Henry James and Music

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Henry James's copious writing on the sister arts of drama, sculpture, and painting is exceeded in quantity, among his non-fictional writing, only by his extensive writing on literature.[1] He was an enthusiastic follower, reviewer, and critic of the dramatic and the visual arts, and both his fiction and the scholarship on James and the sister arts reflect these interests in drama and art. From *The American* to *The Ambassadors*, the theatre, with a particular emphasis on Paris's Théâtre Français, is a recurring reference point. From "The Madonna of the Future" to "The Real Thing," by way of Agnolo Bronzino's portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi in *The Wings of the Dove* and the Lambinet landscape in *The Ambassadors*, the pictorial arts play a central role, though perhaps never so much as in *The Tragic Muse*, where life in the theatre and the studio are as central as can be to the novel's setting and subject. James scholars, from Viola Hopkins Winner and Adeline Tintner to Joseph Litvak and Kendall Johnson, have studied James and the visual and the dramatic arts.[2]

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[1] James's complete art and drama criticism have been collected in *The Complete Writings of Henry James on Art and Drama* and almost all of his literary criticism in *Literary Criticism*.

[2] See also John Carlos Rowe's "Hawthorne's Ghost."

By contrast, music is the sister art that has seemed to have little relevance in James's world. James is himself partly to blame for this. He once described himself "as a strictly nonmusical auditor" (*PS* 174), and in his letters to his family, he shows little enthusiasm for the musical soirées he attended in Paris in 1876. Scholarship appears to have taken James at his word, for aside from a small quantity of work on James and opera and an important article by Daniel Hannah, there is precious little scholarly writing on James and music.[3] And yet, what better place than a conference on "The Aural Dimension in Henry James's Work" to urge the value of exploring the importance of music in both James's biography and his fiction.

It would be wrong to suggest that music is prominent in James's writing in the way it is, for instance, in the work of another James, James Joyce. Henry James's writing rarely refers to the important composers who were his contemporaries or near contemporaries. However, it is worth considering that *The American* appeared the same year (1877) that Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* was first staged. Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* had a 571-performance run in London in 1878, overlapping the serialization of "Daisy Miller," and their *Mikado* (1885, with a run of 672 performances) was contemporary with the serialization of *The Bostonians*. Works such as these or such as Tchaikovsky's violin concerto (1879) or Elgar's *Enigma Variations* (1899) are not usually cited as part of the cultural context for James's own work. In spite of this, only five years after the first of Elgar's pomp and circumstance marches appeared (1901), when James began to revise *The American* for the New York Edition, he altered a sentence which in the earlier editions of this novel explains that Monsieur Nioche "pronounced his words with great distinctness and sonority" (*AM* 65) to: "He pronounced his words with great *pomp and circumstance*" (*AM* 1907 69, emphasis added).[4]

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[3] For scholarship on James and opera, see particularly the work of Michael Halliwell but also that of Pierre Degott, Peter Dyson, and Jeremy Tambling. For scholarship specifically on James and music, in addition to Hannah, see articles by Laura F. Hodges (on *The Portrait of a Lady*), Roland Jordan and Emma Kafalenos (on "Owen Wingrave"), and Kermit Vanderbilt (on "Fordham Castle" and on "Four Meetings").

[4] Another of James's revisions for *The American* also has a musical basis. The early editions of the novel express Valentin de Bellegarde's appreciative observation of pretty women thus: "He looked at a pretty girl as he would have listened to a piece of music. Attention, in each case, was simple good manners" (*AM* 190). For the New York Edition, James revised these two sentences to: "He looked at a pretty person as he would have listened to a good piece of music. Intelligent participation was in such a case simple good manners"

Nevertheless, James did know music and musicians. The first music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Georg Henschel (1850-1934), was one of James's correspondents, and thanks to Henschel, James attended the Boston Symphony on 17 March 1883 and heard, among other pieces, Brahms's second symphony (a work only six years old at the time), two Slavonic Dances by Antonin Dvorák (published but five years before), and Henschel's wife, Lillian Henschel (another of James's correspondents), singing three selections for voice and orchestra.

