



Compte-rendu: Susan Reid, D. H. Lawrence, Music and Modernism

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Susan Reid, *D. H. Lawrence, Music and Modernism*

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REFERENCES

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- 1 In 1984, Anthony Burgess completed a cycle of four songs based on poems by D. H. Lawrence. The cycle, titled *Man Who Has Come Through*, was premiered in Nottingham in 1985 to celebrate Lawrence's centenary. Susan Reid's consideration of Burgess's 'D. H. Lawrence Suite', in an Afterword to her book *D. H. Lawrence, Music and Modernism*, is just one of the fascinating reads in this ambitious monograph.
- 2 So far, Wagner-dominated discussions have made up the bulk of already existing critical literature on D. H. Lawrence's engagement with music. The most groundbreaking study among these is Robert E. Gajdusek's 1959 essay 'A Reading of *The White Peacock*' which does not focus on mere allusion and symbolism only, but also analyses how music-related features are embedded in the very fabric of Lawrence's writings. Karl Krockel's important book *D. H. Lawrence and Germany* (2007) gives valuable insights into Wagnerian influence to reveal how the dynamics of Lawrence's response to the Romantic heritage are manifest on the levels of language, structure and texture. However, *D. H. Lawrence, Music and Modernism* stands out as the first full-blown monograph on the topic of music devoted to the British author and provides a timely contribution to ongoing reassessments of modernism and modernist musical and literary forms. It was published in the Palgrave series of Studies in Music and Literature whose aim is to explore 'how music and literature confront each other as dissonant antagonists while also functioning as consonant companions' (iii). The series already boasts publications devoted to James Joyce, Elizabeth Bishop, and dystopian narrative.

- 3 The impressive scope of the monograph is mapped out in the introductory chapter which contextualises Lawrence's engagement with musical forms within debates about the nature of 'absolute music' and the inter-relatedness of arts. Paving the way to an investigation of how 'contemporary developments in music parallel his quest for new forms of expression' (2), a delve into Lawrence's biographical background reveals that the writer keenly discussed music in letters, displaying knowledge, for instance, of Chladni figures, and regularly attended operas (among others, productions of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at Nottingham Royal Theatre and *Tristan und Isolde* at Covent Garden). Opting for a near chronological approach to Lawrence's oeuvre, Reid discusses how, for Lawrence, music and writing share an affinity with rhythm. Besides the obvious connections, like poems devoted to music ('Discord', 'Piano'), and composers portrayed in his fiction (for instance, Philip Heseltine, alias Peter Warlock, who inspired Julius Halliday in *Women in Love*), Reid's attentive reading of some of Lawrence's essays also brings to attention passages on novel writing couched in musical terms. Each chapter of the monograph, comprising thirteen illustrations, ends with an extensive bibliography, along with an arresting list of recommended listenings that initiates original artistic connections beyond the boundaries of the book.
- 4 Chapter 2 offers a fresh reading of a selection of Lawrence's early poems ('Cherry Robbers', the sequence of rose poems, and the different versions of 'Piano') as it explores how the writer 'comes to terms with the legacies of decadence and Romanticism' (25) through an overtly musical approach to metre. Finding evidence for early musical influences on Lawrence's works, Reid thoroughly documents the folk songs and hymns of the author's Eastwood upbringing and provides compelling insights on the contemporary nationalist developments in British folk song. Besides pointing to how folk songs 'heighten the emotional content of his fiction' (27), Reid claims that Lawrence builds the cadence of his poems on specific features that folk songs share with hymns, often juxtaposing the sacred and the profane, though she acknowledges that Lawrence's debt to religious hymns remains to be fully investigated. Lawrence's use of terms relating to disease, decay and death, in the poems, is contextualised through numerous references to decadent poets together with Romantic and modernist writers and composers. At one point, the argument draws a bold parallel with the decadent poet Ernest Dowson, who adopted the 'ballad-like villanelle' (37), a form traditionally associated with pain and obsession, to combine elements of decadent poetry with 'the fecundity of the folk song' (38).
- 5 The next three chapters analyse how Lawrence, like many of his modernist contemporaries, both resists and refines Wagnerian influence in his fiction. Lawrence's familiarity with the operatic form is the main focus of Chapter 3, where besides referencing mentions of operas in a wide range of novels, Reid identifies recurring allusions to Georges Bizet's *Carmen* as a structuring device of *The White Peacock*. But the bulk of the discussion focuses on *The Trespasser* which abounds with thematic references to Wagner's *Die Walküre* and *Tristan und Isolde*. Lawrence's ambivalence to Wagner stands out in one of his reviews, titled 'German Books', written just after *The Trespasser*, where he takes issue with the literary application of the Wagnerian leitmotif. Reid makes much of Claude Debussy's own resistance to Wagnerian paradigms, found in his use, for instance, of the iconic Tristan chord. (The frequent reference to the Tristan chord becomes itself a leitmotiv in this carefully structured study). Similarly, Reid dwells, for instance, on the tripartite structure of the sonata

form inherited from the Classical period, to bring to our attention other contemporary literary experimentations with musical forms.

