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MUSICAL LIVES: PORTRAITS OF COMPOSERS IN BIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS

In an interview given to *The Guardian* in March 2016, Julian Barnes, freshly crowned Booker Prize winner for his novel *The Noise of Time*, described the concept of a biographical novel as 'kind of cheesy'. 'All novels are biographical – he added – it means the study of life. *Madame Bovary* was the study of the life of Emma Bovary. *Anna Karenina* was a study of the life of Anna Karenina. It's just that in some novels the people are real and in some novels they aren't.'[1]

Given that the main protagonist of *The Noise of Time* is Dmitri Shostakovich, Barnes's statement should really be seen either as a provocation or perhaps as an initially indecipherable intellectual shortcut. There is not even any need to roll out some theory of text interpretation (such as Umberto Eco's well-known proposition, according to which the literary text, besides the *intentio auctoris*, is also subject to the *intentio lectoris*, through the active approach of whom it discovers its *intentio operis*)[2] in order to assert that if the hero of *The Noise of Time* is called Dmitri Shostakovich, then it is highly likely that – even if it is contrary to the author's intentions – the text will be interpreted with reference to the real figure of the composer and within the context of his biography. It would have been read differently, in other words, had the protagonist of the very same text borne another, fictional, name (we will refer to just such a case). In other words, the semiotic strategy adopted by Barnes means that it is impossible in the case of this book to escape the term 'biographical novel'.[3]

Barnes's non-committal or even negative reaction to that classification of *The Noise of Time* could be due in part to the relatively short history, and consequently the uncertain status, of that genre. Pinpointing the date when the biographical novel arose – or even acknowledging its existence – is just as impossible as with any theoretical procedures carried out on the living organism of cultural history. It goes without saying that every work and every phenomenon can have at least several beginnings (and occasionally, perhaps, none at all). That said, it will be worth dwelling for a moment on a few selected aspects of this relatively recent literary genre.

A new genre: the biographical novel

Something like an anacrusis to a theory of the biographical novel is offered by Virginia Woolf in her famous essay 'The art of biography'. She made her observations at a time when the biography – not

1
Marcus Browne, 'Julian Barnes: "The biographical novels are kind of cheesy"', https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/23/julian-barnes-biographical-novels-are-kind-of-cheesy, accessed 13 March 2019.

2
Cf. Umberto Eco, 'Overinterpreting texts', in Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

3
'To recognize the *intentio operis* – clarifies Eco – is to recognize a semiotic strategy. Sometimes the semiotic strategy is detectable on the grounds of established stylistic conventions. If a story starts with "Once upon a time" there is a good probability that it is a fairy tale and that the evoked and postulated model reader is a child (or an adult eager to react in a childish mood). Naturally I can witness a case of irony, and as a matter of fact the following text should be read in a more sophisticated way. But even though I can discover by the further course of the text that this is the case, it has been indispensable to recognize that the text pretended to start as a fairy tale.' Ibid., 64–65.

the biographical novel – was gaining independence as a genre. Beginning with the question 'Is biography an art?',[4] Woolf drew a basic distinction between the biographer and the novelist: the former is governed by facts, which must be observed; the latter's creativity is unfettered. According to Woolf, 'a book that combined the advantages of both worlds [i.e. the world of facts and the world of fiction], that gave the artist freedom to invent, but helped his invention with the support of facts', would be not just a biography, but a work of art as well.[5] She refers here to two biographies by Lytton Strachey about Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth I, respectively; as Woolf sees it, the latter would have a chance of being classified as art, since the paucity of facts about the minutiae of Elizabeth's life (a drawback in a history) paradoxically enabled one to create without constraint. Let us add that this valuable observation applies perfectly to the situation of the biographical novel, the value of which is not necessarily determined by the extent to which the events woven into the narrative can be verified.

Generally speaking, from our perspective today, we may confidently state that although Virginia Woolf's intention was to consider fiction in opposition to historical writing, the perfect answer to her questions and postulates ('Could not biography produce something of the intensity of poetry, something of the excitement of drama, and yet keep also the peculiar virtue that belongs to fact — its suggestive reality, its own proper creativeness?')[6] was the biographical novel. At the same time, it is fascinating to note how this genre coped with all of Woolf's doubts: it produced a fusion (fatal, according to Woolf) of an invented reality ('a free world where the facts are verified by one person only — the artist himself' – and which is therefore 'rarer, intenser, and more wholly of a piece than the world that is largely made up of authentic information supplied by other people') and historical facts, in spite of the fear that 'the two kinds of fact will not mix' and 'if they touch they destroy each other'. Woolf's prediction that 'biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners' sounds almost prophetic.[7]

