March 1992

Music in Dubliners

Robert Haas

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 28, no.1, March 1992, p.19-33

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
James Joyce was a musician before he ever became a writer. He learned music as a child, performed it for his family, friends, and the public as a young man, and loved the art his whole life long. The books of Hodgart and Worthington and of Bowen have traced how deeply and pervasively its role is felt throughout Joyce’s fiction. The great novels of his maturity, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, contain more than a thousand musical episodes, incidents, and allusions. If Joyce’s early fiction has less than this profusion, it is perhaps simply because at the time he was not yet so bold an experimenter in literary style. The early works were, nevertheless, produced by a man who was actively studying music, who was near his peak as a musical performer, and who still at times contemplated making music his life’s career. When Joyce introduces music in his writing, it is with the authority and significance of an expert; and it is surely worth our while as readers to attend to it.

In the present essay I would like to focus on the music in Joyce’s early volume of short stories, *Dubliners*. The role of music became steadily more complex and extensive as Joyce’s style matured: *Finnegans Wake*, for example, has three or four times as many musical allusions as all the rest of his work combined. The commentaries, quite naturally, devote proportionately large attention to the later novels. It is interesting and illuminating, though, to consider the richness and depth that the musical message has already attained in Joyce’s earliest and most naturalistic fiction, *Dubliners*.

Joyce uses music in *Dubliners* in three quite distinct ways, each of them important. First of all, it serves to define the real world in which his characters live. Performed as a social activity or profession, music forms a prominent part in their daily lives: when they are not talking, it is often because they are singing.
playing the piano, or listening to someone else sing. Music thus helps to form the framework, the background, and the texture of their lives. More than this, it can also move the characters beyond their daily lives. For instance, when Joyce’s characters stop to listen to an Irish harp playing, the incident speaks of a world beyond the everyday, of hopes and dreams and yearning, in a word, of romance. Whether or not such romance is real, whether it is attainable or only an illusion, music is often the way that Joyce chooses to evoke it. And third, music is significant because Joyce’s characters reveal themselves through it, in the way that they make music or listen and respond to it. Over and over again in these stories, the telling incident, the crucial episode, or the moment when character is revealed, happens in response to music.

What sort of a musician was it who wrote Dubliners? This essay will open with a description of Joyce the musician, tracing his musical accomplishments up through the title that he wrote these stories. The next three sections will discuss the three roles of music—as reality, as romance, and as revelation—in the individual stories. The final portion will examine how music, functioning in all three of its capacities, serves to enrich the culminating masterpiece of Dubliners: “The Dead.”

1. Joyce the Musician

Music played an important role in Joyce’s personal life. Among the first childhood memories he records in his semiautobiographical novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man are of his singing a song (and then changing its lyrics!), and of his mother playing a sailor’s hornpipe on the piano for him to dance. At the age of three, according to the family accounts (BK 6), he entertained relatives by “playing” the piano and singing; by six he sang with his parents in a public amateur concert (BK 35; JJI 26). Theirs was a musical family. Joyce’s mother had had fifteen years of lessons in piano and voice at a school run by her aunts, who form the originals for the Misses Morkan in “The Dead”; Joyce’s parents were singing in the same church choir at the time that they first met (JJI 16-17). The father was an excellent tenor, whose admirable voice and stage presence in amateur theatricals had been highly praised by the critics, and his household was filled with singing, drinking, and conviviality (BK 23-26; JJI 12-21). At school James Joyce learned piano and sang (JJI 30); when he attended the university, he sampled the full range of vocal music, delighting in the music halls and theaters (JJI 80; BK 113) and becoming interested in Elizabethan songs and folk songs (BK 162) as well as Gregorian chant and choral music (BK 174). He also began to write music himself, composing musical settings for poems by

Yeats, by the Irish poet Mangan, and by himself (JJI 98; BK 99, 123, 134, 153). (When Joyce’s volume of poetry was published later, it would bear the musical title Chamber Music.) At this time he had, in the estimate of his brother Stanislaus, “a musical singing . . . voice (a tenor), a good undeveloped talent in music” (BK xiv; JJI 142).

