Beyond the boundaries of language: music in Virginia Woolf’s “The String Quartet”

Émilie Crapoulet
Beyond the boundaries of language: music in Virginia Woolf’s “The String Quartet”

Émilie Crapoulet

“its [sic] music I want; to stimulate & suggest”
(Woolf 1978a: 320)

1 From an author who felt that “the only thing in this world is music - music and books and one or two pictures” (1975: 41), and who, in her earliest years, humorously toyed with the idea of founding a colony “where there shall be no marrying - unless you happen to fall in love with a symphony of Beethoven” (1975: 41-42), it is hardly surprising that music was an art which directly inspired Virginia Woolf’s own literary compositions, playing a central role in her work as a writer. Woolf’s early technical proficiency,\(^1\) and wide-ranging experience of music-making\(^2\) will lead her to question the nature of musical expression in relation to her own writing in her diaries, letters and essays, to such an extent that she planned to write a book “investigat[ing] the influence of music on literature” (1980b: 450), a project which unfortunately was curtailed by her death in 1941.\(^3\) In her aesthetics of prose, literature and music were inseparable and she felt herself to be more of a musician than a writer: to the poet Stephen Spender, she wrote that she wished that she could write “four lines at a time, [...] as a musician does; because it always seems to me that things are going on at so many different levels simultaneously” (1979: 315). Her most revealing remark however, was made in 1940 in a letter to her friend Elizabeth Trevelyan, who perceived the musical qualities of her biography of Roger Fry, Woolf writing that “its [sic] odd, for I'm not regularly musical, but I always think of my books as music before I write them. [...] Just as you say, I am extraordinarily pleased that you felt this. No one else has I think” (1980b: 426). It is by turning to her first truly through and through “musical” work, her short story “The String Quartet”, that we may trace the seeds of Woolf’s approach to musical expression which were to determine the modalities of her subsequent musicalisation of fiction and the fundamentally musical nature of her aesthetics of prose.
The experimental nature of *Monday or Tuesday* as a whole, which Woolf herself acknowledged as being a milestone in her own stylistic development in her 1925 essay, “Modern Fiction” (1994: 160), as well as its recognised originality within the broader Modernist literary context and the fact that “The String Quartet”, the fifth story in the series, is one of Woolf’s works whose content is primarily and explicitly focused on music and the musical experience, do indeed give rise to certain fundamental questions concerning the underlying musical conception of her style. This is all the more significant as the ambivalent format and the clearly delineated focus of the short story have been seen to play a crucial role in Woolf’s literary development and artistic aesthetics in general. These sketches prefigure the highly original stylistic and formal qualities of her later novels without putting her under the particular constraints brought about by working on a full-length novel. Woolf herself will say of her short stories:

> These little pieces in Monday or (and) Tuesday were written by way of diversion; they were the treats I allowed myself when I had done my exercise in the conventional style. [...] That [...] showed me how I could embody all my deposit of experience in a shape that fitted it – not that I have ever reached that end; but anyhow I saw, branching out of the tunnel I made, when I discovered that method of approach in Jacobs Room, Mrs Dalloway etc – how I trembled with excitement. (1978b: 231)

Despite an ambivalent critical reception of the collection as a whole,4 “The String Quartet” in particular was seen to stand out from the other stories and was greatly admired by the poet T.S. Eliot as well as the biographer, author and critic Lytton Strachey, leading Virginia Woolf to report in her diary, on the 7th of June 1921, that “Eliot astounded me by praising Monday & Tuesday! This really delighted me. He picked out the String Quartet, especially the end of it. ‘Very good’ he said, & meant it, I think. [...] It pleases me to think I could discuss my writing openly with him” (1978a: 125). Concerning Lytton Strachey’s words of appraisal, she writes:

> L[eonard] met me at tea & dropped into my ear the astonishing news that Lytton thinks the String Quartet “marvellous”. This came through Ralph, who doesn’t exaggerate, to whom Lytton need not lie; & did for a moment flood every nerve with pleasure, so much so that I forgot to buy my coffee & walked over Hungerford Bridge twanging & vibrating. (1978a: 109)

Virginia Woolf will also be delighted that her friend, the art critic Roger Fry, thought that *Monday or Tuesday* showed she was “on the track of real discoveries, & certainly not a fake” (1978a: 109).

