

The Rebirth of the Musical Author in Recent Fiction Written in English

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Abstract: In his 2005 monograph on *The Author*, Andrew Bennett reflects on how “authorship is central to the way in which critical practice is currently conceptualized and theorized”. The rebirth of the author in contemporary criticism is being accompanied by a renewed fascination with the figure of the author as the subject of recent fiction. This can be seen reflected in current portrayals of real and fictional writers such as Henry James, in David Lodge’s *Author, Author* (2004), or Olive Wellwood, in A.S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* (2009). Moreover, the recovery of the author can be traced as well in the context of the emergence of music as a fertile referent for interartistic narratives. In terms of the dialogue between contemporary fiction and music, there seems to be a common interest in the image of the author, both in the act of creation, as a composer, and of re-creation, as a performer. Works such as Bernard MacLaverly’s *Grace Notes* (1997), Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music* (1999), Conrad Williams’ *The Concert Pianist* (2006), or Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Nocturnes. Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009) favour the author-musician’s perspective as they interact with music in different ways. In light of this, the aim of this article is to explore the process of rebirth of the musical author in recent fiction written in English, analysing this trend as part of a more general tendency to recover the author’s presence and voice in both fiction and criticism.

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In his latest work, *Nocturnes* (2009), Kazuo Ishiguro brings together a collection of short stories that enter into an enriching dialogue with the art of music. By giving life to street musicians, a singer and guitar-player that composes his own songs, or a professional saxophonist who evokes the climax of a piece with technical terminology —“that moment as we come out of the middle eight, when the band go III-5 to VIx-9 while I rise up in intervals you’d never believe possible and then hold that sweet, very tender high B-flat” (Ishiguro 154)—, the volume emerges as a prototypical example of the interartistic turn in contemporary fiction, already signalled in the subtitle of the collection, *Five Stories of Music and Nightfall*. At the same time, moreover, the choice of such interpreters and composers as narrators and focal points of the stories can be assessed in terms of the current process of renewed attention to the figure of the author that has become noticeable in criticism and literary creativity since the last years of the twentieth century.

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The rebirth of the author in contemporary criticism is being accompanied, I would like to argue, by a growing fascination with the author-character as the subject of recent fiction. This can be seen reflected in current approaches to the life of real and fictional writers such as Henry James, in David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004), or Olive Wellwood, in A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* (2009). Furthermore, the recovery of the author can be traced in the context of the recurrence of music as an inspiring referent for interartistic narratives. In terms of the dialogue between contemporary fiction and music, there seems to be a common interest in the image of the musical author, both in the act of creation, as a composer, and of re-creation, as a performer. Works such as Bernard MacLaverty's *Grace Notes* (1997), Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* (1999), and Conrad Williams' *The Concert Pianist* (2006) favour the author-musician's perspective as they interact with music in different ways. In light of this, the aim of the present article is to explore the attention paid to the figure of the musical author in contemporary literature written in English, analysing this trend as part of a more general tendency to recover the author's presence and voice in both fiction and criticism.

In his 2005 monograph on *The Author*, Andrew Bennett reflects on how "authorship is central to the way in which critical practice is currently conceptualized and theorized" (109). This statement signals a radical departure from the notion of the "death of the author", as postulated by Roland Barthes in the late 1960s: "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. As soon as a fact is *narrated* [...] this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (Barthes 172). Although soon questioned by critics such as Jonathan Culler, who disentangled the concept of intertextuality from the idea of "death of the author", or Susan Stanford Friedman and her feminist revision of women's subjectivity and authorship (146, 155), the Barthesian notion has remained one of the leading concepts in the postmodern paradigm. Undermining subjectivity in its alleged association with the principles of liberal humanism, postmodernism has emphasised both the disappearance of the individual artist within contemporary cultural production, and the prevalence of absences, gaps, and silences in the process of historical and literary (re)creation.

Nowadays, however, the challenge to the postmodern system is running parallel with the recovery and vindication of the entity of the active subject behind any act of creation. If an increasing number of critical voices query the validity of postmodernism in the light of the need for "the subjective, a modality that [...] is [apropos] of art" (Martin 90), the rebirth of the author in contemporary critical theory fuses with the ethical turn towards subjectivity much favoured in Anglo-American criticism of late. There is a heightened sense of the humanising and subjective values of artistic production, while close attention is being paid to thinkers like Paul Ricoeur and his "ethical notion of narrative identity that privileges agency" (Crowley 1).

