RSAJournal
2024, vol. 35
ISSN: 1592-4467

DOI: 10.13135/1592-4467/10159
rsa.aisna.net

"Between the Key of Hope and the Atonal Slash of Nothingness"

Musical Meaning in Richard Powers' *Orfeo*

Stefano Franceschini

"Sapienza" University of Rome
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8953-8491
EMAIL: stefano.franceschini@uniroma1.it

Abstract

This article investigates the phenomenon of musical meaning in Richard Powers' *Orfeo* (2014) through the lens of intermediality and philosophy of music. I am interested in the protagonist's recurring motto – "music doesn't mean things. It *is* things" (69, passim) – as a conceptual cue to investigate both his conflicted musical identity, and the ways in which it reflects on the novel's broader context as well as on its implied message that music is capable of signifying something other than itself.

Keywords

Intermediality, Musical meaning, Musical narrative, Orfeo, Richard Powers

Introduction

In his autobiography, Igor Stravinsky claims that music is "essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind,

a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature," adding that "*expression* has never been an inherent property of music" (53). The Russian composer's ideas fall within the scope of what is generally known as musical formalism: that is, the view that music is incapable of expressing emotions (let alone representing non-musical or extramusical content), and that "musical meaning lies exclusively within the context of the work itself" (Meyer 1). Before Stravinsky, musical formalism had already been established by Austrian musicologist Eduard Hanslick who, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, claimed that the only objective possibly attributable to music, a "self-subsistent form of the beautiful" (17), is the creation of a patterned sequence of sounds without any extramusical correlate: "The [musically] beautiful is not contingent upon, or in need of any subject introduced from without, but [...] it consists wholly of sounds artistically combined" (66). From this standpoint, music would thus possess no meaning, if by meaning we intend, as Charles Sanders Peirce suggests, the constellation of mental representations elicited by a signifier conventionally associated with a segment of reality, or an abstraction thereof (31). That instrumental music has no capacity to (more or less) unequivocally denote or refer to an external object, entity, thought, or concept as language does would apparently legitimate Hanslick's and Stravinsky's philosophically negative positions. However, as proposed by interpretive semiotics, communication is a much more complex phenomenon than a straightforward, interference-proof transmission of content from a messenger to an addressee. Peirce defines the sign "as anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately [*sic*] determined by the former" (80-81). For semiosis (the production of meaning) to occur, interpretation on the receiver's end is essential, as also noted by Umberto Eco in his theory of signs: "Substitution (aliquid stat pro aliquo) is not the only necessary condition for a sign: the possibility of interpretation is necessary as well" (43). The message, as Lawrence Kramer puts it, "does not consist of an item that is neatly packaged and transmitted" ("Speaking of Music" 23). Even making sense of the simplest lexical units relies on the activation of multiple decoding functions that are always rooted in subjective interpretation. If Hanslick and Stravinsky are right, how could

we explain, then, that music is written, performed, listened to, and talked about for reasons other than mere contemplation of beauty? What would the rationale be for film soundtracks, tonal painting, and ritual music? Additionally, one cannot simply ignore that music has been granted, at least for the last three centuries, its own intellectual domain and metalinguistic apparatus, founded as it was on aesthetic as well as affective qualities (Grant 39-40).

Particularly since Modernism, literature has featured an "increasing number of authors […] who purport to approach 'the condition of music' in their writings" (Wolf, "The Role of Music" 294): E.M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, T.S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, Toni Morrison, and Jennifer Egan are just a few notable examples. Among writers who seem to find in music a steadfast source of inspiration is Richard Powers. He has authored three novels overtly dedicated to the subject: *The Gold Bug Variations* (1992), *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), and *Orfeo* (2014). Emily Petermann coined the term "musical novel" – or at least claimed its theoretical autonomy – to designate those fictional narratives that make quite a consistent use of music as a structuring device. As Petermann points out, "a musical novel […] is musical not primarily in terms of its content, but in its very form" (2). While I consider Petermann's theorization of this literary category not only a fit descriptor for works such as Morrison's *Jazz* – a book which the author, as she openly admits in the preface, conceived as an attempt to imitate the namesake genre's techniques and mechanisms – but also a seminal contribution to the field of musico-literary studies in general, its scope fails to account for those novels in which music integrally sustains the narrative at the content-level and suggests alternative epistemic pathways for both characters and reader.

Asked about the role of music in his writing, Powers states that it

> has to do not just with taking music as an organizing principle or approach or set of concerns, but with using music itself as the primary subject matter of a novel. I did that with the three novels that are called my music books. In those novels, I tried not just to put into words the effect of sound on makers and listeners but also to depict music as a cultural activity, as a social act, a historical act, a political

> act, and to use music not just as the window dressing, the color, of the story but for the story matter itself. ("A Conversation" n. pag.)