“Shamelessly impressionistic”? Music and the stream of consciousness

On first reading, “The String Quartet”, despite its musical title and backdrop, hardly appears to be about music in any direct or significant way, but on the contrary, seems to be quite a straightforward example of a miniature in what was then the new fashionable Modernist stream of consciousness technique which Woolf was perfecting at that time, an expression of the flow of thoughts, perceptions and experiences of a particular character, in this case, a first-person narrator,5 in a given situation, the public performance of a string quartet. Strangely enough, we are told nothing of the music itself in technical musical terms, we are told very little about the actual playing and we have hardly any indication of what is being performed, as we only know indirectly, from a dubious remark
made by a fellow member of the audience, that an “early” Mozart string quartet is possibly on the programme. In this story, the music appears to be merely taken as a springboard for the expression of the random and fanciful images conjured up by the narrator as she listens to it. It is not surprising that in one of the first reviews in the New Statesman of Monday or Tuesday, written by one of the Bloomsbury members, Desmond MacCarthy (writing under the pseudonym “Affable Hawk”), and published only two days after the collection came off the press, “The String Quartet” will be perceived as “a wonderful description [...] of such fancies as are woven like a cocoon round the mind while listening to music” (MacCarthy 91), reminding us of a similar passage in The Voyage Out when the narrator describes Rachel Vinrace’s musical talent: “If this one definite gift was surrounded by dreams and ideas of the most extravagant and foolish description, no one was any the wiser” (30). In “The String Quartet”, we are however given a full account of the extravagant and foolish dreams of the narrator to the point that the story paradoxically thus appears to be neither about music proper nor to be musical as such because its discursive style does not depart from traditional narrative syntax and structures and is intrinsically literary. T.S. Eliot himself will note Woolf’s indirect approach to the musical performance she is dramatising in “The String Quartet” in a review of Monday or Tuesday in The Dial of August 1921. In this article, he compares different approaches to Modernist narrative fiction and literary expression, from James Joyce’s more direct rendering of the “external world” to what he perceives as a more reflective and contemplative approach, characteristic of Woolf’s style of writing. We cannot help feeling that T.S. Eliot had “The String Quartet” in mind when he wrote of Monday or Tuesday that

the craving for the fantastic, for the strange, is legitimate and perpetual; everyone with a sense of beauty has it. The strongest, like Mr Joyce, make their feeling into an articulate external world; what might crudely be called a more feminine type, when it is also a very sophisticated type, makes its art by feeling and by contemplating the feeling, rather than the object which has excited it or the object into which the feeling might be made. Of this type of writing the recent book of sketches by Mrs Woolf, Monday or Tuesday, is the most extreme example. A good deal of the secret of the charm of Mrs Woolf’s shorter pieces consists in the immense disparity between the object and the train of feeling which it has set in motion. Mrs Woolf gives you the minutest datum, and leads you on to explore, quite consciously, the sequence of images and feelings which float away from it. (2005: 186)

Undeniably “The String Quartet” would appear to be essentially about “the sequence of images and feelings which float away” from the music and so doing, all but obscure the nature of the music being performed, as they show a mind utterly absorbed in its own imaginative experience, a mind “overflow[ing] with images, favourite images of water and wavering fishes” (Blackstone 49), even though the extent to which the images of the fish are the narrator’s “favourite” images remains to be seen. Like T.S. Eliot, Bernard Blackstone argues that “in [...] ‘The String Quartet’, [Woolf] tries to convey the effect of an early Mozart by means of a chain of images” (Blackstone 49).

