

# Libretto for the Hibernian Meistersinger: *Ulysses* as Opera

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## *Abstract*

This paper extends its author's abiding study of music in Joyce by aligning salient fragments of "Sirens" with Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*. The author's new angle of argument focuses on the blind stripling as piano tuner, who adumbrates the possibilities of a musical literary practice. This finding is sustained by the identification of Joyce with his protagonists, by the stripling's affinities with Stephen, and by the tuner's role as tempo setter when the episode nears its close. The paper is accompanied by a CD, to be played in tandem, and as cued by the essay's prose, with the fragments of "Sirens" printed in its appendixes.

**J**oyce is quoted in Ellmann's biography as saying to George Borach:

I finished the Sirens chapter during the last few days. A big job. I wrote this chapter with the technical resources of music. It is a fugue with all musical notations: *piano*, *forte*, *rallentando*, and so on. A quintet occurs in it, too, as in *Die Meistersinger*, my favorite Wagnerian opera. (JIII 459)

The opera is nearly unique in Wagner in that the characters in the story are all human, historical personages. "For once there are no gods, no fairies, no magic potions, no superhuman interference in men's affairs."<sup>1</sup> Wagner's work is about a song contest in which the protagonist, Walter, eventually wins by sheer merit. I think the opera might have been Joyce's inspiration for his taking the musical stage in *Ulysses* for the Sirens song of twentieth-century literature; and the Song/Ballad of *Finnegans Wake*, which extended his work beyond, throughout all Christian Minstrelsy.

Joyce's affinity for identification with both his protagonist, Stephen, and with Walter, the winner of the song contest in *Die*

*Meistersinger*, comes by way of Wagner's seeing his own image in the opera's meistersinger, Walter. When Joyce himself participated in the celebrated *Feis Ceoil* contest only to be awarded honorable mention, the idea that Joyce might capitalize on the same method of conflating author/composer/writer, that Wagner had used in his operatic singing contest, probably became a reality. The ultimate connection in the compositional chain is the blind stripling/piano tuner, who, operating in the medium of sound only, makes possible the transformation of literary art into a whole new method and aesthetic of communication.

My ideas rest firmly (or perhaps uneasily) on the old chestnut among Joyceans that Stephen is a caricature of his creator, James Joyce, as a young man; and, further, that Bloom is a caricature of James Joyce as a middle-aged man; and ultimately—and this is news—that they all are consubstantial caricatures of the blind piano tuner tapping his way around Dublin looking for his lost tuning fork so that he might write the operetta called “Sirens” inside the grand opera of *Ulysses*.

As Stephen walks along the beach in Proteus, himself a keyless self-dispossessed character, it has been obvious from the Telemachus episode that he has been searching for a creative identity. Mulligan, opening the novel by mixing up the transubstantiated white corpuscular shaving cream with the holy Eucharist, recalls Stephen's cross-identification of himself with Christ in his villanelle in *Portrait*. Mulligan mocks all Stephen's pretensions in making himself the subject of his own poem (the villanelle) in which Stephen as priest transforms himself into the sacrifice by offering up his own transubstantiated body and blood into a transmutational holy Eucharist. In *Portrait* Stephen's villanelle is written in reaction to his own suffering when he sees EC with Father Moran. Stephen will be the priest of his own sacrificial transubstantiation as he compares writing a poem with transforming his ordinary life into a work of art. Now, as *Ulysses* begins, Mulligan, the arch usurper, destroys Stephen's illusion of divine self-inspiration as the subject of deathless villanelle verses of artistic transformation. Clearly, Stephen needs another rationale for his vocation of making himself the subject of his own immortal compositions.

