

**Somewhere a Place for Us:  
How Intratextual Music-Association Conveys Characteral Identity in  
*The Time of Our Singing* by Richard Powers.**

Emma Hooper, School of Humanities and Cultural Industries,  
Bath Spa University, UK

**Abstract**

This study will focus on how literary music-character pairing can effectively and uniquely convey characteral identity in a manner unattainable through words alone. It will explore what it is about music's semantically abstract language that specifically allows for such revelation, through a focused study of the character of Jonah Strom and his association with John Dowland's song *Time Stands Still* in Richard Powers' novel *The Time of Our Singing*.

## 1. Introduction

It is not uncommon to find fictional characters with strong ties to music, often linked with a specific piece in particular. For example, in Forster's *A Room with a View*, the character of Lucy is clearly linked with Beethoven's piano sonata Op. 111. In regards to this musico-literary link, Michelle Fillion goes so far as to argue that, "Without her music Lucy is a 'flat' character, a conventional and rather 'commonplace' ingénue. It is no wonder that critics who discount the novel's musical content also tend to dismiss her as 'a two-dimensional heroine.'" (2001: 268) As Fillion highlights, the linking of a character with a particular piece of music does, no doubt, affect their process of characterization. In this study, we will be taking this idea one step further, examining the role of musical association in fiction as characterization and individualization. Our focus will be on Richard Powers' novel, *The Time of Our Singing*, in which John Dowland's song *Time Stands Still* provides the character of Jonah Strom with a bridge to, and a language for, his own otherwise abstruse self.

## 2. Words vs. Music, The Distinction and the Dialogue

From the Symbolist poets striving towards the idea of music as "a higher art form, floating free of worldly encumbrances and capable of expressing the ineffable" (Frolova-Walker 2002:507), to the Nineteenth-Century Program-Music rabble-rousers fervently debating Stravinsky's claim that "Music is powerless to represent anything at all" (Locke 1986: 681), the discussion surrounding the ineffability of music, that is to say its uniquely semantically abstract language, is hardly a new one. But what exactly is meant by "floating free of worldly encumbrances?" (Frolova-Walker 2002:507) I would define this further as instrumental music's freedom from the strict bounds of concrete meaning. This is not to say that instrumental music contains no semantic system whatsoever, (few would argue that, for example, that the distinction of major vs. minor holds no meaning) but that music's system of communication, its language, is a nonconcrete one, more intuition and abstraction than fixed meaning. Again, this is not to imply, that "Music is powerless to represent anything at all" (Locke 1986: 681), but that the *way* in which it represents is indirect and abstract. Consider, for example, the rousing chorale section of Beethoven's ninth symphony. It is, perhaps, allowable for me to refer to this music as "rousing," a fairly abstract, emotive, description; however, I could not objectively state what is 'meant' by the music (eg. it 'means' God is great. Or it is nine o'clock. Or the house is on fire) any more than I could any other piece of

instrumental music. On the other hand, when I write ‘the house is on fire,’ although I may use all kinds of literary artifice, at its core the message is clear: the house is on fire. This type of concrete meaning simply does not exist within instrumental music. The exception, of course, is program music; however, even in these instances, it is the program itself, the words on the paper picked up in the lobby, that direct listeners to concrete meaning in the music, not the music itself, alone.

This “floating free” is what allows music to function uniquely as a literary tool in the form of intratextual musical reference, encased within and called into being by a body of text. Text is very much at the opposite end of the semantic spectrum to music, for, although there is certainly scope for authors and poets to stretch and play within their media, words are much more strictly representational, a semantic system based on concrete definition and meaning. Intratextual music, therefore, is all the more striking and affective a literary tool in its semantic contrast to the text from which it springs<sup>1</sup>. There are myriad functions for such a tool, as explored by scholars across the musico-literary field; however, this study will focus on how such a thing, the ineffable encased in the concrete, can be specifically put to use in the defining of characteral identity; the music-within-text allowing us a more distinct idea of the character-within-storyworld.

## **2.1 And The Rest?: Considering Other Non-Fiction Artworks in Fiction**

Further to the discussion above, the question arises: What of other non-fiction artworks within fictional settings? For example, what of mentions of ‘real-world’ architecture, paintings, or dance within fictional storyworlds? I believe there is certainly scope for each novelistic intermediality to function as a distinctive and effective character-building tool; however, music, lacking as it does the visual representational tools of architecture, dance, fine art or theatre, or, in its pure form (that is to say without lyrics<sup>2</sup>) the textual tools of literature, is unique in its methods of communication and, therefore, reception. In this way it is a uniquely functioning intermedial character-building tool. We will consequently leave the examination of intratextual occurrences of other art-forms to other studies and continue with our focus solely on music.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of this phenomenon, see my earlier article, *Hear Me: How Intratextual Musical Association Develops Literary Characters*, (Hooper 2012).