Drawing on theories of intermediality and philosophy of music, my study investigates the meaning of music in Richard Powers' *Orfeo* by demonstrating that musical narratives function just as efficaciously at the level of content. Taking as a conceptual and textual cue a recurring phrase in the novel – "music doesn't mean things. It *is* things" (Powers, *Orfeo* 69, passim) –, I intend to explore the protagonist's conflicted musical identity, and how it interacts with the novel's broader context as well as with *Orfeo*'s implied message that music, contrary to a misleadingly literal interpretation like those already mentioned, is in fact capable of producing meaning.

Orfeo's Musical Thematization

Equally inspired by the Orpheus myth and the case of Critical Art Ensemble founder Steve Kurtz, *Orfeo* tells the story of Peter Els, a 70-year-old retired avant-garde composer. Following decades of obscure compositions, Peter wants to encode a string of music into the DNA of a substantially harmless bacterium (Serratia Marcescens) "*to break free of time and hear the future*" (Powers, *Orfeo* 2).[1] After the death of his dog, Fidelio, Peter naively calls the police who, noticing his suspicious-looking lab equipment, alert the Joint Security Task Force about the presence of "bacterial cultures in the house" (43). When the FBI raid his house, Peter panics and leaves town, thus encouraging the media to feed the public a sensationally distorted image of the composer, now renamed "Biohacker Bach" (265).

Set "*in the tenth year of the altered world*" (1), *Orfeo* contrapuntally intersperses Peter's suspenseful westward escape across the country with a series of flashbacks that function as a window into the composer's musical

---

[1] Throughout the novel, italics are always used to signal the characters' direct speech, except for the prologue (narratively framed as an "Overture"), from which the above quote is taken.

past, from childhood until the beginning of his bioengineered project. Fusing tropes and motifs typical of the road novel (Fernández-Santiago 126) and the Bildungsroman, Powers elects music as the novel's primary thematic surface within which the two narrative trajectories interlock. The myth of Orpheus serves as the book's predominant intertextual reference. Peter's entire career can be described as intrinsically orphic: his mission to "*scribble down the tune that would raise everyone he ever knew from the dead*" (Powers, *Orfeo* 221), "to write music that would twist your gut" (235) and achieve "*the restoration of everything lost and the final defeat of time*" (210), are evocative not only of Orpheus' attempt to bring Eurydice back from the dead, but also of his power to move even the Maenads to tears (Ovidio, tenth book, lines 45-48). The recontextualization of the myth also functions "as a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance" (Eliot 175) to the chaotic plurality of post-9/11 America, which Powers attempts to reproduce by designing a story structurally arranged around the interplay between genetics, surveillance tactics, and (of course) music. These themes are experienced in the novel "as recollections, unsuspected connections, or spontaneous and unpredictable occurrences" (Fernández-Santiago 144).

All that it takes to set the story in motion is Els' dog's sudden death and the inadvertent call to 911 the protagonist places without thinking about the suspicions that his DIY biology lab would raise with the police. Peter's new passion for genetic manipulation is clearly indebted to the real case of Steve Kurtz, an American artist specialized in anticonformist, biotechnological art creations. Kurtz was investigated in 2004 for a project that involved the "testing for the presence of genetically altered genes [...] in store-bought groceries" (Sholette 53), and even though all initial charges of bioterrorism were dropped, Kurtz was indicted for the "alleged mishandling of bacterial samples purchased from a scientific house supply" (53). Here, music acts as the cohesive agent of a novel that is concerned with both the perceived weaponization of art (Powers, *Orfeo* 91), as a disruptive force "through the underworld of the contemporary culture of fear" (Powers, "A Fugitive Language" n. pag.) and the story of an (anti)

hero trying to bring something back from the dead with the sole aid of his musical craft.[2]

Peter's musical passion dates back to his childhood years. Even flunking a clarinet competition at seven does nothing but consolidate his commitment to music: after his mother tells him that it was ok to perform the way he did, "[h]e pulls free of her, horrified. *You don't understand. I* have *to play*" (Powers, *Orfeo* 15). At college, Peter "f[alls] in love with chemistry. The pattern language of atoms and orbitals made sense in a way that little else but music did. […] The symmetries hidden in the columns of the periodic table had something of the Jupiter's grandeur" (31).[3] To the future composer, however, the two disciplines are nothing but "each other's long-lost twins […]. The structures of long polymers reminded him of intricate Webern variations […]. The formulas of physical chemistry struck him as intricate and divine compositions" (57). The isomorphic relationship between science and art, here represented by chemistry and music, clearly hints at that same network of equivalences that Stuart Ressler identifies between Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and molecular biology in *The Gold Bug Variations*. In Powers' first musical novel, Ressler, "a mind that looked for the pattern of patterns" (*Gold Bug* 195), heuristically reaches the conclusion that Bach's music and DNA mirror each other: "After intensive, repeated listening, I could hear the first suggestion of what had covertly fascinated me. The strain separated like an independent filament of DNA […]. I had found my model of replication" (194).