Needless to say, this representative approach to the musical experience in terms of dreams and images is highly controversial. As James Hafley has noted, “no musicologist would approve of this story’s narrator, whose voice clearly enough suggests the quartet’s musical structure [...] but responds to that structure in extramusical equivalents of the most shamelessly impressionistic type” (1980: 29). If the “dream-sequences” are primarily characteristic of stream of consciousness, and structural parallels between the text and
the underlying music remain vague and “impressionistic”, this leads us to ask, what relevance does the musical aspect of the story bear upon the significance of the dreams? On the one hand, reading the dreams on their own proves to be quite unsatisfactory as the narrative discontinuity and certain otherwise incomprehensible shifts of perspective only fully make sense within their musical context, the imagery not only suggesting the music but itself being suggested by the music. As Werner Wolf notes, “it is only with reference to the concept of a musicalisation of fiction that some of the otherwise bewildering aspects of the text can be accounted for” (Wolf 154). On the other hand, if the images are taken to be metaphors of the music and whose finality is to express the music, the reader would be expected to decode the “chain of images” back into a purely musical imaginative performance of a Mozart string quartet. As a mental exercise, this might prove entertaining to a point, but as a significant and profound aesthetic experience, this does seem a bit far-fetched. One might as well simply listen to an early Mozart quartet to enjoy the effect of the music first hand. Should we really be taking for granted the narrator’s delight in imaginative day-dreaming?

Woolf, music and words

Concerning the relation between music and words, Virginia Woolf had clearly stated in a review of Wagner’s operas entitled, “Impressions at Bayreuth” and published in 1909 in The Times, that “when the moment of suspense is over, and the bows actually move across the strings, our definitions are relinquished [sic], and words disappear in our minds” (1986: 291-292). Contrast this view with her dramatization of the first few notes of the musical performance in her short story, “The String Quartet”:

Here they come; four black figures, carrying instruments, and seat themselves facing the white squares under the downpour of light; rest the tips of their bows on the music stand; with a simultaneous movement lift them; lightly poise them, and, looking across at the player opposite, the first violin counts one, two, three – Flourish, spring, burgeon, burst! The pear tree on the top of the mountain. Fountains jet; drops descend. But the waters of the Rhone flow swift and deep, race under the arches, and sweep the trailing water leaves, washing shadows over the silver fish, the spotted fish rushed down by the swift waters, now swept into an eddy [...]. (1989: 139)

In this story, words are certainly made to render the music. In fact, the random, fanciful, irrational, and “unmusical” nature of the narrator’s dreams would even seem to be typical of a “hysterical” type of response to music which Woolf was so critical of in 1915, writing in her diary that “all descriptions of music are quite worthless, & rather unpleasant; they are apt to be hystericlal, & to say things that people will be ashamed of having said afterwards” (1980a: 33). It would therefore be quite far-fetched to put down such a striking discrepancy between Virginia Woolf’s understanding of the wordlessness of the musical experience and her far from wordless description of it in “The String Quartet” to any sort of inconsistency in her writing and aesthetics. From an author so conscious of the shortcomings of musical appreciation and aesthetics and “the difficulty of changing a musical impression into a literary one”(1986: 291), it is highly surprising that she herself would then unconsciously set out to write a short story revolving so explicitly round music, and, at first view, so full of those “vague formulas, comparisons, and adjectives” which plague musical criticism, without some ulterior motive for doing so. Indeed, she found that even the most knowledgeable of musical appreciation, such as
the “descriptive notes in a concert programme”, serve only to “lead us astray” (288). The “musicalisation of fiction”, to use the expression coined by Aldous Huxley in *Point Counter Point* (1963: 108), which Woolf is attempting in “The String Quartet” is not therefore to be taken as being gratuitous and it certainly leads us to ask: what was Woolf trying to do when she wrote “The String Quartet” when it so flagrantly contradicts her own thoughts on musical expression and on the literary expression of music? That the narrator herself will be ashamed of her “silly dreams” points to the fact that Woolf was quite aware of what she was doing in this short story, i.e. deliberately making her narrator respond to the music in terms of “silly dreams”. Certain key aspects of this short story will indeed reveal that it is far from being an understanding of the musical experience as being foremost the art of imaginative free association and emotive sentimentalism, which would go against Woolf’s own lifelong consistent views on music and the musical experience, but that Woolf, as we shall show below, is exploring here with great lucidity and insight the entire spectrum of the ways music makes meaning. By failing to perceive Woolf’s inherent satirical vein and detachment in the story, James Hafley, T.S. Eliot and Desmond MacCarthy have not entirely misunderstood the story—”The String Quartet” is indeed also about this “cocoon” of fantasies and the way each image gives way to another within a “stream of consciousness” flow, it is also an *exercise de style* in interior monologue but it is first and foremost about the way music makes meaning. For an author so preoccupied with the words and meanings which form the raw material of her own literary art, music, being a truly “wordless” art, and this is true in particular of the Mozart string quartet which features in her short story, provides the perfect foil from which to explore artistic expression and communication.