It is worth mentioning that Georg Lukács's study *The Historical Novel* was published around the same time as Virginia Woolf's essay: in Russian in 1937; in German in 1955. Although it was written within the context of a specific historical reality and many of its theses correspond to the imperatives of Marxist philosophy, in some respects that work remains relevant today. Crucial from the point of view of the development of the biographical novel is Lukács's assertion that the aim of the historical novel is 'to portray the kind of individual destiny that can directly and at the same time typically express the problems of an epoch'.[8] So it is inadvisable for an historical novel, as Lukács explains, to tell of great historical events all over again in its own particular way; its role should rather be the 'poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events.'[9]

4
Virginia Woolf, 'The art of biography', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 187.

5
Ibid., 192.

6
Ibid., 191.

7
Ibid., 195.

8
Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, tr. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 284.

9
Ibid., 42.

In a novel, the author must reconstruct the social and individual motives behind the related actions and attitudes within a specific historical reality. The aim of that reconstruction is to allow the reader to 're-experience' the way in which the characters lived and thought. It is significant that Lukács, like Woolf, argues that the creative focus should be on the motives and psyche of the characters and not on the conscientious (and inexpedient) recreation of the facts.

Over time, the stabilisation of the rules of the genre obliged institutions to react. A breakthrough came in 1967, when the jury of the Pulitzer Prize tackled the phenomenon of the biographical novel, honouring William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and in the process causing doubts – and indeed controversy – both in its own ranks and further afield. That award led to a debate on the use of history in fiction. The discussion – held on 6 November 1968, which may also be seen as one of the symbolic dates in the emergence of the new genre – attracted some key figures: the moderator was the historian C. Vann Woodward, whilst the debaters were Robert Penn Warren (author of the 1947 Pulitzer Prize-winning *All the King's Men*), Ralph Ellison (winner of the National Book Award in 1953 for *Invisible Man*) and William Styron himself.[10]

The panellists presented differing views on many detailed questions, but significantly concurred that there was no justification for a clear-cut distinction between the historian and the writer: they both use their imagination to forge the world they describe, the novelist always and voluntarily, the historian not infrequently out of necessity. In other words, regardless of whether historical facts are being invoked by a scholar or by an artist, they are filtered through the writer's awareness. The difference between a historical book and a pure literary fiction is that the novelist 'claims to know the inside of his characters, the undocumentable inside', whereas the historian 'wants to find the facts *behind* the world.'[11] Ralph Ellison, focussing on proving that thesis, described historians most strikingly as 'responsible liars'.[12]

Favourable conditions for the biographical novel became established with the advent of the postmodernist current in literary studies, one important property of which is the erosion of boundaries. Within this context, it is useful to invoke Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Fiction, Theory* from 1988, and her notion of 'historiographic metafiction', referring to 'those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages: *The French Lieutenant's Woman* [by John Fowles], *Midnight's Children* [by Salman Rushdie], *Ragtime* [by E. L. Doctorow], *Legs* [by William Kennedy], *G.* [by John Berger], *Famous Last Words* [by Timothy Findley]'.[13] Hutcheon suggests that 'historiographic metafiction' poses questions of an epistemological and ontological nature – about how we can learn about the past and about the

10
See Michael Lackey, *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), Kindle edition.

11
Ibid., Kindle loc 110.

12
Ibid., Kindle loc 120.

13
Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Fiction, Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), 5.

ontological status of documents of the past and our narrative about it.[14] As we might expect, the essence of 'historiographic metafiction' resides in the fact that '[it] refutes the natural or commonsense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. This kind of postmodern fiction also refuses the relegation of the extratextual past to the domain of historiography in the name of the autonomy of art.'[15]

Perhaps the most important works for the issue at hand are the publications of Michael Lackey, especially *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (2014) and its follow-up *Conversations with Biographical Novelists. Truthful Fictions across the Globe* (2018). Both these works contain not just an excellent synthesis of the historical development of the biographical novel, but above all dozens of interviews with authors of such books: what they say is of fundamental importance for an understanding of texts of this type.

It is impossible to even signal in this brief study the multitude of fascinating themes addressed in those interviews. But let me underline one strand in particular, as it is directly relevant to our considerations: most of those outstanding biographical novelists take great pains to give as full account as possible of their hero's inner self or psyche, of the many factors that shaped it and of the many ways it filters his or her understanding of the world. And with that aim in mind, they normally decide to subordinate empirical facts to symbolical truth. One is struck, for example, by the words of Joyce Carol Oates, who states that the characters in her texts are 'more interesting, elastic and subtle' than real people (one notes a connection with the thought of Virginia Woolf).[16] Oates needs her protagonists to represent historical and cultural truth, as broadly conceived. In other words, not only does she entertain the idea of departing from the facts in her biographical novels; she actually considers that departure to be one of the core actions of a biographical novelist.

