here with another of the suite's recurring tropes: nature (river, willows, flowers, leaves). The strings and straying fingers suggest a harp – perhaps the 'invisible' one that will feature in No. 3. This is the first of numerous references to musical instruments (bugles, bells, pipes).

First introduction of two words which will feature throughout: 'sweet' and soft'. Tindall suggested that excessive use of these words contributed to *Chamber Music's* 'reputation for triviality, emptiness, and sentiment' (218).

Tindall regarded 'fingers straying / Upon an instrument' as typical Elizabethan punning for masturbation – if so, a fitting act for lonely Love, and an early instance of one of Joyce's lifelong symbols. Compare with the lyric 'Away with These Self-Loving Lads' from Dowland's *First Booke of Songes*.

'Love' is personified in the manner of Dowland, Jonson and other Elizabethan poets and songwriters.

The contrast between nature and (musical) culture echoes in the contrast between 'pale flowers' and 'dark leaves'. First hints here of a recurring colour motif which Joyce may have picked up from controversial contemporary French novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans. In his memoir of their university days, Joyce's friend Con Curran described how they would 'push these *fin-de-siècle* fancies ... to the correspondence of colours with the sounds of musical instruments and with the sense of taste' (1968: 29).

Curran also described how his friend disdained formal musical training, preferring to learn and play by ear – Joyce, apparently, 'could spend an indefinite time singing at the piano bending with uplifted hands over the keyboard' (1968: 40-1, note imagery of 'bending').

Willows are a traditional symbol of death.

Note the trochaic off-rhyming of 'river' with 'mantle' in the second stanza, and the slow, hesitant rhythm.

The closing image recalls Thomas Campion's (1567-1620) lute song 'To Music Bent is My Retired Mind'.

Ellmann points out that words such as 'pale', 'dew' and 'light attire' are evidence of Yeats's pervasive contemporary influence. There are indeed clear echoes here, as throughout, of various lyrics from *The Wind Among the Reeds*.