

“That Russian Fragment”

JERRY COBBOLD walking to Dr. Girodel’s house reflects on the music that he has just played to Perdita:

... that fragment of Russian music which he played, after his amateur fashion, “for the funny little thing”; and he paused for a moment, while some noisy children quarrelled and jostled on the dirty, littered steps of Sark House, to give himself up to those ideal cadences (...) Here lay—if anywhere—the solution to the mystery of his character.¹

Here’s a curiosity: music being used to describe the *true* Jerry Cobbold by an author with very little interest in, or even knowledge of, music!

There are, it is true, a few instances where music appears in John Cowper’s life or work. On 18 December 1931, Phyllis Playter had her Victrola gramophone delivered. John Cowper and Phyllis listened to Mendelssohn’s *Spring Song* for harp, the Overture to *Raymond*, by Ambroise Thomas, and part of Stravinsky’s ballet *Petrushka*². The longest reference to music and the subsequent talk with Phyllis appears in the *Diary* entry for March 29th, 1932:

All the time after breakfast the T.T. played *Ibéria* by Albéniz on the Victriola [sic]. She explained to me the theme of the old very old Spanish folk-lore ballad-tune & she discoursed most eloquently on how she liked modern composers who like T.S. Eliot in poetry use the old ballad refrain & intellectualise them. But I found it hard to *catch the tune*...

In a 1915 article there are references to Wagner, Richard Strauss, Gilbert and Sullivan:

Putting aside Wagner and Strauss and half-a-dozen Latin Opera-Makers, what has our stage got which really answers to the religious



A Victrola circa 1920-1930
from www.msu.edu/~atchiso5/VictrolaVI2.jpg

¹ J.C. Powys, *Weymouth Sands*, Rivers Press, 1973, p.222

² *The Diary of John Cowper Powys 1931*, Jeffrey Kwintner, 1990

exigency of which I am speaking? Nothing but Farce, nothing but Satyrheels! Devoted revivals of Gilbert and Sullivan restore to us our youth once in a long season...³

References to Wagner and Scriabin are present in a 1927 article⁴, and then, in an essay he wrote in the early 1930's, shortly after he bought Phudd Bottom, there is a reference to the Pilgrim's chorus⁵ from *Tannhauser*. Even *Autobiography* has references to *Carmen*, *Siegfried* and *Parsifal*. But they are never linked to a technical understanding of the music itself.

As to Jerry, he had tried to persuade Perdita to stay as his wife's companion, by playing the piano for her. She realises his intentions:

He is amusing himself by cajoling the 'companion'. He is talking to me through this music and trying to seduce me to stay. He *is* clever, though. He knows just what I like.⁶

Writing this scene, Powys wanted to describe a kind of seduction of the soul—more complete than just a physical seduction. He had to decide what Perdita *does* like, what Jerry can play to achieve this effect. What does Powys draw upon to answer these two questions? I would like to suggest that we feel the strong assistance at this point of Phyllis, whose musical knowledge would be vital to making this scene convincing—allowing even the use of musical terms!

Jerry is an amateur pianist and the music is “a fragment of Russian music”. Why Russian? Did John and Phyllis have a particular piece in mind? What could Jerry play, taking into account his own artistic milieu or even his London experiences? We are in Weymouth, in the 1930s, seen from America and tinged with nostalgia. Could this be the music of an older era? Tchaïkovsky, (for instance *None but the lonely heart*), Borodin, Moussorgsky or even Scriabin? With most of these we are faced with the supposed limitations of Jerry's technique and the seeming unlikeliness of such music being familiar to him. Perdita however provides some hints:

It had the technique—so she thought—of the older masters (...) “Is it some modern musician imitating the old style? No, no! This is no imitation. This is life itself, life filling out the patterns and rules that it has made, as *if they were sails*, to carry it beyond itself, over unknown seas!”⁷

Then she changes her mind:

“Why,” she thought, “he is making a lot of mistakes! He is playing from memory and blundering and stopping. Is he extemporising? No! It is *old* music; it is in the old style! He has forgotten it, and is leaving out and putting in! There—I am sure *that was wrong!*”⁸

Perdita cannot see whether Jerry is playing from music or not, and considers that he might be making it all up—composing as he goes. She is credited with “a passion for the piano and a fairly comprehensive one, though her knowledge was

³ J.C. Powys, 'Maurice Browne and the Little Theatre', *Elusive America*, Cecil Woolf, 1994, p.145

⁴ 'A Modern Mystery Play', *Elusive America*, p.176

⁵ 'An Englishman Up-state', *Elusive America*, p.205

⁶ *Weymouth Sands*, p.211

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

small and her training nil.”⁹ From this odd sentence, Powys wants us to understand that she has a good intuitive feel for music and could be justified in her criticisms of Jerry’s skills.