By way of summary, let us take Lackey's observation regarding the recent trend for the biographical novel to demand of its readers an inductive, rather than deductive, imagination: 'unlike the so-called nonfiction novelists', says Lackey, 'who refuse to offer an overarching vision, biographical novelists immerse themselves in a historically specific figure in order to draw a more cross-cultural conclusion.'[17] And he adds: 'There is something much more penetrating and persuasive about literature that requires an act of the inductive rather than deductive imagination, which, in part, explains why the biographical novel has become increasingly popular.'[18]

14
Cf. ibid., 50.

15
Ibid., 93.

16
Michael Lackey, *Truthful Fictions*, Kindle loc 3866.

17
Ibid., Kindle loc 448.

18
Ibid., Kindle loc 517.

Popular, certainly, but also demanding, both of the reader and of the author. Forging a credible, convincing world – a world that is a work of art, a product of the writer's creative imagination, yet one in which we have a sense of moving around a reality beyond the book – is impossible without specific competence and knowledge. If the protagonist of a novel is a composer, his relationship with music will surely be a crucial element of the story. I assume that being absorbed by music may even be a sine qua non for writing about a composer, although there is certainly no single prescription for this – quite the contrary.

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, at least three exceptional biographical novels about composers were written, and I will take a brief look at each of them in turn.

Julian Barnes: the ethics of a composer in a critical situation

Interpreted within the context of the history of the genre, Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time* is among the most outstanding of contemporary biographical novels. Through the fortunes of his chosen hero, Barnes universalises the fortunes of a creative individual – one of the most brilliant composers of the twentieth century – gifted with exceptional sensitivity and forced to make choices of immense ethical weight in the face of an oppressive regime. All the thoughts and utterances of the novel's protagonist are subordinated to that critical situation – that torment – whether he is speaking about everyday occurrences, art or his own music. There is relatively little of that music in Barnes's novel, especially if we compare his text with Josef Škvorecký's novel *Scherzo capriccioso. Veselý sen o Dvořákovi* (more on that below). What musical descriptions there are function mainly as a starting point or background to the most important theme – the individual and morality *in extremis*.

> In 1949, when the attacks on him were still continuing, he had written his fourth string quartet. The Borodins had learnt it, and played it for the Ministry of Culture's Directorate of Musical Institutions, which needed to approve any new work before it could be performed – and before the composer could be paid. Given his precarious status, he was not sanguine; but to everyone's surprise the audition was a success, the piece authorised and money forthcoming. Soon afterwards, the story began to circulate that the Borodins had learnt to play the quartet in two different ways: authentically and strategically. The first was the way the composer had intended; whereas in the second, designed to get past musical officialdom, the players emphasised the "optimistic" aspects of the piece, and its accordance with the norms of socialist art. This was held to be a perfect example of the use of irony as a defence against Power.

> It had never happened, of course, but the story was repeated often enough for its veracity to be accepted. This was a nonsense: it wasn't true – it couldn't be true – because you cannot lie in music. The Borodins could only play the fourth quartet in the way the composer intended. Music – good music, great music – had a hard, irreducible purity to it. It might be bitter and despairing and pessimistic, but it could never be cynical. If music is tragic, those with asses' ears accuse it of being cynical. But when a composer is bitter, or in despair, or pessimistic, that still means he believes in something. What could be put up against the noise of time? Only that music which is inside ourselves – the music of our being – which is transformed by some into real music. Which, over the decades, if it is strong and true and pure enough to drown out the noise of time, is transformed into the whisper of history. This was what he held to.[19]

Given the enormity of the tragedy that befalls the hounded Shostakovich, the role of music in his life could not be represented as any greater than this – for can music save us? Can anything save us, when all idealistic or lofty convictions can be treated as banal? 'Music is immortal, music will always last and always be needed, music can say anything, music… and so on. He stopped his ears while they explained to him the nature of his own art. He applauded their idealism. And yes, music might be immortal, but composers alas are not. They are easily silenced, and even more easily killed'.[20]

Sensing Shostakovich's state of mind and the motives behind his actions, Barnes achieves an extraordinary level of empathy. The voices of the narrator and his protagonist all but converge; although Shostakovich is spoken of in the third person, we feel sure that we are inside his head. In masterful passages, Barnes writes in such a way that Shostakovich's perspective seems to pass smoothly into the narrator's perspective and back again.

