

Music as the Language of Love and Self-Revelation in George Eliot's "*The Mill on the Floss*"

Beatriz Aguirre

En este artículo, la autora analiza la doble función que Eliot dio a la música en su novela, "*The Mill on the Floss*": lenguaje del amor, de la pasión y de la desesperanza, así como puerta hacia el mundo de la imaginación y del placer. Recordando las calidades musicales de Eliot, desvela cómo la escritora entrelaza episodios de su novela con fragmentos de operas, cómo esos episodios están compuestos como los actos de una opera; eso convierte la novela en una exquisitez estética.

Palabras claves: literatura inglesa del siglo XIX, George Eliot, music.

L'auteur de cet article analyse la double fonction que la musique joue dans l'oeuvre de George Eliot, "*The Mill on the Floss*": d'une part, langage d'amour, de passion et de désespoir, et d'autre, porte qui ouvre le monde de l'imagination et du plaisir. Rappelant que Eliot avait été une excellente musicienne, elle montre comment certains extraits d'opéra sont entretissés dans les épisodes du roman, et comment ceux-ci adoptent la structure d'un acte d'opéra. Le roman est ainsi empreint d'une esthétique délicate.

Mots-clef: littérature anglaise du dix-neuvième siècle, George Eliot, musique.

The author of this article shows the double function, music has in Eliot's "*The Mill on the Floss*": a language of love, passion and desperation, and a gateway to the world of imagination and pleasure. Recalling Eliot's musical ability, the article reveals how the writer enhances the novel's aesthetic qualities by interweaving opera pieces with the episodes of the novel, and bases each episode on the act of an opera.

Key words: English nineteenth century literature, George Eliot, music.



Music in *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot has a doubly remarkable role.¹ On one hand, it has the power of generating a special behavior in Maggie Tulliver, the protagonist. She is dominated and subjugated by musical language; when she listens to music she transcends reality and inhabits a pleasant ideal world of mere sound. Although Maggie wants to follow the Thomas a Kempis' moral code of renunciation, she is not able to refuse the pleasure that music gives to her. On the other hand, music is also the language of love in the novel, and George Eliot's selection of musical pieces shows how she took special care to relate them to the novel's themes.

There is evidence about George Eliot's musical interest in both her life and her letters. Percy M. Young summarizes the musical life of George Eliot and its relation with her literary work. She "had music lessons in her youth and her last public appearance was in the auditorium of St. James's Hall"². Eliot played the piano fairly well and her musical background was wide and diverse: English Renaissance and Baroque, Classic and Romantic composers. She was a frequent spectator of the musical life in London and in her visits to the continent she used to go to see the new musical productions:

operas, ballets, concerts, chamber music and so on.

Throughout the novel there are several situations in which music relates to the flow of emotions. Maggie experiences extreme ecstatic pleasure every time music is heard. She turns to it as to a friend and loses herself in its beauty. Singing is one of her ways of expressing happiness. When she is waiting for her brother Tom, who returns after a long absence, she "was quickly out in the yard, whirling round like a Pythoness and singing as she whirled"³. The narrator identifies Maggie as a Pythoness, a supernatural being whose language is embodied by Maggie's singing.

Mrs. Tulliver knows how Maggie enjoys singing and this certainly calms her suspicions that Maggie had drowned: "Perhaps up in the attic, said Mrs. Tulliver, a-singing and talking to herself, and forgetting all about meal-times"⁴. This is the first evidence of the power music has on Maggie; she creates an imaginative world in the attic detaching herself from the real world.

In her childhood, one of her constant sources of joy is Uncle Pullet's snuff-box. In the first visit to his house, Maggie is afraid that he will not play his musical box because she dropped her piece of cake. She does not mind

the subsequent scolding but the lack of music. As she listens to the snuff-box

her face wore that bright look of happiness, while she sat immovable with the hands clasped, which sometimes comforted her mother with the sense that Maggie could look rather pretty now and then in spite of her brown skin.⁵

At that time the snuff-box plays "Hush, ye pretty warbling choir". This is an aria from Handel's pastoral *Acis and Galatea* with lyrics by John Gay, which is sung by Galatea.⁶ Although only the music is performed by the snuff-box, it is enough to produce in Maggie an enrapturing moment. The melody of the aria is passionate, and the repetition of the short musical theme becomes each time more and more emotive. Music replaces her tensions and gives her peace, and probably that is why she looks pretty to her mother.