Joyce’s own experiences as a public performer provided a large part of the background for one of the stories in Dubliners, “A Mother.” The story centers around a musical performance in the “Antient Concert Rooms”; this hall was also the site of the annual festival “Feis Ceoil,” in which the nervous second tenor of the story competed each year and won a bronze medal on the fourth attempt. There is good reason for the authenticity of the description: Joyce himself competed in this hall in the Feis Ceoil and received a bronze medal, missing first place only because he refused to take part in a sight-reading test (JJI 157-58). He had taken lessons before the contest from Benedetto Palmieri, the best voice teacher in Dublin, who was so impressed by his talent that he offered to train him without charge for three years in return for a share in his future concert earnings (JJI 156-58). The high point of Joyce’s performing career came in that same hall a few months later, in August of 1904, when, at the age of 22, he shared the platform in a program with the great Irish tenor John McCormack, drawing good reviews for his “sweet tenor voice.” He had to accompany himself on the piano because the accompanist left early in the evening, an incident which he made into the dramatic climax of “A Mother” (JJI 173-74). Joyce studied singing later too in Italy in 1905 and 1908 at the time he was writing Dubliners, when, struggling to earn a living while becoming established as a writer, he briefly entertained the idea of becoming a professional singer (JJI 206, 278). His wife Nora, who had no appreciation for literature, indeed felt that “Jim should have stuck to music instead of bothering with writing” (JJI 174, 572!)

Fortunately for literature, Joyce did not follow her advice; but music did remain a vital part of his life. He was often asked to sing at friends’ homes (BK 73). During those first years on the Continent, his daily routine began with sitting down at the piano to play and sing (JJI 319), and the language lessons he gave to eke out a living often ended with the singing of Irish songs (JJI 352; BK xvi). More than a pastime, music was for Joyce also the means for deeply emotional communication and expression. When Joyce’s young brother and his mother lay dying, he sang for them (JJI 98, 141). When he returned home to Dublin following his elopement, his father expressed his forgiveness by singing the elder Germont’s aria from La Traviata (JJI 285-86). When the manuscript to Dubliners was rejected by the printer and publisher after three years’ delay, Joyce consoled himself with a love song at the piano (JJI 346).

Several of Joyce’s favorite songs found their way into his Dubliners. “Cadet Roussel,” for example, which is sung by the high-spirited Jimmy Doyle and his friends in “After the Race,” was one of the French songs with which Joyce entertained his friends when he returned from his first trip to Paris (BK 213). Joyce’s sisters recalled that at home he was perpetually singing the sad ballad “The Lass of Aughrim,” which forms the pivotal incident in “The Dead” (D
He had heard this song from his wife Nora, who was born in Galway not far from the little town of Aughrim (JJ1 162-63, 257). Joyce later visited Galway himself and got Nora’s mother to sing him more of the ballad (JJ1 295); he reputedly knew thirty-five verses in all (D 503). Joyce’s love and talent for music was handed down to his son Giorgio, who became a singer who sang in New York (JJ1 567, 624, 691). The two discuss their favorite music in their letters, in one of which Joyce gives an explication of the song “Silent, O Moyle,” which plays such an important role in the story “Two Gallants” (D 475-76).

Music thus formed a very natural language for Joyce, one which he could use with considerable and practiced skill. Would he use it, though, in any situation other than a purely musical performance? I would like to argue here that he would, that music plays a significant role in his writing even as early as in Dubliners. The reason is that Joyce was already making extraordinary demands of language, and these demands are ones that music could help him fulfill.

It was, of course, only later, in Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, that Joyce attained his full stature as an innovator in the use of language. In these novels his stream-of-consciousness technique, the contact with the subconscious through dreams, half-wakefulness, drunkenness, and myth, the puns, multiple languages, and allusiveness are all methods he used that push the limits of language to enrich the meaning of his story. Dubliners was written, as Joyce said, “for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness” (D 269), and the full flowering of his innovations lay in the future. However, the tendencies toward these directions were surely already present in the writer, and on closer look it is easy to see how much Joyce was already an experimenter, how the germs of his future stylistic innovations are already present under the naturalistic surface of these stories.

Lenehan’s musings while waiting for Corley in “Two Gallants” are surely already stream-of-consciousness narration. So, too, are Maria’s thoughts on the tram ride in “Clay,” or the long trains of thought that lead Mr. Duffy in “A Painful Case” and Gabriel in “The Dead” to their epiphanies. There are dreams in Dubliners: the dream of the little boy in “The Sisters,” the half-dream of Gabriel in “The Dead.” There is Homeric myth: Gabriel in “The Dead” presides with the generosity of a Homeric king at a banquet catalogued in Homeric detail, and by the end of the story has in his mind already taken an Odyssean journey west to learn wisdom from the dead. There are great puns that in their multiplicity of meaning illuminate whole stories: The frustrated little boy in “Araby” is “driven and derided by vanity” that is simultaneously the vanity of his pride, the Ecclesiastian materialistic vanity of the fair, and the vanity of his enterprise undertaken in vain. The “gnomon” in “The Sisters” is not only, at the same time, a word in the boy’s geometry text, and a fragmented, broken shape like the old

10. C.P. Curran, loc. cit.
priest’s life, but also the Greek for “one who knows,” and the term for a pointer on a sundial (if only the light of understanding would shine upon Dublin!). The highly symbolic role of light and darkness in “The Sisters,” “Counterparts,” “Ivy Day in the Committee Room,” and “The Dead” is but another foreshadowing of Joyce’s later techniques. Clearly Joyce in *Dubliners* was already beginning to use language beyond its customary limits; if music could help achieve his expressive purposes, it is reasonable to expect that he might use it too.

