Orchestrating Society: The Merging of Language and Voice to Create Social Bonds in Romola

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George Eliot’s *Romola* (1863) reflects her interest in using musical metaphor to explain how relationships are formed. She explores more fully than she has done before this point in her career how language and the human voice function as music; she theorizes the function of voice more explicitly than she had done before as she examines how it can possess the listener and incite people to action.

There are very few scenes of actual musical performance in *Romola* and in *George Eliot and Music*, Beryl Gray correctly observes that the few musical scenes we are given are unsatisfying. It is entirely possible that Eliot cannot realistically render the scenes of actual musical performances because of the ‘cultural gulf’ between her world and that of Renaissance Florence;¹ because so little evidence of the popular music from that time was available, her research could not help her. Yet Eliot’s failure, if it is a failure, to make us hear Renaissance Florence has little impact on her use of music in the novel. At this point in her career, Eliot is less concerned with scenes of musical performances than with exploring how she can use musical language to explain emotional issues that otherwise would be inaccessible to language. In this sense, *Romola* is one of her most musical novels. It is through musical metaphor that Eliot communicates to her readers what it is like to be acted on by a powerful force such as Savonarola or to be so damaged that your life has only one consuming and destroying aim.

Influenced by G. W. F. Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach, Eliot sees music as the language of the heart or soul.² Hegel values music because it is not dependent on physical expressions (it is not bound by the laws of physics, for example), and can, therefore, express a wider range of emotions. For Feuerbach music is essential because it is pure feeling; it is a ‘monologue of emotion’ and emotion, or ‘[f]eeling speaks only to feeling; feeling is comprehensible only by feeling, that is, by itself – for this reason, that the object of feeling is nothing else than feeling’.³ Eliot draws on these ideas when she uses musical metaphor to access some of the power of music to represent emotions directly; Karol Berger’s *A Theory of Art*, which discusses the power of music in explicitly Hegelian terms, addresses the functions of the various artistic media and informs my discussion of Eliot’s use of language. He summarizes his argument about what the different media can accomplish as follows:

> While visual media show us objects we might want without making us aware of what it would feel like to want anything, music makes us aware of how it feels to want something without showing us the objects we want. In a brief formula, visual media are the instruments of knowing the object of desire but not the desire itself, tonal music is the instrument of knowing the desire but not its object.⁴

For Berger, as well as Eliot, when people listen to the same piece of music, they can be made to feel the same desires.⁵

In *The Triptych and the Cross* (1979) Felicia Bonaparte argues that ‘the sensibilities that
concerned' Eliot were 'the deepest sensibilities' which 'are and must remain inarticulate'; she wanted to make her readers feel empathy for her characters. No language can accurately and directly represent the inner consciousness and feelings of her characters. She can directly describe what they experience, but must rely on figurative language to describe how they experience things. It is because of her interest in this problem with language and the power of music that Eliot focuses on how the voice of one speaker can act on an audience as music does in Romola. She had been concerned with this phenomenon from the beginning of her career; for example, in Adam Bede’s Dinah Morris, Eliot examines how a preacher’s voice influences her audience. This question now comes more to the fore as she shows how Savonarola tries to lead a religious revolution against official Catholicism. His success depends on his ability to make an audience feel with him and, as with Dinah, Eliot uses musical metaphors to describe the effect on his listeners.

Savonarola is temporarily brought into Florentine society when he reaches out to it through the sound of his voice. In ‘Power and Persuasion: Voices of Influence in Romola’ Gray discusses the power Savonarola’s voice has over particular characters; at one point she suggests that his voice is ‘controlled as though it were, indeed, music’. While she also states that Baldassare and Romola respond to Savonarola’s voice as though it were music, Gray’s argument could be pushed further, for it is his musicality that facilitates his success and brings about the Frate’s downfall. Though Savonarola never performs music in the novel, he is by far one of Eliot’s most musical characters. He orchestrates his sermons as carefully as an accomplished composer in order to maximize the emotional impact on the audience. Most of his listeners respond as he calculates they will. While he is speaking, Savonarola fully exploits music’s ability to penetrate the soul and bind one soul to another. He uses his musical oratory to act on the emotions of his audience more so than on their reason or intellect. It is because of this that Savonarola gets so many Florentines who would otherwise dislike him and disagree with him to follow him for as long as they do. The power of his voice is also responsible for his downfall; the Pope feels threatened by it.

The first description of the Frate’s speech is given when Romola first goes to hear him; this is also the day Baldassarre escapes into the Duomo:

Savonarola’s voice had been rising in impassioned force up to this point, when he became suddenly silent, let his hands fall and clasped them quietly before him. His silence, instead of being a signal for small movements amongst his audience, seemed to be as strong a spell to them as his voice. Through the vast area of the cathedral men and women sat with faces upturned, like breathing statues, till the voice was heard again in clear low tones.