The analogue between artist-hero and Wagner's self-identification with his protagonists is common in Wagner scholarship. Tim Martin's definitive study, *Joyce and Wagner: A study of influence*, takes up the issue at some length:

By the end of the nineteenth century, then, Siegfried had achieved wide currency as a certain kind of artist: a

“Wagnerian” artist of heroic vitality who shatters the authoritarian traditions of art and society. This artist is a hero not only because he creates art, but because, as a cultural messiah, he “redeems” his nation’s art and, in some cases, its people.<sup>2</sup>

In Nestor, the episode intervening between Telemachus and the theoretical bonanza of Proteus, Stephen recognizes his own image and part of his story in his pupil, Sargent:

Ugly and futile: lean neck and thick hair and a stain of ink, a snail’s bed. Yet someone had loved him, borne him home in her arms and in her heart. But for her the race of the world would have trampled him underfoot, a squashed boneless snail. She had loved his weak watery blood drained from her own. Was that then real? The only true thing in life? His mother’s prostrate body the fiery Columbanus in holy zeal bestrode. She was no more: the trembling skeleton of a twig burnt in the fire, an odour of rosewood and wetted ashes. She had saved him from being trampled underfoot and had gone, scarcely having been. A poor soul gone to heaven: and on a heath beneath winking stars a fox, red reek of rapine in his fur, with mirthless bright eyes scraped in the earth, listened, scraped up the earth, listened, scraped and scraped. (*U* 2.139-50)

Thus Stephen supplies the answer to his earlier holly bush riddle to the class, and at the same time reveals his continuing struggle with the transformation of the historical realities of his life by concocting a new autobiographical rationale for his art by tying it to some aesthetic process that is based on both reality and novel creation. His surrogate, from the contemporary world of reality, Sargent, despite any humane temptation of Stephen/Joyce to identify with the boy, must be relegated to Joyce’s blend of his own history into an artistic framework that can fashion a new reality from a basis in the realistic past. The need for an art of transformation embracing the artist/poet, Joyce/Stephen, as his own subject, yet coldly detached, was apparent to the first, and perhaps the best Joyce critics, Ellmann, Kenner, Beebe, Tindall, Chayes, and Anderson, all collected in the Anderson edition of *Portrait* (Viking, 1964). In his conversation with Lynch, Joyce/Stephen had outlined the dilemma of the artist trying to distance himself from his work. In the course of his *wholeness, harmony, and radiance* speech, the line of reason that eventually forms the basis of Stephen’s epiphany concept overshadows everything else in their talk. Authorial detachment from

himself and his past was for Stephen/Joyce paramount. Thus when Joyce came to write his second novel, the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* became the *Portrait of the Artist as a Middle Aged Man*, as Joyce updated his title from the *Odyssey* to that of its more modern Roman counterpart, *Ulysses*. Stephen was in his early 20's, thinking and writing about himself in his 1922 novel, but James Joyce was in his 30's and going on 40 by the time the Dublin *Odyssey* was to come out. In the meantime, unable to heed his own taboos about distancing fiction from life, Joyce wrote *Exiles*, a play that was so close to the historical realities of the Joyces' domestic situation (at least as projected in Joyce's mind) that its importance today depends more on its clues as a biographical artifact than as a work of art.

Stephen's self-identification problem eventually was to be resolved by drawing on a mixture of sources for his new titular protagonist, Ulysses/Bloom, even as Joyce retained the original Telemachus/ Stephen conceit in the first three chapters. Tim Martin draws further Wagnerian parallels to *The Flying Dutchman* and the older wandering Jew image in Wagner's later works for a middle-aged Eccles Odysseus. But history itself constitutes in *Ulysses* a more compelling and distancing framework. The situation of the tale taking place in one day and one city with real, named places, events, and characters took on a mantle of historical accuracy, but Joyce needed a new form of artistic virtuosity to enhance the book's uniqueness without destroying its adherence to historicity.