By making absolute music represent, Virginia Woolf is hardly seen to be trespassing over any literary boundaries. On the contrary, she is clearly caught trespassing over the boundaries of musical expression, hence the musicological objections made by most critics of “The String Quartet”, fuelled not so much by the irrational dream-sequences in themselves, but by the fact that Woolf is treating Mozart as programme music. Even the narrator is ashamed of her “silly dreams” when the rest of the audience is gauging the stylistic value of an “early” composition and listening to the technique of the violinists. But no reader of this story would have been surprised or shocked if, for example, Schubert’s “Trout” Quintet had been on the programme. Little do they know that the Schubert is in fact the real piece behind the story, the piece which obviously provided Woolf with the idea of the fish and the river narrative. The Schubert “Trout” Piano Quintet, D 667 in A major (composed in 1819), which she heard among other works performed at a concert in Campden, was however transformed in the story into an early Mozart string quartet. Virginia Woolf must have had a very good reason for doing so. The references to “spotted fish” can only have been suggested to Woolf by the title of the Schubert “Trout” Quintet she heard in Campden Hill.

By featuring a Mozart string quartet, absolute music *par excellence*, instead of the programmatic Schubert, I would argue that Woolf is in fact taking a deliberate stance to work away from any potential programmatic justification of the narrator’s dreams. In fact, she is implicitly questioning their relevance and purpose within the framework of a performance of “absolute” music in such a way that a potential musical programme cannot be seen to justify the dreams in any way. The dreams are thus clearly about the music and not about any non-musical programme. As a consequence, the relations between the dream-sequences and absolute music in general become also far more
significant and universal—rather than having the image of a river full of fish given to the narrator by an extra-musical title which could have justified the imagery and perhaps led to a more superficial “interpretation” of the music, the imagery is here linked with music in general and absolute music in particular if we consider that a Mozart string quartet is being played, thereby serving to highlight certain specific features of the narrative which the melopoetic parallels between absolute music and literature give rise to. Virginia Woolf is here deliberately making words render music in order to go beyond the more typical surface analogies which are usually seen to exist between these two arts in order to dramatize what “beliefs the listener has about music” (Kivy 80-81).

