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## PEACOCK'S USE OF MUSIC IN HIS NOVELS

DURING A LONG study of Peacock, I became increasingly aware of a factor in his writings which seems never to have been fully pointed out, and which I believe aids in understanding much about him that has seemed puzzling—this is his use of music. Several critics have remarked about a kind of light opera atmosphere that pervades the novels but they have pursued the idea no further. Of all the perceptive critics who have written about Peacock only Wilson and Able have partially grasped the musicality of his work. Wilson, in particular, has a sensitive ear and observes:

The fact that Peacock's imagination is not vigorous has kept people from realizing how exquisite his effects are. It is usual to treat him as a satirist whose power is more or less weakened by his scoring off both sides of every question, but the truth is Peacock is an artist the aim of whose art is to achieve not merely a weaving of ideas but also an atmosphere—an aroma, a flavor, a harmony.

You get closer to what Peacock is trying to do by approaching him through his admiration of Mozart than by assimilating him to Lucian or Voltaire. His books are more like operas than novels and the elements of fantasy with which they play as well as landscapes, boating and skating parties are as important as the conversations. It all makes a delicious music, at the same time sober and gay, in which words fall like notes from a flute.<sup>1</sup>

And Able wrote, "The idea of a social group as a sort of symphony, which becomes explicit in Meredith, is in Peacock as such unexpressed, but the behavior of the characters themselves illustrates it abundantly."<sup>2</sup> This is only partly true: Peacock was aiming to express with his social groups a musical ensemble, not a symphony, but an opera; his main interest was operatic and he preferred in music the human voice rather than an instrument. If instead of a symphony one calls to mind the ensemble scenes in Mozart's operas, and particularly *Don Giovanni*, which was his favorite, one will begin to have a perception of what Peacock was trying to do—to express, through the behavior of his characters, a musical ensemble.

Peacock's basic use of music was as the crowning expression of the harmoniousness of the good life—a life that included also dancing and laughter, good food, wine, and talk. The people in the novels are

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Musical Glasses of Peacock," *New Yorker*, xxiii (Aug. 23, 1947), 72.

<sup>2</sup> Augustus Henry Able, *George Meredith and Thomas Love Peacock: A Study in Literary Influence* (Philadelphia, 1933), p. 76.

all strongly musical but definitely prefer vocal music of the classical style—music with expressed but restrained emotion, beauty of melody and harmony, and clarity of phrasing—primarily Mozart, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, and the Italian romantics (particularly Rossini, also Bernini and Donizetti, etc.). Every heroine in Peacock's novels both plays and sings—"She should be musical, but she should have music in her soul, as well as her fingers: her voice and her touch should have no one point in common with that mechanical squalling and jingling which are commonly dignified with the insulted name of music: they should be the modes of the harmony of her mind."<sup>3</sup> More important is the social application of music; it always unites and quiets the group after a clamorous argument and draws them together into a pleasant, harmonious, communal activity; in *Melincourt* "music and conversation consumed the evenings."<sup>4</sup> In *Gryll Grange* the music and chorus of the comedy "Aristophanes in London" are all performed by the guests at the Grange. The characters in the novels are not only adept at playing instruments and singing, they also display a thorough knowledge of music in their discussions, though it must be granted that the opinions they express are simply extensions of Peacock's own. In *Crotchet Castle* the "dilettante musician" Mr. O'Trillo "maintains that the sole end of enlightened society is to get up a good opera, and laments that wealth, genius and energy, are squandered upon other pursuits, to the neglect of this one great matter."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he is supported by Dr. Folliott, who states that "The Athenians gave to music-making, choreography and didascalics, precedence of all other matters, civil and military."<sup>6</sup> But in *Gryll Grange* is the clearest statement of Peacock's ideas on music. Favoring vocal music and the tonal gradations of the human voice, he disliked the "tempered scale" or mechanically adjusted tonal differences adapted for instruments, particularly the piano, in the eighteenth century and still in use today. Disliking it he turned back to the Greeks, and since very little was known about Greek music he could imagine it to be as perfect as their other arts, and presented his ideas in a discussion between Falconer and Mr. Minim, the professional musician.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Melincourt* (London, 1924), p. 116. Citations from Peacock in my text are from the Halliford edition, in ten volumes, of Peacock's entire works, edited by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones and published in London in 1924-34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Crotchet Castle* (London, 1924), p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

Falconer: With their three scales, diatonic, chromatic, and enharmonic, they must have exhausted every possible expression of feeling. Their scales were in true intervals; they had really major and minor tones; we have neither, but a confusion of both. They had both sharps and flats: we have neither, but a mere set of semitones, which serve for both. In their enharmonic scale the fineness of their ear perceived distinctions which are lost on the coarseness of ours.