The idea of musicalization in the form of the rhythm of poetry and its affinity of medium (sound per se) comes to Stephen early in Proteus. Walking along the strand, Stephen can hear the pace reflected in the rhythmic sound of his shoes crushing the sand, step by step:

A very short space of time through very short times of space.  
Five, six: the *Nacheinander*. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable  
modality of the audible. Open your eyes. No. Jesus! If I fell  
over a cliff that beetles o'er his base, fell through the  
*Nebeneinander* [the mode in which visual experience is  
apprehended] ineluctably! I am getting on nicely in the dark.  
My ash sword hangs at my side. Tap with it: they do. My two  
feet in his [Mulligan's borrowed] boots are at the end of his  
legs, *nebeneinander* [side by side]. (U 3.11-17)

In other words, Stephen is experiencing the world through sound instead of sight:

*Won't you come to Sandymount,*

*Madeline the mare?*

Rhythm begins, you see. I hear. Acatalectic tetrameter of iambs marching [possessing the full number of rhythmic feet to fill out the line]. No, agallop: *deline the mare* [as Stephen adds another syllable to regularize the iambic syllable pattern].

Open your eyes now. I will. One moment. Has all vanished since [I closed them]? If I open and am for ever in the black adaphane [neither right or wrong, this or that]. *Basta!* I will see if I can see.

See now. There all the time without you: and ever shall be, world without end. (*U* 3.21-28)

Convoluted as Stephen's thoughts are in mixing two modes of perception, one of hearing only, the other of sight, they foreshadow coming events. If the *nacheinander* (or audible sensibility) can perceive the universe through sound, it might be capable of reconstructing an external world even if the *Nebeneinander* is disregarded or is not working. Once the *nacheinander* begins exclusively, the sound patterns take over perception, and you are informed solely of the pattern of sounds of whatever is to be represented. Stephen's mind immediately imagines rhythmic patterns taking the form of iambs galloping through melodic lines or music. When Stephen taps along with his scone, or imagines he does, as he walks along the Strand he pictures a lively set of iambs akin to Deasy's "Rocky Road to Dublin" song, the whole a world constructed with sound only.

Stephen's *Basta!*, glossed by Gifford and Seidman as Italian for "Enough!", sounds suspiciously like an abbreviated "Bitch's Bastard!", the theme song or mating cry of the blind piano tuner as he stumbles/taps his way across the streets and sidewalks of Dublin looking for his tuning fork. The sound of the tuning fork in the Ormond is the introduction to the four o'clock concert that will register everything musically. Putting the Proteus iambs together with the sensibilities, themes, and meaning of the music in Sirens is more than half way home to the conflation of Stephen and the piano tuner as the joint composers of the musical patterns/opera we call *Ulysses*.

The *OED* defines "stripling" as "A youth, one just passing from boyhood to manhood" (vol. xvi, p.634). The reader gets the sense of a young person somewhere between the two stages of development, rather than simply a blind, slight piano tuner. The nomenclature suggests the youthfulness of the tuner and further expands his relationship to Bloom into more than that of momentary benefactor and supplicant. There is tutorial hint of Bloom teaching/shaping the tuner's direction not only in

crossing the street, but in learning the lessons of life. Bloom first meets the blind stripling tentatively tapping along Dawson Street and trying to cross over to Molesworth Street. Bloom assists the stripling across Dawson and into Molesworth, and verbally indicates the way to Frederick Street, all the while musing on exactly the same things that Stephen contemplated during his earlier sojourn on Sandymount Strand. Bloom wonders what insights sightlessness affords people to compensate for their *nacheinander*-oriented sensibility.

Evidently the affliction of blindness does not lead to pitiful humility on the part of the afflicted. Lamppost Farrell, careering down the street, brushes by the stripling's cane with his dustcoat, creating some alarmed animosity from the sightless tuner: "—God's curse on you, he said sourly, whoever you are! You're blinder nor I am, you bitch's bastard!" (*U* 10.1119-20). When Bloom spots Boylan on the street, as the hour of assignation nears, Bloom too is alarmed and fearful. He begins to grope frantically through his trousers for his talisman/charm, the potato (to ward off pestilence), and his source of physical/spiritual cleansing, the bar of lemon soap that earlier contributed to his languid floating flower bathtub vision.