This re-emergence of the concepts of subjectivity and authorship in recent criticism has a counterpart in contemporary literature, with the proliferation of narratives focusing on the career and experiences of writers, both factual and fictional. Apart from the works by Lodge and Byatt mentioned above, other novels that have lately portrayed the figure of the literary author are Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), Peter Ackroyd's *The Lambs of London* (2004), and Julian Barnes' *Arthur & George* (2005), to cite just a few. In this same line, Lodge's latest narrative, *A Man of Parts* (2011), fictionalises the biography of H. G. Wells, paying special attention to the private life of the science fiction writer. Simultaneously, the creative

interest in the idea of authorship can be detected as well in the interaction between literature and music characteristic of contemporary fiction. In the context of the interdisciplinary and cross-boundary quality of literary creativity nowadays —with the increasing interest in other arts and fields of knowledge shown by Anglo-American writing since the last decades of the twentieth century—, “the confluence between literature and music [...] is recently established as a dynamic field of critical enquiry” (Da Sousa 1).

The growing appeal of the musico-literary intersection, currently attracting the attention of literary critics and musicologists alike, has led specialists to revise processes like the metaphorical conjunction argued to exist between music and language (Cook 252). In this sense, the dialogue between literary and musical discourses is particularly revealing because the two-dimensional nature of music encapsulates in itself the interdisciplinary turn of contemporary creativity and criticism. The traditional approach to an artwork was horizontal, analysing it as a self-contained whole with no links with other disciplines, as if we listened just to the melody of a musical composition; in contrast, current views of artistic works usually concentrate on their vertical intersections with other media, as if we grasped instead the harmonic structure of the musical composition (Da Sousa 2).

Significantly, the emergence of music as a potentially fertile referent for narratives that cross artistic boundaries has witnessed a recurrent tendency to fictionalise the figure and perspective of the musical author, both as an interpreter and as a composer. This implies a crucial difference with the contemporary dialogue between literature and painting, where the focus of the fictional work is usually placed on the artistic object (as in A. S. Byatt’s ekphrastic short story “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary”, 1998), on the inspiration behind the picture (Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 1999), or on the aesthetic recipient of the artwork, whether viewer or art critic, as in Michael Frayn’s *Headlong* (1998). Even a polyphonic novel like Deborah Moggach’s *Tulip Fever* (1999) includes the author-painter’s voice just as one of the multiple threads weaving the tapestry of perspectives of model, patron, and even the picture itself.

In contrast, the points of view presiding over most of the stories collected in Ishiguro’s *Nocturnes*, as argued above, are those of authors-musicians, who become the protagonists, narrators, and main characters in MacLaverty’s *Grace Notes*, Seth’s *An Equal Music*, and Williams’ *The Concert Pianist*. This can be connected with a renewed interest in the narrative rendering of contemporary real-life musicians’ daily lives, from their own perspectives, as exemplified by the Scottish pianist Susan Tomes. In *Beyond the Notes* (2004), Tomes recounts her experiences as an interpreter of chamber music, while *Out of Silence. A Pianist’s Yearbook* (2010) gives voice to her musical practices in the context of her personal life, month by month, in the course of a year. If Seth’s and Williams’ novels are narrated from the perspectives of two interpreters (respectively, a violinist and a pianist), *Grace Notes* explores the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of an Irish composer, Catherine Anne McKenna, in the months preceding and following the *première* of her masterpiece.

This character, like the protagonists of *An Equal Music*, *The Concert Pianist*, and *Nocturnes*, is described as a gifted and brilliant musician that displays technical mastery of piano- and organ-playing: “[h]er hands floated lightly above the keyboard, effortlessly fingering. The strutting rhythm to start – a jaunty march almost, which was overtaken by flowing runs, the glittering phrases and trills held in check by the strength of her left hand”

(MacLavery 67). Above all, Catherine shows an outstanding compositional ability that has resulted in her authorship of a wide variety of instrumental and vocal pieces, including a set of variations for string orchestra, two suites, a song cycle, and preludes and fugues for the piano. One of such compositions, a suite based on Johannes Vermeer's domestic interior scenes — *A Girl Asleep, A Girl Reading a Letter, Milkmaid, Young Woman with a Water Jug, and Woman Holding a Balance*—, acquires special relevance in the context of the interartistic dialogue, since MacLavery's evocation of the effect of the suite on its audience renders in the verbal medium the interaction between the visual and the auditory. As Catherine's old piano teacher listens to the piece, her expression seems to mirror that of the female character in Vermeer's paintings, blurring fact and fiction by means of the transformative power of music and art: "When it began there was something about her absorption in listening which mirrored the absorption of the girl reading the letter. Focused on other. Paying attention to the exclusion of everything else. She does not see the familiar leaded window or her reflection in it. The apple green curtain. The Persian rug" (MacLavery 109-110). The significance of this transformative power of art for Catherine's creativity becomes evident in her composition of a mass, whose projection is described in the course of the novel in terms of the transition from the ordinary (everyday sounds) to the artistic (sublime music):