After a while she becomes enthralled by what he is playing:

... it was very soft and low, and became more and more beautiful as it went on. (...) She could almost feel the caress of the man’s fingers as this soft insinuating music rippled, quivered, trembled, rose and sank about her as she sat there. (...) ripples of lovely sound. (...) Sound was life. Sound was death. Sound was fate. Sound was the pouring forth, out of the abyss (...) She herself... became a sound among other sounds, a sound that was nothing but the rising and falling of darkness and light.¹⁰

Clearly something very profound is happening to Perdita—something spiritual or occult. At this point the almost physical impact of the music shows that the seduction is successful. We get an extraordinary description of a kind of inner disintegration, a return to essence, taking her away from her physical state as *Perdita* into vibration as sound, and completely away from all the problems that she faces with Lucinda, and her whole life in general. We are given some indication of the sound world of this ‘Russian fragment’ and the power that emanates from it. It is almost akin to the effect of Liszt’s piano-playing, making ladies swoon. Jerry is an amateur pianist, so this seems a ridiculous comparison, but the impact of what he is playing is *more* profound if anything, not the result of hysteria, sexual repression or even Romantic excess! We are reminded of “the little phrase of Vinteuil”, in *Remembrance of Things Past*:

At first he had appreciated only the material qualities of the sounds which those instruments secreted. And it had been a source of keen pleasure when, below the delicate line of the violin-part, slender but robust, compact and commanding, he had suddenly become aware of the mass of the piano-part beginning to emerge in a sort of liquid rippling of sound, multiform but indivisible, smooth yet restless, like the deep tumult of the sea, silvered and charmed into a minor key by the moonlight (...) He had tried to grasp the phrase or harmony (...) that had opened and expanded his soul...¹¹

This passage continues in a rhapsodic and more analytical way for several pages, and eventually the name of the composer appears—the fictional Vinteuil, whose sonata was still unknown to the general public. There are obvious parallels with this passage, in our case, which raises the question of whether there *is* a composer for ‘the Russian fragment’, and even what Powys means by “fragment”. Perhaps something similar to Vinteuil’s sonata? Vinteuil is said to be a combination of Saint-Saëns, César Franck, Fauré, (with Reynaldo Hahn possibly) and other composers. The effect here is very similar but less ‘occult’ than in Proust and we are told that it is Russian (perhaps a reference to the ‘Frenchness’ that is symbolised by Vinteuil). John Cowper and Phyllis could just be experimenting with this style of writing or even teasing us with this mysterious piece.

Let us speculate about whose music Jerry *could* be playing and set aside any possible teasing. I believe that Powys’ aim is more serious, given the role of

⁹ *Weymouth Sands*, p.211

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.211-2

¹¹ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, I, Penguin Books, 1989, p.227

Perdita in the novel, and her relationship with Jobber Skald and even Larry Zed. With the latter, the occult again makes an appearance with Gypsy May and Sylvanus Cobbold. It is not a major theme, but one that appears at different points in the novel. What music would Jerry know and be able to perform? Let us turn our attention to his background and artistic milieu:

... he was the greatest clown upon the music-hall stage; and that it was only because it was his wife's caprice to live in Weymouth that he had retired from "Cobbold's Colosseum" in London.

He had bought the well-appointed old-fashioned Playhouse called the Regent, and there for three nights in the week, and for one matinée, he danced his dance and made his grimaces all the winter long...¹²

This seems to take us to the world of Dan Leno and British Music Halls. It is rather anachronistic for Weymouth in the 1930s. Let us look for further clues to the 'Russian fragment' in Jerry's stage performances. We know that he only performs in part of the show and that he is "the clown in the harlequin's dress". There are no references to him playing the piano on stage or even being accompanied by a theatre orchestra or pit band. So we may assume from this that music is purely a *private passion*, possibly an antidote to his bitter misanthropy and to the kind of proto-mysticism or insanity he shares with his brother Sylvanus. In that case, would it be 'light music' or 'art music' that he could be playing to Perdita? We know from Noel Coward how potent 'cheap music' can be and in Perdita's state of mind, anything could affect her. Anything, really? Perdita does not seem so guileless as to be seduced by any ordinary music. Her critical faculties show her to be no fool. It would take something rather special, not just cheap sentiment or 'romantic' music to affect her in the way that it does.