In a sense Bloom is preparing for the literal staging of the operatic vision which encompasses the meaning of *Ulysses* right there on the stage of the Ormond bar. For the moment, Bloom is off to the Museum to check out the statues' orifices for the accuracy of their literal artistic representations, while Stephen is off to the library to substantiate his claim to an artistic patrilineal identification with Shakespeare. Shakespeare will be the metaphoric father of Stephen's creative energy, even as Bloom will provide the basis of naturalistic verisimilitude in Stephen's art. Mulligan, at the end of *Scylla* makes the connection, perhaps a little grossly, of linking Stephen with Bloom on the library steps, the very same spot Stephen had sought signs of aviary augury for his artistic future in chapter five of *Portrait*.

Thus, the Hamlet Sr./Jr. split in Stephen's artistic self-portrait will be linked to Joyce's conflation of the artist and the every-man, in a 2000 plus year old uniting of father and son in the Greek ur-story. But that conflation is not the biggest news: it is Joyce's musicalization of the timeless plot in Sirens.

Everything that could be transformed into musical sound appears in the Sirens overture. The musical world of Sirens by extension (or contraction) is depicted and perceived in terms of sound-bites, snippets of noise and melody in the overture to the episode reduced to the medium of the blind musician/piano tuner. The story line of love and war at this

crucial four o'clock hour of Bloom's day forms the background against which all the rest of *Ulysses* is projected: Molly's liaison with Boylan, Bloom's own love, the history of Irish suppression, war, and sacrifice of Irish croppy-heroes are conjoined in such songs as "Love and War" itself. In all, some 27 melodies representing major motifs from all 18 segments of the novel are condensed in the overture, along with the musicalized noises of clocks, pipe/fifes, hand clapping, scraping boots and general bar noises. See how many you can identify.

Play overture here—*U* 11.1-63 (See Appendix A)

As the musical performances of Sirens begin to unfold themselves on the Ormond stage, each melody performed takes on multi-ubiquitous aspects of the several performers/characters/situations comprising the operatic narrative of *Ulysses*. Mabel Worthington saw the Sirens music emerging in two intertwining themes, love and war, that provide the musical continuity of the chapter. The method is introduced by the song "All is Lost Now" (*U* 11.629), which Richie Goulding whistles for Bloom:

Richie cocked his lips apout. A low incipient note sweet banshee murmured all. . . . Is lost. Rich sound. Two notes in one there. Blackbird I heard in the hawthorn valley. Taking my motives he twined and turned them. All most too new call is lost in all. Echo. How sweet the answer. How is that done? All lost now. Mournful he whistled. Fall surrender, lost. . . .

. . . That's why. Woman. As easy stop the sea. Yes: all is lost.

—A beautiful air, said Bloom lost Leopold. I know it well. (*U* 11.630-42)

Having established the idea of interweaving melodies bearing on Bloom's situation, the text takes up the melody of "M'Appari" from Flotow's *Martha*: "When first I saw that form endearing . . . Sorrow from me seemed to depart" changing the mood of the concert and the book as well in that the subject of the song, "Martha," has the same name as Bloom's new hope and prospective, if not surrogate, joy, Martha Clifford.

Play excerpt 2—*U* 11.713-53 (See Appendix B)

Throughout the Ormond scene another surrogate Odysseus, the deaf waiter, Pat, existing in the nacheinander world of deafness, avoids

the pleasure and pain of surrogate love and attraction that music only can provide, as he performs an antithetical role to the blind stripling whose tapping is identified with the source of musical inspiration. He comes tapping along as the barmaids begin listening for the song of the sea from their seas shells, as we are reminded by Bloom of the relation of music to the sound of the sea:

The sea they think they hear. Singing. A roar. The blood it is.  
(U 11.945)

Tap.( U 11.951

Minuet of *Don Giovanni* he' playing now. . . . Look: look, look, look, look, look: you look at us.

That's joyful I can feel. Never have written it. Why? My joy is other joy. But both are joys. Yes joy it must be. (U 11.965-70)

As Boylan begins banging on Molly's front door, the tap of the blind piano tuner's cane plays a counterpoint:

One rapped on a door, one tapped with a knock, did he knock Paul de Kock with a loud proud knocker with a cock carracarracarra cock. Cockcock.