Through the looking-glass: musical transcendence in Woolfian aesthetics

Interestingly, the verbalisation of the music does not fail because it plays on the more typical musico-literary planes: the technical parallels remain incredibly clear. It is relatively easy to decode from the highly descriptive dream-sequences the corresponding musical features of the piece, to follow step by step the musical moments—from the initial flourish of the bows, the sustained ostinato and the interweaving melodic lines to the delineation and internal structures of the movements themselves. Words are chosen to describe the tempo, speed and textures of the music. From there, Woolf dramatises the meanings usually attributed to these otherwise purely technical and abstract notions. A fast tempo is made to signify happiness (first dream-sequence), the slow movement in a minor key is expressive of melancholy (second dream-sequence), counterpointed themes are understood as a dialogue between two characters (third dream-sequence), and musical form is evocative of architecture (fourth dream-sequence). Music, in this story, is first made to be representative and thus the whole gambit of potential musical “meanings” is put before our very eyes, but under closer scrutiny, it appears that Woolf also surreptitiously warps these meanings, undermines the narrative and puts into question the whole experiment: at the close of each dream-sequence, the narrator is dissatisfied. None of her responses are satisfactory because they are either too literal or they are too literary. The narrator is dismayed as she can only describe metaphorically what for her was a very intense experience. Leaping fish and raging torrents were the only way she could find to express the energy and motion which the music suggested to her, but her musical experience is not about the leaping fish and raging torrent. In a similar way, her response in the second dream-sequence is about the incommensurable fusion of a complex and unnamed emotion beyond the moonlit river trip, it is the expression of tension between two contrasting genders beyond the romantic story between a lady and her lover, and finally, it is the abstract pattern of a fluid architecture of sound beyond the visions of the firm marble pillars of a great city.

Thus symbolically marching into the desert at the close of the performance, the narrator discards all her emotional and imaginative crutches and leaves far behind any hermeneutic signposts as images, metaphors and words finally fail her and she falls back in despair, “eager no more, desiring only to go”. Werner Wolf notes this negative ending, but puts it down to the “dawning consciousness of her and the other concert-goers’ real situation” which “undermines the positivity triggered by the imaginative reception of the music” (Wolf 160), but I would argue that this final negative response should be taken as quite the opposite, i.e. as an indication of the narrator’s dissatisfaction with her own
expressive and linguistic powers and her failure to verbalise the intensity of her experience of the music. As Woolf herself noted, such a type of cross-art verbalisation is “so formal, so superficial, that we can hardly force our lips to frame it; while the emotion is distinct, powerful, and satisfactory. [...] we try to describe it and we cannot; and then it vanishes, and having seen it and lost it, exhaustion and depression overcome us; we recognise the limitations which Nature has put upon us” (1966: 242-243). Does this not describe precisely the way Woolf dramatised the close of the performance in 'The String Quartet'? The “emotion” of the narrator’s musical experience in this short story was surely “distinct, powerful and satisfactory” but her final despair is surely not, as Werner Wolf argues, a sign of dissatisfaction with the “reality” of London versus the sort of transcendent musical paradise of the performance. It was indeed “between the acts” (or rather between the movements) and not during the performance, that the narrator came closest to expressing the effect of the music in a description of significantly wordless actions: “I want to dance, laugh, eat pink cakes, yellow cakes, drink sharp wine” will she exclaim in delight after the first movement. The second movement will make her see the world with a child’s sense of wonder, everything appearing “very strange, very exciting”, out of proportion, a new world to be explored and apprehended in terms of the rhythms, patterns and internal correspondences of a musical composition. For Woolf, the effect of music therefore lies not in its capacity to rouse images as the narrator describes (and despairs of) what after all were cheap emotions and easy thrills. Neither “despair” nor “hope”, “sorrow” nor “joy” were terms which could ever come close to expressing the intensity and complexity of the musical experience in the second dream-sequence. As Woolf argues, any description which verbalizes our response to a work of art “is not a description at all; it leaves out the meaning” and so she asks, as we do, “but what sort of meaning is that which cannot be expressed in words?” (1966: 243). The narrator in “The String Quartet” has not come to the concert to just let herself be submerged by pleasant thoughts and dreams in a form of escapism into some form of musical “paradise”, as Werner Wolf believes (Wolf 162), but she has, on the contrary, come to consciously analyse and assess the power of music in her search for something more fundamental, something which goes beyond the surface, the conventions and the appearances, and which transcends the moment, something which is not outside each and every one of us but something which we are part of. As she asks just before the start of the performance, looking around the concert hall, “there are signs, if I’m not mistaken, that we’re all recalling something, furtively seeking something” (1989: 139, my italics). The superficial pattern of convention, time neatly segmented, people sitting in rows on gilt chairs, processions, pins which keep the ties straight, all this apparent (conventional) pattern and order is taken apart, reassessed in the light of the musical experience. Even though the shortcomings of the narrator’s verbalisation of her musical experience undoubtedly causes her to finally despair, she will nevertheless want to go out back into the world with a new way of seeing things, and thus greet the applewoman and speak to the maid—people who are very often taken for granted—, oblivious to the fact that it is this new way of seeing things which is the very essence of the musical experience, the answer to the question she first asked herself before the start of the performance: why listen to music?