This passage is a work of fiction describing the conscious musical seduction of a young girl and if we put to one side the credibility of Jerry's presumed pianistic skills, we may add the names of Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov, Rachmaninov and Stravinsky to our list of 19th century Russian musicians. Some of these would have been known—at least to Phyllis—and are mentioned in some of John Cowper's American writings. Also as I have already mentioned, a reference to Scriabin appears in the context of the Jewish play *The Dibbuk*:

It cannot be anything else than a reversion to the primordial element in the drama itself (...) This is the 'open secret' towards which, from Job to Faust, the aesthetic sense of our race has groped its way. This is what Euripides, Wagner, Scriabin, Isadora Duncan—all the sly thaumaturgic conjurers with the Divine Comedy—have had at the back of their heads.¹³

Let us remember Perdita's analysis: "The technique ... of the old masters (...) some modern musician imitating the old style (...) muted, muffled, soft and low (...) insinuating music (...) ripples of lovely sound." This could describe the world of 19th century Romantic piano music or even salon music: quite flexible tempi and a profusion of arpeggios. However the nature of the text changes:

Sound was life. Sound was death. Sound was fate... pouring forth out of the abyss...

Scriabin, with his Theosophical connections, is to my mind the only composer who fits this description. The return to the primal source of creation through sound, seen in the writings of Madame Blavatsky, filtered into Scriabin's

¹² *Weymouth Sands*, p.55

¹³ J.C. Powys, 'A Modern Mystery Play', *Elusive America*, p.176

piano music¹⁴ and into works such as *Prometheus* op.60 and *The Poem of Ecstasy* op.54. Such music is created to induce a state of ecstasy, and even to seduce, with its occult undertones and rich harmonies. With constant changes in tempo, it does indeed give the impression of improvisation, being created as it goes along, the listener being part of this process from moment to moment. This music came into Britain through British Theosophists and the composer Cyril Scott (whose works in the 1920s were much influenced by Scriabin). Scriabin discovered the teachings of Madame Blavatsky in 1905 and was influenced by them until his death in 1915. In 1906 he sailed to America and on 20 December gave a much admired piano recital in New York.

Scriabin seemed to be built of wires and nerves, and the genuine excitement with which he played was infectious. He danced and bounced up and down before the keyboard, but his skills in finding little windows (...) for the piano's soul to shine through was fairly the work of a master.¹⁵

Concerts also took place in Chicago and Detroit. It is interesting to read Scriabin's directions to the pianist in Sonata n°10:

Très doux et pur; avec une ardeur profonde et voilée; cristallin; lumineux, vibrant; avec une joyeuse exaltation; avec ravissement et tendresse; avec une volupté douloureuse... (Very soft and pure, with a deep but veiled ardour; as clear as crystal; radiant, vibrant; with joyful elation; with rapture and tenderness; with sorrowful voluptuousness...)

There are many other similar directions. I do not intend to suggest a particular piece, just that the description Powys gives seems 'Scriabinesque' to me. Scriabin seems to me the only Russian composer—given the nature of his music—who could affect Perdita in this way. His early piano works are quite accessible to the amateur pianist, and Jerry Cobbold is absolutely clear in what he is trying to achieve. The more adventurous pieces still speak to the secret world of our own emotional needs, if only for a while.

She felt as if she had disembarked from a voyage to the Isles of the Blest, only to find everything in this old, bitter, unredeemed world, just the same.¹⁶

Robert Carrington

Robert Carrington, a dedicated Powysian, devotes most of his life to music. He is as knowledgeable in ancient music as in the most contemporary trends, gives concerts with Paul Neville and is also a composer. He is presently giving lectures on classical music to adults in Sussex.

¹⁴ Particularly in *White Mass*: sonata n°7, *Black Mass*: sonata n°9; sonata n°10 and *Vers la Flamme*: poem for piano op.72

¹⁵ *The New York Evening Sun*, 21 December 1906

¹⁶ *Weymouth Sands*, p.213