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Fugal form and polyphony in the "Sirens" episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*

Introduction

The emergence of monumental orchestral music in the 19th century resulted in its growing influence upon literary works. Music started to be highly valued because it could express feelings in an undistorted manner. Due to the development of psychoanalytic theories the main concern of the modernist writers was to convey the workings of the human mind. Since the focus of novels shifted from describing outer realities to expressing inner states of mind, language needed to be freed from its semantic rigidity, imitating the natural flow of music (Aronson 20–22). Apart from equating the interior monologue with musical expression (Aronson 22), there was another feature borrowed from music. The departure from traditional storytelling, the impressionistic expression of human thoughts required a shape, which could be borrowed from music. The application of musical forms in order to give a shape to the narrative reached its peak in the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses*. This musical frame is part of a larger, mythical frame. While the musical frame makes the "Sirens" episode coherent, the intertextual background of Homer's *Odyssey* provides the whole novel's unity, which "is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot 177). This paper deals with the musical structure of the "Sirens" episode, trying to determine its exact form, and to find the reason why Joyce resorted to that specific form.

The form and the theme of "Sirens"

The "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses* is the turning point in the novel, where Joyce begins to experiment with various techniques. From this chapter onward the language is deliberately deconstructed; there is a growing distance between the signifier and the signified. The episode is a bridge towards further stylistic experiments to follow later in the novel (each chapter being experimental in a different manner), and culminating in the stream of consciousness of the final episode, where the language imitates the natural flow of the mind.

Although critics have been dealing for decades with the "Sirens" chapter of *Ulysses*, there does not seem to be an agreement on its form. Some critics regard the introductory pages to be an overture, others opt for its being a prelude, and there are also some who claim it to be written according to the rules of a "traditional" or a double fugue. As far as the main body is concerned, it is analysed either as a fugue, or as a *fuga per canonem*, but – as will be demonstrated – several critics consider it to be a canon. This confusion originates partly from Joyce's inconsistent use of the terms fugue and *fuga per canonem*, and from his mentioning "eight regular parts." It is also dubious whether Joyce applied these forms to the introduction, to the main part, or to the whole episode. Even if there are debates over the exact form, the majority of critics agree that the episode follows a polyphonic, fugal structure, which is an old, traditional form. Werner Wolf remarks that "twentieth-century authors who have experimented with the musicalization of fiction refer to old, 'harmonious' music and traditional forms, such as the fugue, rather than to the innovative forms and the more disharmonious music typical of contemporary avant-garde composers" (142–143). His explanation of this choice is similar to Eliot's: the modernist loss of meaning requires an aesthetic order. "[I]n 'Sirens' the function fulfilled by the musicalization as an aesthetic(ist) compensation for the loss of traditional narrative order is rather a symptom of the decentredness of meaning in the modern world" (Wolf 143). In this episode aesthetic coherence is provided by a traditional musical form. Moreover, the polyphonic complexity of the fugal form is a proper base for a many-voiced narrative to be built upon.

Every fugue has a certain theme which re-appears in different places, on different notes (first on the tonic, then on the dominant). Therefore, in "Sirens" there has to be one single theme, appearing in different ways. Wolf claims that this fugal subject is a semantic, and not a formal one – the theme of "desire" and its variations appear throughout the whole episode (133). He sees a correspondence between the three parts or voices of a fugue and the three (groups of) characters, namely the barmaids (treble), Bloom (tenor) and Blazes Boylan (bass) (Wolf 133), who have a major part in the play of desire. Even the characters that do not belong to the three main parts of the fugue are somehow related to the theme of desire: Simon Dedalus, Lenehan or George Lidwell all show attraction towards the two barmaids, the tempting "sirens" of the episode. The theme of the episode takes on different forms as well. The inverted form, i.e. "dislike", appears as a variation of the "desire" theme in Bloom's

dislike of Boylan, as well as his frustration and loneliness, as the effect of unfulfilled desire can be viewed as a counterpoint (Wolf 133).

As far as the form of "Sirens" is concerned, most critics agree that it is some kind of polyphonic, fugal form, but whether the term can be applied only to the main part, or to the whole episode, it is still debated. The following parts of this paper try to clear up this confusion by taking into account the relevant features of the above-mentioned musical forms and trying to apply them to the introduction and the main part of the episode.

The introduction to "Sirens": an overture or a prelude?