When Peter listens to Mozart's *Jupiter* for the first time, what he experiences is "a trapdoor open[ing] underneath" his feet, while "the first floor of the house dissolves above a gaping hole" (Powers, *Orfeo* 17-18). The connections between the mathematics of the piece and the notes themselves are not only heard as "the maps back to that distant planet" (19) that Peter had momentarily set foot on, but clarify no less importantly the reason why Peter sees chemistry and music as "each other's long-lost

---

[2] See Reichel ("Musical Macrostructures") for an in-depth analysis of the structural analogies that the novel borrows from music (from Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo*).

[3] "Jupiter" is the popular name which Mozart's Symphony no. 41 in C major, K. 551 is usually known as.

twins" (57). "Interconnectedness," a signature trait already rehearsed to great effect in Power's oeuvre – especially in *The Gold Bug Variations*, *Galatea 2.2* (1995), *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), *The Echo Maker* (2006), and *The Overstory* (2018) – is, according to Alexander Scherr, "one of the leading philosophical and aesthetic principles of his fiction" (283), in which "different discourses, different temporal or conceptual frames jarringly meet, overlap, or interpenetrate" (Ickstadt 28). This semantics of interconnection echoes Tom LeClair's notion of systems novel. Building on a number of systems theorists, LeClair postulates the systems novel as a typically postmodern literary alignment to a broader paradigm shift from mechanical philosophy to a more comprehensive epistemology rooted in the natural sciences (6-8). Quoting social theorist Anthony Wilder, LeClair conceptualizes a literary genre that parallels the "radical change in the theory of knowledge," in which "the new territory staked out by any one discipline, science, or movement cannot be comprehended except in relation to all others" (7).[4]

While the kind of novels that, according to LeClair, inhabit a cultural region "that asserts the efficacy of literature and leads readers to contest and possibly reformulate the mastering systems they live within" (1) are usually massive, both in terms of intellectual range and material size, *Orfeo* is decisively less imposing than its two musically inflected predecessors. However, with its 350 pages, it still participates in the same transgression of disciplinary and medial boundaries common to LeClair's systems narratives. Moreover, by bridging the gap between science and art at the

[4] The inextricable link between systems and meaningful relationality – which echoes Ishmael's thoughts in Melville's *Moby-Dick* about there not being any "quality in this world that is what it is merely by contrast" (850) – interestingly dovetails with the interconnective quality inherent to musical discourse that Powers' *The Gold Bug Variations* and *The Time of Our Singing* bring to the fore. In the former, Franklin Todd argues that "the trick to listening […] is to hear the pieces speaking to one another" (395); in the second of Powers' musical books, which focuses on music as an integrative, driving force to unveil and overcome racial boundaries (Reichel, "Fictionalising Music" 148-49), Joseph Strom assumes that "a piece was what it was only because of all the pieces written before and after it. Every song sang the moment that brought it into being. Music talked endlessly to itself" (Powers, *The Time of Our Singing* 58).

beginning of the novel, the unfolding story is better equipped to present the reader with several instances of textually mediated musical experience, to which German intermediality scholar Steven Paul Scher gave the name of "verbal music," a technique that applies to "any literary presentation (whether in poetry or prose) of existing or fictitious musical compositions: any poetic texture which has a piece of music as its 'theme'" (149). Other than fictionalizing a musical work through the use of verbal signifiers, according to Scher, "such poems or passages often suggest characterization of a musical performance or of subjective response to music" (149).

Verbal music is thus any portion of text which attempts to capture in words a musical piece through a character's or narrator's own (emotive, psychological, analytical) reaction to said music. It "aims primarily at poetic rendering of the intellectual and emotional implications and suggested symbolic content of music" (152). Decades later, Wolf would describe Scher's notion as "a form of covert musical presence in literature [...] which evokes an individual, real or imaginary work of music and suggests its presence in a literary work by referring to it in the mode of thematization" (*Musicalization* 64). Thus, the significance of verbal music lies in its power to "supply what is tendentially absent in music: a referential content" (63; emphasis added).

The novel's first major episode of such fictionalized music occurs when Peter, after the death of Fidelio, "looks for something to play for his dog's funeral. He lands on Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*: five songs lasting twenty-five minutes" (Powers, *Orfeo* 28). Before introducing a linguistic rendition of Mahler's music, the narrator provides a brief account of the compositional backstory of the song cycle. *The Songs on the Death of Children* are based on five of a group of more than 400 poems written by Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) – also titled *Kindertotenlieder* (1833-1834) – following the death of two of his children by scarlet fever. "The story would stay with Peter better than the details of his childhood" (33): during his convalescence from a severe hemorrhage, Mahler decides to set five of Rückert's poems to music (Carr 98), but to Alma, Mahler's wife, the content of the songs is too morbid, Gustav being a father of two himself: "For God's sake, don't tempt fate! But tempting fate was music's job description" (Powers, *Orfeo* 34).

And fate was tempted indeed, because a few years later Alma and Gustav's eldest daughter would also die of scarlet fever (Reik 315).