Music is understood by Virginia Woolf to be neither an analogy for the stream of consciousness or the emotions, nor a metaphor for a (better) transcendent world. On the contrary, music is seen in this story to determine the creative modalities of a consciousness which can itself shape the world differently. The essence of the musical experience could be summed up in the words of Bernard in The Waves: “who is to say what
meaning there is in anything? [...] All is experiment and adventure” (1980c: 84). Paradoxically, we come to the conclusion that Woolf’s understanding of music is utterly formalist because her dramatisation of the various facets of the musical experience in her short story “The String Quartet” reveals that what is important in music is its purely musical characteristics: the fact that it is a complex “composition” of acoustic phenomena which gradually emerges as we listen. The rest—the feelings, the words, the images and the metaphors which we associate with music or which we use to describe what is after all a highly individual and incommunicable experience—, remains secondary. Therein lies for Woolf the paradigmatical nature of musical expression.

If “The String Quartet” can be understood to be an exploration of the shortcomings of the verbalisation of music, it also re-establishes the inalienable non-verbal specificity of the musical idiom. “The String Quartet” was undoubtedly reworked by Virginia Woolf to feature in The Waves, in a passage with which it bears striking similarities. Both texts, read in parallel, shed light on each other. Both Rhoda in The Waves and the narrator in “The String Quartet” are finally dissatisfied with their original imaginative response to the music. Rhoda, after Percival’s death, finds solace by going to a concert in the Bechstein Hall but is frustrated at not being able to express in words her musical experience:

Then the beetle-shaped men come with their violins; wait; count; nod; down come their bows. And there is ripple and laughter like the dance of olive trees and their myriad-tongued grey leaves when a seafarer, biting a twig between his lips where the many-backed steep hills come down, leaps on shore.

“Like” and “like” and “like” — but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? (1980c: 116)

Though Rhoda’s imaginative response draws on different images from those of “The String Quartet”’s narrator, and the passage itself is shorter and more concise, the same progression from the literary representation of music (the hills covered in olive trees, the seafarer jumping ashore, etc.) to hearing the music in itself, as pure pattern and abstract structure, occurs in Rhoda’s musical experience in The Waves:

There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. (116)

If in the words of Rhoda, language can only express the “like and like and like” of a metaphorical illusion of reality, then music, because it does not function according to the representative principles of language, may possibly get us closer to “the thing which lies beneath the semblance of the thing” (116). But what is the thing which lies beneath the semblance of the thing? As Woolf’s very first hero stated in The Voyage Out:

“What I want to do in writing novels is very much what you want to do when you play the piano, I expect”, he began, turning and speaking over his shoulder. "We want to find out what’s behind things, don’t we?—Look at the lights down there,” he continued, “scattered about anyhow. Things I feel come to me like lights. . . . I want to combine them. . . . Have you ever seen fireworks that make figures? . . . I want to make figures. . . . Is that what you want to do?”

Now they were out on the road and could walk side by side. When I play the piano? Music is different. . . . But I see what you mean.” (1974: 221-222)

In Woolf’s aesthetics, music is thus a bridge between the “silent territory” of pure disembodied “meaning” (‘Walter Sickert’, 1966: 242, 243), a meaning which we apprehend before we find words to describe it, and a verbalised, highly representative literary
expression of this meaning. By seeking “some design more in accordance” with those moments which escape linguistic definition (1980c: 169), Woolf therefore turns to music to express “what is startling, what is unexpected, what we cannot account for” (172). Escaping the constriction of words, music is thus seen to express in its own non-verbal way that which escapes those words which cheat us so often because they are too “facile”, “artificial, insincere” (59), as we revealed in our reading of “The String Quartet”, thus giving us the key to understanding the role and function of music in Woolf’s writing.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

