

Tsung-Han Tsai, 2021.
E. M. Forster and Music
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Parker T. Gordon,
 University of St Andrews

Tsung-Han Tsai's *E. M. Forster and Music* offers fresh readings of Forster's engagement with music, analysing for the first time in a single-author study Forster's essays and short stories in addition to his longer fiction. Tsai's research, detailed and thorough, invites scholars to investigate the rich topic of Forster and music, especially with a political lens. The examples Tsai provides throughout the book are not exhaustive but more of a model for the diverse ways researchers can examine different types of Forster's texts (e.g. fiction, non-fiction) and music (e.g. audible, material). This interdisciplinary study also emphasizes Forster's political views, which Tsai convincingly demonstrates as interwoven into Forster's "representations of music" (4). *E. M. Forster and Music*, therefore, contributes both to literary scholarship of Forster's works and word and music studies through rigorous scholarship and insightful close readings.

Through the monograph's introduction, five chapters, and "Postlude," Tsai discusses Forster's short stories, essays, broadcasts, and correspondence in addition to the novels. *E. M. Forster and Music* therefore builds upon Michelle Fillion's *Difficult Rhythm* (2010), the first monograph study of Forster and music. Tsai argues that Fillion's omission of the shorter fiction and non-fiction "miss[es] the opportunity to uncover themes which Forster consistently tackles through drawing music into his writing" (12). Rich in archival research, Fillion's study opened new paths of inquiry and proposed methodologies for interdisciplinary study. Tsai similarly uncovers variant examples of musical allusions in Forster's manuscript drafts to propose alternate readings of Forster's works, which are supported by analysis that builds throughout each chapter and across the entire volume.

The understudied wartime film *A Diary for Timothy* (1945), written by Forster, provides a brilliant introductory example for Tsai's explanation that Forster's commentary on music is "unquestionably political" (4). In the first chapter, Tsai responds to Forster's use of the term "rhythm" in writings from Forster's time in Egypt, essays by Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, and in *A Passage*

to *India* (1924). Rather than the focus *Difficult Rhythm* places upon Forster's use of "rhythm" in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), which Tsai argues "seems purely – and oddly – aesthetic" (45), *E. M. Forster and Music* instead focuses upon Forster's earlier uses of the term, which present a more racialized or othered context. Tsai's approach, therefore, identifies Forster's "endeavour to challenge the association of rhythm with Western stereotypes about the unchangeability of non-Western cultures, as well as to reimagine that association" (47).

From this re-contextualization of Forster's "rhythm," Tsai turns to "The Queering of Musical Instruments" in the second chapter, which examines Forster's rationale for only including "Western musical instruments instead of 'exotic' Indian ones in *A Passage to India*" (50). This focus upon "the material existence of music" (49) rectifies what Tsai observes as critical neglect of Forster's work in material culture studies within both literary studies and musicology. Tsai identifies Ronny's viola, the Maharajah's harmonium, and the broken piano in the European guest house as "objects through which human relations are mediated and by which the boundary between public and private is negotiated" (49). Additionally, these instruments are not just symbols of "national identity of the British abroad" but rather are used by Forster to demonstrate "webs of complex relations between colonizer and colonized" (52). Tsai's clever readings of the three instruments further demonstrate how research of Forster's material musical objects also reveals new political contexts.

In the third chapter, Tsai similarly examines a piece of sheet music, a "coon song" open on the piano in the reception room in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905). This sheet music, neglected in other scholarship, is shown to be "[e]xplicitly racist" and "implies [Lilia's] unrefined taste and artistic vulgarity, associating her with colonial power and highlighting her whiteness" (94-95). Tsai's analysis of this sheet music pairs with another musical example from *Where Angels Fear to Tread*: the opera scene from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. This opera is analysed in Fillion's study, but Fillion neglects the literary source for the opera, Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*, so it was a pleasure to read Tsai's analysis of the intertextual connections to both Scott's novel and to Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, in which Emma Bovary attends Donizetti's French version of the opera, *Lucie*. Through identifying representations of national identity, Tsai demonstrates how Forster navigates the political associations of an English character attending an Italian opera in Italy based upon a Scottish novel, which shows Forster's "destabili-

zation of national character, playing with musical stereotypes and exposing their superficiality" (100).