> Yes, he loved Shakespeare; before the war, he had written the music for a stage production of *Hamlet*. Who could doubt that Shakespeare had a profound understanding of the human soul and the human condition? Was there a greater portrayal of the shattering of human illusions than *King Lear*? No, that was not quite right: not shattering, because that implied a single great crisis. Rather, what happened to human illusions was that they crumbled, they withered away. It was a long and wearisome process, like a toothache reaching far into the soul. But you can pull out a tooth and it will be gone. Illusions, however, even when dead, continue to rot and stink within us. We cannot escape their taste and smell. We carry them around with us all the time. He did. How was it possible not to love Shakespeare? Shakespeare, after all, had loved music. His plays were full of it, even the tragedies. That moment when Lear awakes from madness to the sound of music… And that moment in *The Merchant of Venice* where Shakespeare says that the man who doesn't like music isn't

19
Julian Barnes, *The Noise of Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), Kindle edition, Kindle loc 1472–1484.

20
Ibid., Kindle loc 1326.

> trustworthy; that such a man would be capable of a base act, even murder or treason. So of course tyrants hated music, however strenuously they pretended to love it. Although they hated poetry more. He wished he had been at that reading by Leningrad poets when Akhmatova came on stage and the entire audience had risen instinctively to applaud her. A gesture which led Stalin to demand furiously: "Who organised the standing up?" But, even more than poetry, tyrants hated and feared the theatre. Shakespeare held a mirror up to nature, and who could bear to see their own reflection? So *Hamlet* was banned for a long time; Stalin loathed the play almost as much as he loathed *Macbeth*.[21]

The novel ends with the sound of a triad: a faint clinking of glasses. Will it really be audible amid 'the noise of time'? Barnes offers us hope: 'And yet a triad put together by three not very clean vodka glasses and their contents was a sound that rang clear of the noise of time, and would outlive everyone and everything. And perhaps, finally, this was all that mattered.'[22]

Jean Echenoz: loneliness in surfeit

Maurice Ravel as the hero of a novel was tailor-made, it would seem, for Jean Echenoz – for his somewhat mocking, aphoristic, jazzy style of utterance, where the words proceed in syncopations and sharp dotted rhythms. His novel *Ravel*, published in 2005, is sometimes included in a sort of biographical trilogy, also comprising *Des éclairs*, referring to Nikola Tesla, and *Courir*, about Emil Zátopek. Echenoz focuses on the last ten years of Ravel's life. The composer, once a dandy, is an embodiment of loneliness, which is impossible to overcome by means of the mass of things that surround him.

The detail of the descriptions is one of the most characteristic features of this book. Entering Ravel's world, we learn, for example, that waiting for the tardy composer outside his window is

> Hélène shivering at the wheel, which she drums on with fingers left bare by her buttercup-yellow knit driving gloves. Hélène is a rather attractive woman who might look somewhat like Orane Demazis, to those who remember that actress, but at that time quite a few women had something of Orane Demazis about them. Hélène has turned up the collar of her skunk-fur coat, beneath which she wears a crêpe dress of a delicate peach color with a vegetal motif and a waistline dropped so low that the bodice seems more like a jacket, while the skirt sports a decorative belt with a horn buckle.[23]

We learn even more – from the perspective of a neurotic Ravel, beset by countless intrusions – about the liner that will be taking Ravel to the United States:

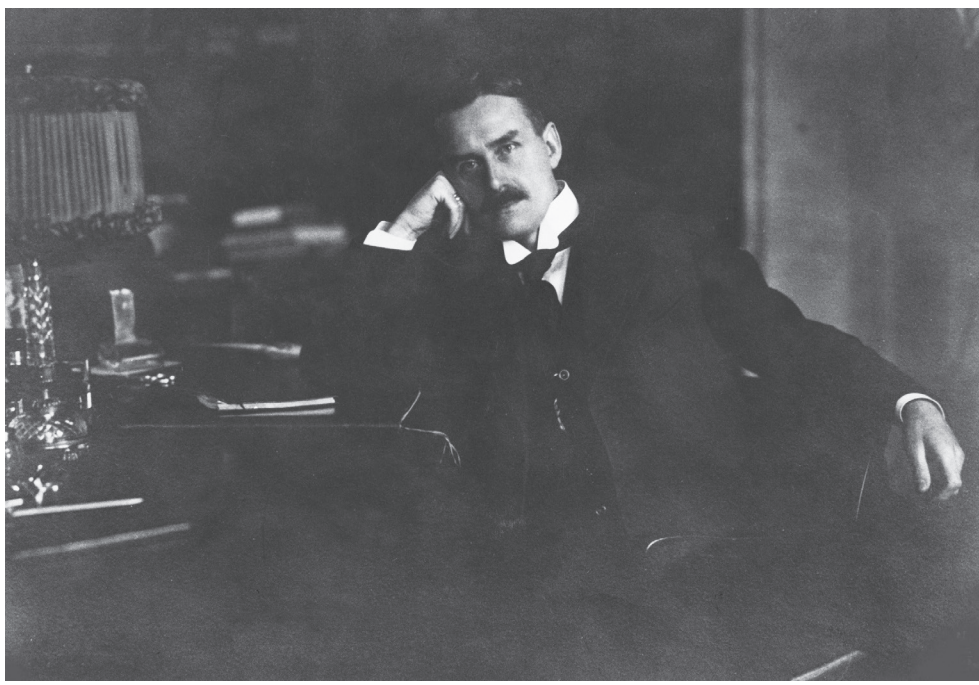
21
Ibid., Kindle loc 1035–1060.