<sup>2</sup> We will discuss the potential significance of lyrics in later sections.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of visual art and the novel, see Marianna Torgovnick’s *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence and Woolf*, or Viola Hopkins Winner’s *Henry James and the Visual Arts*, or Sophia

### 3. A Brief Review of Character-Music Pairings in Novels: ‘Real’ Music

I will here present a brief overview of some of the various forms this type of characterization, that of novelistic character developed and defined by intratextual musical references, can take, with examples from the music-novel canon, and brief discussions as to how these variations can manifest in terms of musico-literary characterization. Firstly, we will consider the type of musical content presented. In novels, a character-music association can be made with either real music or fictional music. By “real” music I refer to pieces that exist in the real world, the reader’s universe, our own, non-fiction reality.<sup>4</sup> Take, for example, the earlier-cited E. M. Forster’s *A Room With a View*, in which Lucy Honeychurch is quite strongly linked with Beethoven’s piano sonata Opus 111:

Among the promised items was "Miss Honeychurch. Piano. Beethoven," and Mr. Beebe was wondering whether it would be Adelaida, or the march of The Ruins of Athens, when his composure was disturbed by the opening bars of Opus III. (1908: 29)

Mr. Beebe, indeed, noticing her startled eyes at dinner-time, had again passed to himself the remark of "Too much Beethoven." (1908: 43)

The Beethoven Forster refers to is, of course, a real world piece of which readers could have experience outside the novel. Readers familiar with the piece could, therefore, aurally recall, or, in fact, go and put on a recording of, an actual pre-existing and *complete* piece of music while reading the novel and considering Lucy’s association with it. This “immigration” (Ronen) of a real world piece into a fictional character’s world is far from an uncommon type of intertextuality (or intermediality), and is often used to great effect in the interests of characterization. Another, more recent example of this type of reference is the linking of Nancy Huston’s protagonist Liliane Kulainn with Bach’s Goldberg Variations in Huston’s

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Andres’ *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries*, for dance and the novel, see Sarah Davies Cordova’s *Paris Dances: Textual Choreographies in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel*, and for architecture and literature see: *Writing the Modern City, Literature, Architecture, Modernity* edited by Sarah Edwards and Jonathan Charley, or “The Grandeur of the Abbey: Exploring Gothic Architecture in Novels by Helen Maria Williams, Ann Radcliffe, and Jane Austen” by Natasha Duquette.

<sup>4</sup> This definition assumes an “ideal reader” who is able to recognize and identify the musical works being referenced. We will explore some of the issues hereby raised at the end of this section. (For a more detailed look at the ‘immigration’ of real-world items into fiction settings, see Ruth Ronen’s *Completing the Incompleteness of Fictional Entities* (1988))

novel of the same name,<sup>5</sup> or, the novel I shall be looking at more closely later in this study: *The Time of Our Singing* by Richard Powers (in which the character Jonah is linked with Dowland's "Time Stands Still").

### 3.1 Intratextual Character Association: Fictional Music

Now let us consider the alternate side of this particular musico-literary coin: novels that pair a character with a fictional or non-real world piece of music, that is to say, with a piece that is a fabricated inhabitant of its own story-world. One of the most well-known examples of this would be the Vinteuil violin sonata, linked with the character Swann (and also with the character of Marcel, though here we'll just consider the single, former, character pairing) in Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*.<sup>6</sup>

But now, at last, he could ask the name of his fair unknown (and was told that it was the andante movement of Vinteuil's sonata for the piano and violin), he held it safe, could have it again to himself, at home, as often as he would, could study its language and acquire its secret. (1922: 164)

This type of association functions differently to the real-world music association, in that the piece, like the fictional character it is associated with, can never be fully known, or *heard*. Like the character, it can have traits:

The waving tremolo of the violin-part, which formed a bristling bodyguard of sound two octaves above it—and as in a mountainous country, against the seeming immobility of a vertically falling torrent, one may distinguish, two hundred feet below, the tiny form of a woman walking in the valley—the little phrase had just appeared, distant but graceful, protected by the long, gradual unfurling of its transparent, incessant and sonorous curtain. (1922: 310)

However, no matter how thorough the author's descriptions, in the absence of an original aural referent (or score), the piece can never be aurally complete for readers, can never be fully "heard".<sup>7</sup> It is tied to the words that describe it, and, as such, cannot function as

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<sup>5</sup> An examination of Huston and Bach can be found in Frédérique Arroyas' *Word and Music Studies* essay "Literary Mediations of Baroque Music: Biber, Bach, and Nancy Huston" (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Although some scholars have speculated on the idea that the Sonata may have been based on a piece by Fauré or Franck, there is nothing like an agreed consensus on the matter, and we will be considering it as a purely fictional piece.