Minim: With all that they never got beyond melody. They had no harmony in our sense. They sang only in unisons and octaves.

Falconer: It is not clear that they did not sing in fifths. As to harmony in one sense, I will not go so far as to say with Ritson that the only use of the harmony is to spoil the melody; but I will say, that to my taste a simple accompaniment, in strict subordination to the melody, is far more agreeable than that Niagara of sound under which it is now the fashion to bury it. . . . A song sung with feeling and expression is good, however accompanied. Otherwise, the pianoforte is not much to my mind. All its intervals are false, and temperament is a poor substitute for natural intonation. Then its incapability of sustaining a note has led, as the only means of producing effect, to those infinitesimal subdivisions of sound, in which all sentiment and expression are twiddled and frittered into nothingness.

Minim: Yet I must say that there is a great charm in that brilliancy of execution which is an exclusively modern and very modern accomplishment.

Falconer: To those who perceive it. All things are as they are perceived. To me music has no charm without expression.<sup>7</sup>

The discussion of the difference between brilliant execution and true expression led to a final statement of Peacock's taste. He acknowledged his limitation—that his experience was principally in opera, or as it was then known, "Italian theatre"—but in that realm as in others, Peacock's taste was infallible and his criticism excellent. "For music . . . which requires only to be correctly interpreted to be universally recognized as the absolute perfection of melody, harmony, and expression, I think Mozart has . . . [no equal.] Beethoven perhaps: he composed only one opera, *Fidelio*; but what an opera that is! . . . What pathos in the songs of affection, what grandeur in the songs of triumph, what wonderful combinations in the accompaniments, where a perpetual stream of counter-melody creeps along in the bass, yet in perfect harmony with the melody above!"<sup>8</sup>

Now that Peacock's taste in music is apparent and also his general, conventional use of it, what remains to be seen is how it influenced the style and the structure of the novels. He does not use music for the purpose of character "Leit-motifs" in the Wagnerian manner, or as

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Gryll Grange* (London, 1924), p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Shaw does in his *Don Juan in Hell*, where each person enters to the accompaniment of the music associated with that character in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. He does use it to express a character's mood and personality, and to heighten the effect of a scene; he uses musical forms in the structures of his plots and applies tone and rhythm both internally and externally in the verbal style.

The use of music and musical expressions to delineate a character's personality and mood occurs mostly in *Nightmare Abbey* and *Maid Marian*, two earlier works. Peacock says of the gay, vain, sprightly and unpredictable Marionetta of *Nightmare Abbey*, Scythrop's first love: "Being a compound of all the Allegro Vivace of the O'Carrolls with the Andante Doloroso of the Glowries, she exhibited in her character all the diversities of the April sky."<sup>9</sup> When you know that in music Allegro Vivace means merry, gay, brisk, lively, spirited and fast-moving; and that Andante Doloroso means slow, plaintive and pathetic, you get a far more vivid picture of the contradictions of Marionetta's character than a long string of such adjectives would give. Also in *Nightmare Abbey* Peacock made an interesting though not greatly original use of familiar arias to express and heighten the moods of his characters. In the middle of one of Scythrop's long, pathetic, and impassioned remonstrances to Marionetta about her constant changes of heart she strikes up a gay rondo, and when he begins to storm she answers him with "Zitti, zitti, piano, piano, non facciamo confusione" (quiet, quiet, soft, soft, let us not create confusion),<sup>10</sup> from Rossini's *Barber of Seville*. Or, when Scythrop sulks in a corner reading Dante, Marionetta remarks to him, "I see you are in the middle of Purgatory." "I am in the middle of Hell," said Scythrop furiously. "Are you," said she, "then come across the room and I will sing you the finale of *Don Giovanni*"<sup>11</sup> (which happens to tell of the final disappearance of Don Giovanni in flames).

