

# SoundEffects



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## **Fictionalising music/ musicalising fiction:**

The integrative function of music in  
Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing*

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## Abstract

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*Twentieth-century scholars tended to describe music either in constructivist terms, as a culturally produced system of signs without real effects, or in essentialist terms, as a universal force detached from sociocultural contexts. Recently, however, the field of sound studies has raised new awareness of the fact that music is, at its core, sound. It is thus both culturally constructed and ineluctably material. Given this shift in the scholarly conception of music, a reassessment of its functions is needed. Starting from the notion that music is a complex system of cultural meanings and concrete sounds, this article investigates its integrative function, that is, the notion that music is able to connect individuals from diverse backgrounds and to integrate them into a community.*

*Richard Powers' novel *The Time of Our Singing* (2003) provides a valuable platform for reassessing the integrative function of music, as it unfolds it on two different levels at the same time. On its narrative level the novel insists on the long-term failure of music in uniting people from different racial backgrounds. Yet, by being also a piece of musicalised fiction and, hence, musical itself, the novel tests this function on its aesthetic level as well. It thus shows that, while failing to integrate socially divided people in the long run, in its aesthetic experience, at least, music is able to bring them together for as long as the performance lasts.*

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*The integrative function of music*, to begin with, is used in this article to denote a very simple idea, which may be best illustrated by way of example. In his autobiography Sartre (1964) describes his reaction to a silent – though very musical – film as follows:

We communicated by means of music [...]. I would read the conversation, but I heard the hope and bitterness; I would perceive by ear the proud grief that remains silent. I was compromised; the young widow who wept on the screen was not I, and yet she and I had only one soul; Chopin's funeral march; no more was needed for tears to wet my eyes (p. 124).

At the centre of this article is precisely this capacity of music to bring people from different backgrounds together, to *integrate* them. Through music Sartre comes to feel close to the young widow on screen, even though they do not even share the same ontological status. Music, it appears, is able to unite individuals despite personal differences, cultural barriers and even the fourth wall.

Against the backdrop of this idea, the article will open up with a short review of different notions of music: first, twentieth-century notions, with their tendency to view music either in essentialist terms or as a cultural product, and then more recent positions, which consider both music's cultural constructedness and its material embeddedness in sound. It is with the latter that the article also aligns

itself. The relation, though, between music's cultural and material components is still in dire need of theorisation. Therefore, it will be proposed to view music as a complex system in which codes and sounds constantly interact, thus forming inextricable, recursive links.

What this conception in complex terms implies for music's integrative function is played out in Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), which points out both the potential and limitations of music as a means of integration. On its narrative level Powers' novel claims that the sound of music is subject to the prevailing cultural norms and, hence, fails in the long run to bring together people who are otherwise segregated in society. However, by deploying musicalising techniques on its formal level, *Our Singing* also explores the potential of musicalised fiction to unite readers and characters temporarily in shared musical experiences. What is left, then, if music is a complex web of material sounds and cultural codes, is an integrative effect that brings people together but fades as soon as the music fades.

## Twentieth-century and contemporary notions of music

To be sure, the idea that music has uniting powers is far from new. Especially in the second half of the twentieth century it has often been embraced with uncritical enthusiasm. French poststructuralists such as Kristeva (1989), Irigaray (2004) and Barthes (1989, 1991) have made strong claims based on music's 'special' nature as something that requires sound and hearing rather than vision and natural speech. Music, so the argument goes, is fundamentally different from all cultural texts, because it does not consist of culturally coded signs but affects the body immediately. For Barthes (1989), '[m]usic constitutes a kind of *primal state* of pleasure: [...] it is the site of a pure effect, [...] severed from and somehow purified of any explicative reason' (p. 299). This quote is from one of his last essays, tellingly titled 'One Always Fails in Speaking of What One Loves'. Barthes fails in speaking of music by exalting it as the Other of language, the 'exotic' exception from the overwhelming rule. According to this view, music is able to integrate different people, as it constitutes something that – essentially and universally – touches and moves them.

On the other side, there is a strong tendency in twentieth-century writing to regard music as nothing *but* text, a cultural construct that is historically contingent and not in any way special. Music's integrative power is part of this construct, then, and does not amount to reality. Most notably, such an understanding of music has been advocated by cultural studies: 'Cultural studies', Shepherd and Wicke (1997) summarise,

have customarily insisted that the only legitimate way to examine music as a signifying practice is to examine specific musical practices in the circumstances of their

historical contingency. To examine music in any other way is to invite the charge of essentialism if not idealism [...] (p. 3).

While it is imperative to take the historical, social and cultural constructedness of music into account, thus forestalling an uncritical idealisation as exemplified by Barthes, '[t]he *necessity* of referring to the wider gamut of social and cultural processes in order to explain "the musical" does not [...] amount to a *sufficiency*' (p. 3). Clearly, what has to be considered as well are 'the specific qualities of the signifying practices of music [...]: that is, its sounds' (Shepherd & Wicke, 1997, pp. 33-34).