Indeed, during the winter of 1883, which James spent in Boston following his father's death, James attended a number of concerts. He wrote to his close friend Lizzie Boott (whose father, another of James's friends, was a composer) on 27 March 1883 that "I dine out a little, & go to concerts with [Anna Sophia Cabot] Lodge" (*CLHJ 1883-84* 1:75), the mother-in-law of James's Harvard Law School friend George Abbot James (and also mother of the first Senator Henry Cabot Lodge as well as a cousin of William James's associate, Charles Sanders Peirce).

James also heard music in Paris, during 1876, when he attended several musical soirées, and it is his critical remarks, in his letters, about some of these soirées that have led James's biographers to dismiss the idea that James had any particular interest in music. In one such instance, James wrote his brother William of hearing "of late a quantity of music" and then rattles off the names of four musical hostesses (*CLHJ 1872-76* 3:105-6). One of these is Pauline Viardot, the famous singer who lived in a *ménage à trois* with her husband and Ivan Turgenev. In a letter to his father, James describes a musical evening at the Viardots', and this letter has been cited as evidence of James's lack of interest in music. James wrote that Viardot's "musical parties are rigidly musical & to me, therefore, rigidly boresome"; "the other night," he continues, "I stood … on my legs for three hours … in a suffocating room, listening to an interminable fiddling, with the only consolation that Gustave Doré, standing beside me, seemed as bored as myself" (*CLHJ 1872-76* 3:97). It is this description that prompts Peter Brooks to write of James being "*subjected* to musical soirées, at the Viardots and elsewhere" (33, emphasis added).

(*AM* 1907 208). In both passages, listening to music has its element of politeness, but in the revised passage, "music" becomes "good music," and "Attention" becomes a much less passive, and perhaps more rewarding, "Intelligent participation."

But while this description obviously criticizes the "interminable fiddling" Viardot offered her guests, it does not mean that James had no interest in music. In fact, what the description does prove is that James could discriminate, for the passage concludes on a positive note: "But when M^me^ Viardot does sing, it is superb. She sang the last time a scene from Glück's *Alcestis*, which was the finest piece of musical declamation, of a grandly tragic sort, that I can conceive" (*CLHJ 1872-76* 3:97).

James praises other vocal performances, such as Joséphine Conneau's (in the letter to William); her "singing is the finest thing possible" (*CLHJ 1872-76* 3:106). Conneau, the wife of Napoleon III's physician, was not internationally known, like Pauline Viardot, so James's appreciation shows that something more than Viardot's star power appealed to his ear. And in 1870, James insisted, while writing his publisher, James T. Fields, that Fields tell his wife, Annie Fields, that he, James, had heard the night before the concert at the Boston Music Hall of the famous Swedish singer, Christina Nilsson (*CLHJ 1855-72* 2:382).

James, in these letters, was not so much reporting that he was being "*subjected* to musical soirées" (to repeat Brooks's phrase) as that he could be a discriminating and appreciative listener. In the same text where he calls himself "a strictly nonmusical auditor," James proceeds to devote the better part of a paragraph to "the brilliant short season of Italian opera" (*PS* 174). James had heard two works by Giuseppe Verdi, *Aida* and the *Requiem*, and he calls the vocalists' performances "phenomenal" and "enchanting." "I don't know when I have partaken of such a feast of vocalism," he continues. And he adds that he "found" the *Requiem* "in places irresistibly moving" (*PS* 175). Rather than taking James calling himself "strictly nonmusical" at face value, it makes more sense to see the phrase as a gesture of (perhaps false) modesty in keeping with journalistic conventions of the time. Furthermore it certainly shows the danger of quoting James out of context and taking what he says about his (lack of) interest in music at his word.

