

**Michelle Fillion, 2010.**

***Difficult Rhythm: Music and the Word in E. M. Forster*  
(Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press)**

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In his 1939 essay “Not Listening to Music,” E. M. Forster ambitiously grapples with what he terms “music itself.” Eschewing definition in favour of description, the author introduces the concept of “rhythm” which both encapsulates and transcends aesthetic ideology: “There’s an insistence in music—expressed largely through rhythm; there is a sense that it is trying to push across at us something which is neither an esthetic pattern nor a sermon.”

Michelle Fillion’s study picks up and expands on these cross-media formulations of rhythm. The book’s title comes from Forster’s 1927 Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in which he argued that a great novel should imitate music’s ability to set in motion a quivering vibration which continues to affect the receiver long after the music has ceased. For Fillion, then, “at the apex of [Forster’s] literary metaphysics is the concept of ‘difficult rhythm,’ by which ‘great chords’ resound below the verbal surface of a novel and echo after it has closed” (xviii). Fillion’s book proceeds as an astute analysis of Forster’s biographical and practical experience with music, in Chapter 1, before delving into the intricate schematics of the music of Forster’s novels.

One of the book’s key strengths is its ability to capture, through a delicate matrix of historicist, contextual, and conceptual approaches, the political undertones to Forster’s musical aesthetics. Such rejection of music as an apolitical art form is timely – over the past four decades musicologists and revisionist scholars alike have been working to diminish the purported *coron sanitaire* between music and politics.<sup>1</sup> Werner Wolf’s 1999 work, *The Musicalization of Fiction*, which inaugurated the concept of musico-literary intermediality, was a flagship critical effort to this end. As such, Fillion’s study joins a dynamic debate on the

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1 See, for instance: Joseph Kerman, 1985. *Musicality* (London: Fontana); Lawrence Kramer, 1990. *Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Susan McClary, 2010. *Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

role of music in the representation of identity in twentieth century fiction. Chapter 3's focus on the Wagnerian leitmotif as a method of revising the characterisation of *The Longest Journey*, and Chapter 5's astute analysis of Brahms' *Four Serious Songs* from the concert programme in *Howards End* offer especially cogent discussions, locating gender politics within the broader modernist tension between individual and collective identities. Chapter 5 with an invocation of the "stark realism" of Brahms as a means of portending the impossibility of "only connecting" is particularly subtle and effective.

Fillion's prose is impressive in its clarity, particularly given the ambitious scope of the project. Intended for musicologists, literary scholars, as well as "general readers," the book incorporates musical technicalities (often including a page or more of sheet music per chapter), synopses of the works in question, as well as astute forays into close reading. Despite such an itinerary, the study is never overburdened by jargon and retains an accessible tone, counterpoising the critical and the evocative elements of its argument. Fillion also supplements her formalist analyses with archival work, presenting some of Forster's hitherto unpublished musical projects in Chapters 7 and 8. While the former chapter outlines Forster's ambitious attempt to annotate all of Beethoven's piano sonatas, the latter makes effective use of unpublished libretto drafts and musical scores to examine Forster's involvement in the opera *Billy Budd* and his close collaboration with composer Benjamin Britten. The chapter contends, convincingly, that the opera – exemplifying the view Forster expressed in "Not Listening to Music" that "the arts were to be enriched by taking in one another's washing" – was a product of cross-pollination and mutual influence between the composer and the librettist.

A notable void in Fillion's otherwise meticulous study, however, is the omission of Forster's short stories, which contain a wealth of musico-literary techniques and intermedial constructions. Chapter 6, in particular, with its focus on Forster's last novel, *Maurice*, would have benefitted from reference to the author's early short fiction. The proposition that Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony serves not only as a nonverbal mutual admission of homosexuality between Maurice and Clive, but that the pair's ultimate parting represents the novel's denunciation of Victorian ideals of Uranian love which the *Pathétique* embodies, finds echoes in Forster's earlier stories. For instance, the key role of the "musical whistle" in the 1904 "The Story of a Panic," whose insistent melody alerts Eustace to an "understanding" of his "desire for Gennaro," leading to him ultimately being "saved" and escaping the austere mores of Ravello. Likewise, the tenets

of the chapter resonate with the sexual-political elements of Forster's escapist "fantasia," observed in the 1908 story "The Celestial Omnibus," where music is cast as an agent of transgression – a "truth in the depth, truth on the height" – providing a stage for the culturally unspeakable, becoming an early variation of the techniques the author deploys in *Maurice*.

Such additions would bring nuance to Fillion's argument, illustrating the evolution and diversity of Forster's musico-literary formulations and his developing engagement with the sociopolitical climate of the era. Similarly, to supplement the effective archival work, a closer engagement with Forster's nonfiction and epitextual material (integration of his influential *Abinger Harvest* is particularly scant) would help anchor the conceptual framework of the study. This may aid in decreasing the turn of the book to speculation, as witnessed by the frequent appearance of such terms as "surely," "likely," "perhaps," and "appears to," which tend to dilute the otherwise beautifully robust prose.

Yet such omissions do not detract overmuch from what is an accomplished study of Forster's cross-medial aesthetics. Expanding Werner Wolf's critical methodology of musical "thematization" in modernist literature to include historicist, formalist, as well as previously unpublished, accounts of Forster's engagement with intermediality, this study is an interdisciplinary resource and an asset to the broadening field of musico-literary studies.