The description of the effects produced on Peter Els – voiced through the novel's third-person narrator – by Mahler's first song, "Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgehn" (the English title is "Now the Sun Wants to Rise So Brightly"), is strikingly evocative: "At first, there's only a thread of frost spreading across a pane. Oboe and horn trace out their parallel privacies. The thin sinews wander, an edgy duet built up from bare fourths and fifths" (Powers, *Orfeo* 34). The alternating major and minor modes of the opening song are imbricated in a dialectical interaction between "bright and dim, peace and grief, like the old hag and lovely young thing who fights for control of the fickle ink sketch" (34-35), with the final thrills of the glockenspiel "throwing off glints from a place unreachable by grief," a grief most likely symbolized by the key reverting to D minor.[5] The second song oscillates between "clarity and cloud" too, while "the cadence on the dominant" of the third one (the dominant being the fifth degree of a scale; since the referenced song is in C minor, the dominant note would be G) feels like "the sound of false recovery" (37). The cycle ends in a "storm," slightly after what "felt like the first flash of real light in the whole cycle" (37), as the glockenspiel makes its final comeback to express a "funeral chime, a light in the night" (38).

Powers deploys the technique of verbal music for other musical works that find their way into the novel and that resonate with the protagonist's experience, including Olivier Messiaen's *Quatour pour la fin du temps* (*Quartet for the End of Time*, 1941).[6] While Mahler lends dignity to Fidelio's burial, Messiaen contributes to highlight Peter's condition as a victim of political

---

[5] Although widely adopted during the Baroque period and by no means an irrefutable paradigm, according to the musical theory of affects, D minor was originally associated with melancholy and "humorous brood" ("Affective Musical Keys" n. pag.).

[6] Another piece that figures in the novel and that further frames the ominous climate of fear around Peter is Dmitri Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* (1937). Shostakovich composed the symphony in response to a harshly negative review of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1934) that appeared in *Pravda*: "From the first minute, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, by a confused stream of sound. […] To follow this 'music' is most difficult; to remember it, impossible" ("Muddle" n. pag.).

powers beyond his control. The framing device for the presentation of the verbally rendered piece is a course on twentieth-century classical music that the protagonist regularly teaches at an assisted living facility. After giving an outline of the tragic, historical circumstances of the piece – Messiaen composed the eight-movement quartet during his imprisonment at a German concentration camp in 1941[7] – Powers sets out to sketch a suggestively accurate transcription of the work. The eight movements of the quartet sound like a "whirling solar system [that] would take four hours to unfold its complete circuit of nested revolution"; the piano "descend[s] in waterfalls of chords," while the "violin and cello, in a unison chant, wander as far from this camp as imagination can reach" (115). "[B]urnt in the crucible of the war," the final movement emerges "out of a cloud of shimmering E major chords – the key of paradise" (117). As stated by the composer himself, "the piece was directly inspired by [. . .] Revelation" (qtd. in Rischin 129) with the objective to guide "the listener closer to infinity, to eternity in space" (129). To achieve such a spiritual communion between time and music (the temporal art par excellence), Messiaen resorted to fermata (that is, a long pause to stretch a note or a rest), which, according to music professor Michel Arrignon, is "symbolic of eternity, but eternity in all of its horror – in the abyss" (60). The profoundly synesthetic nature of the quartet, in its combination of light, colors, motion and material that one can read in both the novel and the composer's own program notes, clearly exhibits the narratively relayed susceptibility of music to produce meaning.

Towards Peter's "Great Song of the Earth"

If Mahler's tragic songs are an appropriate soundtrack to Peter's dog's funeral, offering the protagonist (and the reader) a chance to reminisce about the moment when he first heard the piece, it is also true that Mahler's music paves the way for a "pedagogical parricide" (Powers,

[7] 1941 is also the year Peter was born.

Orfeo 92). After meeting in the early 1960s with Matthew Mattison, an extravagant music teacher described as a "study for a bust in tomorrow's Museum of Iconoclasm" (93), Peter is eventually convinced by Mattison that "*Mahler was a not a real composer*," and that "*the point of music is to wake listeners up*," not "*move* [its] *listeners*" (94). The two men fight for weeks over their initially differing conceptions of music and its functions, with Peter trying "to revive the once-audacious inventions of the past and make them dangerous again," and Mattison "dismiss[ing] his études as pretty sentiment" (95). It is around this moment in the protagonist's life and artistic journey that he begins to develop his personal theory of music, arguing that "music doesn't mean things" but "*is* things" (69), a refrain-like slogan which frequently recurs in the novel. Yet, Peter is torn between his romantic pieces and the destructive power of "modern music," in Adorno's terms, or, to use the narrator's words, "between the key of hope and the atonal slash of nothingness" (Powers, *Orfeo* 69). Els feels himself creeping "between camps like a Swiss diplomatic courier," as he tries to make a choice between "radiant versus rigorous, methodical versus moving" (96); indeed, later in the novel he is also accused of being "*a damn centrist*" (139). Peter's early work is frowned upon by his colleagues and mentors, who all agree – coherently with the countercultural climate of the time – that "[a]rt was combat, an exhausting struggle" (91), and that composers should neither be seeking from the public an emotional response, nor treat music as a representational medium. Eventually, Peter "learn[s] how to weaponize art" (91), guided by the same principles professed by Kurtz and the Critical Art Ensemble, whose major goal was to creatively "re-invent new ways of responding critically to contemporary social and political reality" (Sholette 52).