Richard Wagner is the one contemporary composer whom James does occasionally mention and about whom James scholars have written,[5] particularly in respect to James's declining Paul Zhukovsky's offer in 1880 to meet "the musician of the future" (*CLHJ 1878-80* 2:154), as James, like Wagner's supporters, called the composer (an important point, for it shows

[5] See Chris Brown, Gary Lemco, and Shirley Rose for three examples.

that James knew enough about Wagner to have been aware that his champions considered him and called him "the musician of the future"). James knew what Wagner represented as an artist and used him as a sign of unlimited will to power (based on Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs* tetralogy) in the 1874 story "Adina" and of German nationalism in "Collaboration" (of 1892).[6]

James attended a Wagnerian musical soirée at Zhukovsky's in Paris in 1876; he described it in letters to his father and to Lizzie Boott. He told his father that the "musical séance" had "lasted from 9 till 2 a.m," and that "I was bored, but the rest were in ectsasy" [sic] (*CLHJ 1872-76* 3:215). To Lizzie Boott James described his fellow-listeners as "a small Russian circle," whom "I enjoyed" (*CLHJ 1872-76* 3:213). The program consisted of "a lot of selections from Wagner's Bayreuth operas" (*CLHJ 1872-76* 3:215), and James confessed to "an overdose of Wagner" (*CLHJ 1872-76* 3:213). Nevertheless, the performer was "A young French pianist of great talent" (*CLHJ 1872-76* 3:215). Brooks (33) cites the letter to James Sr. as evidence, along with the description of Viardot's interminable fiddler, of James's unenthusiastic response to the music he heard in Paris. Yet if James was not enthusiastic about those particular performances, it does not mean that he was generally unmusical, and his acknowledgement of the "great talent" of the "young French pianist" is an additional indication of James's ability to discriminate.

James lived most of his life before the advent of the gramophone. The residents of middle- and upper-class homes during James's day provided their own music by owning, playing, and knowing how to play musical instruments. Much as paintings adorn the walls of the homes in James's fiction (for instance the picture-gallery at Gardencourt in *The Portrait of a Lady* or, again, the Bronzino portrait in *The Wings of the Dove*), so too, when they are at home, do James's fictional characters listen to each other play music.

As a result, musical instruments appear often and in important ways in James's fiction. In chapter 7 of *Watch and Ward*, Nora decides not to attend the opera, and instead Hubert and she "have an opera of our own" in which "she played Weber for more than an hour … to the man she loved." James's early text, like its successors will, concludes the scene by adding to what the character played a judgment of *how* the character played: "'I have never played so well'" (144). This passage, while it marks a point in Nora's sentimental

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[6] For "Adina" and Wagner see Walker, "'Adina,'" and Rowe, "Hawthorne's Ghost." For "Collaboration" and Wagner see Walker, "Art and Nationalism."

journey (from the unscrupulous and philandering Hubert to the steady and faithful Roger), also shows something of Nora's evolution from the wayward orphan of the first chapter to the sophisticated and independent-minded young woman who plays Weber and Mozart (as she does in the serial text, 584-85, Weber being a revision for the book edition) and spends the evening unchaperoned in the company of a young man, much as in the concluding chapters she travels alone to New York.

In *The Bostonians*, the text tempers Olive Chancellor's single-mindedness of purpose by revealing her susceptibility to well-performed music. Olive scorns New York and Boston high society; she "loathed and despised … the world of fashion" (106). Yet in chapter 18, when Olive reluctantly accompanies Verena in a visit to Henry Burrage's Boston lodgings, we learn that Burrage is a fine pianist and that Olive, a bit grudgingly, falls under the spell of his playing. "Olive was extremely susceptible to music," the text tells us. She is "beguiled by the young man's charming art" (152), and she is able "to surrender herself, to enjoy the music, to admit that Mr. Burrage played with exquisite taste." As a result, "Her nerves were calmed" (153).

