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Introduction: Beyond the ‘little phrase’

Yet another contribution on the special relationship between Proust and music, one might think. This is, in fact, a topic of research and reflection which returns with pendulum-like regularity in Proust criticism. It is certainly not my ambition to present a synthesis of all that has been written and all that could be written on the subject, but it seemed to me in the light of recent information that a fresh look at the question might be justified. I shall start by surveying the work of my predecessors, in order to define the aims and limits of the present essay.

According to Ingarden, literature constructs a quasi-world. This is particularly true of Proust, whose *A la recherche* reveals a complex, complete and self-contained universe. Like all phenomena of the world, music has its place in it, a special place, as we shall see, alongside society, the emotions, literature and painting. Hence we can study the musical universe of Proust the man (Piroué 1960: Part I, ‘La Musique dans la vie de Proust’) – drawing on biographies, memoirs, correspondence (Mayer 1978) – and of his work: Georges Matoré and Irène Mecz (1972: 30), using the index in the first Pléiade edition, have identified the names of 170 writers, eighty painters and forty musicians. Wagner comes top of the list with thirty-five mentions, Beethoven second with twenty-five; Debussy appears thirteen times. These figures are probably conservative, for the index does not include adjectives (‘Wagnerian’), the titles of works or numbers (*Lohengrin*, the ‘Song to the Evening Star’) are not listed, and the text contains allusions to specific works or composers¹ that have to be decoded.

It is not surprising, then, that there are so many studies dealing with

Proust's relationship to music: his tastes and aesthetics (Piroué 1960: Part III), music and society in his day (*ibid.*: 45–56),² snobbery and the avant-garde, his conception of musical time, etc. Most of these topics have been addressed by Georges Piroué and will not be referred to again.³

In Proust, however, music influences the fact of literature itself. In the first book devoted to Proust and music, Benoist-Méchin (1926, repr. 1957) maintains that the majority of Proust's comparisons are of a musical nature (see also Piroué 1960: 169–73). This could only be proved by compiling a complete list, an enormous and patient undertaking: no doubt it would require a team. Milly, in a particularly thorough stylistic study (1975), has tried to show how phrases concerning the composer Vinteuil possess their own unique characteristics. To check this work systematically would be an endless task, for if the Bergotte/Vinteuil comparison were to be convincing one would have to make sure that these stylistic features did not recur elsewhere.⁴

The richness of Proust's vocabulary is well known. The passages in *A la recherche* devoted to music have been the object of lexicographical studies (e.g. Ferguson 1974) and thematic studies (Matoré and Mecz 1972).

In the field of purely literary studies there has also been research, often fascinating, into the genesis of the sections that touch upon the compositions of Vinteuil. The very history of *A la recherche* – to which I shall refer in chapter 2 – is the object of ever more exhaustive investigations, itself a novel upon the novel. Yoshikawa's fine study of the Septet (1979), irrespective of its stated aims, contains a wealth of observations relevant to our subject. Detailed questions of genesis as such concerning the musical episodes in Proust will not, however, detain us here.⁵

All this is just to remind us of the multiplicity of directions and ideas for research on the literary level that have been suggested by the presence of music in the work of Proust. But there is more.

Yielding to a classic temptation in comparative studies of music and literature,⁶ critics have sought to trace musical *structures* in *A la recherche*. The title of Part IV of Piroué's book, 'La Structure musicale de "A la recherche du temps perdu"', is a case in point, even though the author rightly emphasises that he has 'never entertained the idea of demonstrating the correspondence between Proust's novel and music' (1960: 193). Even such a critic as Costil – whose principal

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article is of unquestionable importance, as will emerge later – does not hesitate to speak of the 'musical construction' of *A la recherche* (1958–9), a phrase which turns out to have a purely metaphorical application: he means construction according to the role played by music in the organisation of the book, something entirely different. Those who have ventured into literal comparison have quickly discovered the pitfalls of metaphor. *A la recherche* has been compared to a symphony (de Lauris 1948: 33), but does the discovery of an ABA structure in passages of the work or in the original plan justify talk of sonata form? The most constant leitmotif in such studies is the Wagnerian leitmotif itself: Matoré and Mecz (1972: 246–54) seem to have listed once and for all everything that distinguishes the specificity of a leitmotif in music from the Proustian system of preparation and anticipation – which is not to deny that Proust is in some respects very close to Wagner, as I shall try to show. Milly, in a more recent book (1975: 72), has postulated an equivalence between the leitmotif and the anagrams that he believes he can discern in Proust's text; but in order to accept the suggestion one would have to be convinced that 'their density shows my regroupings are not arbitrary' (*ibid.*).