<sup>7</sup> This raises the issue of musical novels wherein authors have included scores to new works in the body of their fiction, for example, in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (for a discussion of the use of the musical score in this

effectively within the non-textual, non-representational language of music. Nevertheless, such a link can still be used to character effect; however, the lack of a real-world aural referent lends a less intermedial form of characterization, confined as it is within one language. One may argue that the piece of music can be imagined by readers, thanks to the textual descriptors, and therefore function within its own, musical, language; however, this is only possible to the same extent that readers may imagine the characters they're building in reading the text: despite imaginings, the core of each is still fully rooted in the same, textual, language. This is not to be considered as an out-and-out unconstructive thing, and this type of character-piece pairing is not to be held as unconditionally weaker than real-world music examples; it is simply another form or style altogether, with its own purpose and place. For example, in the case of Proust, the lack of concrete referent works very well towards the novel's shifting-nature-of-memory aesthetic.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2 Intratextual Character Association: Individual Pieces of Music

Another way to categorize musico-literary characters in novels is to consider whether the character in question is paired with one piece of music specifically. All of the examples we have considered thus far sit within this category, as does another Forster specimen, Helen, from *Howard's End*. Like Lucy, Helen's musical association is Beethoven, specifically, his Fifth Symphony, the unnamed referent in the following quotations:

Now, this very symphony that we've just been having – she won't let it alone. She labels it with meanings from start to finish; turns it into literature. (1910: 38)

Helen pushed her way out during the applause. She desired to be alone. The music had summed up to her all that had happened or could happen in her career. She read it at a tangible statement, which could never be superseded. The notes meant this and that to her, and they could have no other meaning and life could have no other meaning. (1910: 28)

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work, see Janine Barchas' "The Engraved Score in *Clarissa*: An Intersection of Music, Narrative, and Graphic Design" (1996)). The question here is: does this count as real or non-real music? This is a question deserving of a more thorough handling than I'll have time to offer here; however, briefly, I would argue that this work, realized as it is within the *musical* language and therefore able to be completely played and heard, would be categorizable as a piece of *real* (or real world) music.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Dayan has done some remarkable work on this element of Proust's writing, including his Word and Music Studies essay, "On the Meaning of 'Musical' in Proust" (2002). For another, more contemporary, example of this type of pairing, a novelistic character paired with fictional music, see Ian McEwan's composer Linley, from his novel *Amsterdam*, (1999) a character linked with his own, fictional symphony (and the theme from which it grows).

The novel is careful to specify that it is this one piece, the Fifth Symphony, with which Helen is linked, as opposed to a wider pairing with all Beethoven symphonies, or symphonic music in general. This type of association is well suited to novelistic characterization, as one piece of music for one character is a good balance, and is a digestible amount of non-textual referent for readers to easily evoke and utilize.

### **3.3 Intratextual Character Association: More General Musical Categories**

Nevertheless, effective musical associations aren't always specific individual pieces. Other forms include characters linked with specific composers, or styles, or, as with Jude from Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, with a specific instrument. In Jude's case, it is church bells:

Suddenly there came along the wind something towards him...Surely it was the sound of bells, the voice of the city, faint and musical, calling to him, 'We are happy here!' (1985: 63)

Bells began to ring, and the notes came into the room through the open window, and traveled round Jude's head in a hum. (1985: 484)

Here, there is no one specific piece, or even composer from whom the musical link stems, just the instrument. This type of link is more open-ended and fluid than that which pairs a character with a specific piece, as, instead of evoking one encapsulated musical entity, it evokes in readers a more general intermedial idea or feel, in this case, that of the non-specific (and therefore, more subjective and wide-ranging) sound of church bells. Although more loose, in this way, than specific piece associations, the aural, intermedial connotations for this type of musico-literary character link can still function as an effective characterizing tool. I place into this same 'general feel' category characters linked with a composer (but no specific work), for example Schubert; or one genre, for example, Viennese waltzes. An example of this former type of association, dealing with a specific musical form, is Ameen Merchant's recent novel, *The Silent Raga* (2007), in which the protagonist, Janaki, is linked with the musical form of the Raga.