This kind of passionate, emotional music is a constant in the novel with the only exception being the Christmas carols. However, Maggie also invests Christmas music with the same extreme emotions by erasing the religious atmosphere and replacing it with a human and aesthetical milieu:

she trembled with awe when their caroling broke in upon her dreams,



Maternidad. Bronce.
Plaza de Esculturas
Fernando Botero, 1999

and the image of men in fustian clothes was always thrust away by the vision of angels resting on the parted cloud.⁷

Music also serves to establish contrast between Tom and Maggie. While for Maggie the Christmas carols are "supernatural singing", Tom only perceives how "the singers were old Patch"⁸. If Maggie and her brother Tom are differentiated by their response to music, she and her friend Philip flow together in both their



musical taste and their attachment to it. Music is for them a way of liberating their feelings. Maggie's inner nature is freed in music:

her sensibility to the supreme excitement of music was only one form of that passionate sensibility which belonged to her whole nature and made her faults and virtues all merge in each other.⁹

Philip empowers himself and transcends his deformed body because:

Certain strains of music affect me so strangely - I can hear them without their changing my whole attitude of mind for a time, and if the effect would last I might be able of heroism.¹⁰

O yes, he said, seating himself at the piano, it is a way of eking out one's imperfect life and being three people at once - to sing and make the piano sing, and hear them both all the while - or else to sing and paint.¹¹

Maggie and Philip have the same sensibility and need for music, yet only he has real musical talent. He uses music for both his own pleasure and social relation, while for Maggie music means a separation from the others because she herself submerges in an isolated enjoyment.

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When Maggie is integrated into society "amidst the new abundance of music", she feels that life is now very pleasing.¹² It does not disturb her that music and the other social events violate the rigid moral code she follows; music and social commitments do not depend on her will. Actually, music is offered to her because it is believed that such an art does not generate any rebellious thought, on the contrary, music can integrate individuality into society. Perhaps if Maggie had had an extraordinary musical talent, which could have made her different from the accepted social model, music would have been prohibited to her. What the Dodsons, her mother's family, require is to follow the general norm and Maggie is doing that by participating in social events.

Musical language also becomes the language of love in the novel. The first instance of music invested with this meaning appears in the chapter entitled "The Red Deeps" when Maggie is forced to decide whether or not she will allow Philip to visit her again. She is pressured by two different and opposite inner "voices": one makes "sweet music to Maggie", saying that it "was not only innocent by good". The other voice says to her that "she had learned to obey" and therefore, her decision should be to avoid any further meeting with Philip. However, when "the music would swell out again", Maggy says neither 'yes', nor 'no'. She finally conceives an intermediate solution which can be interpreted as 'yes'.¹³ The Dodson's moral code is defeated by that inner voice which tells her, with music, pleasant love sounds.

This scene at the Red Deeps has a pastoral atmosphere. The place had been a refuge for Maggie during her childhood. She and Nature are fused, the whole landscape is a part of her feelings:

With her dark colouring and jet crown surmounting her tall figure, she seems to have a sort of kinship with the grand Scotch firs, at which she is looking up as if she loved them well.¹⁴

In this meeting, Phillip uses music as the language of love for the very first time. The song Philip sings to Maggie: "Love in her eyes sits playing" (See Appendix) is again an aria from Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, in which idealistic pastoral love is represented by two perfect, young and beautiful characters, the sheperds Acis and Galatea, whose love is menaced by Poliphemus. The story has a tragic ending when Acis, wounded by Poliphemus, dies. George Eliot could not have chosen more appropriate music than this aria for this scene. Acis sings the aria while he is waiting for Galatea at the beginning of the pastoral; melody and lyrics play with tenderness and passion between life and death. The delicacy of the music recreates the pastoral frame, the song is sweet and soft, but not feeble, there is enough energetic emotion to make Maggie change her decision to renounce Philip. Besides, the aria emphasizes on the eyes of Galatea, and Maggie's eyes have been described as her most attractive feature and the way of expressing her inner emotions.

The first attempt of Stephen, the second possible suitor, to approach Maggie alone is through a musical excuse: to bring some parts of the score of *The Maid of Artois* by



Michael W. Balfe to Lucy Dodson, Maggy's cousin. Unfortunately, it was not possible to get information about this opera.

The chapter 12 of book III of the novel, "A Family Party" contains the most musical allusions. The operas: *La Somnambula* by Vincenzo Bellini, *Masaniello* by Daniel F. Auber, and *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay. There is also an aria from *The Tempest* with music by Thomas Arne for the songs of Shakespeare's play, and a song for a poem by Withier. With this selection George Eliot gives evidence of her keen musical knowledge. She shapes this chapter as the act of an opera with its arias, recitativos, chorus, duets. The instrumental part is performed by the narrator who gives cohesion and coherence to the act. The central figure of the scene is Maggie, although, paradoxically, she is the only one who does not sing or play any instrument; she performs the part of the spectator and, at the same time, she is the ultimate cause of the musical dialogue.

