

# How to Lose a Musical Compass in a Few Hundred Lines? (And How to Find it again?):

Adventures of a Twentieth-Century and an Early  
Romantic Composer in a Waste Land

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*This paper attempts to explain the collective incomprehensibility of The Waste Land. Of course, this attempt does not only apply to the music of Anthony Burgess, since, for one, it is inseparable from the poetry of T. S. Eliot, and it also multiplies the number of quotations and associations in the literary work, be it obvious or more or less hidden. Therefore, this paper will embark on a special task: through the compositional methods of a nineteenth-century composer, Robert Schumann, it will try to demonstrate the real and metaphorical ambiguity of the tonality resulting from fragmentation, creative and playful musical gestures, and the various personae—this method may help to find an individual way to experience the effect of Burgess's music.*

The following lines were stimulated by the account of one of the Antarctic expeditions (I forget which, but I think one of Shackleton's): it was related that the party of explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant

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delusion that there was *one more member* than could actually be counted. (Eliot 74–75)<sup>1</sup>

Was it light?  
Was it light within?  
Was it light within light?  
Stillness becoming alive,  
Yet still?

A lively understandable spirit  
Once entertained you.  
It will come again.  
Be still.  
Wait. (Roethke 20)<sup>2</sup>

Anthony Burgess considered himself most of all a composer. He composed around 200 pieces of music, and with this amount proved more prolific in the field of music than in that of literature—thus it is not really possible to classify his creative activity into solely literary or musical works. In the case of such an exceptional artist, talented in two different art forms, there is no way to differentiate him as a literary artist or a composer alone, nor would it be right to do so. The reverse is true for those composers whose musical work is permeated by literary influences and musical effects, and whose work is rich in linguistically-inspired musical inventions. Thus, reading Burgess's books can make the reader associate to different kinds of musical pieces (and not only those often referred to by the author, but also those of our own imagination); and similarly, when listening to his music, we might think that what we hear might as well be a short story. (The so-called "storytelling manner" in different types of musical works was already very common in early Romantic music.) *The Waste Land* was classified as a melodrama by Burgess himself, a category much favoured by Romantic composers.

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- 1 T. S. Eliot's notes on the part of his long poem *The Waste Land*, beginning with 'Who is the third who walks always beside you?'
  - 2 Theodore Roethke, *The Lost Son* (1948)—the closing lines of the long poem.

This “multi-authored” composition—besides the work of T. S. Eliot and Burgess, other musical pieces also appear in it—had never been performed live in Hungary in its full length until recently. In 2017 in the chamber room of the Institute of Arts Communication and Music (formerly Department of Music) within Eötvös Loránd University’s Faculty of Humanities, excerpts of the original piece were performed. The Department of English Studies within the School of English and American Studies, and the International Anthony Burgess Foundation organised a symposium in November 2017 to commemorate the centenary of the author’s birth,<sup>3</sup> and at the closing concert of this conference, parts of the musical transcriptions of the long poem were put on by students and professors.<sup>4</sup> Strange as it may sound, this was also a continental premiere due to various reasons not to be specified here; the piece had not been performed in its full length in Europe until that date.

The above story reflects the composer’s (and perhaps the poet’s) idea well, since fragmentation is in full effect: the audience hears a few mosaic-like fragments of the event featuring a poem composed of mosaic-like excerpts accompanied by music similarly made up of mosaic-like pieces—as if written by Burgess himself. The musical concept of fragmentation is also rooted in early Romanticism, primarily in Friedrich Schlegel’s *Athenaeum Fragments*, where the philosopher defines the concept of a fragment as follows:

Ein Fragment muß gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerke von der umgebenden Welt ganz abgesondert und in sich selbst vollendet sein wie ein Igel (Schlegel, *Athenäums-Fragmente und andere Schriften* 56).<sup>5</sup>

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3 More on the conference: <https://b100b.wordpress.com/about/>

4 Some audio excerpts: [https://music.elte.hu/burgess\\_100\\_budapest](https://music.elte.hu/burgess_100_budapest) (with commentary in Hungarian). Full piece: <https://www.anthonburgess.org/the-music-of-anthon-burgess-exhibition/the-waste-land/>, score: <https://www.anthonburgess.org/app/uploads/2017/01/II-Waste-Land-SCORE-PDF.pdf>

5 “A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog” (qtd. in Rosen 48). Charles Rosen, in his analysis of the song, correctly translates the original word “Igel” as hedgehog instead of the more commonly used porcupine (Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments* 45), with the following reasoning: “The hedgehog (unlike the porcupine, which shoots its quills) is an amiable creature which rolls itself into a ball when alarmed” (48).