22
Ibid., Kindle loc 2164–2179.

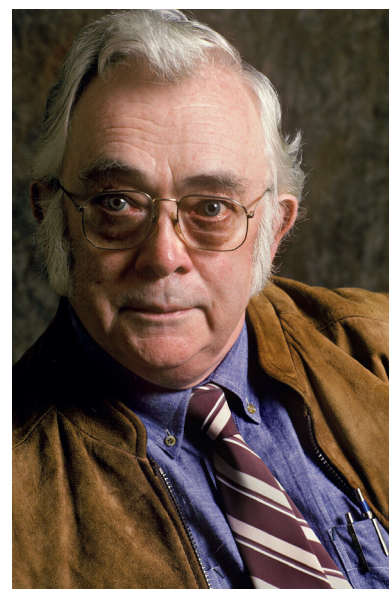
23
Jean Echenoz, *Ravel: A Novel*, tr. Linda Coverdale (New York: The New Press, 2007), Kindle edition, Kindle loc 126.

Julian Barnes.
Photo by Adrian Arbib, bewphoto, BE3FXH.

Thomas Mann, *c.*1910.
Fine Art Images, Heritage Images, bewphoto, 2694640.



Virginia Woolf, 1932.
Granger Collection, 0012408_H.



Josef Škvorecký.
Photo by Ulf Andersen, Ulf Andersen Photos, bew10AD27C.

> The ocean liner *France*, second of that name, aboard which Ravel will head off to America, she still has nine active years ahead of her before her sale to the Japanese for scrap. Flagship of the transatlantic fleet, a mass of riveted steel capped with four smokestacks (one a dummy), she is a block 723 feet long and 75 feet wide, sent into service twenty-five years ago from the Ateliers de Saint-Nazaire-Penhoët. From first to fourth class, the vessel can carry some two thousand passengers besides her five hundred crewmen and officers. This ship of 22,500 tons burden—propelled at a cruising speed of twenty-three knots by four groups of Parsons turbines fed by thirty-two Prudhon-Capus boilers generating forty thousand units of horsepower—needs only six days for a smooth transatlantic voyage, while the fleet's other steamers, less powerfully driven, take nine to huff and puff across.'[24] The role of things, the role of details in Ravel's life is taken to the extreme. Some of them are essential to the composer's very existence: 'So here he is emerging from the Sheldonian Theater into the courtyard of the Bodleian Library in frock coat and striped trousers, wing collar and tie, his patent-leather shoes without which he is nothing, draped in a toga with a cap on his head, laughing and standing as straight as possible.[25]

The voices of the narrator and the protagonist are entwined in a slightly different way than in the Barnes. Echenoz is also Ravel through and through, but at the same time he maintains towards him (but does Ravel also not proceed in the same way in respect to himself?) a co-sentient-ironical distance. A splendid example of such switches of perspective from the character to the narrator comes at the start of chapter 8, when we initially see with Ravel's eyes:

> Back in Montfort-L'amaury, a classic and temperate French spring provides a change from American eccentricities. Even before Ravel has opened his front door, he is greeted by flocks of birds overhead, putting the finishing touches to their recitals. From the robin to the titmouse, piping songs that Ravel has at his fingertips, lots of little fellows warble away in the trees, watched closely by his two Siamese cats. The house itself, for all its splendid view of the valley below, is rather bizarrely slapped together. Shaped like a quarter-wheel of brie, distinctly different in aspect when seen from the street and the garden, it contains five or six rooms as cramped as nests, linked by a spindly staircase and a hallway one person wide.