Tap. (U 11.986-88)

As the twin themes of love and war are combined, back on the Ormond stage begins the first of the war songs, and the song which will bring the tuner, Stephen, and Bloom together under one victimized thematic composition of the confession, life, and death of the Croppy Boy. Stephen has hardly stopped feeling the oppression of Irish Nationalism on his future as a writer. Bloom suffers throughout the day at the anti-Semitic disregard and abuse of his fellow Dublin citizens, and the piano tuner, knocked about on the street, goes around cursing at his fellow Dubliners. The betrayal of the Croppy Boy by the British Captain in the garb of a priest parodies much of the history of Stephen's dilemma in *Portrait*. Through the shared betrayal of cuckolded Bloom and the martyred Croppy Boy, the maligned piano tuner and the angry young author musically merge their plights with the betrayal of Christendom's original martyr, Jesus Christ. As the concert draws to its conclusion the piano tuner reenters the Ormond to the words of the Croppy Boy,

ultimately sealing the allusive bond among all the *Ulysses* martyred clan with the great last words of Robert Emmet:

Tap. A youth entered a lonely Ormond hall. (*U* 11.1273)

At the conclusion of the episode, the authorial intrusion of the blind stripling's cane brings a final percussive accompaniment to the rising theme of Irish nationalism, as the tuner sets the tempo for the grand finale of "The Seven Last Words of Christ" heralded by the trumpet of Bloom's farts, as the deathless dying utterances of the great Christian and Irish martyrs combine with the muffling poetics of an oncoming tram car in a last stirring crescendo of musical tribute.

Play finale—*U* 11.1274-94 (See Appendix C)

A final footnote. Clearly, if Joyce and the blind stripling wrote the Wagnerian opera of *Ulysses*, Bloom is the book's Siegfried, and the stripling's cane—our Woton's spear—is the chandelier breaker in Circe. But much more of that later.

## Appendixes

### A. Overture—*U* 11.1-63

Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons. Steelyringing.

Imperthnthn thnthnthn.

Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.

Horrid! And gold flushed more.

A husky fifenote blew.

Blew. Blue bloom is on the.

Goldpinnacled hair.

A jumping rose on satiny breast of satin, rose of Castile.

Trilling, trilling: Idolores.

Peep! Who's in the . . . . peepofgold?

Tink cried to bronze in pity.

And a call, pure, long and throbbing. Longindying call.

Decoy. Soft word. But look: the bright stars fade. Notes chirruping answer.

O rose! Castile. The morn is breaking.

Jingle jingle jaunted jingling.

Coin rang. Clock clacked.  
Avowal. *Sonnez*. I could. Rebound of garter. Not leave thee. Smack. *La cloche!* Thigh smack. Avowal. Warm. Sweetheart, goodbye!  
Jingle. Bloo.  
Boomed crashing chords. When love absorbs. War! War! The tympanum.  
A sail! A veil awave upon the waves.  
Lost. Thristle fluted. All is lost now.  
Horn. Hawhorn.  
When first he saw. Alas!  
Full tup. Full throb.  
Warbling. Ah, lure! Alluring.  
Martha! Come!  
Clapclap. Clipclap. Clappyclap.  
Goodgod henev erherd inall.  
Deaf bald Pat brought pad knife took up.  
A moonliit nightcall: far, far.  
I feel so sad. P.S. So lonely blooming.  
Listen!  
The spiked and winding sea horn. Have you the? Each, and for the other,  
plash and silent roar.  
Pearls: when she. Liszt's rhapsodies. Hissss.  
You don't?  
Did not: no, no: believe: Lidlyd. With a cock with a carra.  
Black. Deepounding. Do, Ben, do.  
Wait while you wait. Hee hee. Wait while you hee.  
But wait!  
Low in dark middle earth. Embedded ore.  
*Naminedamine*. Preacher is he.  
All gone. All fallen.  
Tiny, her tremulous fernfoils of maidenhair.  
Amen! He gnashed in fury.  
Fro. To, fro. A baton cool protruding.  
Bronzelydia by Minagld.  
By bronze, by gold, in oceangreen of shadow. Bloom. Old Bloom.  
One rapped, one tapped, with a carra, with a cock.  
Pray for him! Pray, good people!  
His gouty fingers nakkering.  
Big Benaben. Big Benben.  
Last rose Castile of summer left bloom I feel so sad alone.  
Pwee! Little wind piped wee.