Since Levin takes for granted that the main part of the episode is written in fugal form, for him it is obvious that a fugue can be preceded only by a prelude (not an overture), taking as a precedent Bach's *Das wohltemperierte Klavier* (14). Furthermore, Levin claims that Joyce combines the prelude with the Wagnerian *Vorspiel* (14), which he considers to be a kind of prelude. Although he is right to some extent in that the two introductory pages are a combination of the two forms, the prelude does not stand as close to the *Vorspiel* as the overture does. Both the overture and Wagnerian *Vorspiel* precede an opera, and include the major motifs of the following tunes in a condensed form. Much the same can be said about the introduction of "Sirens" where the major themes prop up in a saturated manner; these terms are elaborated later in this chapter. Levin supports his choice of the term prelude instead of an overture by saying that "[s]tructurally, the prelude is more closely knit than an overture" (14). This is true; still, a "conventional" prelude from Bach's period does not contain any of the following fugue's elements. In most cases their keys are identical, but they do not have any common thematic or rhythmic patterns.

The only proof in favour of the possibility of the introduction being a prelude instead of an overture might be its cyclic nature. Although in *Finnegans Wake* this cyclicity is more overt – the two half-sentences at the beginning and the end of the book belong together; references are made to cyclic movements in nature, etc. – there are traces of cyclicity in *Ulysses*, too. The introductory part of "Sirens" ends with the words "Done. /Begin!". The imperative "Begin!" may refer either to the following part, or to the introduction itself, which was probably intended to be read several times so that the major themes become perceptible. In the first case one is reminded of Bach's preludes, which can be played as self-contained pieces as well; however, the listener's musical appetite is not satisfied with the light,

introductory-type of music, and he feels that something more substantial is to come. In this case a linear movement is suggested by the composer (or the writer). In the second case, one can also compare Joyce's prelude to later musical works, such as Chopin's *Preludes*, which are self-contained pieces, and are not followed by anything. Chopin's *24 Preludes* are held together by cyclicity. They are placed in the order of the quint-circle, which means that the original key (C-major) will return at the end [**c**-g-d-a-e-h-f#-c#-g#-d#-a#-e#(f)-**c**, or the other way around]. Similarly, the pieces themselves are cyclical, beginning in a certain key, and after numerous drastic shifts in tonality, the original key returns. In this interpretation Joyce's imperative "Begin!" refers to the introduction, thus – following Chopin's method – suggesting a cyclical movement. All in all, its introductory nature (tuning up, setting the mood) and the cyclical element are the only features that may serve as an explanation for the text being a prelude. However, the leitmotif-like presentation of themes seems to be a much stronger feature, thus it is advisable to treat the introductory part of "Sirens" as an overture. Moreover, the length of the two parts also tends to support this view, since a prelude is approximately as long as the following fugue, whereas an overture is a rather short introduction, a condensation of the major work that follows it.

The fugal structure of the introductory part

So far the problem of the introductory part seems to be solved, but we cannot ignore Joyce's reference to *fuga per canonem* in his letter to his benefactress, Harriet Shaw Weaver.[1] Critics like Levin applied the term only to the main chapter: "Now that Joyce has introduced his audience to the episode's main motifs and to a highly abbreviated outline of the narrative progression (both of which […] serve to familiarize the reader with central themes and voices which recur throughout the ensuing action), the *fuga per canonem* begins" (16). Conversely, David Cole and Heath Lees examine the whole episode as a *fuga per canonem*. Lees agrees with Cole in taking into consideration the 15th century meaning of the term *canon*, which was used to give verbal directions either before or within the music itself (40). But Lees goes further – he states that the introduction to "Sirens" does not only give the directions necessary to perform (or understand) the main chapter, but the introduction itself shows "the form of the music too, because when it is read with a musical ear, it becomes apparent that it embodies

[1] "Dear Miss Weaver [...] the passages you allude to [...] are all the eight regular parts of a *fuga per canonem* [...]" (*Selected Letters* 129).