Smoothly, without a break, we suddenly behold Ravel from outside, or perhaps he himself imposes that external perspective upon us, so as to sink back into himself with the final words of this passage.

> As Ravel himself is not tall, one may laugh at his desire for a home his own size, but he has the last laugh. First, he found something within his means, which are limited: not being rich, obliged to count

24
Ibid., Kindle loc 194.

25
Ibid., Kindle loc 713.

costs, he would never have been able to buy the place without a small inheritance from a Swiss uncle. And besides it's the view above all that convinced him, that view over the valley discovered from the balcony: horizon almost rectilinear beneath changeable skies, long even waves of overlapping hills, foothills of grass and woods, punctiform clumps of trees, stretches of hedgerows.[26]

A musical quality, as we have already suggested, is ever-present in this novel, through the very way in which language is used. That feature is a staple of Echenoz's prose, like his ability to create a filmic image; so all the more felicitous is the marriage of his style with the subject of the novel. Yet descriptions of musical works – understood more in the sense of interpretations – are all but non-existent. Among the exceptions is a well observed and razor-sharp passage devoted to *Boléro*, also dealing both with the composition itself and with the story surrounding it:

Assembly and repetition: the composition is completed in October after a month of work hampered only by a splendid cold picked up on a trip through Spain, beneath the coconut palms of Malaga. He knows perfectly well what he has made: there's no form, strictly speaking, no development or modulation, just some rhythm and arrangement. In short it's a thing that self-destructs, a score without music, an orchestral factory without a purpose, a suicide whose weapon is the simple swelling of sound. Phrase run into the ground, thing without hope or promise: there, he says, is at least one piece Sunday orchestras won't have the cheek to put on their programs. But none of that's important: the thing was only made to be danced. The choreography, the lighting, the scenery will be what carry off the tedious repetitions of that phrase. After he has finished, when he passes the factory on the Vésinet road one day with his brother, Ravel says to him, you see, there it is, the *Boléro* plant. Well, things don't go at all as planned. The first time it's danced, it's somewhat disconcerting but it works. Later on in the concert hall, however, is when it works terrifically. It works extraordinarily. This object without hope enjoys a triumph that stuns everyone, beginning with its creator. True, when an old lady in the audience complains loudly at the end of one of the first performances that he's a madman, Ravel nods: There's one of them at least who understands, he says, just to his brother. Eventually, this success will trouble him. That such a pessimistic project would meet with popular acclaim that is soon so universal and long-lasting that the piece becomes one of the world's warhorses—well it's enough to make one wonder but—above all—to go straight to the point. To those bold enough to ask him what he considers his masterpiece, he shoots back: It's *Boléro*, what else; unfortunately, there's no music in it.[27]

The irony is complete: Ravel's best-known work is not a work of music.

26
Ibid., Kindle loc 546.

27
Ibid., Kindle loc 689.

Josef Škvorecký: all-embracing musicality

While Barnes and Echenoz allow an omniscient narrator to speak in their novels, Josef Škvorecký, in his novel *Scherzo capriccioso. Veselý sen o Dvořákovi*, first published in 1983 (in the English-language edition, the first part of the title was changed – rather infelicitously, perhaps – to *Dvorak in Love*), takes a completely different path. He circles around Dvořák, making him no more than an episodic character, who does not speak on his own behalf, but at the same time is central to the plot, existing either as the subject of some utterance or as part of the history of all the other characters. The way in which Dvořák exists in this book might be compared to water soaking into a sponge – imperceptible, perhaps, but nonetheless ubiquitous.

This novel is also free from insistent, importunate biographizing, yet at the same time the music, which seems to lie at the heart of the work, is constantly surrounded by life. The chapters, or tableaux, represent a sort of splicing and entwining of non-musical and musical events, and occasionally the rhythm of that entwining speeds up, as in the chapter which dwells on the funeral of Josefina Kounic, an erstwhile love, and later sister-in-law, of Dvořák. The narrator's perspective alters from one paragraph to the next, resulting in a continuous succession of moments of retrospection on the part of the Count, his ongoing observation of the funeral cortège and musical descriptions:

> *She was sitting in front of the mirror in the dressing room when all at once she said, "Count! This is dreadful!"*
> *"What?" [...]*
> *"I've got a wrinkle!" [...]*
> *She took a powder puff from the table and began drowning the wrinkle in powder. [...]*
> *"I think [said the Count] the wrinkle means a definite end to my period of waiting.*
> *"Hmm," she said, in a cloud of powder. She leaned close to the mirror to examine the result. "Hmm," she said again. "You may well be right."*
> *His happiness took all the strength out of his legs, and he sank into the position recommended in the book Courtship and Marriage: Precepts for Young Gentlemen.*