Savonarola’s voice crescendos, ‘rising in impassioned force,’ and then he becomes ‘suddenly silent.’ His silence has the force of a musical caesura or rest; an audience would no more consider talking and moving about when an orchestra pauses after sounding a powerful chord in the middle of a movement than Savonarola’s listeners would during his grand pause; they are as entranced by his silence as by his speech. When he resumes, his ‘clear low tones’ have the effect of an orchestra playing at pianissimo; he requires the listeners to pay very close attention in order to hear all that is being said. Impelling his audience to go with him in his
crescendos and decrescendos makes them complicit in what he is saying; by participating in this way the audience shows how attentively they are listening. When Savonarola comments on his grand pause he compares it to the pause ‘when Jerusalem was destroyed [...] that the children of God might flee from it’ and encourages the people of Florence to flee the evil in their city (228). All of this is said relatively quietly to make the impact of the next crescendo more powerful when he reaches a climax: ‘For the sword is hanging from the sky; it is quivering; it is about to fall! The sword of God upon the earth, swift and sudden!’ (228) He makes his audience feel the immediacy of his message. Savonarola’s entire speech is orchestrated in this way, rising and falling in intensity to keep his audience with him.

The narrator’s extended description of Savonarola’s sermon tells us more about the way in which he speaks than what he says. In the earlier novel, the narrator focuses on the text of Dinah’s speech and then explains how it affects her hearers. There is little focus on the dramatic and dynamic structure of her sermons. We are occasionally told how calm she looks before she speaks and that her voice affects others, but there is little description of her voice. While it is possible that Eliot does not turn to translations of Savonarola’s actual sermons for fear that the words would not affect a Victorian readership as they affected Renaissance listeners, I believe it more likely due to her fuller understanding of the power of making her readers feel with her speaker’s audience. Eliot does this through showing how Savonarola’s voice works on his listeners.

When the narrator pauses to examine the affects of the sermon on particular characters, Eliot shows that the response elicited by the speaker-musician is partially dependent on the listener’s state of mind. Certain listeners choose, unconsciously, to listen to specific strains in Savonarola’s seemingly multi-voiced or polyphonic speech. For example, Baldassarre hears a very different message from the one Romola hears:

Among all the human beings present, there was perhaps not one whose frame vibrated more strongly than his to the tones and words of the preacher; but it had vibrated like a harp of which all the strings had been wrenched away except one. That threat of a fiery inexorable vengeance – of a future into which the hated sinner might be pursued and held by the avenger in an eternal grapple, had come to him like the promise of an unquenchable fountain to unquenchable thirst. [...] ‘I rescued him [Tito] – I cherished him – if I might clutch his heart-strings for ever!’ [...] The one cord vibrated to its utmost. (230)

Baldassare is an instrument being played by Savonarola. He hears only one note among the many because he is a damaged instrument; like a harp with only one string, he can make, or hear, only one sound. The metaphor that a man’s heart or soul has strings like a harp is continued in Baldassare’s thoughts of forever clutching Tito’s ‘heart-strings’. The narrator returns to Baldassare’s one remaining cord at the end of the chapter to make it absolutely clear that his life has only one driving force.

Baldassare is so badly damaged that he cannot respond to the full range of Savonarola’s music. He responds to the blows dealt by Tito’s refusal to rescue him from slavery or to recognize him when they meet in Florence by becoming so consumed with thoughts of revenge that he fails to hear any other note in Savonarola’s rich music than that which calls for vengeance.
Baldassare cannot be recovered by the community and can never have sympathy with others. He has forgotten that such a thing is possible and will never again hear the full music of another’s soul.

Unlike Baldassare, Romola, who is capable of fellow-feeling, does not hear a message of vengeance the first time she hears Savonarola preach:

But the sermon did no more than slightly deepen her previous impression that this fanatical preacher of tribulations was after all a man towards whom it might be possible for her to feel personal regard and reverence. The denunciations and exhortations simply arrested her attention. She felt no terror, no pangs of conscience: it was the roll of distant thunder, that seemed grand, but could not shake her. (247)

Savonarola’s influence on Romola comes, in part, from his willingness to martyr himself for the people of Florence. The effect his martyrdom has on Romola ‘[is] not altogether unlike the thrill which had accompanied certain rare heroic touches in history and poetry’ (247). This suggests that it could just be the power of language working on her, but the narrator goes on in the next clause to say that ‘the resemblance was as that between the memory of music, and the sense of being possessed by actual vibrating harmonies’ (247). Savonarola has an affect on her that is very like Romola’s own ‘rhythmic empire’ over Tito early in their relationship (118). Through these similar descriptions, Eliot highlights the parallels between falling in love and falling under the influence of another person. Describing the complicated emotions involved in such a possession defies language; the narrator cannot say in literal language what one character’s influence is on another. Savonarola’s influence on Romola is somewhere between the memory of possession and possession itself. His voice, like music, has begun to take possession of Romola’s inner-self to persuade her to follow him. I say he has begun because at this point she is still detached enough that she does not rush out to feed the poor, nor does she go about her home discarding anything that might be considered a vanity.