the shape of a fugue and that it alludes to specific works written in fugal style" (42). It is not indifferent whether we call the introductory part an overture, or we look at it as directions for the following part. Although both have similar purposes, they are intended for different people: the overture makes the listener's job easier by familiarizing him in advance with the main themes, while the 15th century directions for the *fuga per canonem* were given to the performer to help him interpret the work according to the composer's intentions. The second part of Lees's statement concerns the combinatory (or formal) features of the introduction, which – to his mind – has a fugal structure. He states that the three main parts of the fugue – i.e. Exposition, Middle Section and Closing Section – are discernible in the introduction (Lees 44). In a regular fugue the Exposition and the Closing Section both comprise about one quarter of the whole fugue, while the Middle Section, the most complex one, contains the other half of the fugue. The Exposition introduces the main themes of the fugue which return in the original form or with variations in the Closing Section. The Middle Section develops several fragments from the Exposition which appear in different keys, and it also includes some freely-devised music. Lees divides the introduction to "Sirens" into these three major parts of the fugue – since it contains 57 statements, he regarded the first 14 statements ("Bronze ….. Goodbye!") as the Exposition, the statements between 15 and 42 ("Jingle ….. protruding") as the Middle Section, and the statements from 43 to 57 ("Bronzelydia ….. Begin!") as the Closing Section (44). The return of the themes in the Closing Section in a varied form is evident (e.g. "Bronze by gold" becomes "Bronzelydia by Minagold"; "A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin, rose of Castille" becomes "Last rose Castille of summer…"). Still, Lees fails to explain why the Middle Section begins with the 15th statement. Apart from explanations regarding fugal symmetry, the themes of these two pages cannot readily be divided into any sections – only the recurrence of several themes present at the beginning reminds one of fugal form.

Although Lees makes some remarkable obsevations, his overall analysis of the introductory pages is somewhat vague. His study is entitled "The Introduction to 'Sirens' and the *Fuga per Canonem,*" but the gist of the argument is that "the introduction itself embodies the *canon*" (Lees 41) in spite of the fact that "it embodies the shape of a fugue" (42). He goes still further by trying to prove that it alludes to certain fugues written by Bach (Lees 41–52). First of all, the canon might be said to be the strictest type of fugue, still, its form differs from the form of a later type of fugue. Secondly, *fuga per canonem* is a separate musical form

originating from the 15th century, where the term *canon* refers to the directions given to performers. Finally, comparing several sentences from a literary work to the rhythmic pattern of a range of fugues (each sharing the same key and rhythm) is not a very convincing idea. While it is true that some rhythmic patterns are favoured by composers or writers, and the rhythm of musical and literary works can be compared, and the main subject used in Bach's *The Art of Fugue* may fit the introduction to "Sirens," there are hundreds of fugues written by other composers which have the same rhythmic pattern in their subject. Lees's explanation of why Joyce seems to have used Bach's pieces as a model for these two pages is that Joyce must have been familiar with many of Bach's works, and that Joyce even included the initial letters of the composer's name into the first four statements (47):

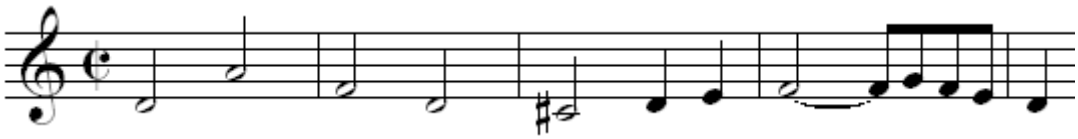
"**B**ronze by gold heard the hoofirons…"

"**C**hips, picking chips…"

"**H**orrid! And gold flushed more."

"**A** husky fifenote blew." (Joyce 328–329)

In the introduction two rhythmic patterns dominate, one of them including half-, quarter- and eighth-notes, which are attributed by Lees to fragments like "Bronze by gold heard the hoof irons steely ringing" and the other including mainly quarter-notes, attributed to fragments like "jum-ping rose on sat-in(y) breasts of…" (Lees 48–49). The rhythmic pattern of the main subject, along with the specific quotations from "Sirens" can be illustrated as follows:



If these rhythms really dominate the first two pages of the episode, it may be compared to a double fugue with a subject and a counter-subject. These two subjects or rhythmic patterns appearing four times each in the Exposition might explain Joyce's mentioning of "eight regular parts" (Lees 46). In this case, by "parts" Joyce might have meant similar "rhythmic patterns." On the other hand, Levin interprets Joyce's "parts" as voices, and "according to frequency and placement in the narrative, these voices would be those of Miss Douce and

Miss Kennedy (the sirens), Bloom, Simon Dedalus, Lenehan, Boylan, the piano tuner, Dollard, and Pat the waiter, with Cowley, Lidwell, Kernan, and Goulding functioning as free counterpoint" (14). Lees considers this list to be arbitrary, since Levin omits (from the list of "subjects") the "ultra-musical" Father Cowley, but includes the blind, non-speaking piano-tuner (46). Lees's approach of considering the eight parts to be rhythmic patterns makes more sense to me, since there are more than eight voices appearing in the introduction, and they do not appear in a proportionate, regular manner. As far as the rhythmic patterns are concerned, they appear more regularly, though sometimes Lees seems to have forced several statements into one of the above-mentioned rhythmic patterns (in some cases he tried to create a correspondence between the words or syllables containing short vowels and the half-notes).