### **3.4 Intratextual Character Association: Musician-Characters**

We have considered a (limited) variety of character-music pairing types with a focus on the differences between types of musical element. We can also, however, distinguish differences

between the types of character we are looking at, considering the relationship that character has with music. Very often a character linked with music in a novel is a musician themselves.<sup>9</sup> Many of the examples we've considered fall into this category, including *A Room with a View* and *The Silent Raga*. Another example would be Rosamond from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a pianist, as described here:

Rosamond played admirably...It was almost startling, heard for the first time. A hidden soul seemed to be flowing forth from Rosamond's fingers. (1967: 152)

Characters, such as Rosamond, who are musicians can have some of the strongest and most effective musical links in terms of characterization, as the novel can use them themselves as the vessels through which music is delivered to the reader.<sup>10</sup> These characters frequently draw on their music as a privileged method of communicating with those around them (in the novel); similarly, this music can be interpreted as a privileged method of communicating character to the reader, coming, as it does, directly from them.

### 3.5 Intratextual Character Association: Composer-Characters

A related, but not identical, musico-literary character type is that of the composer. One of the more well-known examples of this type would be Thomas Mann's Leverkühn from *Doctor Faustus*, as described here by the work's unassuming narrator:

I offer few words about myself and my circumstances in preface to this account of the life of the late Adrian Leverkühn, to this first and certainly very provisional biography of a musical genius. (1976:1)

Characterization of this type can function similarly to that of our musicians; however, although akin, it differs from the musician-character in that the latter is commonly regarded as interpreter, while the former, the composers, are more generally considered as creators, therefore inhabiting a different sort of relationship with the art form.<sup>11</sup> They are not the

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<sup>9</sup> This type could again be broken down into sorts of musician: professional, amateur, and so on. However, we will, for the sake of brevity and simplicity, not follow all the various minor potential forks in these typological roads, leaving them to other, more specific studies.

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting, if far from comprehensive, list of musician-characters in novels, see Michael Meckna's article "Musicians in Novels: Good Reading for Teachers and Students" (2009).

<sup>11</sup> I am speaking here in broad terms. There are, of course, instances when the reverse is true, or varying degrees of either.



translators or vessels, imparting the music, they are, within the context of the novel at least, its originator. This is both helpful and problematic to our character-building cause. Firstly, this can be constructive in that such a character's link with their music is rather undeniable, and readers need not ponder over whether or not the novel's music speaks of the character, as the novel's music comes so directly from them, one step less removed, even, than with the musician characters. However, as we are dealing with fictional characters, (with no real-world referents, as discussed in earlier sections) the music being composed in these novels, by these composers, will almost unavoidably be fictional as well, leaving us in the more inscrutable category of non-real-world (or fictional) musical associations, as described above. This can give rise to complicating circumstances, such as we find in James Hamilton-Paterson's *Gerontius* (1990), in which an actual composer (in this case Edward Elgar) is placed in a fictional context, and therefore has his character somewhat "fictionalized" as well. In this case the music *is* actual or real-world; however, I contend that this type of character does not apply to this study, as, despite the fictional context, there is still a real-world referent for him, and he is not, therefore, purely fictional.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.6 Intratextual Character Association: Layperson-Characters

Thirdly, within the sub-category of character-types, we have instances of musically linked characters who are neither performers nor composers, those who neither interpret nor create, but who are, instead, on the receiving end, the listeners. In this category we find (along with some others we have already considered) Alex from Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (2000), a character who, although not linked to music through profession or even idle performance, is still very much defined by his association with Beethoven, specifically his Ninth Symphony, as referred to in the two following excerpts:

I thought here at least was time to itty off to the disc-bootick (and cutter too, my pockets being full of pretty polly) to see about this long-promised and long-ordered stereo Beethoven Number Nine (the Choral Symphony, that is), recorded on Masterstroke by the Esh Sham Sinfonia under L. Muhaiwir. So out I went, brothers. (2000: 42)

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<sup>12</sup> For other examples of novelistic character-composers, see Linley, from Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam* (1999) or, alternatively, Lewis Dod, from Margaret Kennedy's, *The Constant Nymph* (1925). He had entertained in his early youth an ardent desire to compose music. He could imagine no keener joy. (13)

When it came to the Scherzo I could viddy myself very clear running and running on like very light and mysterious nogas, carving the whole litso of the creeching world with my cut-throat britva. (179)

Although they are neither creator nor (formally at least) interpreter, the musical link with this sort of character should not be diminished or underestimated, as it can, depending on context, often be just as strong and effective a link as with the two previous categories. As their relationship with music is not as straightforward as with composers or musicians, these characters' musical links are often deeply rooted in significantly personal ways, often psychological, and frequently representative of some significant interior issue. Burgess' Alex is a prime example of this, as, for him, the Beethoven is the link to an intense, primal self. For this type of character, music's ineffable language is often a way for an otherwise silenced element of their personality to be able to "speak."<sup>13</sup>