By giving us such detailed accounts of Romola’s and Baldassare’s responses to Savonarola, Eliot shows us how and why they are susceptible to particular parts of his sermon. While each character does cling to some of his words, Baldassare to those of vengeance, Romola, to those of martyrdom, the larger impact on each is due to the power of his voice. Their reactions are compared to responses to actual music. Taken as a whole, the scene demonstrates Eliot’s move beyond language into music in order to make her readers feel as her characters do.

Later, when Romola hears Savonarola in the Duomo during Lent following the Carnival in which all of the Anathema had been gathered and burned, she hears some of the notes in his speech which attract Baldassare’s attention: ‘But that mighty music which stirred her in the Duomo was not without its jarring notes’ (440). By this point in the novel, Romola is a follower of the Frate, but she is bothered by the changes she detects in the tone of his sermons. When his hope was fresh that there would be the ‘triumph of good in the reform of the Republic and the coming of the French deliverer,’ his sermons focused on ‘peace, charity, and oblivion of political differences’ (440). Romola could support all these things. As Savonarola comes to realize that reform is unlikely, that the French king is not going to be the deliverer of Florence, and political differences are as strong as ever in the Republic, his sermons become more
strident (440-1). Romola is troubled by these notes in his sermon, but we know, from Baldassare’s response, that they have always been present in Savonarola’s ‘mighty music’: the change, therefore, must be in Romola who now focuses on different strains than before. Romola’s resistance to the more strident notes in Savonarola’s sermon, like her only partial possession by his call to martyrdom, shows that she is still not completely won over by him. She can now hear his whole message, but cannot give herself over to it entirely. She finds that ‘the assent of her understanding [goes] alone; it is given [to the Frate] unwillingly’ (444).

Romola agrees with part of the Frate’s teachings; she feels that ‘to keep out a vicious rule’ in Florence is ‘a sacred cause,’ but she cannot fully assent to Savonarola’s narrow system of placing men into categories. She finds herself ‘clinging with new tenacity to her godfather, and with him to those memories of her father which were in the same opposition to the division of men into sheep and goats by the easy mark of some political or religious symbol’ (444). Romola senses in Savonarola those aspects of politics and religion she was early taught to despise. Her continued resistance to Savonarola’s campaign suggests the existence of some nascent sense of self. She seems, now, to be aware of how the Frate acts on his listeners. Just as it is possible either to listen to a Beethoven symphony with a sense of abandonment to the music, letting the powerful strains wash over in a flood of passion, or listen to the same symphony more objectively, analysing chord progressions and form, Romola can choose to listen more, or less, objectively to Savonarola. Romola, through the trials of her marriage and the political unrest of Florence, has developed a strong enough sense of self that she can refuse to allow herself to be swept along with the flood of the Frate’s sermons. This developing sense of self has been too hard won to be given up easily.

Baldassare, still hearing only one strain, is thrilled by the sermon that troubles Romola:

But if the tones of exasperation jarred on Romola, there was often another member of Fra Girolamo’s audience to whom they were the only thrilling tones, like the vibration of deep bass notes to the deaf. Baldassarre had found out that the wonderful Frate was preaching again, and as often as he could, he went to hear the Lenten sermon, that he might drink in the threats of a voice which seemed like a power on the side of justice. (441)

Comparing Baldassare to the deaf who can only appreciate the physical sensations of ‘the vibration of deep bass notes’ recalls the idea that he is a broken harp on which only one string can sound. He is incapable of appreciating the totality of Fra Girolamo’s message; he is driven only by revenge and when he finally kills Tito, his own life ends. Savonarola’s message for Baldassarre, already physical in that he can only feel the vibrations of one part, is further solidified in the drink metaphor. The violent strain of the Frate’s speech becomes something with which Baldassarre can quench his thirst.10 By connecting the power of music with one of our most basic needs, sustenance, Eliot makes clear the kind of control it can have over its listeners. Just as people will do almost anything to make sure they have enough to drink, music can inspire them to extreme actions.