The chapter begins with the return of the absent hero, the tenor, Philip. The

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initial narration, the overture, presents the themes that will be developed through the chapter: Maggie's ambivalent feelings towards Stephen, Maggie's affection for Philip, Maggie's dependence on her brother Tom's desires, Lucy's ingenuity, Philip's emotional instability because of his extreme feelings, and,

although Stephen is physically absent, his influence is present through Maggie's contradictory feelings.

The role of music in Maggy's life is evidenced in the introduction of the chapter when the narrator refers to her "as if she had been constructed of musical strings"¹⁵ This assertion can have two interpretations: first, she is the instrument in which musical language—love language, will be performed; and second, she, like a musical instrument, can be played in musical language. Her special sensibility to music makes these channels of communication possible.

The silence between Maggie and Philip at the beginning of their meeting is extremely meaningful. It is an introductory break that ends soon when each feeling, each theme, appears and combines with the other,

meanwhile the narrator performs the instrumental part. Through an intimate dialogue, Philip and Maggie recognize each other after their long separation. This dialogue plays the function of recitativos, that is, it provides the general frame of the scene by telling what has happened to the protagonists since the last time they were together.

When Stephen finally comes in, Philip quickly realizes there is something special between Maggie and this other man. Philip's "eyes were watching them keenly",¹⁶ and when Lucy proposes to have some music, Philip brightens:

for there is no feeling, perhaps, the extremes of fear and grief, that does not find relief in music...and Philip had an abundance of pent-up feeling at this moment... to express love and jealousy and resignation and fierce suspicion all the time.¹⁷

The first musical piece proposed by Lucy is a duet from *Masaniello*, an opera by Daniel F. Auber, which was first performed in 1828 in Paris and spread the composer's fame all over Europe. The opera follows Rossini's style, and its libretto is dramatic, combining love and politics. Masaniello is a fisherman whose dumb sister, Fenella, has been

seduced and imprisoned by Alphonzo, the son of the Duke. The disappearance of Fenella is an indirect cause of the rebellion Masaniello leads against the authorities; fishermen feel oppressed and want freedom. But Masaniello becomes insane and is killed by his comrades; the Viceroy's soldiers put down the rebellion. Fenella, who has forgiven Alphonzo's action, helps him and his wife Elvira during the revolt; and at the end, in despair over her brother's death, plunges from the terrace into the burning lava from Mount Vesuvius.

George Eliot does not precise the piece selected but two duets from the opera could fit here, both for tenor and baritone. One is an aggressive dialogue between Masaniello (bass) and Alphonzo (tenor), in which Masaniello finally betrays his political position and gives protection to Alphonzo and Elvira. The other duet is between Masaniello and Pietro (tenor) in which the grief of Masaniello for his missing sister and the mutual resolution of the friends to strike a blow for freedom are expressed. According to Lucy's words, when she assures that the duet "will suit" Maggie, the duet selected must be the second one: "Sara il morir men viltade e soffrenza" (Better to die



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Monumento Fundación Medellín. Detalle.
Bronce. Parque del Poblado.
Luz María Piedrahíta, 1997

than ever live so abject) is the initial and also the central idea of the duet (See Appendix). Surely, Lucy thinks this duet suits Maggie because the two friends have a goal in common, so, Maggie could see Philip and Stephen joined by a fraternal link which can resemble Lucy and Maggie's relationship. But Maggie is more affected by the strong emotional power of the music itself than for the fraternal feeling. Besides that, it is Masaniello who more beautifully

develops the melodic part, and Stephen's "fine bass voice"¹⁸ has here the opportunity of captivating her emotions. Stephen knows, although not consciously, that "to sing: it is a way of speaking to Maggie"¹⁹:

Maggie always tried in vain to go on with her work when music began. She tried even harder today, for she thought that Stephen knew how much she cared for his singing...But it was of no use: she soon threw her work down, and all her intentions were lost in the vague state of emotion producing by the inspiring duet.²⁰

Stephen tries to soften the emotional tension the duet has produced on Maggie and proposes to sing a chorus from *The Beggar's Opera*, by John Gay with music from Handel's *Rinaldo*. It would be a "rush of sound" to please Maggie. But Philip wants to take advantage on Maggie's emotional receptivity to say what he feels, and the chorus is replaced by an aria from Bellini's *La Somnambula*, "Ah, perche non posso odiarti" (See Appendix).