### 3.7 Intratextual Character Association: Musical Structures

Finally, there is the musico-literary novel wherein the form or structure of the novel itself strives to be musical in one way or another, implicating the characters as an element of this structure.<sup>14</sup> One example of this, where the author has chosen to mimic the form of a specific piece, is *Napoleon Symphony*, again by Burgess, in which the form of Beethoven's Third, "Eroica," Symphony is mirrored.<sup>15</sup> Burgess outlines this ambition in a poetic epilogue:

...[E]ver since I chose  
The novelist's métier one mad idea  
Has haunted me, and I fulfill it here  
Or try to – it is this: somehow to give  
Symphonic shape to verbal narrative,  
Impose on life, though nerves scream and resist  
The abstract patterns of the symphonist (348)

<sup>13</sup> Another example is that of Philip Wakem from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, whose critique of Hady's *Creation* as, "a sort of sugared complacency and flattering make-believe" (474) demonstrates his role as what Rupert Christiansen describes as "The novel's first musical intellectual" (2).

<sup>14</sup> Very much a current "hot-topic," this type of musical-structuring within novel-length prose is explored by Alan Shockley in his 2009 book, *Music in the Words: Musical Form and Counterpoint in the Twentieth-Century Novel*.

<sup>15</sup> It's interesting to note the undeniable prevalence of Beethoven in the musico-literary canon. For an introductory investigation of this phenomenon, see William S. Newman's "The Beethoven Mystique in Romantic Art, Literature, and Music."

A less specifically focused example is Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counter Point*, which does not strive to replicate or represent the structure of any one particular musical work but instead, as suggested by the title, to replicate through text the musical concept of counterpoint, in which his characters play the part of the voices in what is referred to as "the human fugue," (32) as described here:<sup>16</sup>

The parts live their separate lives; they touch, their paths cross, they combine for a moment to create a seemingly final and perfected harmony, only to break apart again. Each is always alone and separate and individual. (32)

This type of musical referencing is distinct from the others discussed thus far, as it does not function by linking a specific character with music in one way or another, but, instead, implicates all characters musically, as they themselves make up a part of the overall structure of the novel which is, itself, musical. In this sort of scenario, the music operates less as a specific encapsulated expression for the character than in the other examples we've discussed, instead, alternatively, the characters operate as instruments or instrumental parts to a larger whole. In this way, this kind of literary musicality mirrors the function of the novel itself, as, within a novel each character is a working part of a larger whole. Here, then, the musical structure, superimposed upon the novelistic structure, is like another dimension functioning alongside each element of the novel, including, of course, character and characterization. What's more, this idea of characters as instrumental parts raises the idea of 'voice', as identified in the Huxley example, above, and the questions implicit to this idea such as: to what extent does each character's voice blend into the one "symphonic" (or otherwise harmonic) fusion, and to what extent does each stand apart as a distinct instrument or instrumental part on their own, and what does this represent in terms of characterization?

### **3.8 Intratextual Character Association: Summary**

Although far from comprehensive, I have, in the last few paragraphs, endeavored to relate an idea of the musico-literary novel's field, both in terms of some available forms and in canonical examples, as it can be related to character-music pairings, and what this can mean

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<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, there are two pieces which feature somewhat prominently in the text: J. S. Bach's B Minor Suite and Beethoven's Fifteenth String Quartet.

in terms of musico-literary characterization as we are identifying it.<sup>17</sup> The remainder of this study will now focus on the exploration of characterization within one particular type of musical association, the music-character pairing dealing with a specific real-world piece, where the character in question is a musician themselves, as presented in the character of Jonah as paired with Dowland's *Time Stands Still* in Richard Powers' novel *The Time of our Singing*.

#### **4. *The Time of Our Singing: Specifications***

Our study will focus on Powers' relatively contemporary work (2003), as it thusly represents the cleanest bridge to readers in terms of contemporary cultural understanding (setting aside, for the time being, the more narrow potential complications of geographics and demographics). The piece of music (Dowland's *Time Stands Still*) featured within it, however, is anything but contemporary, dating back to 1603. This occurrence of a modern novel featuring ancient music is by no means rare, and this seeming disconnect between the intermedial-pairing in fact serves an important musico-literary purpose.