1. Virginia Woolf undoubtedly had a fair share of technical musical knowledge. When she was eleven years old, her sister, Stella, noted in her diary that “Ginia” was learning music and she herself was sight-reading Beethoven sonatas (qtd. in Lee 33) and the seventeen-year old Virginia used to play fugues with her sister Vanessa (1975: 5). This contradicts both Leonard Woolf’s and Clive Bell’s assumptions that she had no technical knowledge of music (L. Woolf 528; Bell 1: 149). The numerous references to musical terms in her diary show us that she was far from being musically illiterate and she did not hesitate to make critiques of the interpretations of the performers she used to hear.

2. Virginia Woolf usually attended several concerts a week, but even though the social aspect of concert-going fascinated her and was the subject of many of her more satiric sketches in her diaries, novels and short stories, the opening pages of “The String Quartet” being an example in case, it also distracted her mind from the actual music being performed. The newly invented gramophone provided her with an ideal alternative. After her acquisition of one of the newest models in 1925 (Bell 2: 130), Virginia Woolf spent a lot of time listening to music in the less
distracting surroundings of her sitting-room (D5: 73, 161), whilst working on her literary projects, the music thus becoming “a background to her musings, a theme for her pen” as her nephew Quentin Bell put it (Bell 1: 149). Leonard Woolf recalls indeed that his wife was “very fond of music and we used to listen to the wireless and gramophone – classical music – practically every night” (L. Woolf 528).

3. This was perhaps to be a part of her “Common History” project, of which only two draft chapters were written: “Anon” and “The Reader” (see Silver 382-398).

4. Woolf will be exasperated by the incomprehension and puzzlement of some of the critics of Monday or Tuesday, leading her to complain that “they don’t see that I’m after something interesting” (D2: 106, 8th April 1921). This comment probably refers to a review attributed to Harold Child in the Times Literary Supplement of Monday or Tuesday, published on the 7th of April 1921. Though Child reveals the affinities between Woolf’s innovative use of prose and, the new style of “unrepresentational art which is creeping across from painting” and music, he will nevertheless give a critical and ironic account of Woolf’s style of writing, arguing “not that it means too little that is intelligible to the plain mind, but that it cannot help meaning too much for its purpose. Prose may ‘aspire to the condition of music’; it cannot reach it” (Child 87-88).

5. As we are not told explicitly the gender of the narrator, we shall, for convenience’s sake, consider the gender as feminine. See also Werner Wolf’s discussion of the matter (Wolf 148-149).

6. As the narrator herself speaks of the “silly dreams” she imagines for each of the movements of the quartet, I shall refer to these as the “dream-sequences”.

7. Speaking of hearing Wagner’s Parsifal, she will indeed show herself to be well aware of the difference between impressions derived from the music in itself and those which spring from cultural or extra-musical associations: “how much of the singular atmosphere which surrounds the opera in one’s mind springs from other sources than the music itself it would be hard to say. It is the only work which has no incongruous associations” (1986: 290).

8. Woolf was working on most of the short stories which were to form the collection Monday or Tuesday in 1920 and 1921. When Woolf first thought of writing this short story in March 1920, she went to listen to a performance of “the [c]hubert quintet” at a concert given in Campden Hill in the vaulted music room of George Booth’s house (whose wife Margaret was a violinist) in order to “take notes for my story” (1978a: 24). Woolf thus deliberately set out to record her own impressions and responses to the music during this real performance. Among the works played that evening in George Booth’s house by the English String Quartet (founded in 1915 by Frank Bridge) was also a Beethoven trio. According to Booth’s diary: “English String Quartet. Beethoven Trio. Schubert Quintet. Crowds” (qtd in Woolf 1978a: 24).