Burrage's impromptu piano recital in chapter 18 and Olive's enjoyment of it have no plot relevance in *The Bostonians* (unlike in "The Turn of the Screw," where Miles's piano art equally beguiles the narrator-governess and serves the plot function of giving Flora rein to wander off to the lake and, possibly, commune with Miss Jessel). The inclusion of Burrage's playing and of Olive's appreciation of it in *The Bostonians*, therefore, serves some other function. At one level, that function is to round out Olive's character, to show that there is more to her than her single-minded and all-consuming devotion to women's rights. But at another level, by showing that Olive has a degree of artistic sensitivity, this early part of the novel prepares readers' sympathies for the moment in chapter 39, in the Cape Cod section of the novel, when Olive is faced with losing Verena's companionship. When Basil takes Verena away for a day, Olive's unhappiness overwhelms her: "But an immeasurable load of misery seemed to sit upon her soul; … now she was too weary to struggle with fate" (406).

Readers' responses to Olive have evolved over time, from the middle of the twentieth century, which disparaged what Madoka Kishi has called "Olive's pathological nervousness" (101), to half a century later, when Terry Castle championed Olive as "English and American literature's first lesbian tragic heroine" (171). Whereas earlier readers scorned her lesbian possessiveness of

Verena, increasingly in the twenty-first century, readers are able, at the very least, to register and feel the degree of heartbreak to which she is subjected in the later chapters. *The Bostonians* begins by setting its readers up to dislike Olive, and then through its many pages, it gradually turns readers toward a more sympathetic view and toward facing the fact that her feelings for another woman are as valid and deserve as much sympathy as any feelings might. Few readers, few people, if any, have *not* felt "misery" or "despair" or had to "struggle with fate" (406), and therefore this moment in *The Bostonians* asks its readers to recognize their shared humanity with Olive. The inclusion of Burrage's recital and of Olive's appreciation of music—coming as it does early in the novel, when Olive's intolerance of just about everyone and everything and her purchase of Verena from her parents (for that is what it amounts to) are fresh in readers' consciousness—lays the ground for the appeal to Olive's shared humanity in chapter 39.

Two passages that highlight musicianship in two other early novels, one in *The American* and one in *The Portrait of a Lady*, also have no plot importance but nonetheless have a different kind of significance. One musical scene in *The American* is already well-known: this is chapter 17, which James set at the Paris Opera and where Christopher Newman hears Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, while Valentin de Bellegarde sits in a box occupied by Noémie Nioche, trading insults with the son of an Alsatian brewer who will eventually shoot Valentin in a duel. John Carlos Rowe, in *The Other Henry James*, has given this chapter its definitive reading.[7]

But the opera chapter is not the novel's only scene to foreground music significantly. Another instance appears in the middle of chapter 13. The scene itself is short, though the chapter is one of the novel's longest. It takes place in the Bellegardes' drawing room, but its position at the middle of the novel's thirteenth out of twenty-six chapters makes it the novel's very center. It is sandwiched between two scenes in which Claire has discussed with Newman his relations with her family. During this middle scene, Claire is restless, and the "violent storm" and "howling wind" out of doors echo her restlessness (*AM* 229). Claire stares out the window, but suddenly she turns around and pleads to her sister-in-law, "with peculiar eagerness," to "'For Heaven's sake … go to the piano and play something'" (*AM* 230).

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[7] Nevertheless, two other important readings of this chapter are Tintner's, in *The Cosmopolitan World*, and Degott's (32-38).

The novel has already shown this sister-in-law, the young Marquise de Bellegarde, to be a good pianist. In chapter 10, Newman had heard the young Marquise "at the piano, playing a very expressive waltz" (*AM* 167). The "waltz" fits with her enjoyment of dancing, but she plays expressively, which indicates the quality of her interpretation.