While there are certainly a number of examples of music novels whose focus is on less canonical, more recent works (G. Smyth's *Music in Contemporary British Fiction*, *Listening to the Novel* neatly outlines several of these, with small chapters devoted to a number of such forms, for example Pop or Dance music), there is a definite literary tendency towards the use of established, canonical pieces.<sup>18</sup> One potential explanation for the tendency towards older, more established musical works within newer novels is the idea of the "ideal" reader. In short, the more established a piece is, the more likely readers are to be familiar with it, and therefore to be able to "read" these intermedial references within the texts. This concept of "ideal reader" calls to mind Chatman's exploration of the "implied reader," which he describes as: the "implied readership necessary to the elementary comprehension of the narrative." (150)<sup>19</sup> However, unlike Chatman, our definition here (of *ideal* as opposed to *implied*) does not go so far as to concern itself with the reader's *Weltanschauung*, instead, only concerning itself with the extent to which a reader is familiar with a particular musical piece. For the purposes of

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<sup>17</sup> For a more comprehensive list of musico-literary novels, see Kellie Brown's *An Annotated Bibliography and Reference List of Musical Fiction*, or the more-than 900 entries listed in John R. Gibb's *A Bibliography of Musical Fiction*.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon, one can refer to the "Performing the Canon: *An Equal Music*" chapter of Benson's *Literary Music*.

<sup>19</sup> See Chatman's diagram and explanation p. 147-151, and Rimmon-Kenan's discussion of it, p. 86-89.

this study we will assume this ideal reader. As previously stated, in order for textual musical references to function fully, we require a reader who is familiar with the musical works in question and is therefore able to “read” the intermedial references.<sup>20</sup> To further clarify, by this I mean a reader who, upon reading a reference to a piece, for example, *The Lark Ascending* by Vaughan Williams, is able, aurally (internally), to recall the musical work in question. To quote the founding mother of intertextuality, Julia Kristeva, what we are looking at is the reader’s ability to allow “the passage from one sign system to another.” (1984, 59)<sup>21</sup>

It would be easy to now become ensnared within a web of details: to what extent should they be able to recall the work? Note by note? Or just an overall idea? And what, exactly, should they be recalling, a specific recorded edition or some live performance or a sight-read score? What if the reader is familiar with Dowland in general but not this piece specifically? One could easily become entangled in the minutiae of the “ideal reader” issue, and while it wouldn’t be without interest or merit to explore each of these avenues, for the current study we will go only as far as to specify that the reader has at least *some degree* of knowledge of the piece, enough to aurally recall at least an overall idea of some version of the said piece itself (that is to say, not just an idea of Dowland’s style, for example). This is, basically, so as to ensure that we are truly dealing with the idea of a character linked with a real-world piece. If the reader has no real-world knowledge of the piece outside of the novel, then we are essentially dealing with the piece as though it were fictional, not real-world at all, resulting in a different category of characteral association and the distinct connotations that implies, as I hoped to have begun to make clear in the previous section. So, we will here, as stated above, assume a reader who is familiar with the musical works in question to the point, at least, where they are able to “read” the intermedial references, and from there continue on in our examination of how such references can navigate and relate the tricky terrain of cultural identity in literature.

#### **4.1 *The Time of Our Singing: Neither Here nor There***

*The Time of Our Singing* is a novel very much built around binary tensions: black-white, father-mother, science-art, now-then, high culture-low culture; and a society’s need to define

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<sup>20</sup> For a more thorough discussion of intertextual (or intermedial) reading and readership, see “Eight Readers Reading: The Intertextual Links of Proficient Readers Reading Multiple Passages” by Douglas K. Hartman.

<sup>21</sup> We shall return to a somewhat more thorough investigation of intertextuality, and how it is applicable to this study, within the upcoming discussion of Richard Powers’ text.

and rank according to them. Suspended precariously between these poles is the character we will be looking at here, Jonah Strom. Jonah is the son of a black American musician mother and a white European scientist father, and, thusly, cultural binary tensions churn within him from birth (and beyond, through family history). The Strom family slogan, repeated at weddings and funerals, and whispered back and forth during the every-day as a sort of outsiders' comfort, is: "Bird and fish can fall in love...but where will they build their nest?" (2003: 610-11) This saying reflects the seeming impossibility of their ever finding a niche in which to "fit in." Members of the Strom family are therefore perpetual outsiders, as their society (America from the late 1930s to the novel's present day) cannot fit them into any of its categories of binary classification. They fit the definition of no one faction; they are not this *or* that, but instead, both and, within the rules of this society, therefore, nothing, as reflected in this passage:

"Mama," [Jonah] asked. "You are a Negro, right? And Da's...some kind of Jewish guy. What exactly does that make me, Joey and Root?"