However, the favourite theme of studies devoted to the presence of music in Proust, and the one that most fascinates the general public, is the search for sources of 'the little phrase'. Piroué made a reasonably complete assessment of what was known about this at the time when he wrote his book (1960: 173–90). In order to clarify my own position on the matter, it is necessary to supplement his work with some more recent information.

Ever since Painter first published his biography (1966, repr. 1983) it has been known that each of Proust's characters borrows various features from a multitude of real people. And so we can take Proust seriously when he writes, in his famous dedication to Jacques de Lacretelle (in *CSB*:⁷ 565): 'Insofar as reality has been of use to me (which is not very much, to be honest), the little phrase of the Sonata – and I have never told this to anyone – is (to begin at the end), at the Saint-Euverte soirée, the charming but ultimately mediocre phrase of a violin sonata by Saint-Saëns, a musician I do not care for.' There is no reason to think that Proust is making fun of his correspondent, since this statement is confirmed by the explicit reference to Saint-Saëns in *Jean Santeuil* (*JS*: 816) and since the Sonata is still attributed

to Saint-Saëns in the 1910 drafts of 'Swann in love' (*NE*, I: 909, 911, 913, 918, 935, 941). Proust continues: 'I should not be surprised if, in talking of the phrase a little further on at the same soirée, I had thought of the "Good Friday Spell".' I shall try to demonstrate, later in this essay, the particular role that Proust's interest in *Parsifal* plays in the meaning of *A la recherche*. Further: 'Still at that very same soirée, when the violin and piano are moaning like two birds in dialogue with one another, I thought of the Franck Sonata (especially as played by Enesco); Franck's String Quartet appears in one of the later volumes.' Proust thus confirms that he was inspired not only by the inventor of cyclic form – in which the same theme returns from one movement to another of the same work – but also by the connection between two works of the same composer: Painter has shown (1983: 565–6) the thematic connections between the Violin Sonata and the Piano Quintet of Franck, connections analogous to those between the Sonata and the Septet of Vinteuil.⁸ Indeed, in 1918 Proust alludes to a quartet, which in the course of the successive transformations of the manuscripts will become a quintet, a sextet and finally a septet. We know from other sources that Proust had noted 'Franck Quintet' (while reminding himself to 'insert another name') in the margin of a description of a concert at Balbec which he did not use (*WBG*, I: 1028). Again: 'The tremolos that obscure the little phrase at the Verdurins,' says Proust, 'were suggested to me by a prelude to *Lohengrin*, but the phrase itself at that point by something of Schubert's. At the same Verdurin soirée it is a ravishing piano piece by Fauré.' J.-M. Nectoux has managed to show, in an exceptionally well-documented article (1971), what the Sonata owed to Fauré's *Ballade for Piano and Orchestra* in its piano solo version. In the pages of *Les Plaisirs et les jours* that are devoted to Mme de Breyves (in *JS*: 74), Proust attributes a function analogous to that of the little phrase to a passage from *Die Meistersinger*: 'She had made it . . . the veritable leitmotif of M. de Laléande.' Finally, according to the direct testimony of Benoist-Méchin (1957: 19), Proust was thinking of the theme of the Andante with Variations which concludes the Piano Sonata No. 32 of Beethoven when he wrote:

[The little phrase] was still there, like an iridescent bubble that floats for a while unbroken. As a rainbow whose brightness is fading seems to subside, then soars again and, before it is extinguished, shines forth with greater splendour than it has ever shown; so to the two colours which the little phrase had

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hitherto allowed to appear it added others now, chords shot with every hue in the prism, and made them sing. (S, I: 383)