Chapter 10 concludes with Claire's surprise announcement that she will join her older brother and his wife in attending a ball (*AM* 178). Claire's announcement is a surprise because "She has not been into the world these three years" (*AM* 178). Newman's overture to Claire—he had proposed to her in the preceding chapter, chapter 9—would appear to have prompted her sudden change. Newman represents for her the possibility of a larger embrace of life and of the world and the wish no longer "to bury herself alive," as her younger brother puts it (*AM* 178).

Claire's restlessness in the later, middle chapter, chapter 13, and her equally sudden request that her sister-in-law play something comes as a coda or repeat of sorts to chapter 10. But here the suddenness is less positive, prompted by the subject of the two tête-à-tête conversations with Newman that sandwich the request: Newman's relations with her mother and elder brother. It is an intimation of what is to come later, when this same mother and brother will become outright hostile to Newman.

Young Madame de Bellegarde does not accede to Claire's request for music. Instead, she suggests that Claire should "Play something yourself" (*AM* 230). At first Claire refuses; "'It is absurd for me to play when you are present,'" she says, thus acknowledging the young Marquise's musicianship. "But the next moment she went to the piano and began to strike the keys with vehemence. She played for some time, rapidly and brilliantly" (*AM* 230). Not only are we again told *how* the character plays, but there is a distinction: young Madame de Bellegarde plays expressively. But Claire's technique is not bad; she plays "rapidly and brilliantly." It is the young Marquise who gets called a "gad-about" (*AM* 169), not Claire; one would expect Claire, who has known suffering, to play with the kind of sensibility that would come of an experience of life's difficulties, and her apparently superficial sister-in-law only to play technically well. But it is the contrary, revealing, first, that the younger Madame de Bellegarde, as the novel will state explicitly much later, "was not such a goose as she seemed" (425).

Newman, who cares for music (he had told his friend Tom Tristram in chapter 2 that in Paris he wanted "to hear some good music" [*AM* 30]),

asks Claire, after she stops playing, to play some more. But she refuses, and when he insists, she offers that: "'I have not been playing for you; I have been playing for myself'" (*AM* 230). This is a telling—and very rare—instance where Claire puts herself first. The novel almost always, otherwise, presents a Claire who has let herself be sacrificed on the family altar (when she was married off to the late Monsieur de Cintré) and who, according to her younger brother, is "fond of pleasing" others (*AM* 137). Her playing for herself is a moment of rebellion on her part. It is therefore a key moment in the novel, for it shows her to be not always just the dutiful daughter, and it suggests (as did the sudden decision in chapter 10 to attend the ball) that contact with Newman has inspired her to gratify, at least some, her own desires. Furthermore the "vehemence" of her playing is in fact the giving rein to her repressed feelings of frustration at both the general situation and her mother's and older brother's enmity toward Newman, which is why, when she decides at the end of the novel to take the veil, we have reason to see her decision as an act of rebellion against the tyranny of her mother and brother, an act that uses their professed religious values as a weapon against them, for as staunch Catholics they cannot criticize her, even though her taking the veil frees her of them. The piano playing in *The American*, therefore, is as important a symbolic correlative to the characterization of Claire (and of her sister-in-law) as the Bronzino portrait is to Millie Theale's in *The Wings of the Dove*.

The musical scene in *The Portrait of a Lady* occurs in chapter 18, when Isabel Archer first meets Serena Merle.[8] They meet because Isabel is attracted to the sound of a piano being played, it turns out, by Madame Merle. In the original editions of *The Portrait of a Lady*, the text specifies that Madame Merle "was playing something of Beethoven's" (*PL 1882* 165). But for the 1908 revised edition, James changed Beethoven to Schubert (*PL 1908* 1:245). This is a significant change for two reasons. One is that one of the salient facts of Schubert's short life (1797-1828) is that he died fairly young of tuberculosis, like James's cousin Minnie Temple, but more importantly, like Isabel's cousin, Ralph Touchett, and like the English painter Richard Parkes Bonington (1802-28), an example of whose "beautiful and valuable" (*PL 1882* 547) and "charming and precious work" (*PL 1908* 2:404) Isabel examines in the

[8] For a different reading of this scene and of James's revision of the composer's name, which provides, among other things, insight into the original edition's use of Beethoven, see Hannah (133-35).