- 6 Offering more insights into the inter-relatedness of music and writing, Chapter 4 examines how *The Rainbow* provides literary parallels with the spatial turn in music. The discussion hinges on intriguing analogies with Chladni figures and Arnold Schoenberg's unfinished oratorio *Die Jakobsleiter*, and highlights contrasts with *Das Rheingold*, Wagner's first work to reject more conventional forms of opera. *Parsifal*, Wagner's last completed opera, is associated with the spatial turn in music for, what Reid calls, its 'threshold' moments (not to mention its impressive stage set in Bayreuth Festival Theatre, which included the Grail Hall modeled on The Cathedral of Sienna). Reading *The Rainbow* as 'anti-Parsifal' (89) however, Reid returns to Debussy's sinuous arabesque which resists Wagnerian resolution, to illustrate the cyclic nature of the novel.
- 7 Rounding off the discussion of Lawrence's response to Wagnerian legacy, Chapter 5 expands on the Bakhtinian metaphor of polyphony, itself borrowed from music, to argue that *Women in Love* engages with the modes of Igor Stravinsky (specifically percussions and rhythmic structures) and Debussy (his use of silence), both in dialogue with Wagner. To contextualise her arguments, Reid points to other contemporary composers with references to the works of Arnold Bax, Peter Warlock, and Gustav Holst whose experiments in chromaticism revolutionised traditional harmonic structures. Thus, a wide range of musical developments are called upon to evidence how Lawrence celebrates difference through polyphony.
- 8 Chapter 6 associates the little studied collections of war poems *All of Us* and *Bay* with the postwar novel *Aaron's Rod* to show how musical forms (and writing) had to re-invent themselves, after the war challenged 'the consolation that music can offer' (146). The contemporary musical turn to folk-song, lullabies, Lieder, and poems set to music, pertains to the shift away from large-scale unified forms, such as the opera, towards older traditions of song 'which the Romantics had conceived as fragments' (150). The originality of the study lies in its reading of *Aaron's Rod* as 'an opera-resistant novel' (159) in which fragmentation, widely noted by critics, is enhanced thanks to short pieces of music performed by the titular character and the Marchesa, a former singer. Older traditions of song are certainly inscribed in the multi-layered texture of the poems collected as *All of Us* whose textual genealogy underpins issues pertaining to translation, genre, and the quest for new literary forms. Originally sung by Egyptian fellaheen, these songs had been noted down phonetically by the German Egyptologist Heinrich Schäfer on an excavation site outside Cairo in 1900-1. Two years later, Schäfer published a translation in German of the songs, called *Die Lieder Eines Ägyptischen Bauern*. The humble short pieces inspired Lawrence to transpose them from German into English to depict the hardships of the war.
- 9 The seventh chapter introduces Lawrence as the composer of the score for the play *David* and of the hymns included in the novel *The Plumed Serpent*, both written during his stay on the American continent. Reid's main contention is that Lawrence achieves the very anti-thesis of Western music by adopting native rhythms over melody or harmony. In some compelling pages, Reid thoroughly documents how, besides flourishing hybrid musical forms derived from European folklore and orchestral music, Native and African-American rhythms and instruments became the foundation of musical developments in America, championed by the Czech Antonin Dvořák who, in

1892, was appointed director of the National Conservatory of Music of America. While acknowledging the obvious biblical sources of the hymns in *The Plumed Serpent*, Reid highlights the role of the drum-beat and thud of the dancers' feet, which provide the Mexican revival with 'the religious impetus for a community based on shared rhythm rather than the melody of individualised emotion' (177). Similar Native American influences are claimed to have been embedded in the play *David* (although percussion instruments such as tambourines, or 'timbrels' and 'tabrets', are mentioned in the Bible) possibly in a critical move away from the full Western orchestra of previous works devoted this biblical episode. Since parallels with contemporary musical experiments dominate the study, an examination of the oratorio *Le Roi David* by the Swiss composer Arthur Honegger performed in a revised version in London in March 1927, two months before the first performance of Lawrence's *David*, would have been relevant here because of its wide range of innovative compositional techniques.

- 10 *D. H. Lawrence, Music and Modernism* testifies to the manifold musical shifts taking place in Lawrence's time and to the literary applications they inspired. This modernist blending of arts, which has been discussed elsewhere on the topics of painting, dance, and sculpture by other scholars, fits in wider thematic, formal and philosophical issues raised in Lawrence's oeuvre. Like musical pieces, the book ends with a coda, itself followed by a comprehensive list of Lawrence's works set to music, which opens more avenues of research. Although written in a dense style due to the scope of references and original parallels, the study remains accessible and will benefit scholars with an interest in the modernist inter-relatedness of arts.

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