> The tones of Anton's Requiem rose over the open grave as the coffin was slowly lowered in its golden sling and the light of the brilliant black diamond was extinguished in the shadow of the earth. He looked at Anna and her six children standing on the other side of the grave. They were all crying. But the tones of the Requiem denied the eternity of mourning and sang of the eternity of the beauty that is left behind, and of those who were beautiful on this brief pilgrimage. Traces of loveliness remained through all the endless countryside of

his music. Traces of a loveliness whose name is Josephine, who is, as Anton is.

When the soprano began to sing Rusalka's great aria on the darkened stage, where a white stage moon hung among the blue treetops, somewhere in the chambers of ancient memory an afternoon piano picked out a melody...[28]

The reporter's polyphony in Škvorecký's book clearly sidelines the chronicler's factography. For example, each of the many interlocutor-narrators is equally plausible, presenting another version of the origins of the 'New World' Symphony or *Rusalka* (in this context, it is useful to draw attention to the telling motto that opens the novel, taken from a letter by W. B. Yeats: 'Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it'). Given the comedy that recurs in those versions and that characterises the speakers themselves, we may surmise that conscientious biographizing is mocked in this novel.

Musical descriptions reappear among the numerous strands of the plot. The reader is drawn almost unawares into the process of interpreting the work. One of the masterful descriptions – worthy of quoting as extensively as possible – is the passage, attributed to Jeanette Thurber, devoted to the Symphony, Op. 95.

The major semicircles described by the baton, the full, unerring harmony of the deep strings – God knows why he loved them so deep – the slow adagio descending to the velvet encounter with the clarinet in its lowest register, the resounding bassoons, then the profound mystery, suddenly broken by the lonesome call of the French horns in unison, a prefiguration of the magnificent air in the second movement, the call of beauty above the broad distances of our beautiful continent. [...] Those deep tones again, still those deep tones. Those long, extended half-notes sustained by exhaled breath, descending in harmony to the bottom of their registers, the vibrato still perceptible, softly, mysteriously, in pianissimo to the tragic, leathery rumble of the timpani on D flat. At the premiere, instead of watching Seidl at this point, she had looked at the woodwinds and the brass. She had always been thrilled by the sight of people producing such magnificent sounds – for beauty, for mystery, for the otherwise unattainable delight of the soul – sending tiny, ethereal waves into the nerves, the muscles, the heart. That delight was visible in the faces of the men blowing absurdly into hollow wood, sputtering softly through pursed lips into brass. The paradox of saliva, moist breath and trembling reeds becoming immaterial sweetness, a harmony of wood pervaded by the call of the forest, the ocean. This, more than anything else, saddened her for the blind. And she remembered an inconspicuous little man who sat at the edge of the brass section, beside the bass trombonist, and when Seidl raised his baton placed an enormous tuba on his lap, almost vanishing behind it. She kept her eyes on the tuba. They played the fifth bar, the

28
Josef Škvorecký, *Dvorak in Love. A Light-hearted Dream,* tr. Paul Wilson (New York–London: W.W. Norton & Company), 218–219.

> mysterious melody passed to the bass strings and she caught a glimpse of the little man's face behind his tuba. There was no doubt about it, he was grinning towards their box. Perplexed, she glanced at the Master, and his unusually well trimmed moustache seemed to be bristling with pleasure. The English horn began playing its immortal hymn to the pentatonic scale.[29]

How does it come about that, although we are shown around different versions of events, observing Dvořák almost exclusively from a distance, we remain convinced, on closing the book, that we have truly captured the essence of the composer's character, personality and art? In such a necessarily cursory discussion, we have no right to posit unequivocal theses, but it would seem that we perceive the portrait and story of the protagonist as being so convincing and complete precisely because they are suffused with music.

Doctor Faustus: end and beginning

In writing this study – or rather sketch, since space precludes an adequate treatment of its complex themes – I have before me a sort of invariant reference point: the masterwork that is Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*.

Mann's novel is not strictly a biographical novel and so lies beyond the scope of this article (I hope to devote a separate work to some of its hitherto overlooked aspects). It is, however, a peerless representation of a 'musical life'. What is more, Mann's powers of persuasion in this novel are so overwhelming that it is widely seen as referring indirectly to the life and figure of Arnold Schoenberg.