*Maid Marian* is the most singing of all the novels; music is inherent in its spirit, and it is so interspersed with beautiful songs that, according to Garnett, it was transplanted in its entirety as the libretto of a very successful opera in London.<sup>12</sup> The characters in it cannot continue speaking in prose; they burst into song out of an overflow of good

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey* (London, 1924), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Garnett, Introduction to *Maid Marian*, by Thomas Love Peacock (London, 1908), p. 10.

spirits: "The friar was warm with canary, and in his singing vein; he could not go on in plain unmusical prose. He therefore sang a new tune."<sup>13</sup> Later when he has to leave his abbey and join the outlaws Peacock's most effective expression of the friar's grief and sadness is the statement that he cannot sing. The friar bids farewell to Matilda, who had always joined voices with him whenever they met, and "walked away without a song."<sup>14</sup>

The use of music and singing to heighten whole scenes is most evident in *Maid Marian*, which is a veritable songfest, one particular scene of *Crotchet Castle*, two scenes in *The Misfortunes of Elphin*, and one scene in *Gryll Grange*. In *The Misfortunes of Elphin*, instead of assuming the protective jester's coat Taliesin wears the inviolable bard's robe in order to be free to tell the truth in song. He avails himself of this inviolability to go to a neighboring king and rebuke him for holding his step-father, King Elphin, a captive. The more powerful ruler acknowledges that Taliesin is a far better bard than his, but announces that he is not to be "sung, cajoled, or bullied out of his prisoner."<sup>15</sup> On his way to King Arthur to seek help, Taliesin stops at the castle of a King Melvas; entering the castle he hears Melvas' knights singing of their exploits in what Peacock rightly called "the quintessence of all the warsongs that ever were written, to the sum and substance of all the appetencies, tendencies, and consequences of military glory":

The mountain sheep are sweeter,  
But the valley sheep are fatter,  
We therefore deemed it meeter,  
To carry off the latter.  
We made an expedition;  
We met a host, and quelled it,  
We forced a strong position,  
And killed the men who held it. . . .  
We brought away from battle,  
And much their land bemoaned them,  
Two thousand head of cattle,  
And the head of him who owned them:  
Ednyfed, king of Dyfed,  
His head was borne before us;  
His wine and beasts supplied our feasts,  
And his overthrow our chorus.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Maid Marian* (London, 1924), p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (London, 1924), p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

This is one of Peacock's best songs, those in *Maid Marian* have more charm and beauty, but nothing else has such tight craftsmanship. Every line is packed with meaning, power and rhythm. After hearing this song Taliesin has a good idea of the character of King Melvas and what he could expect from him. Finally Taliesin achieves his end by winning the highest prize at the Bardic Congress in Arthur's court, thus freeing Elphin, marrying Elphin's daughter, and later becoming Chief of the Bards of Britain—all through the power of song.

In *Gryll Grange* we find a much more subtle use of music to heighten a scene and illustrate character. Falconer is a young man in danger of investing ideality with too much the semblance of reality and is immersed in the sentimental depths of religiosity—worshipping the ideal beauty of St. Catherine. Dr. Opimian observes this at one of the regular evening sessions, where the seven sisters who superintend Falconer's household all appear dressed in purple and white, play the harp and piano and sing music, including Mozart and Beethoven, and then invariably end with a hymn to Falconer's favorite saint, St. Catherine, whom he considers "a most perfect emblem of purity and in that sense alone there can be no fitter image to be presented to the minds of young women." "Very true," said the doctor. "And very strange withal," he thought to himself.<sup>17</sup> Obviously, this is a pattern of life quite charming but neither natural nor healthful.

The most interesting influence of music on Peacock is not in the external uses just indicated but in the application of it to his internal structure and verbal style. This is what Wilson caught when he wrote: "Peacock is an artist the aim of whose art is to achieve not merely a weaving of ideas but also an atmosphere—an aroma, a flavor, a harmony. . . . It all makes a delicious music, at the same time sober and gay, in which words fall like notes from a flute."<sup>18</sup> What Wilson missed and what Able caught was that the weaving of ideas together created a consistent whole. "As the line of argument passes from one to the other of them, however, their contradictory points of view are shown to be complementary, for each is a segment of truth made contributory to a rounded whole. Truth is discovered on all sides, although the wranglers themselves are unaware of it; all parties are justified, while none is accredited. . . . The characters themselves are really the threads of an argument, logical partitions of a subject, the pro's and con's of debate."<sup>19</sup> What Able missed and Wilson perceived

<sup>17</sup> *Gryll Grange*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, p. 72.