In Romola, these extremities include defying the pope. Savonarola continues preaching after his excommunication, and the people keep coming to hear him:
As long as the belief in the prophet carried no threat of outward calamity, but rather the confident hope of exceptional safety, no sign was needed: his preaching was a music to which the people felt themselves marching along the way they wished to go [...]. (506)

Savonarola’s sermons feed desires already present among the people. He provides a unifying force; they can all march to the same beat, so to speak. But once the people see that the pope will punish them for listening to Savonarola, they start asking when they will see the miracle he has preached about. The power of the Frate’s music goes only so far; it can inspire great movements and great actions, but the people are only enthralled by him so long as they can hear his voice reverberating in their ears and will not risk severe punishment to follow it.

Savonarola’s power over the people of Florence does not last. After his excommunication, his sermons are delivered from a wooden pulpit erected outside the Duomo. That people would erect an outdoor pulpit for him and still gather to hear him speak after the Pope has made his feeling clear speaks to the extent of the Frate’s power. The monks chant as he prepares to preach in order to get his audience’s attention. The monks’ chanting signals that something is about to happen and that they stand as a unified body in support of it, but the chanting does not arrest attention for itself. The crowd is only silenced and brought to attention when it stops and Savonarola stands; the power of the chant seems to be transferred into the power of the Frate’s look and he once again begins to captivate his listeners:

> The monotonous wail of psalmody had ceased, and to those who stood near the pulpit, it was as if the sounds which had just been filling their ears had suddenly merged themselves in the force of Savonarola’s flashing glance, as he looked round him in the silence. Then he stretched out his hands, which, in their exquisite delicacy, seemed transfigured from an animal organ for grasping into vehicles of sensibility too acute to need any gross contact [...]. But then came the voice, clear, and low at first, uttering the words of absolution – ‘Misereatur vestri’ – and more fell on their knees: and as it rose higher and yet clearer, the erect heads became fewer and fewer, till, at the words ‘Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus,’ it rose to a masculine cry, as if protesting its power to bless under the clutch of a demon that wanted to stifle it: it rang like a trumpet to the extremities of the piazza, and under it every head was bowed. (507)

Again, the Frate’s voice is compared to a trumpet with its powerful, piercing sound that commands attention. ‘The monotonous wail of psalmody’ prepares the audience for his entrance, he has orchestrated things so all attention is focused on him in the powerful silence when the chanting ceases. Also, allowing his listeners’ ears to be filled with the innocuous sound of psalmody makes Savonarola’s speech more interesting by contrast. The audience hears, but is not arrested by the chanting; Savonarola’s dynamically more complex speech and intentional silences prove to be far more effective at unifying the listeners. The building crescendo from his first low utterance to the last ringing tones completely enthrals the audience.

This would be Savonarola’s last sermon; he ends it by asking for a sign from God and is then hit with an opportune ray of sunlight reflected through the crystal container holding the
consecrated Host (508). The audience watches this in silence, but after he disappears into the church and the sunlight no longer seems to be there specially to illuminate Savonarola, 'but was spreading itself impartially over all things clean and unclean' as the crowd starts moving around (509). As they begin to speak to one another, there is 'a confusion of voices in which certain strong discords and varying scales of laughter made it evident that, in the previous silence and universal kneeling, hostility and scorn had only submitted unwillingly to a momentary spell' (509). The crowd's response after Savonarola's exit reveals his waning power over them. Before his excommunication, when people could follow him without insulting the Pope, many stayed under Savonarola's influence in his absence; people gave up their Vanities to be burned in a bonfire without the Frate personally collecting each one, for example. Now that he has so clearly fallen into disfavour, the Florentines doubt his teachings; they are enthralled by him when he speaks, but when he leaves they feel this submission as something they undergo 'unwillingly' like 'a momentary spell.' They no longer fully participate in nor embrace what they hear from Savonarola.

Notes

3. Feuerbach, p. 28.
5. Berger also offers a lengthy discussion of the problems with desire described through language: 'though it may be used to describe desire, language cannot make us experience desire as directly, powerfully, and purely (without any knowledge of the desired object) as music can. A described world must be imagined by the reader (this is what is meant by its relative lack of directness) and it can be imagined to look in a great variety of ways (this is what is meant by the relative lack of precision in any description). [...] [A] described desire must be imagined by the reader, who might imagine feeling it in a great variety of ways. The dynamics of desire embodied in the tonal motion of music is felt directly when a musical work is heard and it cannot be felt differently each time one hears the work' p. (48).
Gray’s essay and the mention of the paucity of music in her earlier book are so far the only critical treatments of music in *Romola*.