On the whole, we can conclude that the introduction is a kind of overture presenting the major themes that follow later in the chapter, making use of some formal elements of the fugue such as the three major parts, the appearance and the later variation of themes, the similar rhythmic patterns, etc. But this introduction can also be viewed as a part that gives directions for the reading of the forthcoming chapter.

The form of the main part: polyphony and space

The terms fugue, *fuga per canonem* and canon are used inconsistently in reference to the main body of the episode, too. Although they use different terms to denote the form of "Sirens", critics like Burgess and Levin agree in defining its structure. Opposed to Wolf, who claims that the subject of the fugue is "desire", played by three voices (the barmaids, Bloom and Boylan), they take characters as the subject of the fugue. Burgess finds that the Sirens (Mina and Lydia) represent the subject of the fugue, "the theme on which the whole fugue is based" (84), and Bloom represents the fugal answer, "which is technically the subject re-stated in another voice, a fifth higher or a fourth lower" (84). In this scheme Boylan is the counter-subject, "the contrapuntal accompaniment to the answer and, from then on, to every re-statement of the subject" (Burgess 84). Levin also takes the Sirens as the subject and Bloom as the answer of a fugue; however, he analyses this part as a *fuga per canonem*, which in his interpretation means that there are many voices that move independently, as in a canon (17). He adds that "there is not word-for-word imitation, but the voices have polyphonically followed one another at fugal distances, and thematic material from the subject has been imitated consistently, with slight modulations, by the answer" (Levin 17). As more and more

characters enter the Ormond Bar, so does the fugue become more and more complex. This way the characters can be compared to the voices of a fugue entering, re-appearing, "speaking" simultaneously and finally "leaving" the piece. In the bar sometimes voices of more people can be heard, but – as in a fugue – one voice always dominates over the other.

Although this explanation is similar to Wolf's, it seems that the latter's statements are more accurate. Wolf, being a church organist as well, took into consideration the fact that a fugue has one theme appearing in different voices. This particular melody re-appears on different pitches, similarly to the theme of "desire" voiced by different characters on a different pitch. Moreover, he makes a comparison between the 'fragmented' polyphony Bach uses in some of his works and the polyphonic simultaneity of a narrative. The previous "(similarly to the one ongoing text) repeatedly creates the impression of polyphony by constantly leaping between different pitches, thus outlining passages which the listeners will attribute to different parts, but whose 'complete' melodies are only formed in their minds" (Wolf 21). Therefore, this is the only point where music and literature are completely comparable: "the juxtaposition of 'contrapuntal' elements in rapid succession in order to simulate a (polyphonic) simultaneity of parts" in literature is similar to the "fragmented" polyphony where musical instruments play only one part, and create the impression of simultaneity (Wolf 21). In this case simultaneity is created on the levels of signifiers and signifieds, but "all other literary means of suggesting simultaneity rely even more heavily on the level of signifieds and hence on concepts rather than on audible (or visible) signifiers" (Wolf 21). Otherwise the reading process is inevitably linear, simultaneity is an imaginary one. In the case of the "Sirens" episode we may say that Joyce applies a "fragmented" polyphony, where the reader imagines the characters speaking and acting at the same time.

With the help of the fugal form and polyphony, Joyce presented simultaneity very successfully. In a certain span of time many things occur which are signalled by a typical sound (e.g. the jingling of the jaunting car, the piano-tuner's tapping), this way indicating to the reader that there is not only one theme appearing in a linear way, but many things happen simultaneously. Burgess praises Joyce's "ability of the musical composer to work in time and space at the same time (or space)" (83). In polyphonic music many voices are present in the same span of time. Since in a fugue these voices move independently from each other, it gives the listener a feeling of space; the vertical axis is present besides the horizontal one. From a certain point of view all polyphonic forms might be said to have a spatial aspect, but if we

want to range these forms according to their use of musical space, we will find that the fugue is the most compound one since its independent voices may move in different directions. In forms like the sonata or the symphony a certain melodic line is supported by harmonic structures which do not have so much "space" for movement as the voices of a fugue have.

Another similarity between the structure of "Sirens" and the structure of a fugue is that in the former the space between the entries of different voices is filled with episodes, similarly to the freely-devised material of the fugue. Characters enter and leave the bar, their voices can be heard sometimes in a dominant manner, sometimes from the background, and among the appearances of these voices the plot goes on continually, as the freely-devised material of a fugue fills up the remaining space among the multiplicity of voices, and keeps the fugue going. The term fugue seems to be fitting from a semantic point of view as well. Originally, this term means "chase," which may be applied to Bloom's chasing of Boylan, Boylan chasing Molly, etc.