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True men. Lid Ker Cow De and Doll. Ay, ay. Like you men. Will lift  
your tschink with tschunk.

Fff! Oo!

Where bronze from anear? Where gold from afar? Where hoofs?

Rrrpr. Kraa. Kraandl.

Then not till then. My eppripfftaph. Be pfwritt.

Done.

Begin!

**B. U 11.713-53**

*Martha* it is. Coincidence. Just going to write. Lionel's song. Lovely name you have. Can't write. Accept my little pres. Play on her heartstrings pursestrings too. She's a. I called you naughty boy. Still the name: Martha. How strange! Today.

The voice of Lionel returned, weaker but unwearied. It sang again to Richie Poldy Lydia Lidwell also sang to Pat open mouth ear waiting to wait. How first he saw that form endearing, how sorrow seemed to part, how look, form, word charmed him Gould Lidwell, won Pat Bloom's heart.

Wish I could see his face, though. Explain better. Why the barber in Drago's always looked my face when I spoke his face in the glass. Still hear it better here than in the bar though farther.

—*Each graceful look. . . .*

First night when first I saw her at Mat Dillon's in Terenure. Yellow, black lace she wore. Musical chairs. We two the last. Fate. After her. Fate. Round and round slow. Quick round. We two. All looked. Halt. Down she sat. All ousted looked. Lips laughing. Yellow knees.

—*Charmed my eye. . .*

Singing. *Waiting* she sang. I turned her music. Full voice of perfume of what perfume does your lilactrees. Bosom I saw, both full, throat warbling. First I saw. She thanked me. Why did she me? Fate. Spanish eyes. Under a peartree alone patio this hour in old Madrid one side in shadow Dolores shedolores. At me. Luring. Ah, alluring.

—*Martha! Ah, Martha!*

Quitting all languor Lionel cried in grief, in cry of passion dominant to love to return with deepening yet with rising chords of harmony. In cry of lionel loneliness that she should know, must martha feel. For only her he waited. Where? Here there try there here all try where. Somewhere.

—*Co-ome, thou lost one!*

*Co-ome thou dear one!*

Alone. One love. One hope. One comfort me. Martha, chestnote, return!

—*Come. . .!*

It soared, a bird, it held its flight, a swift pure cry, soar silver orb it leaped serene, speeding, sustained, to come, don't spin it out too long long breath he breath long life, soaring high, high, resplendent, aflame, crowned, high in the effulgence symbolic, high, of the ethereal bosom,

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high, of the high vast irradiation everywhere all soaring all around about  
the all, the endlessnessness. . . .

—*To me!*

Siopold!

Consumed.

C. Finale—U 11.1274-94

Bloom viewed a gallant pictured hero in Lionel Marks's window.  
Robert Emmet's last words. Seven last words. Of Meyerbeer that is.

—True men like you men.

—Ay, ay, Ben.

—Will life your glass with us.

They lifted.

Tschink. Tschunk.

Tip. An unseeing stripling stood in the door. He saw not bronze.  
He saw not gold. Nor Ben nor Bob nor Tom nor Si nor George nor tanks  
nor Richie not Pat. Hee hee hee hee. He did not see.

Seabloom, greaseabloom viewed last words. Softly. *When my  
country takes her place among.*

Prrpr.

Must be the bur.

Fff! Oo. Rrpr.

*Nations of the earath.* No-one behind. She's passed. *Then and not  
till then.* Tram kran kran kran. Good oppor. Coming. Krandlkrankran. I'm  
sure it's the burgund. Yes. One, two. *Let my epitaph be.* Kraaaaaa.  
*Written. I have.*

Prrrpfrrppffff.

*Done.*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Biancolli and Robert Bagan, *The Victor Book of Operas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953) 257.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Peter Martin, *Joyce and Wagner: a study of influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 40.