The protagonist's struggle also reflects on his relationship with two other characters, Maddy Corr and Richard Bonner. Peter meets his future wife, Maddy, at the audition for an unconventional song cycle inspired by Jorge Luis Borges' fiction. Their marriage, however, lasts only a few years, because Peter, too invested in composing the score to an avant-garde street theater piece to salvage a relationship already strained by his out-of-state commuting, has already chosen music over everything else: "Music was pouring out of him, music that danced and throbbed and

shouted down every objection. Composing was all he wanted to do, all he *could* do, and he would it now with all he had" (Powers, *Orfeo* 211). The work, titled *Immortality for Beginners*, had been commissioned to Peter by his long-time Mephistophelian partner in crime Richard Bonner, an eccentric choreographer with whom he would collaborate again for the only work that Peter managed to get some recognition for – *The Fowler's Snare*, an operatic adaptation of the religious uprising of Münster (1534-1535) which eerily foreshadowed the 1993 Waco massacre.[8] Richard is the one who charges Peter with being a musical centrist who "*will never make anything but steamy, creamy, lovely shit*" (217), which sounds peculiar considering that *Immortality* was met with mixed reactions at best: "The *Times*," we read, "admired the choreography's giddy novelty and called the music of thirty-nine-year-old Peter Els evasive, anachronistic, and at times oddly bracing. But this reviewer admits to leaving after an hour and fifty-three minutes" (216).

It is possible to think of the triadic connection between Maddy, Richard and Peter as a corollary of a quasi-Hegelian dialectics, as the characters respectively seem to embody thesis (tonality), antithesis (uncompromising avant-garde music) and synthesis (Peter's inner musical conflict). When Maddy remarries, Peter learns that at the wedding "the music was straight-up Mendelssohn" (215). Here, Mendelssohn implies not just the traditional wedding march that he wrote in 1842, but also indexically signifies the kind of music that Spanish philosopher José Ortega Y Gasset condemned as qualitatively inferior compared to the music of Stravinsky or Debussy: "To prefer Mendelssohn over Debussy is a subversive act: it is tantamount to celebrating the inferior and violating the superior. The honored public that applauds the 'Wedding March' and boos the great modern composer's 'Iberia' is guilty of artistic terrorism" (242).[9]

---

[8] The "Waco Massacre" was a fifty-one-day siege initiated by the FBI following a failed raid by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) against the Branch Davidians, a fanatical religious group cult led by David Koresh whose headquarters were located near Waco, Texas (Monroe n. pag.).

[9] "Preferir Mendelssohn a Debussy es un acto subversivo: es exaltar lo inferior y violar lo superior. El honrado público que aplaude la 'Marcha nupcial' y silba la 'Iberia' del egregio moderno ejerce un terrorismo artístico" (translation mine).

Peter narratively exemplifies that aesthetic locus where diverging musical concepts and beliefs are continuously negotiated: tradition and innovation, tonality and atonality, romanticism and serialism. The fact that music welcomes such a diverse host of (here deliberately simplified) polarities only attests to its synergic, cross-domain quality. As British musicologist Philip Tagg points out, music is "a meaningful system of non-verbal sound" that

> lets us mix elements from any of the six domains of representation into an integral whole. It's an activity allowing us to represent combinations of signals from its constituent domains in one symbolic package rather than in merely linguistic, social or somatic terms. (66)[10]

Despite his hubristic compositional method falling upon obscure, post-classical music for just "a handful of listeners" (Powers, *Orfeo* 211), Peter is not immune to regretting his musically determined life choices. Unable to see "why he ever signed on for the full Faust ride," Peter comes to realize "that what the world really needs is a lullaby simple enough to coax a two-year-old to lay down her frantic adventure each night for another eight hours" (182). While his works fully subscribe to the principle that "music doesn't mean things," thus reverberating Hanslick and Stravinsky's ideas, Peter's imaginative predisposition to musical interpretation does challenge the "superiority of being over meaning in music" (Balestrini 21) implied by his own slogan.

If taken at face value, Peter's dictum that music is in no condition to produce meaning would leave little to no room for interpretation, unless his mantra is read against his bacteriological experiment. A few weeks before Fidelio's death, Peter experiences an Emersonian moment of clarity at the park, where, after scraping some mud off of his shoes, he reckons that those "billions of single-cell organisms" living in the dirt must have "encoded songs, sequences that spoke to everything that had ever happened to him" (Powers, *Orfeo* 332): all around him, sound "was pouring out of everywhere"

---

[10] These domains are the emotional, (gross) motoric, (fine) motoric, linguistic, social and physical (Tagg 64).