<sup>19</sup> Able, p. 102.

was that Peacock was aiming not merely to create a whole idea but also to create an audible texture in the prose itself. It is in this purpose that the influence of operatic practice is evident. Each character maintains his thread of argument, speaking his piece and allowing the others to speak without his thread's being changed. The separate strands of all the characters, woven together, create a true whole. Similarly, in a vocal ensemble, particularly in contrapuntal music, each voice sings its own melody, the less important melodies are subordinated to the more important ones, but each is complete in itself. One may be in dissonance with another but the weaving together of these separate melodies, all moving along together but at different speeds, creates a harmonious whole. And the factor of dissonance is imperative; if all the melodies were in constantly harmonious relations with each other the effect would soon become cloying and boring. Dissonance is needed to create interest and provide contrast; whenever dissonance resolves into harmony there is created a feeling of relaxation and rightness.

There are two large scenes, one in *Nightmare Abbey* and one in *Crotchet Castle*, that show this use to best effect. In the climax scene of *Nightmare Abbey* Mr. Glowry discovers Stella in Scythrop's tower; she learns of his engagement to Marionetta, while he had been paying court to her. Mr. Hilary appears and, seeing another young woman, protests that his niece "has been sported with in an unjustifiable manner."<sup>20</sup> He summons Mrs. Hilary and Marionetta to the tower. Mr. Toobad goes along out of curiosity and discovers that Stella is his runaway daughter. Stella and Marionetta, seeing each other, both refuse to have anything further to do with the double-dealing Scythrop, who refuses to say anything at all concerning the whole matter.

Mr. Toobad and Mr. Hilary, in the mean time, were each insisting on an explanation from Mr. Glowry, who they thought had been playing a double game on this occasion. Mr. Glowry vainly endeavored to persuade them of his innocence in the whole transaction. Mrs. Hilary was endeavoring to mediate between her husband and brother. The Hon. Mr. Listless, the Rev. Mr. Larynx, Mr. Flosky, Mr. Asterias and Aquarius, were attracted by the tumult to the scene of the action, and were appealed to severally and conjointly by the respective disputants. Multitudinous questions, and answers en masse, composed a charivari, to which the genius of Rossini alone could have given a suitable accompaniment, and which was only terminated by Mrs. Hilary and Mr. Toobad retreating with the captive damsels.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Nightmare Abbey*, p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

The statement about an accompaniment by Rossini indicates that as Peacock composed the scene he was thinking of it operatically, as the increasing number of speakers and the subtly increasing speed of the prose indicate. An operatic "tutti"—the total tonal effect of all the players and singers performing together—is produced in the same way. First the principals perform their arias and then more and more persons join them until there is a full group singing—"everybody gets into the act."

Peacock handled this method still better in a scene in *Crotchet Castle*, where the construction is tighter, and the separate parts, each independent and unaffected by the others, intermesh with one another to create a harmonious chorus:

Crotchet, Jr.: Pray, gentlemen, pocket your manuscripts; fill your glasses; and consider what we shall do with our money.<sup>22</sup>

After each member of the group has proposed his own pet, little project, Crotchet says:

Gentlemen, it is not for partial, but for general benefit, that this fund is proposed: a grand and universally applicable scheme for the amelioration of the condition of man.

Several: That is my scheme. I have not heard a scheme but my own that has a grain of common sense.<sup>23</sup>

The finale of the scene is Mr. O'Trillo's observation:

Gentlemen, you inspire me. Your last exclamation runs itself into a chorus, and sets itself to music,  
 After careful meditation,  
 And profound deliberation,  
 On the various pretty projects which have just been shown,  
 Not a scheme in agitation,  
 For the world's amelioration,  
 Has a grain of common sense in it, except my own.<sup>24</sup>

A still greater influence of music is reflected in his verbal style—his choice and arrangement of the precise words that would convey his ideas with the utmost clarity; and which would, at the same time, develop a definite rhythm and pace, and also create a distinctive prose texture. Many critics have puzzled over Peacock's style and have compared it to old dry wine; sparkling, dry, light, and strong; have remarked about its clarity and simplicity, stripped of everything