The monograph then pivots to Forster's writings about Wagner in the fourth chapter, where the political and musical arguments of the book appear to coalesce most naturally and with great effect. Tsai's research shows that Forster's "participation in and advocacy of ... wartime musical activities, in which German music had a prominent part, only highlight the absence of Wagner in his writing during and after the war" (107). Tsai's examples from Forster's writing about Siegfried from Wagner's *Ring* as a "cad," rather than the more conventional hero figure, are entertaining and reveal more of Forster's humour and satirical voice. Ultimately, the association between heroism and Wagner's hero characters led to Forster's "resistance to heroism, which is also a resistance to propaganda" (126), which Tsai persuasively argues as a reason why Forster did not complete his Beethoven sonata project.

Tsai's final chapter proposes that Forster's views on "Amateurism, Musicology, and Gender" are represented in the characters of Vashti from the short story "The Machine Stops" (1908) and Dorothea from the unfinished *Arctic Summer*, which Forster began writing in 1911. Both women have jobs associated with musicology - careers that were emerging and becoming more professionalized in the early twentieth century. Tsai's research of these two characters and Forster's views on folksong collecting and musicology reveals misogyny but also, Tsai argues, a "resistance to the gendered hierarchy of professional and amateur" (146). The succinct conclusion to the section on Vashti, following Tsai's convincing case for Forster's satirical depiction of the character, proposes that the negative portrayal of Vashti suggests Forster's criticism of "professional norms and the domination of patriarchy" (146). This arrival appears to neatly wrap up the argument, but such an argument would benefit more from further discussion considering the weight of evidence to the contrary presented earlier.

In a book where the arguments are well sustained and tightly articulated, three short sections appear almost out of place: a brief section on Tchaikovsky and *Maurice* in the fifth chapter and two sections in the "Postlude" on Hugo Wolf's songs and Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd* (1951), for which Forster collaborated as lyricist. These informative sections do not bring the book to an end but rather introduce new arguments and information that might have been better placed as short interludes between chapters. These small criticisms aside, the volume is well presented from Cambridge University Press with ample margins

for writing annotations. Tsai's footnotes throughout the text are unobtrusive and useful, providing information about further sources, such as identifying a 1955 recording of the *Ring* performed by the same cast and led by the same conductor that Forster would have seen during his Bayreuth Festival visit in 1954 (131). Two minor comments for future reprints and editions: the publication date for *Abinger Harvest* was 1936 rather than 1935 as listed on pages 31 and 63; a typo on page 111 omits "a" in "happy ending in contemporary fiction."

Perhaps what is most delightful about Tsai's scholarship is the keen ear turned towards Forster's ironic narrative voice. Tsai takes the necessary time to work through Forster's use of double meanings, satire, and tongue-in-cheek, providing scholars with a model for discussing irony in Forster's works, especially in relation to musical examples. Open to Forster's sense of irony and playfulness, Tsai pursues Forster's ironic narrative voice, tracing new meanings and connections hidden in musical representations and demonstrating that attention to the "irony, irresolution, and ambivalence" (165) in Forster's work is a rewarding pursuit.

Tsai's debut monograph merits pride of place alongside Fillion's *Difficult Rhythm*. Both are indispensable scholarly studies of Forster's relationship with music. Each presents different aspects of Forster's life with music, and both are necessary works for any scholar of Forster or literature and music. *E. M. Forster and Music* demonstrates that there is more still to be said about Forster's musical life and writing. Both Tsai and Fillion, rightly so, limit the scopes of their studies because the field of Forster's engagement with music in his fiction, non-fiction, and personal life is so richly enlightening to our understanding of his works. Forster, as Benjamin Britten wrote, is indeed "'our most musical novelist'" (176), and just like similar studies of other modernist writers and music, Forster's relationship with music cannot be articulated in only one or even two monographs. *E. M. Forster and Music* proposes "a return to the text and its contexts ... to uncover unexpected nuances in and stimulate new understandings of Forster's work" (165), and, in doing so, it breaks new ground in Forster (and music) studies and the field of single author and music studies.