The only sound now is the high whine of their own tyres and the whoosh as they pass huge trucks. In the relative silence the rhythm she heard in the place bounces into her head again. But now it is more *agitato*. Driving forward. In the fast lane. The first section of something. Leading the way. [...] Then she knows with certainty what it is. The *Credo*. Her *Credo*. The linchpin of the mass she is writing. *Credo in unum*... Voices barking one sound at a time – single syllables. Nonsense syllables. [...]

The thread of the single voice meshes with the next voice and its neighbours to become a skein which weaves with other skeins of basses and tenors and altos and sopranos to make a rope of sound, a cincture which will girdle the earth so that there is neither East nor West. She is getting carried away. No, she isn't — she is being carried home. *Credo*. I believe. (MacLavery 132-33)

This passage is particularly revealing because it encapsulates two key aspects of the protagonist's approach to creativity in her role as a musical author-composer: on the one hand, her musical principles, which connect with her views on the act of composition, and on the other, her conception of the musical work as a reflection of life experiences and personal memories. Catherine's inspiration for her mass in the sounds made by a taxi as she rushes home puts into practice her first musical principle: "Any sound or no sound at all is valid, as 'good' as any other sound" (MacLavery 220). Indeed, the act of composition for this author-musician implies a process of 'inner hearing', and rendering the rhythms of everyday life in musical terms, since "[w]hen she was writing she always thought in terms of the rhythm first [...] Like an actor who could never get into a part until they got the walk, or the moustache, or the voice, of the three names. For her it was the rhythm" (MacLavery 100).

The rhythmical constituent of music emerges as the backbone of all her works, including her masterpiece. Catherine's pride when listening to the première of her suite,

which alternates the orchestra with Lambeg drums from Northern Ireland, derives to a great extent from her perception of authorship in her role as a composer : “It is only when she plays one of her own pieces that she feels she can accept the applause. She made the work, she played it as it should be played. Something now exists which has never existed before” (MacLavery 85). This reflection articulates a dichotomy contrasting the roles of composers and performers in the creation of music that deserves to be analysed, as it recurs in Seth’s and Williams’ novels as well.

The view of composers and performers as separate, though mutually-dependent authors, is deeply linked to the special status of music as an art with a closed language that requires expert knowledge. As Kendall Walton has argued, “music itself is not a prop, as a painting or a novel is. What the music does is to supply us with experiences when we listen to it, and we use these experiences as props. It is the auditory experiences, not the music itself, that generate fictional truths” (60). In the case of arts like painting or literature, the aesthetic enjoyment of the artistic work is based on a dialogue between the artist and the audience with different degrees of mediation. If the reception of a pictorial artwork depends on the unmediated exercise of visual contemplation of the painting, that of a literary piece is based on the decodification of the almost universal language of written communication, but with the mediation of influential actors external to the author, such as typographers, illustrators, printers, and editors.

With music, this process of mediation becomes crucial because the aesthetic enjoyment of score-based music is almost impossible without the mediation of performance. Indeed, the perception and understanding of a musical piece involve the presence of a performer that transforms the score into an audible and enjoyable artwork. As Guerino Mazzola has put it in his recent study on *Musical Performance* (2011), “Musical performance deals with the transformation of a (typically classical Western) score into a physical entity composed of acoustical events and the embodiment of the score’s symbols in the musicians’ bodies” (3). Therefore, if the actual practice of performance emerges as an exercise of authorship in improvised (non-score-based) music such as jazz —with the performer being equated with the author—, typically classical Western music entails a two-level process of authorship. The interaction between author-composer and audience is not meaningful, but a mediator is needed: the author-interpreter and his/her exercise of re-creation-playing-performance. In Seth’s words,

The quintet exists without us yet cannot exist without us. It sings to us, we sing into it, and somehow, through these little black and white insects clustering along five thin lines, the man who deafly transfigured what he so many years earlier had hearingly composed speaks into us across land and water and ten generations, and fills us with sadness, here with amazed delight.