9. Even though the “Trout” Quintet is not directly “programme” music, it is nevertheless associated with the lied of the same name, Schubert’s musical setting of a poem by Christian Friedrich Schubart, since the fourth movement of the quintet is a set of variations based on the melody and accompaniment of Schubert’s earlier song “Die Forelle”. It is irrelevant to consider here the musical accompaniment to the Schubart poem in Schubart’s lied, or even the poem itself, which Virginia Woolf did not necessarily know, as the musical setting of the poem in the lied is hardly relevant within the context of the fourth movement of an otherwise musically “absolute” quintet whose only purely musical link with the lied is that of a musical theme. Schubert indeed often took themes and reworked them into different pieces regardless of their original context, purely for their musical potential.

10. We break down the various moments which compose the narrator’s response to the music as follows: after springing out in fountains and jets from under a flowering, burgeoning pear tree, the stream cascades down from the top of the mountain into the deep and swift bubbling currents of the river Rhone, then, eddying into fish-laden pools, flows under the stone arches of ancient cities past laughing fishwives. This we call the first dream-sequence. After the first interval, in the second dream-sequence, the narrator imagines she is on a boat, slowly floating...
along a slow “melancholy” river which runs through osier beds in the darkness, the moon
shining through the willow branches, before capsizing, the souls of the drowned passengers
rising as wraiths into the sky. After the next interval, what is now a gentle stream meandering
through the grounds of a Southern European, possibly Spanish medieval castle, has become mere
background, the narrator turning away from it to focus rather on the action of the scene between
the two lovers and the Prince. This we term the third dream-sequence. At last, after the “escape”
of the lovers, rather than flowing to the sea, the river strangely turns back on itself. The
narrator, thus feeling the end of the performance approaching, seems to look back upon her
dreams, retracing her steps through the imagery back to the fish of the opening dream-sequence,
in a short transition towards what we call the fourth and final dream-sequence, the waters of the
river gathering into a “moonlit pool” which then “dissolves” into the “opal sky” of the new
dawn, the iridescent rainbow-like colours and the oval shape associated with “opals” itself
suggesting an aerial reflection of the surface of the pool. This then gives way to the last scene,
the mirage of an impressive and stately citadel and the final dry, hot, barren and significantly
waterless desert scene.

11. For a discussion of imaginative or visual experiences of absolute music, see Langer, who uses
the term “crutch” to describe such responses (Langer 242).
12. In fact, after the revelation of the final dream-sequence in ‘The String Quartet’, the narrator,
at the end of the concert, will significantly seek out “those who, stepping lightly, go smiling
through the world”, the simple happy characters of the applewoman and the maid, modern-day
fellows of the simple “jolly fishwives” which she imagined so good, carefree and happy in the
first dream-sequence.

RÉSUMÉS

La musique joue un rôle important dans l’esthétique woolfienne. Pour cette raison la musicalité
de sa prose est une préoccupation constante, quoique non toujours bien définie, des études
woolfiennes. Woolf elle-même a toujours été fascinée par la musique tout au cours de sa vie. Il
n’est donc pas étonnant que ceux et celles qui s’intéressent à son œuvre soient amenés à étudier
cet aspect de son esthétique. Mais cette « musicalité » est particulièrement difficile à évaluer, et
on l’a souvent interprétée d’une façon simpliste et impressionniste. En prenant comme point de
départ sa nouvelle, « Le Quatuor à cordes », nous montrerons que l’expérience musicale, telle
qu’elle est décrite dans ce texte par Virginia Woolf, est loin d’être une simple évocation
superficielle de rêves, d’images ou de sentiments musicaux, mais, qu’au contraire, Woolf explore
ici avec beaucoup de discernement et d’intelligence, le sens même de la musique, sous toutes ses
facettes. Cette nouvelle démontre surtout le rapport de la musique avec la conscience,
l’imagination, le langage et l’expression littéraire, en nous amenant à sa potentielle fonction
ontologique et transcendantale.

AUTEURS

ÉMILIE CRAPOULET

University of Surrey