As far as the Septet is concerned, Yoshikawa has catalogued all the composite sources in the rough drafts (1979: 298, 305). If Carnets 3 and 4 are to be believed, Proust was influenced by the 'fixed relation of the elements of the soul in Schumann' and 'the sudden, pathetic grandeur of a phrase by Schubert'. More precisely, the bell-sounds in the Septet (C, III: 252) must be attributed to the end of the Franck Symphony (Carnet 3); 'the spirits, the dryads, the familiar deities' (C, III: 261) to 'the habitual phrases, the habitual harmonies of Franck' (Carnet 4); the motif of 'the only Unknown Woman' (C, III: 262) to a phrase from Schumann's *Faschingsschwank aus Wien* (Carnet 4); and 'the perfumed silkiness' of the impressions conveyed by Vinteuil's music (C, III: 381) to a violin passage from Fauré's Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor (Carnet 3). According to Cahier 55, Franck's *Prelude, Fugue and Variation* provided the origin of the 'virginal' motif of the 'honeysuckle' (C, III: 251), and it was the opening of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 12 that inspired 'the charm of certain phrases of Vinteuil's music . . . [a charm which] defies analysis' (C, III: 388).

The work of Sybil de Souza, who has concentrated particularly on the sources of the Septet, should also be mentioned. Among many other things, she has pointed out the influence of Franck's cyclic conception of sonata form (1981: 370); but she has also shown the similarity between the theme of the Adagio of Beethoven's Quartet No. 8 and that of the Scherzo of his Quartet No. 12 (1969: 884). For the Septet scoring she cites the precedent of Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* for flute, clarinet, string quartet and harp (1969: 886), as of Saint-Saëns' Septet for trumpet, string quartet, double bass and piano (1973: 1607, 1980: 202). Painter, similarly, has pointed out the analogy between the description of the Septet and the first movement of Debussy's *La Mer* (1983: 564).

In fact, the game quickly proves fruitless, first because all the evidence suggests that Proust was inspired by a multitude of specific musical data in composing his imaginary works of music, and secondly because, as previous critics have noted (Piroué 1960: 175–7; Matoré and Mecz 1972: 64), his technical descriptions of the little phrase are few and far between, thus leaving the field open to the most diverse interpretations. We must look beyond the little phrase.

Are such investigations of no use whatsoever? There can be no question of rejecting historical perspective *en bloc*, as one might have done twenty years ago; and I should like to define my theoretical position in this regard. Of course Proust was perfectly right to take issue with Sainte-Beuve, inasmuch as the latter's minute piecing together of biographical facts tended to lead to an understanding of the writer rather than of the work. But historical information reassumes its rights if we are prepared to consider the legitimacy of a certain conception of meaning. If, as I believe, the meaning of the text is not only that which is constructed by its reader, but also that which has been invested in it by its author, and if – as the linguist Georges Mounin, following on from the work of Bloomfield (1933), has shown (1969: 255–85) – it is the *placing* [*situation*] of a word, of a phrase, that gives it its meaning, then research into sources and biographical or textual contexts may have a decisive bearing on the *understanding* of a work. While particular references to Saint-Saëns, Franck, Fauré, etc. do not seem to me to illuminate the meaning of the little phrase, or, more exactly, of the passages in Proust concerning music, a knowledge of Proust's poetics, that is, his working methods, is essential in order to determine the relative value of his sources.

As Painter has shown, and as the dedication to Lacretelle confirms, Proust foraged all over the place to create the characters and the imaginary works of art in his novel. Thus a knowledge of any *individual* source cannot contribute much to a better understanding of the book.⁹ By the same token, it is hardly possible to discuss the overall structure of *A la recherche* without drawing on the knowledge of the genesis of the novel bequeathed to us by Feuillerat (1934), Bardèche (1971) and all those involved in the new Pléiade edition. When Butor tries to establish, in the purest structuralist spirit, a point-by-point relationship between the number of instruments in the Septet and the number of novels that make up *A la recherche*, he is unable to leave this genesis out of account (1971: 180–5). And when Anne Henry, in her two fine books (1981, 1983), demonstrates what Proust's aesthetics owe to Schelling, Pater and Schopenhauer, and what his analyses of politics, society and language owe to the style of *La Revue des deux mondes*, the sociology of Tarde or the linguistic theories of Max Müller and Michel Bréal, she throws new light on both the meaning and, paradoxically, the originality of Proust's work, for her research reveals