(332). It is precisely "in that moment the idea came to him" (333). Peter is familiar with musically transcribed strings of DNA, a phenomenon which Ross D. King and Colin G. Angus had already described as "protein music" (251) in a 1996 article published in the journal *Bioinformatics*. Protein music is fundamentally "the analysis of protein sequence information using [...] the sense of hearing to analyse data" (251). But the "real art," according to Peter, "would be to reverse the process, to inscribe a piece for safekeeping into the genetic material of a bacterium" (333). Genetically spliced music paves the way for Peter's magnus opus, a music beyond the idea of music itself: invisible, unhearable, ethereal; in other words, "his great song of the Earth at last – music for forever and for no one..." (333). "With luck," ponders Peter, "during cell division, the imposter message would replicate for a few generations, before life got wise and shed the free rider. Or maybe it would be picked up, inspired randomness, and *ride forever*" (142). The idea of a virtual music endlessly replicating and circulating "into the biosphere, where it will live and copy itself for a while" (359) is a nod to Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," where at the end of verse 6 the poet writes that "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (*Leaves of Grass* 35, lines 129-30). The connection to Whitman is explicitly instated by Powers, who has Peter incorporate the poem's sixth stanza into the lyrics of one of his early compositions: "He had the perfect text, the end [sic] of Whitman's 'Song of Myself.' [...] He studied the words for days, listening to the sounds contained in them" (Powers, *Orfeo* 61-62).[11] The image of the soil rich with millions of species that the composer wipes off from his shoes is also evocative of other lines from Whitman's poem – "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (*Leaves of Grass* 89, lines 1339-40) – which are directly quoted in the novel (Powers, *Orfeo* 242, 311, 315). These lines precisely touch upon the motif of regeneration and life's endless cycle that is particularly distinctive of the poem's concluding stanza. In the words of Ed Folsom and Christopher Merrill, Whitman eventually "dissipates into

[11] The last line of the stanza is hinted at in multiple other passages of the novel (61, 64, 68, 106, 130, 238, 369).

the landscape, where we will find him nowhere and everywhere, growing from the grass he loves, composted into the dirt beneath our 'boot-soles.' Every atom belonging to him now as well belongs to us and to the living world around us" (*Song of Myself* 184).

Peter's music has semiotically gone full circle: his bacteriological composition bears now so direct a meaning, that the music ends up being the very thing it is supposed to stand for, in this case, life's endless proliferation – or, to put it differently, immortality. Such coincidence between matter and meaning differs greatly from the recursive self-signification endorsed by Hanslick, who claimed that "[o]f music it is impossible to form any but a musical conception, and it can be comprehended and enjoyed *only in and for itself*" (70; emphasis added). In fact, besides offering interesting solutions such as the sound-based data analysis mentioned above, the 'DNA-music' equivalence – a fruitful epistemological correspondence in *The Gold Bug Variations*; a concrete (however intangible the composition may be) communion between notes and genes in *Orfeo* – allows to directly engage with the debate of how meaning is generated through analogies. Cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter argues that "using th[e] image of ribosome as tape recorder, mRNA as tape, and protein as music" leads to identifying

> some beautiful parallels. Music is not a mere linear sequence of notes. Our minds perceive pieces of music on a level far higher than that. We chunk notes into phrases, phrases into melodies, melodies into movements, and movements into full pieces. Similarly, proteins only make sense when they act as chunked units. (525)

Yet, Peter's transcendentally musical defeat of time comes at a price. Towards the end of the novel, after meeting with Richard (now an Alzheimer's patient participating in a clinical trial), Peter sets up a Twitter account choosing the username "@Terrorchord," under which he will post a series of tweets "proving that he was this year's fugitive" (Powers, *Orfeo* 350). It is Richard who first recommends that Peter should indulge the nation's accusations of terrorism and "*say that it's all out there, spreading.* [...] *An epidemic of invisible music*" (346). Only at this point in the narrative

does the reader realize that the ambiguous quotes and aphoristic excerpts scattered throughout the text and signaled by a change of font are Peter's serialized, digital confession. Eventually located at his daughter's house by the FBI after being on the run for days, Peter defyingly embraces the idea of death and starts rushing towards the agents waiting outside, as he holds a "bud vase [that] will look much like lab glassware in the dark" (369).