And music can indeed serve these ends. In its attributes of direct emotional expressiveness, its allusiveness, its contact with the collective past through folk song and physical rhythm, and in its tremendous emotional range from the banal to the sublime, music offers resources that in certain ways can challenge or surpass spoken language. That Mozart can reach the frozen soul of Mr. Duffy, or Maria raise her quavering voice in a song, says a great deal about these characters, and Joyce can and does enhance the power of his stories by including music in them. 13 Let us examine now the ways he uses music to build up the world, or to transcend it, or to reveal human character, in *Dubliners*.

II. Music and the Real World

*Dubliners*, before it is anything else, is a faithfully naturalistic evocation of the city and people of turn-of-the-century Dublin. Music formed an important part of both the geographic and the human scene. The streets of Dublin were filled with music that reverberates through these stories: The ballads and “nasal chanting of the street singers” are heard in “Araby” (D 31), the street organs play in “Eveline” (D 40), and the harpist stands in the roadway amid his little ring of listeners performing “Silent, O Moyle” in “Two Gallants” (D 54). Music also plays a prominent part in the social world recorded in *Dubliners*. Much of the technology that fills and shapes present-day life had not yet appeared when these stories were written, and they can therefore be read and appreciated as chapters in the social history of an era when automobiles like those in “After the Race” were exciting novelties, and radio, television, records, and movies were not yet a part of daily life. In these circumstances music was a major leisure and social activity, occupying both amateurs and professionals. Thus, it was a natural thing for Little Chandler in “A Little Cloud” to invite his old friend Gallaher home to “have a little music” (D 79); for Mr. Duffy of “A Painful Case” to spend his evenings before his landlady’s piano (D 109); for Mrs. Mooney’s boarders in “The Boarding House” to have reunions on Sunday nights in the front

13. Note, parenthetically, that a similar case can be made for poetry too. Joyce was also a poet, from his “Et Tu, Healy” as a nine-year-old, through the collection *Chamber Music* published while he was writing *Dubliners*, and finally to *Finnegans Wake*, in some ways a book-length lyric poem. Poetry, like music, has direct emotional expressiveness, allusiveness, contact in form and subject with the past, and tremendous range, from nursery rhyme through heroic epic. And poetry is used extensively in *Dubliners* too. It occurs in the person of the frustrated poet Little Chandler, contrasted to Byron in “A Little Cloud,” in the “thought-tormented music” (D 192) of Browning’s poetry that echoes against the “Distant Music” which is Gabriel’s romantic vision of Gretta in “The Dead” (D 210), and in the poem on Farnell that forms the epiphany of “Ivy Day in the Committee Room.” Actually, for the many readers who are not acquainted with the melodies of the songs Joyce quotes in the stories, the music can be appreciated only in the lyrics, that is, as poetry.
drawing room with waltzes, polkas, and singing (D 62); or for the young men of “After the Race” to celebrate with singing in the street, and music and dance on their yacht (D 47). Singing and playing piano were favorite party pastimes; Mrs. Donnelly played while the children danced and sang at the Hallow Eve party in “Clay” (D 104); Mr. Power in “Grace” accompanied the waltz at the Kermans’ twenty-fifth wedding anniversary (D 156). It required a supply of professionals at various levels to sustain this culture. There are the music hall artistes who take rooms in Mrs. Mooney’s establishment in “The Boarding House” (D 62); the daughter who leaves Mrs. Sinico alone so much in “A Painful Case” by going out to give music lessons (D 110); and Mrs. M’Coy in “Grace” (a former soprano and the wife of a tenor of former repute) who teaches piano to children “at low terms” (D 158) and sustains her reputation by imaginary engagements in the country (D 160). Public concerts and operas were also a favorite activity: Mr. Duffy and Mrs. Sinico could meet two or three times by chance simply by going to concerts (D 110); and the sailor Frank of “Eveline” courted Eveline by taking her to the opera (D 39).