My mother stopped singing. I wanted to slug my brother and didn't know why. Mama looked off into whatever place lay beyond sound. Da, too, shifted. They'd been waiting for the question, and every other one that would follow, down the years to come. "You must run your own race," our father pronounced. I felt he was casting us out into coldest space. (2003: 29)

Cast into "coldest space," the idea of this lack of societal definition is a lonely and confusing thing for a character, and leads to a lack of definition not just societally, but individually as well. Here we have a character who does not lack for words, (*The Time of our Singing*, clocking in at a hefty 640 pages, is hardly a book consciously holding back on text) but for whom words, with their strict definitions, are inapplicable. There are no words for who Jonah Strom is, neither from society, or, necessarily trapped as he is within it, himself. However, the Strom family are fluent in another language, that of music. It is arguable, even, that their almost freakish ability and affinity for the art-form grows out of, and is perpetuated by, this need for an alternate method of expression. From their societal and textual place of swirling contradictions, the Stroms seek to find resolute peace, unity and, ultimately, definition through music.

Within the context of the plot, it is music that brings the unlikely pair, Delia Daley (Jonah's mother) and David Strom (his father), together in the first place, meeting as they do

at a free public concert in Washington, a place where barriers are temporarily suspended. And it is music that keeps them together, through which they knit their relationship and family:

This is how they play, night after night, more regular than sex, and just as warming. One begins; the other harmonizes. Finds some accompaniment, even when she has never heard the tune, when it comes down out of the attic from some musty culture no one would claim to own. The secret's in the intervals, finding a line half free of the melody, yet already inside it. Music from a single note, set loose to run in unfolding meter...Humming in bed: softer than love. (2003: 414)

#### **4.2 *The Time of Our Singing: Jonah and Dowland: The Specifics of this Song in Relation to this Character***

Jonah is therefore born of a unity made in music. W. M. Hagen describes the family unit thusly, in his *World Literature Today* review of the novel: “they sang themselves – and their children – into existence” (2005: 92). Consequently, it is quite evident that Jonah is a character with deep musical connections; however, in *The Time of Our Singing*, Jonah Strom is not just associated with music in general, but specifically linked with one piece, Dowland’s song, “Time Stands Still.” This connection is made clear from the very opening of the novel:

In some empty hall, my brother is singing... teasing out Dowland of all things, a bit of ravishing sass for this stunned lieder crowd, who can't grasp the web that slips over them:  
Time stands still with gazing on her face,  
Stand still and gaze for minutes, hours, and years to her give place.  
All other things shall change, but she remains the same,  
Till heavens changed have their course and time hath lost his name. (2005: 3)

The piece goes on to become the character’s secret weapon, the song he pulls out as a surprise encore to stupefy audiences, throughout his career. Jonah keeps his relationship with this piece as close and as preciously guarded, (at times even more so) as his other great connection in the novel, that with his brother and accompanist, Joey. In this song, Jonah seems to find, finally, a method of speaking, communicating, that his society will not only listen to, but will also, in music’s ineffable, indirect way, understand him by. As Jonah struggles through the novel to find definition, it is revealed that, in fact, this sought-after point of belonging is only achievable for him through the suspension of time and place, of visual and societal identity, through music; specifically through the performance of music, and even more specifically, through the performance of this one song:

Jonah whispered, “Dowland?” I nodded without registering. Thank God he also chose to announce the choice to the house, so I could hear. And time stood still again, as it did each time my brother said so. (2003: 310)

With that simple song, he planned to bring stones to life and change lives into mute stones. (2003: 209)

That Jonah is linked with this piece, in particular, is important. “Time Stands Still” is pre-baroque, meaning it would have been written to be performed in a completely unaffected style, without the ornamentation or decorative devices, or even vibrato, of later vocal works (and western art-music in general). This, in combination with the opening of a simple descending scale of three notes, to be sung slowly and deliberately, results in a serene sort of purity of voice; the voice here seems to be laid bare. This is especially effective in contrast to the melismatic and ornamented lieder, arias, and art-songs that surround Jonah in his world of vocal performance; the Dowland comes across as cuttngly pure, and therefore somehow more true: a more true, pure, and authentic language for Jonah’s self, both for his story-world audience, as they hear him sing, and for us, the readers, as our real-world knowledge of the piece is triggered and we ‘hear’ it too.

These musically defining characteristics, the sparse unornamented style, the descending motif, the slow but steady pace, and a restrained range of only a perfect fifth, all amount to the song’s overall sense of restraint. Restraint, which Chris Whent describes in his “Here of a Sunday Morning” discussion of the piece as, “far from inhibiting [its] force of expression, is able to sublimate it, raising it to a higher level where it can outlast the heat of the moment.” (Whent, 1) Whent goes on to state that, for all this, “Time Stands Still” is “is as affecting as anything Dowland wrote.” (Whent, 1) This statement is easy enough to read and comprehend; however, in reading it, along with the various descriptions of style and sound preceding, the fact remains that we are, still, reading. Experiencing words about music (functioning, as they do, within the semantic system of text, as previous discussed) is not at all the same as experiencing the sound of that music itself. It is the aural experience of “Time Stands Still” that is “as affecting as anything Dowland wrote,” not the phrase itself that tells us it is. Likewise, it is the aural occurrence of the song experienced by readers of *The Time of Our Singing*, not the



textual descriptions of it, that give it its affecting potency in terms of character-development for Jonah.