Philip, who knows Latin and therefore must understand Italian, intentionally changes the general meaning of the aria and makes up a plot according to his needs. "Ah, perche non posso odiarti" means: Oh, why can I not hate

you!. The story Philip tells about the aria, establishing first that he does not know the opera, is quite different. Philip says: "the tenor is telling the heroine that he shall always love her though she may forsake him"²¹. In the opera the situation is as follows: Amina, the sleep-walker, after one of her night walkings, has been found one morning in the bedroom of Count Rodolfo. Elvino, her fiance, does not want to accept Rodolfo's explanation about Amina's innocence. In the previous scene, Elvino in his rage snatches back the ring he has previously given Amina. When everybody protests, the unhappy young man bursts out, bewailing the fact he cannot hate Amina as he would like: she may find another suitor to love her as well as he has done, this is his wish.

Philip does not know the opera, but George Eliot must have known it very well and with extreme delicacy chose this aria that perfectly fits here. Philip is jealous, he thinks Maggie has some interest in Stephen, and Stephen does not deny his interest in Maggie, as Rodolfo does in the opera. Moreover, with his attitude, Stephen confirms Philip's suspicion. The music of the aria suggests passionate desperation, and the initial sentence—the title, is repeated each time with more emphasis. In the original score the

melody is played by the bass clarinet, and the repetition of "Ah, perche non posso odiarti" sounds deeply sensual and painful. This musical evocation is missed in the piano score, and undoubtedly Philip's voice cannot replace it: "that pleading tenor had no very fine qualities as a voice"²². However, the obstinate pizzicati of the cellos which inflames the dramatism of the aria can be well reproduced by the piano.

The change of meaning in the aria has the effect on Maggie Phillip wanted—her special attention, a melancholic emotion, and maybe a touch of guilt. The concealed meaning, "the plaintive passion of the music" is understood for her when Phillip begins to sing:

She was touched not thrilled by the song: it suggested distinct memories and thoughts, and brought quiet regret in the place of excitement.²³

Perhaps the correlation, Maggie-Amina, Philip-Elvino and Stephen-Rodolfo is not exact, but the two trios are involved in the same struggle of love, jealousy and passion. However, Maggie and Amina have in common two things: both live in a mill, which is not too relevant here, and secondly, if Amina is to be a sleep-walker,



Maggie is an awakened dreamer, specially when listening to music.

Stephen wants to diminish Philip's effect on Maggie and mocks about tenors and the complete resignation they express in their songs. As an "antidote", Stephen sings, with "saucy energy", a George Whiter's poem: "What care I?" (See Appendix). This poem tells us about the indifference a man feels for female affections. Stephen obviously directs the song to Maggie; by confessing indifference he wants to capture her attention. The selection of the song cannot be more accurate here:

I am afraid there would have been a subtle, stealing gratification in her mind if she had known entirely this saucy, defiant Stephen was occupied with her, how he was passing rapidly from a determination to treat her with ostentatious indifference, to an irritating desire for some sign inclination from her, some interchange of subdued word or look with her.²⁴

The effect caused on Maggie by this song is due not only to the music which enraptures her, it is "a wave too strong for her", but also to her understanding of Stephen's message which confuses her emotions. She tries to continue her work with no

success. The language of music and "the spirit of the song and to the singer" defeat her will.²⁵

The chorus "Let us take the road", a martial song used by John Gay to incite McHeath's thieves, is a relief after those serious emotions. The chorus indicates both the ending of the love dialogue and the apparent victory of Stephen. The love scene in this chapter is closed with the performance of a chorus, as well as in an opera act. Stephen does not sing again; he has the certainty of having gained Maggie's affection. She accepts his gentle compliments, the simple offering of a footstool; they are "a new element in her life, and found her keen appetite for homage quiet fresh". In contrast, Philip is extremely nervous; he cannot continue using music as his beautiful and powerful voice, "the piano shrieked in utter discord".²⁶ Mrs. Tulliver's entrance gives the chance for "abruptly breaking off the music", it is not longer a pleasant activity. Love is replaced by jealousy, fears, and disenchantment.