A story entirely centered about Dublin musical life is “A Mother,” which draws heavily on Joyce’s own experiences for its satirical backstage portrait of the music world. Perhaps the kindest picture is of Mr. Duggan, the bass, who with dedication, talent, and modesty had raised himself from his humble beginnings to become a first-rate artiste (save that he wiped his nose while on stage). After him the gallery rapidly becomes less flattering: other singers include the nervous, jealous little second tenor, the main-chancing contralto Miss Healy, the stout, complacent baritone, with no concern for the accompanist since he himself has been paid, and the pathetic overage soprano Madame Glynn with her gasping, wailing voice. Representing the musical establishment are the provincial-minded officers of the Eire Abu society and the unctuous critic Mr. O’Madden Burke with his umbrella. It is a full world of its own, quite ample to sustain the drama when the amateurs Mrs. Kearney and her daughter try to turn Kathleen’s fine musical education toward social gain. Their failure through the mother’s greed and miscalculation is also a familiar story, which has been played out in the wreck of innumerable prodigies. Worthy targets for Joyce’s ironic contempt they are, one and all!

III. Music Symbolizes Romance

Every one of the stories in Dubliners can be read as a confrontation between realistic and falsely romantic views of the world. Jimmy Doyle’s grand party, Doran’s love affair with Polly, the young narrator’s adventurous day of truancy in “An Encounter,” Little Chandler’s Byronizing, Hynes’s paean to Parnell, Fr.
Purdon’s sermon, Gabriel’s passion for Gretta—all are a striving for a higher, better, and happier world, a world that never was and never will be. And in every case the search is misguided, the goal profaned in the grasping, and any success attained profoundly and ironically different from what was sought. Joyce’s Dublin is filled with humanity struggling and yearning in error; few people viewed that struggle with greater fascination, scorn, and understanding than Joyce.

Music, because of its rich emotional connotations, is a natural image for the romantic point of view in these stories, and Joyce uses it for this purpose in three of them. In “Araby” music initially forms part of the texture of the real world in the ballads and chanting of the street singers. Because of the young narrator’s romantic cast of mind, however, the dull reality is charged, quivering, and resonant with latent romance, which is also conveyed through the image of music: “The career of our play brought us... to the stables where a coachman smoothed and combed the horse or shook music from the buckled harness” (D 30). The purest romance in the story occurs in the memorable musical image of the narrator’s youthful infatuation: “...my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires” (D 31). The minstrel’s harp has always been a symbol of Irish romance, and here Joyce has in one sentence made from it in word, sound, and touch an unforgettable metaphor of young love.

Music is also associated with love and with the romance that is not to be in “Eveline,” where the heroine’s love Frank, who “was awfully fond of music and sang a little,” courted her by singing about “the lass that loves a sailor” and taking her to the romantic opera “The Bohemian Girl” (D 39). The darker side of Eveline’s inner conflict is expressed by music too: The sound of a distant street organ evokes the memory of the melancholy Italian air she had heard long ago during her mother’s last illness, and with it the recollection of Eveline’s tragically misguided vow to keep the home together. As there are “songs without words,” Eveline’s story is an “opera without songs,” and the tragic melody in the end prevails.

Perhaps the most prominent musical symbol of romance in Dubliners is the harp playing “Silent, O Moyle” in “Two Gallants.” Early commentators have already pointed out how the harp—romantic yearning among the sordidness—forms a central point in this story’s structure and development. “Two Gallants” is one of the most emotionally complex of the stories. How many feelings might rush through Lenehan’s quicksilver mind, for instance, when he finally gazes at the coin in Corley’s hand—astonishment, relief, joy, triumph, admiration, gloating, pride, lust, greed, hate, contempt, pity, shame, regret, anguish, remorse, and despair? A similarly rich complexity surrounds the scene of the harp and its

16. Ibid.
music. The incident occurs as the gallants are walking down the street on the way to Corley's assignation with his lady. They have been discussing at length their plan to turn her affection to monetary account when they chance to pass the harpist. As would be expected from a true musician like Joyce, the description of the scene is factual, realistic, and not romanticized:

Not far from the porch of the club a harpist stood in the roadway, playing to a little ring of listeners. He plucked at the wires heedlessly, glancing quickly from time to time at the face of each new-comer and from time to time, wearily also, at the sky. His harp too, heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees, seemed weary alike of the eyes of strangers and of her master's hands. One hand played in the bass the melody of *Silent, O Moyle*, while the other hand careered in the treble after each group of notes. The notes of the air throbbed deep and full.