For me there is another presence in this music. As the sense of her might fall on my retina through two sheets of moving glass, so too through this maze of motes converted by our arms into vibration — sensory, sensuous — do I sense her being again. (Seth 101)

This reflection is filtered through the perspective of Michael Holme, the narrator-protagonist of *An Equal Music*. As a virtuoso violinist playing in a quartet, Michael's thoughts during rehearsals and concerts foreground his personal belief in the soothing and mnemonic function of music. Such a belief acquires special relevance because the connection between music and memory emerges as a recurrent *topos* in recent fiction based on the dialogue with the musical discourse. In this sense, another musical novel published in the same year as Seth's work, Rose Tremain's *Music & Silence* (1999), incorporates in its final section a reflection on the structural configuration of music that traces its key constituents of melody and time to the human ability to remember: "They say that Music, to reach into a Human Soul, depends upon Expectation born of Memory—that certain notes will follow in sequence after certain others—and so we hear the thing we call Melody flowing through Time. And if Memory be faulty—as I do think mine must certainly be—then we shall remain all our lives Indifferent to Music" (Tremain 453).

Similarly, during the closing, climactic performance of Catherine's masterpiece at the end of *Grace Notes*, the auditory perception of her own creation awakens the protagonist's thoughts about her life experiences, bringing the past alive in a patchwork of inspiring memories: "It began with a wisp of music, barely there—a whispered five-note phrase and she was right back on that beach with her baby. [...] Darkening and growing, rising and falling by the narrowest of intervals. Plaiting bread. Her mother's hands, three pallied strands, pane fingers over and under, in and out. Weaving. Like ornament in the Book of Kells" (MacLavery 269-70). The access to the author-composer's voice in revisiting personal experiences associated with the musical work recurs in *An Equal Music*, where the protagonist's thoughts mingle with those of the composer in the course of a concert. As he is performing Schubert's String Quintet, Michael's point of view gives way to Schubert's perspective, and the identification between fictional performer and real-life composer results in an explicit rebirth of the musical author that enables us to listen to Schubert's voice as he remembers the circumstances surrounding the composition of his last chamber work:

Thank you, then, my fellow citizens, for listening to this here, for your acute attentiveness to what is the mere elaboration of a song; my one concert was also under these auspices, and I am sure there would have been others if there had been time. But do not flee; applaud these players, then drink your Sekt, good burghers and return, for after the interval you will hear what I would myself have been pleased to hear through gut and hair and wood, not merely through the music of my mind. But it was the year I walked to Haydn's grave; it was the year I died; and the earth took my syphilis-riddled flesh, my typhoid-ravaged guts, my vainly loving heart many times around the sun before my quintet for strings was heard by human ears. (Seth 308-9)

The performance of a piece like this becomes particularly significant in *An Equal Music* because the novel contains several reflections on the collective authorship of chamber music. In contrast with the main character of Williams' novel, a concert pianist and therefore soloist performer, the creative activity of the protagonist of *An Equal Music* depends on the unity and understanding of the members of the quartet: "We try not to look at each other when we play

this scale; no one appears to lead. [...] When I play this I release myself into the spirit of the quartet. I become the music of the scale. I mute my will, I free my self” (Seth 12); “A strange composite being we are, not ourselves any more but the Maggiore, composed of so many disjunct parts [...] all to produce these complex vibrations that jog the inner ear, and through them the grey mass that says: joy; love; sorrow; beauty” (Seth 110).

The positive effect of music as a restorative or memorising force is emphasised throughout Seth’s novel, especially in the multiple evocations of the exercise of musical creation. This tendency to fictionalise the musician’s engagement in authorship—usually with references to real-life authors and works—pervades the three novels discussed in the present article. Thus, the detailed description of Catherine’s compositional activity in *Grace Notes* is accompanied by references to contemporary musicians and the difficulty to understand twentieth-century art and music: “Sometimes I have difficulty with the *avant-garde*. [...] Is it an exhibition or are they preparing an exhibition? Is the artist asking me to pay attention to something trivial or important? [...] Is the orchestra actually getting ready to play something or are they playing it? Are they tuning up or performing?” (MacLaverly 105).