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According to Charles Rosen, one of Robert Schumann's Heine songs, "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai" (the opening song of the *Dichterliebe* cycle), is a perfect musical example of this fragmentation, as it "begins in the middle, and ends as it began—an emblem of unsatisfied desire, of longing eternally renewed" (41). In her book on Schumann, however, Beate Julia Perrey also points out that the fragment is a very important part of Romantic thought.

... whilst both maxim and aphorism are self-sufficient and self-satisfied in their confident claim to reveal an essence as it were in one stroke, and in the most concise and linguistically most efficient way possible, the fragment depends on other fragments in order "to make its point"—the "point" being that through its very opposition and otherness, it denies the system, of which it is a vital part, the articulation of an absolute truth. Here, no one part leads into, or grows out of, the other, and hence there develops no organic whole—the archetypal idea of "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." (32)

In his musical repertoire Burgess preferred to use the harmonies of Pre- and Post-Romanticism rather than those of the early Romantic period; still, he often uses Romantic examples and was indeed a prolific composer of the so-called Romantic "Lied," which was a typical genre of nineteenth-century music. In addition to fragmentation, irony, and allusion/self-allusion, he is comparable to Schumann through his creativity and the playfulness in his musical gestures, which are also characteristic of artists talented in two separate art forms. He often applied the traditional forms of "puzzle" in his literary as well as musical work, in which composers form words from notes to convey a secret message or simply leave a musical signature. Of course, this technique was already apparent in stylistic periods much earlier than Romanticism—for example, the proliferation of the well-known B-A-C-H motif from Bach to Burgess and onwards—but the true admirer, conceptual cultivator, and exemplar of the "*lettres dansantes*" was Schumann. Moreover, the different musical terminology used in English and German result in new puzzles and a series of confusions. For example, the note the English call B is H in German, whereas in German, B is the same

as the English B-flat.<sup>6</sup> The title of Teodóra Wiesenmayer's study on the musicality of Burgess's novels, "Prelude and Fugue in B(urgess) major," may refer to this ambiguity, because it can be interpreted in one way in Hungarian and German, and in another in English (Wiesenmayer, "Prelude and Fugue in B(urgess) major" 1394).

The accumulation of allusions gives *The Waste Land* considerable scope for play: Eliot is clear about employing a number of musical and literary references in his work, but Burgess makes his intention even more explicit. This multi-character game encourages the emergence of the so-called persona characters, a feature characteristic of vocal music since Romanticism. One of the first to describe this phenomenon was Edward T. Cone, who later worked out his own ideas in his study "Poet's Love or Composer's Love," mainly in the context of *Dichterliebe*, in which the various persona characters (vocal, instrumental, and that representing the totality of the musical piece) are integrated within the personality of the composer (Cone 181–182). As an antithesis to this, Berthold Hoeckner, in his essay "Poet's Love and Composer's Love," identifies independent persona-players.

My proposal, then, is to keep the basic conception of Cone's earlier model, while accommodating his later modification: to adopt the notion of a single creative mind, while still hearing independent voices. What is more, where Cone heard a complete musical persona constituted by instrumental and vocal personae, I hear a triple voice, which includes a poetic persona that remains on a par with the musical ones. Even when a poem has been molded into a through-composed song; even when its words have lost the rhythm of their original meter; and even when its text has been altered by the composer: the poetic text still remains an independent component of a song. Even sung,

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6 The highly educated Burgess was obviously well-aware of all this, just like Schumann, who made the musical "sphinx" of his *Carnaval* with two possible interpretation of A-S-C-H or A-SCH, the key motif of a piano piece with a French title and subtitles. (In French specialised language, the German H or English B sound is called "si," while the German B and English B-flat is called "si bemol.")

the words assume their own dramatic agency within what may be called a composer-poet's multiple voice. (Hoeckner 2.6)<sup>7</sup>

Everything is set for a “joint nineteenth- and twentieth-century investigation” in a romantically overheated context, for which the cross-generational connection is once again provided by an alliance created by Schumann's “The League of David” or “Davidsbund.”