The two young men walked up the street without speaking, the mournful music following them. (D 54)

The emotional effect of the scene is lasting, and as Lenehan wanders through the streets of Dublin, musing on his life while waiting for Corley and his love to return from their tryst, the incident recurs to his mind:

Now that he was alone his face looked older. His gaiety seemed to forsake him and, as he came by the railings of the Duke's Lawn, he allowed his hand to run along them. The air which the harpist had played began to control his movements. His softly padded feet played the melody while his fingers swept a scale of variations idly along the railings after each group of notes. (D 56)

This musical reprise links Lenehan's soliloquy to the previous scene, and inclines him (and the reader) to thought and introspection. "Silent, O Moyle" was, as described above, a favorite song of Joyce's. It deals with the legend of Fionuala, the daughter of the sea god, who was transformed by a spell into a swan that had to wander the waters of Ireland for millennia until released by the coming of Christianity (D 475-76). By introducing this song, with its melancholy yearning for release and its memory of tragic Irish love and beauty, Joyce conjures a vision of romance that rises beyond the sordidness of his scene.

By means of the music Joyce thereby deepens the emotional meaning of his story far beyond the cynical little tale of deception that is its surface. The song, ironically, does support even the story's most banal meaning: Corley and Lenehan yearn for their bucktoothed dupe and her money as devoutly as that enchanted swan yearned for its salvation. But the music does far more than this. As, so to speak, the theme song for the love story, it also reflects the feelings of the lady, who is honestly hoping for love and happiness. Bucktoothed and worldly-wise or not, she is walking to her betrayal, and the beautiful song in the background only heightens the pathos of the scene. The gallants too, on another level of their existence, share her basic wish for a decent and happy life. ("Would he never get a good job? Would he never have a home of his own?" thought Lenehan [D 58].) It is because their scheme must diminish them morally even as it improves their finances that Lenehan both desires and fears their success. His quandary must stir strongly mixed feelings in the reader as well: Ironic contempt for what the gallants are, equally blended with compassion for what, with their vitality and talents, they might have become. And, as the ironic point of view so often finally reflects back to illuminate the observer as well as the observed, the
yearning expressed by the harp might lastly also be taken as the author’s own: Joyce’s hope by his writing to reveal his Dubliners to themselves and free them from the evil enchantment of their moral paralysis.  

IV. Music Reveals Character

Music can reach some levels of human emotion and character more easily than almost any other means, and Joyce in several stories of *Dubliners* uses music for a swift and telling revelation of character.

*I’m a... naughty girl.
You needn’t sham;
You know I am*

sings Polly in “The Boarding House” (D 62). And all the rest of the story is really only the working out “in prose” of the truth revealed in those three lines! Similarly, Mr. Duffy and Mrs. Sinico of “A Painful Case” are revealed to each other and the reader through music. Music is essentially Mr. Duffy’s only remaining trace of humanity: “His liking for Mozart’s music brought him sometimes to an opera or a concert; these were the only dissipations of his life” (D 109). He meets Mrs. Sinico at a concert and her human warmth and kindness show forth in her first words about the event: “—What a pity there is such a poor house to-night! It’s so hard on people to have to sing to empty benches” (D 109). How characteristic it is too that the music of Mozart would have the richness and depth to appeal to two such different people. Few other artistic creations have such a combination, on the one hand of life and human warmth to attract Mrs. Sinico, on the other of classical beauty and formal perfection to reach Mr. Duffy. To a considerable degree the two of them owe not only their acquaintance but also their friendship to music: “The dark discreet room, their isolation, the music that still vibrated in their ears united them” (D 111). The end of their acquaintance is also the end of music for Mr. Duffy: Mrs. Sinico returns his music and books, and, though he gets some new music on his music stand, he keeps away from concerts in order not to meet her (D 112). In Mr. Duffy’s final scene, when he has learned of Mrs. Sinico’s death and understood his responsibility for it, he sees a train which combines in one image music, death, and the final departure of his earthly happiness:

Beyond the river he saw a goods train winding out of Kingsbridge Station, like a worm with a fiery head winding through the darkness, obstinately and laboriously. It passed slowly out of sight; but still he heard in his ears the laborious drone of the engine reiterating the syllables of her name. (D 117)


Then the train winds away and he is left alone in perfect silence (D 117).