Touchetts' gallery just before she goes to sit at Ralph's deathbed. The change from Beethoven to Schubert reinforces a motif of references to young men cut down early in life by tuberculosis.

In addition, the fact that Madame Merle plays piano music by Schubert shows something of James's general knowledge of music. Beethoven had, of course, been a well-known pianist and, by the time James wrote *The Portrait of a Lady*, was generally considered among the greatest, if not the greatest, classical European composer.[9] That a proficient pianist would play Beethoven is no surprise, and Merle is a proficient pianist: James's text describes her playing "softly and discreetly," and Isabel compliments "your playing" for making the music "more beautiful still" (*PL 1882* 165). For the 1908 edition, James added that her playing "showed feeling" (*PL 1908* 1:245). Unlike with Beethoven's, much of Schubert's music took many years to enter the standard repertory. Beethoven's music can be "characterised," as Michael Anesko writes in glossing this passage, as "achiev[ing] dramatic emotional and musical effects" (591n82). The same can be said of much of Schubert's music. But one feature that distinguishes Schubert's music is the prominence of passages of heart-wrenching sadness, especially in some of his more mature compositions, such as the slow movements of his string quintet or his "Death and the Maiden" string quartet. James's switch from Beethoven to Schubert not only brings out more strongly the tuberculosis motif, but it connects that motif and the tragedies of all those young people's deaths with the emotional power of Schubert's most heartfelt music.

Lastly, also according to Anesko, "the very gradual publication of the full range of his works throughout the nineteenth century" meant that "for a long period" Schubert was "associated with less prestigious musical genres than those of his predecessor," Beethoven (591n82). Schubert was less well known during his short life, but where he was known, and for quite some time after, it was primarily as a composer of songs. It took decades before "the full range of his works" became widely known and appreciated. Even by the time James

[9] One indication that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Beethoven was considered the leading composer of European classical music is visible on the proscenium arch of Boston's Symphony Hall, construction of which began in the late 1800s and which opened in the fall of 1900. The design for the proscenium includes large medallion-like plaques, each of which was "meant to be inscribed with the names of great composers, but the hall's original directors were able to agree unanimously only on Beethoven, so his remains the only name above the stage" ("A Brief History" 19).

prepared the New York Edition, Schubert's reputation was not yet what it later became. But James's revision reveals his prescience, since the playing of Schubert's solo piano music is very much in keeping with the overall arc of *The Portrait of a Lady*, the story of a young woman of great talent and with so promising a future that ends so sadly, an arc that Schubert's own parallels, albeit more fatally.

James might have learned of the appropriateness of substituting Schubert for Beethoven in chapter 18 of *The Portrait of a Lady* from his acquaintance with George Grove. When James began publishing with Macmillan, one of the editors James worked with was Grove, then editor of *Macmillan's Magazine* (which serialized *The Portrait of a Lady*). Grove was a prominent British musicologist; he created the first edition of *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the standard reference work on music (first published beginning in 1879). Among Grove's important contributions to musicology are his championing of Schubert and his discovery, during research trips to Vienna, of manuscripts of otherwise lost scores by Schubert.

While James himself was certainly no musicologist like Grove, while he was by no means the fervent student and critic of music that he was of fiction, drama, and art, it is wrong to dismiss James's connection and the connection of his fiction to the musical world of his time. Scholarship exploring James's musical contexts will likely never surpass in quantity the considerable number of studies that have explored (and continue to explore) the dramatic and visual arts as contexts for James's own work, but giving more attention to the role that music plays both in James's life and in his writing is a potentially fruitful, and relatively neglected, path of enquiry.

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