Burgess makes an interesting remark on the names of the two sirens; he considers the name Mina to refer to the minor scale, and the name Lydia to the ancient Lydian scale, which is an F major scale with a B natural (84). He also gives an appropriate rhythm to the musical letters of their names (min**A** k**E**nn**ED**y ly**D**i**A** **D**ou**CE**) (Burgess 84). This idea seems a little bit far-fetched, since if Joyce had wanted his readers to hear a melody while pronouncing these names, he would have done so with other names too.

"Sirens" and modern music

Most of the studies written on the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses* draw analogies only with classical forms and elements of music. Herman approaches this chapter from a completely new perspective – in his study " 'Sirens' after Schönberg" he ascribes language an equally important role, viewing the musical techniques and effects structuring "Sirens" as "instrumental to reflection on, and re-evaluation of, the structures and functions of language itself" (475). This approach is based on the discovery and the formalization of rules which make the (re-)combination of elements possible. At the same time, the rules – "an apparatus for reconciling space and time," since it allows items to be linearized or combined – constitute the object of the syntactic analysis (Herman 475). From this it follows that " 'Sirens' (self-reflexively) exploits the formal or constructional devices common to both musical and linguistic structures – devices or rules necessarily belonging to the syntactic or combinatory

versus the semantic or referential dimension of those structures" (Herman 476). The language of "Sirens" may be compared with Schönberg's (modern) music on the ground that both are innovative and both search for a universal grammar.

Drawing a parallel between "Sirens" and modern music instead of the classical fugue or canon might seem rewarding. One way to support this statement is to compare these works according to their spatial features. It has already been mentioned that among the classical forms the fugue is the most complex one from a spatial aspect, since its voices move independently from each-other, in many cases in different directions. Still, these voices support each other, and according to Palestrina's compositional rules (formed in the Renaissance period), they have to "harmonize," and are forced in the confines of a tonal system. The voices of Schönberg's composition have, in spite of the underlying rules, more freedom however, and thus they constitute a larger space, pushing temporality into the background. Schönberg's twelve-note scale allows a greater space for movement for the different voices than the traditional scale consisting only of seven notes, which could occasionally be altered. Although modern music has its own rules too, the augmentation of the tonal system results in a greater musical space, not to mention the frequent transgressing of rhythmic confines which diminishes the role of temporality, thus placing space into the foreground.

In the case of "Sirens" "the narrative […] compels us to juxtapose two differently linearized versions of the episode" (Herman 483). In the introductory part we are presented with the outline of the plot, which is elaborated later on. The reader needs to read back and forth in order to be able to perceive the simultaneity of the narrative. This pairing or grouping of motifs along a vertical or associative axis resembles the act of listening to a fugue, "in the split temporality of a double awareness, the subtle schizophrenia of modern music appreciation, resolving every sequential or 'melodic' development back into the stasis of its 'harmonic' situation, the totality of its associative chains" (Herman 484). Herman adds that this duality of "narrative sequences exploited by "Sirens" reproduces the polyphonic technique of a specifically modern music" (484). The need to think associatively while reading the chapter (or the whole novel) diminishes temporality and gives space a greater role. In "Sirens" there are two separate planes of syntagmatic or successive structure on which the narrative unfolds: the structure of the (anticipating) repertoire and the structure of the

(anticipated) realization of the repertoire; the association of these elements happens along an atemporal axis (Herman 485).

With the help of this technique the reader becomes aware of the fact that the different activities in – and outside – the Ormond Bar (singing, talking, Bloom's writing a letter while thinking and talking, the piano-tuner's progression, Boylan's approach to Molly etc.) happen simultaneously. The *leitmotifs* or the typical sounds belonging to a certain character indicate the presence or the actions of different people at a given time. While the time span is relatively short in the "Sirens" chapter, the plot is presented in a detailed manner, giving great importance to minor characters and events as well.

Conclusion

The musical episode of *Ulysses* may be compared to a traditional form as well as to the works of avant-garde composers. The elements of the fugal form are evident; the voices of the characters entering the Ormond Bar remind one of the entering themes of the fugue, each on a different note. Moreover, this musical technique serves as the frame of the episode, an ordering structure which gives the episode a unity. The abandoning of traditionalism and comparing the episode to modern musical structures approaches from a different angle, emphasizing the role of signifieds instead of the signifiers. This latter explanation of the "Sirens" episode focuses rather on its spatial dimension, and on the readers' role in juxtaposing elements in order to perceive simultaneity.

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