Two different kinds of music reveal two different types of character in the happy young men of “After the Race.” One is the lively public drinking song “Cadet Roussel” that they all sing together, linking arms and stamping their feet at the chorus to express their youthful high spirits (D 47). In considerable contrast is the playing of the Hungarian pianist Villona, which helps to set him apart as a distinctly artistic character representing several aspects of the Joycean artist in exile. In one way Villona is far more cultured than his friends. He is a brilliant pianist (D 44), and at the dinner, while the others discuss cars and politics, he began to discover to the mildly surprised Englishman the beauties of the English madrigal, deploring the loss of old instruments. . . . The resonant voice of the Hungarian was about to prevail in ridicule of the spurious lutes of the romantic painters. . . . (D 46)

On the yacht he at first plays waltzes for his friends to dance by, but when the others start in at cards, “Villona returned quietly to his piano and played voluntaries for them” (D 48). On the other hand, Villona is not at all “sophisticated” in the way the others are, such as the young millionaire Segouin with his “very refined taste” who had arranged the “excellent, exquisite” dinner (D 46). In this regard Villona is much more naive or closer to the basics of existence, such as food: “Villona was in good humour because he had had a very satisfactory luncheon; and besides he was an optimist by nature” (D 43). Though he is separated from the others by his poverty and speaks at the dinner “with immense respect” (D 46), his optimism, his physical hugeness, and the “deep bass hum of melody” that he keeps up for miles as they drive along (D 44) make him appear quite securely anchored at the center of a universe of his own. From here he is thus well placed to see and reveal the truth of their youthful happiness at the story’s moment of epiphany.

A Joycean epiphany culminating in music is that of Maria in “Clay.” In this particular story Joyce actually utilizes music in all three of its roles, as a social activity, emblem of romance, and revelation of character. The music and singing takes place quite naturally as a social event at the Donnelly’s Hallow Eve party. Maria’s song recounting the memories of an abducted highborn lady, “I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls” (D 106), however, suddenly introduces an element of high romance, if only the romance that Maria herself will forever be denied:

\[ \text{I had riches too great to count, could boast} \]
\[ \text{Of a high ancestral name. . . . (D 106)} \]

And in singing this song, even if only while “blushing very much” and with “a tiny quavering voice” and by mistake singing half of it twice (D 106), Maria most movingly reveals herself, not so much in character as in spirit. Locked within that pitiful body and that mind that does not even realize what she is saying there is a spirit of goodness and decency that has every right to the “high ancestral name” of “human.” Unlike the girl in the song, who has been carried away by gypsies and will be rescued, though, Maria has been exiled by fate, and forever.
"THE DEAD" is universally acknowledged as the culmination of Dubliners. The role of music in this great story is fittingly also the most extensive. The characters, the plot, and the theme are all in some way related to music, and music functions in all three of the roles it has played throughout Dubliners, as a social and professional activity, as a symbol of romance, and as means for the revelation of character.

The closed square piano quite appropriately serves as a sideboard for refreshments in the story (D 182; D 196; D 197), for the daily profession of music underlies most of the activities of the household. Mary Jane, who plays the organ in church and teaches pupils from the better-class families, is "the main prop of the household" (D 176); Aunt Kate gives lessons to beginners on that old square piano (D 176); old Aunt Julia is still the leading soprano in her church choir (D 176) "for the honour of God" (D 194). As music is the basis for the household, it is also the basis for the party, where the guests, besides family members and old friends, include Kate and Mary Jane's piano students and members of Julia's choir (D 175). Music on the drawing-room piano goes on almost constantly throughout the story: Mentioned explicitly are the two dances played by Miss Daly, including the waltz that Gabriel hears when he arrives (D 179; D 182; D 184); the quadrilles, played by a different pianist (D 184); Mary Jane's display piece (D 186); the lancers (D 187); another waltz (D 190); Julia's song, accompanied by Mary Jane (D 192); a waltz played immediately after supper while Gabriel is making his speech (D 202); and, when most of the guests have already left, D'Arcy's song, accompanied by Miss O'Callaghan (D 206). Music is also a major topic of the supper table conversation: D'Arcy, about whom "all Dublin is raving" (D 184), is a professional tenor at the opera, and he begins a long, expert discussion among the guests comparing the merits of contemporary opera singers to those of the great Italian and English singers of the past (D 198-200).

With music so important in his characters' lives, it is not surprising that Joyce should have them reveal themselves through their music making and their attitudes towards music. For example, the spirit of social conviviality, joyful if unsophisticated, that prevails after Gabriel's speech praising the hostesses' hospitality is fittingly expressed by the song, "For they are jolly gay fellows," that the company sings in unison in their tribute (D 205). Individual character, too, is searchingly revealed by musical performance. Mary Jane, for instance, appears first only in brief glimpses that show a busy energetic person:

Mary Jane . . . was now the main prop of the household. . . . She had been through the Academy and gave pupils' concerts every year. . . . (D 176)

A red-faced young woman, dressed in pansy, came into the room, excitedly clapping her hands and crying:
—Quadrilles! Quadrilles! (D 183)

The true measure of her soul is in her music, though, and the performance here reveals her lacking in mature artistry:

Gabriel could not listen while Mary Jane was playing her Academy piece, full of runs and difficul
passages, to the hushed drawing-room. He liked music but the piece she was playing had no melody for him and he doubted whether it had any melody for the other listeners, though they had begged Mary Jane to play something... The only persons who seemed to follow the music were Mary Jane herself, her hands racing along the key-board or lifted from it at the pauses like those of a priestess in momentary imprecation, and Aunt Kate standing at her elbow to turn the page. (D 186)

In contrast, Aunt Julia physically is a befuddled old woman:

Her hair, drawn low over the tops of her ears, was grey; and grey also, with darker shadows, was her large flaccid face. Though she was stout in build and stood erect her slow eyes and parted lips gave her the appearance of a woman who did not know where she was or where she was going. (D 179)

Her song, though, reveals the soul of an artist:

Her voice, strong and clear in tone, attacked with great spirit the runs which embellish the air and though she sang very rapidly she did not miss even the smallest of the grace notes. To follow the voice, without looking at the singer’s face, was to feel and share the excitement of swift and secure flight. (D 193)

The contrast between Mary Jane and Aunt Julia shown in their music is, of course, part of the central theme of the story, the overwhelming greatness of the dead past. For Aunt Julia, as her singing also betrays, is the person of the company closest to death:

Poor Aunt Julia! She, too, would soon be a shade with the shade of Patrick Morkan and his horse. He had caught that haggard look upon her face for a moment when she was singing... (D 222)

Joyce also compares the living unfavorably with the dead through the other musical performance at the ball, Mr. Bartell D’Arcy’s uncertain, hoarse rendition of a fragment of “The Lass of Aughrim.” There had been no question about D’Arcy’s ability to sing earlier in the story. Mary Jane, arranging partners for the quadrilles, had told Miss Daly:

—But I’ve a nice partner for you, Mr Bartell D’Arcy, the tenor. I’ll get him to sing later on. All Dublin is raving about him. (D 184)

At the dinner, too, he seems healthy, vigorous, and cocky in his defense of contemporary singers:

—O, well, said Mr Bartell D’Arcy, I presume there are as good singers to-day as there were then. —Where are they? asked Mr Browne defiantly. —In London, Paris, Milan, said Mr Bartell D’Arcy warmly. I suppose Caruso, for example, is quite as good, if not better than any of the men you have mentioned. —Maybe so, said Mr Browne. But I may tell you I doubt it strongly. (D 199)

But when pressed to sing himself, he suddenly wilts:

... the singer seemed uncertain both of his words and of his voice. The voice, made plain by distance and by the singer’s hoarseness, faintly illuminated the cadence of the air... —Can’t you see that I’m as hoarse as a crow? said Mr D’Arcy roughly. He went into the pantry hastily and put on his overcoat. The others, taken aback by his rude speech, could find nothing to say. ... Mr D’Arcy came from the pantry, fully swathed and buttoned, and in a repentant tone told them the history of his cold. Everyone gave him advice and said it was a great pity and urged him to be very careful of his throat in the night air. (D 210-11)
His failure sets in high relief the greatness of the past he had slighted at the banquet: the Italian tenor who “had sung five encores to ‘Let Me Like a Soldier Fall’, introducing a high C every time” (D 199), or old Parkinson, whom Aunt Kate remembers as having “the purest tenor voice that was ever put into a man’s throat” (D 199). Like the discourtesy of Miss Ivors, who left the ball early on a pretext, D’Arcy’s “rude speech” also offers an unfavorable contrast to the graciousness of the past. It is, most of all, highly poetic justice that he should be undone here by a cold, for the elements of cold and snow are closely associated in the story with the dead singer of the ballad from out of the past, Michael.

The art of music involves an audience as well as performers, and Joyce also illuminates his characters by showing their reactions to the music they hear. Thus Gabriel’s sensitivity and understanding is demonstrated by his aversion toward Mary Jane’s display piece (D 186). The image of his mother that he recalls at this scene, as the “serious and matronly” woman who was “the brains carrier of the Morkan family” (D 186), is paradoxically enhanced here by the fact that she did not have any musical talent. In contrast, the vigorous applause by the four young men who did not even hear the piece offers a mordant Joycean comment on the shallowness of both the music and the audience.

Judgment and character are similarly revealed in the memories of past performances discussed at the supper: Aunt Kate’s remembrance of the tenor Parkinson is lively and true; Freddy Malins, with somewhat grotesque misjudgment, esteems the chieftain in the pantomime as having “one of the finest tenor voices he had ever heard” (D 198); Mr. Browne redeems his officiousness (“—Browne is everywhere, said Aunt Kate, lowering her voice” [D 206]) by his clear memory of the old Italian opera companies: “Those were the days, he said, when there was something like singing to be heard in Dublin” (D 199).