Schumann discovered the idea for the *Bund* readily enough in contemporary literature. The idea for Florestan and Eusebius he borrowed from Jean Paul.<sup>8</sup> ... Schumann may have created the name Raro from an amalgamation of his own name and that of Clara: CLARAROBERT. The first public appearance of Florestan, Eusebius and Master Raro was, oddly enough, in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* ... Schumann's great admiration for Chopin's music led ... to his writing a review ... But his review ... was unlike any other, giving the appearance not a work of criticism, but an excerpt from a novel or a short story. (Jensen 108–109)

It is thus possible to write about music in the form of a novella or, like Eliot, to express the message of an opera in a poem, and to use the leitmotif technique in the same work, as Teodóra Wiesenmayer argues in her dissertation, *Words Embedded in Music* (92–101).<sup>9</sup> In *The Waste Land*, a fragment of a quotation from an opera presents two contexts at the same time and it is up to the reader to juxtapose these texts, even if the process

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7 In my opinion both versions are possible depending on the particular work we are talking about.

8 Jean Paul Richter (born Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, 1763–1825) was a successful contemporary writer and philosopher. He used his pseudonym out of respect for Rousseau, but tradition holds that Jean was pronounced in the French way, while Paul in the German way. With Florestan and Eusebius, Schumann portrayed the dual character of his own personality, modelled on Jean Paul's novel, *Flegeljahre*.

9 Since leitmotif in musical terminology is usually associated with larger scale (vocal or program music) works, which during the musical process can exclusively and regularly be heard in the context of a given dramatic poetic moment, it is more appropriate to use the term characteristic motif or, as defined by Akido Mayeda, a motto (501).

of reading or listening to the poem is linear—thus creating simultaneity through imagination.

The act of waiting, along with the emptiness and desolation of the sea, reinforces Eliot's theme, since in *The Waste Land* desolation (of the land and of the people's lives) and waiting for redemption are also central topics. The first and the second quotation from Wagner are thematically connected. When the piper watches the empty sea ("Oed' und leer das Meer."), and Isolde is not seen yet, the question arises: "Mein Irisch kind, wo weilest du?"—this may be Tristan's question as well, waiting for Isolde's arrival. This frame strongly holds Eliot's passage together, strengthening the effect of the characters' feeling of yearning and desolation. (Wiesenmayer, *Words Embedded in Music* 101)

But to what extent do literary or musical quotations remain the same in another context? Are we really talking about the music of *Le sacre du printemps* or *Tristan und Isolde* when they are transformed as quotations or collages in another work? (Similarly, is it really Schubert's symphony in the second song of *Dichterliebe* or a waltz by Schubert in the opening piece of *Carnaval*?) We can try to trace the messages of the somewhat "confused" musical world of Burgess's *The Waste Land*.

THE "WATER-DRIPPING SONG" AND OTHER ASSOCIATIONS

If there were the sound of water only  
 Not the cicada  
 And dry grass singing  
 But sound of water over a rock  
 Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees  
 Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop  
 But there is no water (Eliot 67)<sup>10</sup>

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10 *The Waste Land*, part V. (What the Thunder said).

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Goodbye, goodbye, old stones, the time-order is going,  
I have married my hands to perpetual agitation,  
I run, I run to the whistle of money.  
Money money money  
Water water water  
How cool the grass is.  
Has the bird left?  
The stalk still sways.  
Has the worm a shadow?  
What do the clouds say? (Roethke 18)<sup>11</sup>