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the intellectual backdrop against which the writer developed his own ideas. If literary criticism of the past suffered from the fault of relying implicitly on a simplistic mimetic model, the present-day return of historical perspective enables us to define what might be called a *poietic space*, that is to say, the starting-point from which the artist, writer or philosopher develops his own conception of the world, his own ideas, his own style. The poietic space may be compared to the situation created by the position of the pieces in chess: at certain moments of the game this position determines the possibilities of play open to the opponent, while at the same time leaving him a certain freedom of action. In making this point I am not proposing a new method. Let me say merely that I should like to read more frequently, in the field of literary and musical studies, essays as successful as *Wittgenstein's Vienna* by Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin and *The Intellectual Origins of Leninism* by Alain Besançon.

When Anne Henry writes, 'Vinteuil's score was written by Schopenhauer' (1981: 8), and demonstrates with chapter and verse the decisive influence that *The World as Will and Idea* had on Proust's aesthetics, she must be taken seriously. Besides, did not Proust contrive to give us the 'keys' to his work while at the same time hiding his sources? From *Jean Santeuil* to *A la recherche*, the little phrase passes from Saint-Saëns to Vinteuil, to such effect that *nothing* in the text makes us think of Saint-Saëns. But why, on the other hand, do we have a long disquisition on Wagner, a series of transparent allusions to Debussy's *La Mer* and an explicit reference to Beethoven's late quartets? We have to leave the text and pursue instead what it suggests, and it is on this aspect of Proust's poietics that we shall concentrate.

If our definition of poietic space – whether philosophical or musical – signifies a return to history, and if a return to history characterises the very period in which we live, then this return is something that has taken place *since* the emergence of structuralism. Without going into detail, we can say that one of the historic merits of structuralism, following on from the narrowly biographical approaches typical of earlier literary criticism, has been to bring about a return to the text. It is one of the fundamental hypotheses of this essay that the role played by music in Proust's novel cannot adequately be interpreted without an examination of the themes that intersect in each 'musical' passage. Such an examination should be not only as exhaustive as

possible but also successive, that is to say, it should take into account the order in which these themes appear in the course of *A la recherche*.

It is well known that there are three imaginary creative artists in the work of Proust: the writer Bergotte, the painter Elstir and the composer Vinteuil. However, little is known about the work of the first; as for the second, Proust gives a superb description of *Carquethuit Harbour*, yet the work of Elstir as such appears (apart from numerous allusions) only once. On the other hand, the works of Vinteuil – his Sonata and Septet – go right through *A la recherche*, inspiring several big ‘set pieces’ as well as some fragmentary allusions¹⁰ to which I shall refer where appropriate. The set pieces are as follows:

- 1 The ‘archetypal’ performance and the Andante at the Verdurins’ (*S*, I: 224–34).
- 2 Other Verdurin performances (*ibid.*: 238–9).
- 3 The Sonata played on the piano by Odette (*ibid.*: 258–60).
- 4 The Sonata played on the piano at the Verdurins’ (*ibid.*: 288); the little phrase on the outskirts of Paris (*ibid.*: 295).
- 5 The Sonata played on piano and violin at the Saint-Euverte soirée (*ibid.*: 375–84).
- 6 The ‘transmission’ of the Sonata to the Narrator by Odette (*WBG*, I: 570–5).
- 7 The comparison of Vinteuil with Wagner (*C*, III: 154–9).
- 8 The Septet (*ibid.*: 250–65).
- 9 The sessions on the pianola (*ibid.*: 378–90).

Of itself this simple list determines the content and method of the present study.

The works of Vinteuil mark out the psychological evolution of the characters, as in the amorous relationship of Swann and Odette or in that of the Narrator and Albertine. Consequently they act as milestones in the Narrator’s discovery of his vocation as a writer, of the nature of the ‘true life’ and of the recovery of Time through the literary work. The present essay is explicitly intended as a sequel to the article ‘La Construction musicale de la *Recherche du temps perdu*’ by Pierre Costil (1958–9), who seems to have been the first to establish beyond doubt the essential role played by the Sonata and the Septet in the work’s structure: it is the Narrator’s meditation on the nature of music that leads him to see in it the ideal model for literature and to decide to

devote his life to literary work. The Vinteuil Septet inspires a veritable revelation: 'Proust's novel', writes Costil, 'is a *quest**¹¹ for the true reality beyond what is perceptible' (1959: 102).