The person in the story most profoundly affected by hearing a piece of music is Gretta, whose memories of her dead lover Michael are reawakened through the evocative power of music when D’Arcy sings “The Lass of Aughrim.” The music here does not so much reveal her character as unleash it, for not only is her mood transformed, and her very appearance, but she undergoes a remarkable transition from a rather peripheral to a centrally important character in the story. Throughout the first half of “The Dead,” the Christmas ball at the Misses Morkan’s, Gretta occupies a quite subsidiary role. She is the cause of Gabriel’s late arrival (“my wife here takes three mortal hours to dress herself” [D 177]), the object of his tender solicitude (complete with galoshes [D 180]) and of his late mother’s disfavor as “country cute” (D 187). Frequently she is identified merely as “Mrs Conroy” (D 180) or “Gabriel’s wife” (D 200). In one incident only (portentously, in retrospect) is she enlivened: by the thought of western Ireland:

His wife clasped her hands excitedly and gave a little jump. —O, do go Gabriel, she cried. I’d love to see Galway again. (D 191)

But Gabriel resists the idea coldly (D 191) because he is ashamed of her western origin (D 189).

As she listens to D’Arcy sing “The Lass of Aughrim,” however, Gretta
suddenly becomes a central figure in the story, an object of mysterious beauty, fascination, and desire:

Gabriel had not gone to the door with the others. He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terracotta and salmonpink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. 18 She was leaning on the banisters, listening to something. Gabriel was surprised at her stillness and strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps, a few chords struck on the piano and a few notes of a man’s voice singing.

He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. “Distant Music” he would call the picture if he were a painter. (D 209-10)

In this hauntingly beautiful picture of Gretta, it is music that, as before in Dubliners, serves as an emblem of romance. Joyce, in fact, describes the love of both Gabriel and Michael for Gretta in terms of music. For Gabriel, the highest expression of love and beauty is often as music. His love for Gretta kindles at “the first touch of her body, musical and strange and perfumed” (D 215). Earlier, he had termed poetry “thought-tormented music” (D 192). “Distant Music” characterizes his vision of Greta on the stairs, transformed by her memory of a love of which he is unaware. The image of “Distant Music” also recurs when he recalls a love letter he had written to Gretta in his youth:

Like distant music these words that he had written years before were borne towards him from the past. He longed to be alone with her. (D 214)

The love of Gretta and Michael is also expressed and recalled through the medium of music. D’Arcy’s song awakens this memory of love in Gretta:

Gabriel saw that there was colour on her cheeks and that her eyes were shining. A sudden tide of joy went leaping out of his heart. (D 212)

But in touching irony, it is the greater love of Michael that she is remembering.

—It was a young boy I used to know, she answered, named Michael Furey. He used to sing that song, “The Lass of Aughrim.” (D 219)

He was going to study singing only for his health. He had a very good voice, poor Michael Furey. (D 221)

Michael’s love, too, is therefore described musically, by being associated with the ballad “The Lass of Aughrim.” This song, with its image of an earlier love returning in the rain, is certainly a splendid symbol for Michael, who caught his

18. Joyce provides a remarkable description here. It is as if Gretta in her mysterious raptiness is so transfigured in her beauty that Gabriel at first hardly recognizes her as his wife. A similar scene happens at the end of “A Little Cloud,” when Little Chandler, irrationally upset by his crying baby, does not register for the reader that it is his wife who has returned:

The door was burst open and a young woman ran in, panting.

—What is it? What is it? she cried.

The child, hearing its mother’s voice, . . . (D 84-85)
death for love in the rain, and whose spirit returns to haunt Gabriel at the end of the story in the tapping of the snow on the windowpane. Thus that final confrontation between the love of Gabriel—real, living, and romantic—and that of Michael—more real, and more romantic because he died for it—is once again a confrontation of music.

It is fitting that the resolution of the conflict in Gabriel’s soul should also be expressed in sound:

His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (D 224)

The dead have come alive in this story—the tenor Parkinson, Patrick Morkan with his horse Johnny, and the tragic lover Michael Furey—to match or surpass the living in power, greatness, and vitality. Yet there is no real contest between them, because the dead also depend on the living: The dead live only in the memories of the living; and furthermore they are memorable only because they once lived themselves. Gabriel’s love is humbled before that of Michael, and Gretta would not be the person she is without the memory of the love of the dead man. Yet Michael lives on only through that memory too. The living and the dead carry each other through time, and are united, in Gabriel’s vision, in their common humanity. The last sound of Joyce’s story is the gentle sound of the snow that will muffle forever any discord between them.