The semantically tangled world around Jonah stops at the singing of this piece, his Dowland, and grants respite as it shifts the world around him from visually to aurally receptive, so that both the story-world audience and we readers are no longer trying to classify and appraise him by what we see, but instead by what we hear:

The eyes are only mediocre. But the ears are extraordinary. (Powers, 615)

It is within the aural sphere that Powers gives us a character at peace with himself and his surroundings, a character that is at the same time culturally identified and individuated; it is through music, through this music, that Jonah can just be.

#### **4.3 *The Time of Our Singing: Considering the Lyrics***

There is one particular element to the Dowland song that must be considered: its lyrics. This is an interesting sort of intersection of intertextualities, a point where three sources, or referents, meet for the reader: the novel itself (text), the lyrics to Dowland's song (text), and the song's aural, musical component (music). Perhaps the best way to grasp this idea is by considering what John Fiske proposes in *Television Culture* as: "horizontal intertextuality," (1989: 110) to be distinguished from "vertical intertextuality," (1989: 118) the former referring to references within one media type (so, text referring to text, what I will call intertextuality) while the latter demarks references that span media (such as a reference to music within a novel, what I have generally been calling intermediality). If we consider *The Time of our Singing's* Dowland reference as divided into three sources (novel, lyrics, music) as opposed to two, it is clear that the song is functioning intertextually in two "directions" (vertical *and* horizontal), and, as such, in two different fashions, both of which offer important and distinct characterizing tools. The lyrics themselves function within the musico-literary character association in two respects. Firstly, they provide a useful framing tool. Because they are text themselves, they provide a smooth transition between media, they are a simple and effective trigger for the sound of the song, blending easily with the surrounding text. They are a sort of textual camouflage that the music dons in order to creep unobtrusively into the reader's awareness, without having to resort to prosaic descriptions of sound, which are often

clumsy and ineffective. Another attribute of these lyrics is that their actual content can function as a sort of helpful signposting, guiding readers towards the music's characterizing role. In the case of Jonah, these lyrics, describing as they do the freezing of time, are a definite indication of what this piece of music can do for him:

Time stands still with gazing on her face,  
Stand still and gaze for minutes, hours, and years to her give place.  
All other things shall change, but she remains the same,  
Till heavens changed have their course and time hath lost his name. (2003: 3)

The 'she,' in this case, serves as a personification of the music itself. Time stands still as Jonah releases this aural element of himself, and all the identity confusion of place (his societal and cultural confusion) and time are dissolved:

This is how I see my brother, forever...he touches his tongue to his hard palate, presses on the cylinder of air behind it until his tongue tips over his front teeth with a dwarf explosion, that fine-point puff of *tuh* that expands, pulling the vowel behind it, spreading like a slowed-film cloud, to *ta* to *tahee* to *time* to transcend the ear's entire horizon, until the line becomes all it describes:

Time stand still with gazing on her face...  
He sings that gaze, the one the heart tried to hand on to but couldn't. His eyes shine with the light of those who've freed themselves to do what they need. Those who see shine back, fixed at this moment, arrested, innocent. As he sings, Elizabeth's ships sail out to sudden new continents. As he sings, Freedom Riders one state away are rounded up and jailed. But in this hall, time stands still, afraid to do so much as breathe. (2003: 215)

## 5. Conclusion

Dowland's lyrics, then, this "vertical" component to our three-way intertextual axis, function symbiotically with the aural, "horizontal" component; however, they themselves do not accomplish the same task of enhanced intermedial characterization as the music itself does. They are intertextual enablers, helping readers, in the manners just discussed, to be open and receptive to the aural effect, the *sound* of Dowland's music (as internally triggered by the textual referenc). But it is the music itself, the intermedial, aural effect that, through its flexible and indirect language, is able to define Jonah's non-binary, textually and societally un-definable character. So that while we are unable to say what he is, we are able to hear it, through Dowland's song, ineffable, and, at the same time, candid in aural effect. Jonah escapes his cultural invisibility and becomes present, indeed *becomes*, to his fictional

audiences, to his world, to himself, and, to us, the readers, through this song. If this seems idealized, perhaps it is because so is the aesthetic of the novel. Music here is utilized as a kind of better, truer, more authentic language for the self. “Time Stands Still” could just as well read, *text* stands still, as words melt away into sound, into the sound of Jonah.

I give them what’s theirs. Their music. Their identity. (2003: 600)

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