To my mind there is only one possible method for analysing the role played by music in the novel: it consists of examining, one after the other, each of the passages relating to Vinteuil's works. This is what Matoré and Mecz do, with fine judgment and skill, in *Musique et structure romanesque dans la 'Recherche du temps perdu'* (1972). Yet while they rightly insist upon the role played by Vinteuil's works in the progress of the Narrator towards his vocation, they make, surprisingly, no reference whatever to the analysis of Costil. Perhaps it is for this reason that this painstaking and comprehensive study of the themes that intermingle in the musical passages of *A la recherche* does not succeed in conveying the profound teleology of each individual element, that irresistible heartbeat which culminates in revelation and which is based, as I shall try to show, on a fundamental progression articulated in three stages – being as much a characteristic of Proust's perception as it is of his aesthetics and metaphysics. Moreover, the authors omit (1972: 162–80) to comment on the passage where Proust compares musical and verbal language (C, III: 260). This is, in my view, the key moment of the novel, as Benoist-Méchin observed as long ago as 1926 (1957: 135), even if he makes no reference to Proust's homosexuality and does not dwell on the connection between Vinteuil's music and the structure of the book.

I cannot therefore subscribe to the basic conclusion of Matoré and Mecz, namely that 'the relationship between Vinteuil's music and the problem of vocation, established by a certain number of encounters of the Narrator with the musician's work, nevertheless remains *gratuitous*. Nothing, in fact, predestined this art to promote a literary vocation' (1972: 280). Or again: 'The writer regards the musical work as a *pretext*' (1972: 158).

In order to understand the role played by music in relation to literary vocation, one must take seriously Proust's explicit references to Wagner, Debussy, Beethoven and Schopenhauer and consider them in their order of appearance; in other words, one must determine the role they play at each stage of the quest. It is because he considers the three

* Costil uses the old French spelling, *queste*, rather than the more usual *quête*. [Trans.]

musicians in chronological order and not according to their function in the novel, and because he makes only two brief allusions to Schopenhauer, that Piroué is able to assert – even though he, too, recognises the fundamental role played by music in the Narrator’s journey towards his vocation (1960: 7, 86, 108) – that Proust ‘has missed his rendezvous with music itself’ (*ibid.*: 60); he also asserts, with regard to Beethoven, that ‘Proust remains on this side of music, on the side where music is still mixed up with every kind of emotion’ (*ibid.*: 165), and that ‘of a music which satisfies us, Proust has retained only the moments when we are racked with dissatisfaction’ (*ibid.*: 104). On the contrary, I shall show how the Narrator makes a journey which, in leading him from Debussy to Beethoven, enables him to discover in music the embodiment of that art which, according to Schopenhauer, can ‘arrest the wheel of time’ and consequently guide him to his literary vocation and the ‘true life’.

I would find it difficult to talk about the ‘*anecdotal* character that is assumed by the music associated with the principal events of *A la recherche*’ (Matoré and Mecz 1972: 288). On the ground that Proust was not a professional musician, and perhaps also because when discussing music he does not draw on the technical concepts of music theory, writers have tended to underestimate the extent of his musical *understanding*. In particular, the relevance of a *perceptual* approach to music has been dismissed – as if music could only be discussed when ‘perceived and analysed objectively [?]’* (Piroué 1960: 136), and as if it were of secondary importance to consider music in terms of the various effects it produces and the varied ideas it awakes. These criticisms do not in the least detract from the value of my predecessors’ work, and a perusal of their writings cannot be too highly recommended. But because their generally negative verdict seems to be tied to a somewhat restricted concept of music, which is belied both by recent developments in musicology and by changes in the way people think, I have felt it necessary to rehabilitate *Proust as musician* – if that epithet may be used in the first sense given in the French *Robert* dictionary, i.e. ‘someone who is capable of appreciating music’.

The musical texts in *A la recherche* occupy a relatively small number of pages. Consequently I shall inevitably fall back on examples already

* Nattiez’s [?]. [Trans.]