Similarly, Seth’s narrative incorporates several depictions of Michael’s playing—both in rehearsal and in public performance—interspersed with allusions to classical composers such as Bach, Haydn, or Schubert, as in the passage quoted above, which merges the author-performer’s perceptions in re-creation with the author-composer’s emotions in the creation of Schubert’s String Quintet. One of Schubert’s piano pieces, an Impromptu, plays a crucial role in *The Concert Pianist*, where the protagonist’s thoughts also tend to revolve around the creative experiences of real-life musicians. If in *An Equal Music* Michael’s point of view gave way to Schubert’s voice in remembering the composition of his last piece of chamber music, the protagonist of *The Concert Pianist*—Philip Morahan, “The Renaissance Man of British Pianism” (Williams 2)—feels identified with Chopin as he listens to the performance of the Funeral March Sonata, which triggers a reflection on the composer’s emotions surrounding the creation of the musical work:

When the [pianist] started I had the sensation of actually being Chopin and feeling what I can only describe as terror. You see, when Chopin was in Valdemosa, I’m sure he thought he would die. And though he survived, he had the taste of death in his mouth. The whole sonata is his creative struggle with the memory of that abyss. I think he realised he’d written a funeral march for himself. It was an unconscious musical premonition that became, in Majorca, almost a reality. With a terrible insight. Because after the funeral march, what comes next? A return to life, spring? Some ethereal threnody conducting us to a place of peace? Not for Chopin. What you hear in the last movement is the absolute end. A soundworld beyond human life. The unspooling of consciousness itself. (Williams 78)

Significantly, this composition is one of the pieces played by the protagonist in the final section of William’s novel. As in MacLaverly’s and Seth’s narratives, the closing episode of *The Concert Pianist* is the climactic performance of a work that has special connotations for the protagonist. In this way, *Grace Notes* ends with the *première* of Catherine’s masterpiece, in a concert that revives the composer’s memories of key moments of her personal life. In the

same way, *An Equal Music* stages in its final pages a piano concert given by the protagonist's lover, awakening an epiphanic feeling of lifelong happiness rooted in music: "It is enough, it is to be blessed enough, to live from day to day and to hear such music—not too much, or the soul could not sustain it—from time to time" (Seth 484).

In *The Concert Pianist*, the protagonist's successful exercise of authorship is a concert including Schubert's Impromptu and two Chopin sonatas, presented from the point of view of both the audience (Williams 237-38) and the interpreter: "The fortissimo section was secure, well graded, and it was good to leap at those chords, to embed one's fingers deeply, allowing the muscles of his hand to tense at full strength, recovering command" (Williams 239). This brilliant performance allows Philip to face the fears of illness and approaching death, which in the months before the concert have exerted a paralysing effect resulting in his inability to play. The protagonist perceives the performer as a mediator between the composer and the audience—"the artist hero/virtuoso, a priestly figure [...] mediating between God (the composer) and his audience (the flock)" (Williams 17)—, a role that he is unable to fulfil in the course of the novel due to his personal and creative crisis, only overcome in the final episode of the climactic concert:

He fastened on and pushed, driving himself beyond strict control into untethered expression, feeling and playing with unbridled intensity, and felt his heart race, so nearly there; and this was the bit they would love, had been waiting for, up, up and over, and now the notes came down, razor sharp, brilliant, a spangling arpeggio in the home key, followed by an eruption, scintillating, right up and around, pure tension, the climax of Chopin almost; throttling back for the final climb, the right hand travelling chromatically up, the left hand beating out that ominous figure for the last time, and then a spilling-over of glitter and sparkle; the final chords ratcheting, bass octaves thundering, straining to the ultimate cadence, deep B, grand, growling, right hand teeming from on high, the triumph, the summation, the last crash of octaves dispatched, skewered to victory, instrument ringing. Arms back. Wild release. Victory. (Williams 244)

This concluding passage of Williams' novel aptly illustrates the centrality of the author-musician's perspective in *The Concert Pianist*. Like this narrative, *Grace Notes* and *An Equal Music* place the figure of the composer-performer as the central presence in the structure, content, and meaning of the novels. Apart from emphasising the crucial role played by the two levels of musical authorship—composition and performance—in the process of artistic creativity, such works give voice to the exercise of aesthetic transmission from the composer's abstract inspiration to the audience's auditory reception in all its steps. By doing so, these novels imbued with the fruitful dialogue between literature and music reflect the phenomenon of the rebirth of the author pervading contemporary literature. If Barthes closed "The Death of the Author" with the controversial assertion that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 172), the literary richness of this type of recent fiction allows us to argue that the rebirth of the musical author enhances the aesthetic enjoyment of the contemporary reader.

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