Conclusions

Unable to unwaveringly choose either side of the debate concerning musical meaning, Peter Els opts for a musical experimentation that, if anything, only strengthens music's perceived capacity to prompt a combination of interpretive responses on the listener's part. As Nassim Balestrini remarks, "[E]ven if Els's DNA notation concentrates on what he considers music's essential being, he cannot escape the subjective meaning that the composition has for him, for Maddy, and for Sara," (25) – Peter's daughter –, as well as for the fictive American public (who overinterprets Peter's musical harmless bacteria as a terrorist threat) and even for the novel's empirical readers. To elucidate his statement that "music is unable to express anything at all," Stravinsky added that if music succeeds in communicating something outside itself, it is only "an additional attribute which, by tacit and inveterate agreement, we have lent it, thrust upon it, as a label, as a convention" (53-54). Although meaning (especially of a musical kind) is always highly dynamic and dependent on context and personal experience, there is no sufficient cause to dismiss the possibility of an intersubjectively shared extra-sonorous supplement.[12] Despite music's lack of a comparatively immediate referential component, "addressing the nonverbal, communicating indirectly what cannot be directly conveyed by words, is one of the most traditional functions of language, and one of the

[12] The universality of music lies not so much in a sort of metaphysical, univocal signification common to multiple cultures as in the fact that every culture seems to make and listen to music, as confirmed by Theodor Gracyk: "While it is false that music is a universal language, music-making is a universal human activity" (174).

richest in terms of technique" (Kramer, *Musical Meaning* 14), a lesson that Powers aptly appropriates through the textually fecund incorporation of twentieth-century art music, including Mahler and Messiaen.

Mahler's grief-stricken song cycle and Messiaen's transcendental, time-arresting composition allow Powers to qualify Peter's seeming conviction "that music doesn't mean things," thus establishing a poignant connection between their sonic meaningfulness and the diegetic circumstances of their textual reproduction. In my opinion, the musical works that are extensively thematized in the novel engage in a feedback loop of reciprocal connotations with Peter's life stages – an operation that serves to emphasize the signifying capability of music in what can be seen as a triangulation between sound, written text and narrative context. In regards to the relationship between written word and music, Joseph P. Swain maintains that "when a different set of words is applied to music and the fit seems apt, it means that the new text provides a context that is still appropriate and whose meaning is well within the semantic range of the original music" (142). In the verbal music passages of *Orfeo*, the text is indeed complementary to the contour, tonal content, and other attributes of the music reproduced, whose "potential meanings" are thus actualized "out of vast semantic ranges of those pieces" (141).

By turning to music "not just as the window dressing" (Powers, "A Conversation" n. pag.) but making it the cultural, existential, psychological and political drive of the story, *Orfeo* redefines Petermann's category of musical novel, demonstrating that fictional narratives may not only find in music a productive arsenal of "structural analogies" to organize their "textual materiality" (Wolf, *Musicalization* 58), but can also distillate music's most profound meaning. Thus, *Orfeo* enacts that "most traditional functio[n] of language" (Kramer, *Musical Meaning* 14), and convincingly explores the "many different ways of bringing actual pieces of music into a fictional story" (Powers, "A Conversation" n. pag.). Through a variety of strategies to substantiate the discrepancy between the protagonist's refrain and the interpretable quality that the narrative (both at the discursive and diegetic levels) assigns to music, Powers successfully addresses "the question that [Peter's] whole life had failed to answer: How did music trick the body into thinking it had a soul?" (*Orfeo* 330).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article partly draws on my research work at the Center for Intermediality Studies in Graz (CIMIG) in 2023 under the supervision of Prof. Nassim Balestrini. My stay was possible thanks to an "Ernst Mach Grant Worldwide" scholarship, funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF), and awarded by Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalization (OeAD). I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. Balestrini, the BMBWF and the OeAD for their support.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Stefano Franceschini holds a PhD in Anglo-American Literature at Roma Tre University. His thesis focused on the meaning of music in the fiction of Richard Powers. In 2021 he was awarded the "Caterina Gullì" prize by AISNA and the Center for American Studies for his 2020 MA dissertation. In 2022, he was a visiting scholar at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute in New York City. In 2023, he received an "Ernst Mach Grant – Worldwide" scholarship (funded by the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research) for a research period at the Center for Intermediality Studies in Graz. He is an adjunct professor of English at Sapienza University and has published on Gothic Fiction and intermediality. His monograph, *"What does that tune mean?" Il significato della musica nei romanzi di Richard Powers* (Nova Delphi), is scheduled for publication at the end of the year.

WORKS CITED

Adorno, Theodor W. *Philosophy of Modern Music*. Trans. Anne G. Mitchell. London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.

"Affective Musical Key Characteristics." Accessed 22 March 2024: n. pag. Western Michigan University. <https://wmich.edu/mus-theo/courses/keys.html>.

Balestrini, Nassim. "Of Silent Notation and Historiographic Relationality: Words, Music, and Notions of the Popular." *Words, Music, and the Popular. Global Perspective on Intermedial Relations*. Eds. Thomas Gurke and Susan Winnett. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 11-35.

Eco, Umberto. *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986.

Eliot, T.S. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth." *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975. 175-78.

Fernández-Santiago, Miriam. "Of Language and Music: A Neo-Baroque, Environmental Approach to the Human, Infrahuman and Superhuman in Richard Powers' *Orfeo*." *Anglia* 137 (2019): 126-46.