Since we can move through the loosely structured and collage-like musical structure in Burgess's *The Waste Land* as we please, let us begin at the sources. In the fourth movement, as Nikolett Mayer observes, "the flute plays soft, repetitive chord progressions that symbolise the ripping sound of water. The cello only contributes with a few ... notes to the flute's surface ripping, and so making the sea three-dimensional" (Mayer 64).<sup>12</sup> However, since the associations of the listener are crucial to truly understand the musical messages in this work—not only in relation to the quotations but the independently composed passages as well—the listener (and perhaps even the composer) should recall the flute-Sprechgesang dialogue in Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, a defining chamber work of the early twentieth century, as a medium of the feelings of the errant protagonist. The portrayal of water is multi-layered, but its absence is expressed by the nostalgic recollection of the above-mentioned flute solo, which as a result becomes its own refutation; and then the general pause of "But there is no water" can rightly appear. Similarly, there is a general pause to acknowledge the fatality of water after the performance of "Fear death by water." However, the piano motif here, which bursts out like a stream and drops back like a wave, is more important than the words themselves, and is not in harmony with the text. The "walking and contemplative" music of the passage about the longing for water ("If there were only water amongst the rock"), which has the word "water" repeatedly, is not about the portrayal of water

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11 *The Lost Son*, part III (The Gibber).

12 Shortly after, though it takes over the flute motif for the length of a bar.



either. Besides, it also ends in a sudden general pause to give way to the “ripping sound of the flute.” Furthermore, at the opening part of the work, the E-flat major of the key passage can be associated with *Rheingold* or even Schumann’s *Rheinische Symfonie*.

From another point of view, *The Waste Land* almost aleatorically alternates between musical passages conveying a sense of tonality and the lack thereof. (But the reverse is also possible: tonal passages make us feel the absence of quasi-atonality, which is more in line with the message.) Atonal interludes surprise the listener after the passage “With a wicked pack of cards”; however, just as unexpectedly, after a long period of tonal insecurities, the jazz-like part follows at the end of “And puts a record on the gramophone,” although at this point it is justified by the message. Paul Phillips has an interesting observation as to Burgess’s works: “curiosity compelled him to experiment with twelve-tone music, but his conservative musical tendencies led him no further in the direction of the *avant-garde*” (9). Phillips also remarks on the composer’s general composing style: “an angular, vigorous style, often dissonant although mostly tonal, characterises much of Burgess’s music—a hybrid of Holst and Hindemith” (16). Thus, the question is if the atonal and tonally ambiguous passages in *The Waste Land* are there to reinforce a sense of tonal ambiguity in the listener, or if they wish to represent the ad hoc nature of unexpected thoughts and impressions. It is probably best to let the listener decide.

It is essential to take into consideration Burgess’s views on Eliot’s work. Jonathan David Mann quotes the following from an interview in his dissertation: “Burgess found both *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* are ‘intensely conservative works,’ whose intertextual Modernist style is a means ‘of conserving the past’ whilst being “presented in a totally revolutionary technique, which, on closer examination, seems to have its roots in conservatism” (Cabau 103, qtd. in Mann 48). Mann also quotes Cary di Pietro who states with reference to Burgess: “Shakespearean allusion in *The Waste Land* is one of the ‘numerous particles of literary texts ... scattered through’ the poem” (di Pietro 28, qtd. in Mann 57). Besides, as Burgess writes about his own music, for him *The Waste Land* is “among other things, a collage of literary citations” (99–100).

So, we are back to square one: in music evoking quotations, perhaps because of their accumulation the quotations become a “collection of music” whose proper reception is most similar to that of neoclassical works—seemingly nostalgic, but in fact provoking real emotions in the listener, who is flooded by memories and forced to reflect on them.

*The Waste Land*, therefore, can be experienced and presented in a myriad of ways. But it is not enough to know the work of T. S. Eliot or Anthony Burgess or even both, nor the quotations in the poem and the music: it is all these factors taken together that form the whole picture, showing the unity that is created using all the separate parts. But still, we will never get a homogenous picture, as each person can only sum up their impressions of each topic, and, therefore, of the whole. Besides the poet and the composer, a “powerful third” is needed,<sup>13</sup> in this case the listener. This way we may find the lost son (or *The Lost Son* itself), which may be hidden in any or all of the literary and musical mosaic pieces.

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13 A reference to music historian Tibor Tallián’s *Chamisso, Schumann and the Powerful Third*, referring to Géza Gárdonyi’s novel *The Powerful Third*, who is the one dominating the relationship between two people because he “does not yet exist, but wants to” (Gárdonyi 20).

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