Music appears again in the novel, but it does not have the magic it had before. Stephen tries to tell Maggie his feelings "Singing in pianissimo falsetto

The thirst that from the soul doth rise,
Doth ask a drink divine.²⁷

But Maggie does not vibrate again with his message. Another duet is performed by Lucy and Philip, but it is only music for entertainment and Maggie

sat apart near the table where the books and work were placed - doing nothing, however, but listening abstractedly to the music.²⁸

The double role of music is sweetly closed in the last letter Philip writes to Maggie. He says, keenly appreciating what music is for Maggie, an 'inner voice':

You have been to my affections
what light, what colour is to my eyes
- what music is to the inward ear:
you have raised a dim unrest into a
vivid consciousness.²⁹

George Eliot must have had a pleasant and absorbing time deciding what musical pieces she would select for the novel, especially for the family party. She shows her personal enjoyment in music through her secret musical message; the connection between the musical pieces and the situation in that particular chapter is concealed. George Eliot only indicates authors, titles, and few lines of some arias. It is as if she had

written it only for her own delight or for a specific reader, the educated readers of her own time who knew those pieces of music very well because they were performed very often. She provides Maggie with an accepted way to express what a woman could not in her time, passion and desire.

George Eliot paid careful attention not only to the lyrics and the melodies but also to their aesthetical principle. Handel, Auber and Bellini have in common the lyricism of the Italian opera which, even in the nineteenth century preserved a kind of ideal atmosphere with its sweet arias, adding to it the dramatic reality with its passion and desperation. *The Mill on the Floss* symbolizes these two characteristics of the Italian opera — the idealistic childhood of Maggie and Tom and the dramatic shift of their lives in their adulthood.

Although the music in the novel does not generate radical changes in the characters, it is a way to show their inner life and the reader can appreciate their sensibility through their reactions to music. It can also be said that music performs a decorative element in the novel, as a delicate and sophisticated embroidery which gives it an aesthetic glow.



ENDNOTES

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- ³ Eliot, Op. cit., p. 70.
- ⁴ Eliot, Op. cit., p. 90
- ⁵ Eliot, Op. cit., p. 154
- ⁶ HANDEL, GEORGE. *Acis und Galatea*. Frankfurt: C.F. Peters, [19?].
- ⁷ Eliot, Op. cit., p. 224.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 514
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 401
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 531
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 513
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 392
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 393
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 525
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.530
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 531
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 494
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 583
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 532
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 533
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 533
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 533
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 534
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 534
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- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 585
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 634

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APPENDIX

LOVE IN HER EYES
SITS PLAYING

G.F. Handel

*Love in her eyes sits playing,
and sheds delicious death,
love on her lips is straying
and warbling in her breath.*

*Love on her breast sits panting,
and swells with soft desire;
no grace, no charm is wanting,
to set the heart on fire.*
(Handel, 20-31)

SARA IL MORIR MEN VITALDE E SOFFRENZA

Daniel F. Auber

*Sara il morir men vitalde e soffrenza.
Ha forse un schiavo altro danno a tener?
Si franga il gioco che tuttor ne opprime
Di nostre man perisca lo stranier.*

*O santo ardor di patrio amor
Nostr' alma accendi, audace fa
Al patrio suol dobbiam la vita,
Azza da noi la liberta.*
(Auber, 28)

(English version)

*Better to die than live so abject,
A slave must not a greater evil fear.
Let us break off the bonds that keep us subject,
Let us the stranger from our land expel.*

*Love for our country give us thy aid,
Thou in the struggle give us new vigour,
If to this land we owe our life,
Let it to us its freedom owe.*
(Auber, 29)

AHI PERCHE NON POSSO ODIARTI

Vincenzo Bellini

*Ahi perche non posso odiarti,
Infidel, com' io vorrei!
Ahi del tutto ancor non sei
Cancellata dal mio cor
Possa un altro, ahi possa amarti
Qual t'amo quest' infelice!
Altro voto, o traditrice, no,
Ahi non temer dal mio dolor.*

(English version)

*Oh, why can I not hate you
Unfaithful girl, as I should like!
Alas, you're not yet banished
Completely from my heart.*

*May some other man adore you
As this unhappy creature did!
Your need fear no worse a wish,
Oh traitress, from my unhappiness.*

WHAT I CARE?

George Whiter
(Fragment)

*Shall I, wasting in despair,
Die because a woman's fair?
Or make pale my cheeks with care
'Cause another rasy are?
Be she fairer than the day,
Or the flow'ry meads in May,
If she think not well of me,
What care I how fair she be?*

(Last stanza)

*Great or good, or kind, or fair,
I will ne'er the more despair,
If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shal grieve;
If she slight me when I woo,
I can scorn and let her go,
For if she be not for me,
What care I for whom she be?*



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LET US TAKE THE ROAD

G.F. Handel - John Gay

Let us take the road,
Hark! I hear the sound of coaches!
The hour of attack approaches,
To your arms, brave boys, and load.

See the ball I hold!
Let the chymists toil like asses,
Our fire their fire surpasses,
And turns all our lead to gold.
(Gay, 131)



Inspiración. Bronce.
Autopista Sur. Familia.
Salvador Arango, 1979