Gracyk, Theodor. "Expression Theories." *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*. Eds. Theodore Gracyk and Andrew Kania. London/New York: Routledge, 2011. 166-75.

Grant, Roger Mathew. "Music Lessons on Affect and its Objects." *Representations* 144 (2018): 34-60.

Hanslick, Eduard. *The Beautiful in Music: A Contribution to the Revisal of Musical Aesthetics*. (1854). Trans. Gustav Cohen. London: Novello and Company, 1891.

Hofstadter, Douglas R. *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. London: Penguin House, 1979.

Ickstadt, Heinz. "'Asynchronous Messaging': The Multiple Functions of Richard Powers' Fictions." *Ideas of Order*. Eds. Antje Kley and Jan D. Kucharzewsky. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012. 23-45.

King, Ross, and Colin G. Angus. "PM – Protein Music." *Bioinformatics* 12 (1996): 251-52.

Kramer, Lawrence. *Musical Meaning. Toward a Critical History*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: California UP, 2001.

—. "Speaking of Music." *Speaking of Music. Addressing the Sonorous*. Eds. Keith Chapin and Andrew H. Clark. New York: Fordham UP, 2013. 19-38.

LeClair, Tom. *The Art of Excess. Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*. Urbana and Chicago: Illinois UP, 1987.

Melville, Herman. *Redburn, White Jacket, Moby Dick*. New York: The Library of America, 1983.

Meyer, Leonard. *Emotions and Meaning in Music*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1956.

Monroe, Rachel. "What Really Happened at Waco." *The New Yorker*. 12 Apr. 2023: n. pag. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-the-southwest/what-really-happened-at-waco>.

Morrison, Toni, *Jazz*. (1992). Eugene: Pickwick, 2018.

"Muddle instead of Music." N. a. *Pravda*. 28 Jan. 1936: n. pag. <https://web.archive.org/web/20110127123117/http://www.arnoldschalks.nl/tlte1sub1.html>.

Ortega y Gasset, José. "Musicalia." *Obras Completas* (vol. 2). Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1966. 235-45.

Ovidio, Publio Nasone. *Le metamorfosi*. Eds. Guido Patuano, Alessandro Perutelli, and Luigi Galasso. Torino: Einaudi, 2000.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Semiotic and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Lady Victoria Welby*. Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1977.

Petermann, Emily. *The Musical Novel. Imitation of Musical Structure, Performance, and Reception in Contemporary Fiction*. Rochester: Camden House, 2014.

Powers, Richard. "A Conversation with Richard Powers." Interview by Keenan McKracken. *Music and Literature*. 11 Sept. 2014: n. pag. <https://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2014/9/4/a-conversation-with-richard-powers>.

—. "A Fugitive Language: An Interview with Richard Powers." Interview by Alan Vorda. *Rain Taxi*. Accessed 10 March 2024: n. pag. <https://raintaxi.com/a-fugitive-language-an-interview-with-richard-powers/>.

—. *Galatea 2.2*. (1995). London: Penguin, 2019.

—. *Orfeo*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2014.

—. *The Echo Maker*. (2006). London: Penguin, 2020.

—. *The Gold Bug Variations*. (1991). London: Penguin Random House, 2019.

—. *The Overstory*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.

—. *The Time of Our Singing*. (2003). London: Penguin Random House, 2019.

Reichel, Elisabeth A. "Fictionalising Music/Musicalising fiction. The Integrative Function of Music in Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing*." *Sound Effects* 4 (2014): 144-60.

—. "Musical Macrostructures in *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Orfeo* by

Richard Powers; or, Toward a Media-Conscious Audionarratology." *Partial Answers* 15 (2017): 81-98.

Reik, Theodor. *The Haunting Melody: Psychoanalytic Experiences in Life and Music*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953.

Rischin, Rebecca. *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006.

Scher, Steven Paul. "Notes toward a Theory of Verbal Music." *Comparative Literature* 22 (1970): 147-56.

Scherr, Alexander. "The Contemporary North American Science Novel: Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker* (2006) and *Generosity: An Enhancement* (2009)." *The American Novel in the 21st Century: Cultural Contexts - Literary Developments - Critical Analyses*. Eds. Michael Basseler and Ansgar Nunning. Trier: WVT, 2019. 279-95.

Sholette, Gregory. "Disciplining the Avant-Garde: The United States versus the Critical Art Ensemble." *Circa* 112 (2005): 50-59.

Stravinsky, Igor. *Igor Stravinsky: An Autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936.

Swain, Joseph P. "The Range of Musical Semantics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 135-52.

Tagg, Philip. *Music's Meanings: A Modern Musicology for Non-musos*. New York and Huddersfield: The Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2012.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*. Eds. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1965.

—. *Song of Myself: With a Complete Commentary*. Eds. Ed Folsom and Christopher Merrill. Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2016.

Wolf, Werner. *The Musicalization of Fiction. A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999.

—. "The Role of Music in Gabriel Josipovici's *Goldberg: Variations.*" *Style* 37 (2003): 294-317.