<sup>22</sup> *Crotchet Castle*, p. 133.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

irrelevant or redundant, yet capable of anything Peacock wished it to do without the slightest strain or forcing. Priestley caught the qualities of rhythm and balance in it:

All his people, in spite of individual differences, which are more marked in the later novels, talk in the same way, like members of one closely united family. They all talk in crisp phrases, delicately balanced and full of antithesis, and with a precision that is at once admirable and droll. However wild their opinions and arguments may be, their actual statements of them are all given an epigrammatic brevity and ring. Thus the maddest of them is something of a stylist and wit . . . they explain themselves, as it were, only too well: there is mockery in the very precision of their language and the crisp rhythm of their phrases."<sup>25</sup>

It is my contention that Peacock was trying to write prose in a manner that is similar to the way in which music is written; and was carrying on an experiment in tone and rhythm that many modern writers have carried further beyond the ordinary realms of syntax; and that the model for this style was primarily Mozartian. Shaw called Mozart "the master beloved of the masters,"<sup>26</sup> and it is interesting to note this appeal of Mozart to such similar personalities, satirists, and verbal stylists as Shaw and Peacock. Everything in Mozart's music appealed to Peacock's feelings and philosophy: its gay knowledge, and the inimitable sense of physical well-being that radiates from it. Tovey has observed that the "eighteenth century style of the Comedy of Manners was translated by Mozart into the music of his operas,"<sup>27</sup> and that "the fact is that Mozart's whole musical language is and remains throughout, the language of comic opera,"<sup>28</sup> but he also added that "perhaps the most luminous thing ever said about Mozart was by Edward Fitzgerald, 'People will not believe Mozart can be powerful, because he is so beautiful.'"<sup>29</sup> This combination of comedy, power, and beauty is what appealed to Peacock and suited his own genius. Music is inherent and embodied in his novels, but it is freed of the restraints of the stage and production, and has become the very essence of his stories.

When one reads Peacock aloud one soon notices that the style is tuned to the cadence of the human voice rather than to the sweep of

<sup>25</sup> J. B. Priestley, *Thomas Love Peacock* (London, 1927), p. 166.

<sup>26</sup> George Bernard Shaw, Preface to *Man and Superman* (London, 1903), in John Gassner, "The Puritan in Hell," *Theatre Arts*, xxxvi (1952), 68.

<sup>27</sup> Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis* (London, 1936), II, 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 192.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 194.

the eye, which accounts for so much of its balance and variations of rhythm and tone. Wilson thought of flute music in connection with the qualities of clarity and purity of tone in Peacock's style, but the roundness and fullness of the style evoke the sound of the French horn as well. Both the flute and the French horn were, with the oboe, Mozart's favorites as best for cleanness of phrasing and precision and balance. When one considers that Tovey calls Mozart's tunes "bristling with epigram,"<sup>30</sup> the complete parallelism is obvious and explains the passage in *Maid Marian* where Peacock was definitely trying, though playfully, to blend music and prose into one, and wrote the whole passage as one would write music:

The abbott began to intone the ceremony in a style of modulation impressively exalted, his voice issuing most canonically from the roof of his mouth, through the medium of a very musical nose newly tuned for the occasion. But he had not proceeded far enough to exhibit all the variety and compass of this melodious instrument, when a noise was heard at the gate, and a party of armed men entered the chapel. The song of the choristers died away in a shake of demisemiquavers, contrary to all rules of psalmody. The organist, intent only on his performance, and spreading all his fingers to strike a swell of magnificent chords, felt his harmonic spirit ready to desert his body on being answered by the ghastly rattle of empty keys, and in the consequent *agitato furioso* of the internal movements of his feelings, was preparing to restore harmony by the *segue subito* of an *appoggiatura con foco* with the corner of a book of anthems on the head of his neglectful assistant, when his hand and his attention together were arrested by the scene below. The voice of the abbott subsided into silence through a descending scale of long-drawn melody, like the sound of the ebbing sea to the explorers of a cave.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, one realizes that Peacock, in *Gryll Grange*, his last published work, is merrily giving away his own secrets when he states that he has used the mottoes of his chapters in the manner of "the motivo of the operetta," and is truly, as Miss Gryll remarks, handling as a musician "everything that presents itself, dealing with your theme like a series of variations in music."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 182.

<sup>31</sup> *Maid Marian*, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Gryll Grange*, p. 5.