The relationship between *Doctor Faustus* and the life of Schoenberg is clearly read primarily on the basis of Mann's reference to dodecaphonic theory. Let us leave a more precise account of that issue for the future; here, we will just listen to the author himself, explaining years later how this novel came to be written:

> Ought I [...] to cite as an example of [...] an act of montage and theft from reality an element which many persons have found objectionable; namely, Adrian Leverkühn's appropriation of Schoenberg's concept of the twelve-tone or row system of music? I suppose I must, and from now on the book, at Schoenberg's request, is to carry a postscript spelling out the intellectual property rights for the uninformed. This is being done a bit against my own convictions – not so much because such an explanation knocks a small breach into the rounded, integral world of my novel, as because, within the sphere of the book, within this world of a pact with the devil and of black magic, the idea of the twelve-tone technique assumes a coloration and a character which it does not possess in its own right and which – is this not so? – in

29 Ibid., 264, 266–267.

a sense make it really my property, or, rather, the property of the book. Schoenberg's idea and my *ad hoc* version of it differs so widely that, aside from the stylistic fault, it would have seemed almost insulting, to my mind, to have mentioned his name in the text.[30]

Mann came to know Schoenberg's system via the intermediary of Theodor W. Adorno. That knowledge was accompanied by Adorno's interpretation of the system, which is what made the whole concept seem to Mann the perfect complement to the story of Adrian Leverkühn. The manuscript of Adorno's work (subsequently published as *Philosophy of Modern Music*), which the author brought to Mann, 'dealt largely with Schoenberg, his school, and the twelve-tone technique. The author professes his belief in Schoenberg's commanding importance, but then goes on to subject the system to a profound and searching criticism. In a pithy, excessively sharpened style that owes much to Nietzsche and still more to Karl Kraus, he shows the dire consequences that must flow from the constructive Schoenbergian approach to music. However necessary it may objectively be to subject music to rigorous rational analysis, and however illuminating that may be, the effect is just the converse of rationality. Over the head of the artist, as it were, the art is cast back into a dark, mythological realm. What could fit better into my world of the "magic square"? I discovered in myself, or, rather, rediscovered as a long familiar element in myself, a mental alacrity for appropriating what I felt to be my own, what belonged to me, that is to say, to the "subject." The analysis of the row system and the criticism of it that is translated into dialogue in Chapter XXII of *Faustus* is entirely based upon Adorno's essay.[31]

Suggestive musical settings

In dealing with these few novels, I have explored the degree to which they are imbued with music and the way in which that music is treated. The most powerfully and directly musical – leaving aside, for the reasons explained, *Doctor Faustus* – is undoubtedly Škvorecký's *Scherzo capriccioso*, although music also looms large – and in a way that is just as splendid! – in Echenoz's *Ravel*. Barnes, on the other hand, seems to concentrate not so much on Shostakovich as a composer (although that does not mean that he ignores that aspect) as on the human story of a man imprisoned by a regime. That was what he set out to do, and he achieves it with supreme mastery.

Can a cursory survey of such different – although similarly classifiable – texts allow for any conclusions at all? I will risk leaving the reader with one hypothesis, opening up an avenue for further exploration of the subject. It is the suggestion, half intuitive, half backed up by *Scherzo capriccioso* and by *Doctor Faustus* (which cannot

30
Thomas Mann, *The Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus*, tr. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 36.

31
Ibid., 45–46.

be entirely excluded from these considerations), that the stuff of music itself must play a rather decisive role in any novel devoted to a composer. After all, a 'musical life' requires a kind of writing that is musically aware, since only then can an author achieve a credible, true and intimate portrayal of a composer's inner world.

ABSTRACT
The biographical novel, currently so popular among readers and authors alike, only recently acquired its status as an emerging literary genre: the process of its separation from the historical novel as more broadly conceived can be dated to the second half of the twentieth century. It is also worth remembering that the biography itself, as one of the types of scholarly text belonging to the field of history, only became the subject of more serious theoretical considerations during the first decades of the twentieth century.
The biographical novel, combining – in various ways – historical reality with the author's creativity, affords a unique opportunity to get inside the lives of its protagonists. Relatively few of the most outstanding works in the genre are devoted to composers, but a number of them open up fascinating vistas for study. In my reading of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time*, Josef Škvorecký's *Scherzo capriccioso. Veselý sen o Dvořákovi* and Jean Echenoz's *Ravel*, I endeavour to show how the authors build a credible image of their characters. The present study forms an anacrusis to further reflection.

KEYWORDS
Thomas Mann, *Faustus*, Shostakovich, Barnes, Ravel, Echenoz, Škvorecký, Dvořák, biographical novel, composers in novels

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