This critique of an unrestrained constructivism for neglecting sound is at the very basis of sound studies.<sup>1</sup> Scholars engaged in this field are aware of the different traditions of writing about music and 'that they are part of an ongoing conversation about sound that spans eras, traditions, places, and disciplines' (Sterne, 2012a, p. 5). 'No sound student', Sterne goes as far as to claim, 'can write anything of substance without at least implicitly taking a position in these debates' (p. 8). It has thus become somewhat of a notorious gesture among sound scholars to define auditory – including musical – experience as both culturally constructed and materially grounded and to position oneself somewhere in between. Gilbert and Pearson (1999), for instance, state:

The interaction between sounds and our bodies will always be in part a result of learned responses, of personal and/or cultural dispositions. [...] However, music's medium is sound, and sound is a qualitatively different medium from any visual medium (pp. 48-51).

Nevertheless, by then positing a particularly physical nature of sound (p. 52), Gilbert and Pearson come very close to essentialising music. Given that sound scholars are heavily invested in the new materialisms (Schulze, 2012, p. 256) and in disrupting the traditional hierarchy of the senses, in which 'hearing has come a poor second to [...] vision' (Bull & Back, 2003, p. 1), it does not surprise that they frequently 'begin with an argument that sound is in some way a "special case" [...] through an appeal to [...] sound's natural or phenomenological traits' (Sterne, 2003, p. 14). In doing so, many of them fall back into the same idealising and exoticising tendencies of earlier schools of writing, the difference only being that the 'special case' argument is now backed up by scientific findings, which are taken to hold absolute authority. Gilbert and Pearson discuss at length the physics of sound as opposed to vision, and Dyson (2009), to give another example, opens with a long list of differences between hearing and sight, presented as indisputable scientific facts (p. 4). Such "audiovisual litanies" (Sterne, 2003, 2012a), though, do not offer solid ground for analysis, since their composition is highly selective. Take, for instance, the observation that '[w]hereas eyes can be closed, [...] ears have no lids' (Dyson, 2009, p. 4), first made by Schafer

(1994, p. 11) but now a commonplace in these ‘litanies’. Yet, the undeniable biological fact that humans have no ear lids certainly does not come naturally to us; part of its perception is a selection process that is determined by culturally specific views. In Western culture it is thus entwined with a dualistic world view, which strictly distinguishes between interiority and exteriority and demands rigid barriers. It is only within this context that ‘ear lids’ are perceived as lacking and the fact of their nonexistence seems noteworthy.

Clearly, it does not suffice to make the general observation that materiality and cultural processes are interrelated in music. Since the question of *how* they are connected, however, is still largely untheorised, this article suggests to think of the gamut of cultural and material components that sound studies has shown to constitute music as a complex system.

1. Complex systems are comprised of many different parts, which are connected in multiple ways.
2. Diverse components can interact both serially and in parallel to generate sequential as well as simultaneous effects and events (Taylor, 2001, p. 142).

Thus, if one rethinks music as a complex system, explaining its functions is not a matter of either/or. Rather than being the product of a simple chain of cause and effect, music’s capacities are the result of multiple events, which reinforce and counterbalance each other. It is not *either* material sounds *or* cultural codes that determine what music can accomplish; they are all imbricated in reciprocal and recursive relations, influencing and being influenced by each other. Music’s integrative function, by implication, is neither a mere construct nor a natural given. By being always already sound, something material that can be experienced by almost everyone, music has the potential for bringing different people together. Nonetheless, it is also bound to failure if the existing social and cultural structures do not authorise the alliances created. It is precisely this ambivalence that is played out in Powers’ *The Time of Our Singing*.

### **Powers’ *The Time of Our Singing* and music’s failure to integrate a segregated society**

Importantly, *Our Singing* is a novel not only about music but also twentieth-century American race relations. It tests whether music is able to integrate racially diverse people in the context of a society that – *de jure* or *de facto* – segregates black and white.<sup>2</sup> The Stroms, its protagonists, are a mixed-race family from New York whose African-American mother and white Jewish father struggle for a ‘weapon’ (p. 517)

that will save them from racial hatred. It is their belief to have found this protection in '[t]he power of your own song' (p. 517) that renders the novel particularly valuable for this analysis.

Delia and David first meet at Marian Anderson's historical concert on the National Mall on Easter Sunday 1939. 'This day, a nation turns out for its own wake' (p. 30), and this nation, as a matter of fact, is mixed:

And what color is this flocking people? [...] She [Delia] never steps out in a public place without carefully averaging the color around her, the measure of her relative safety. But this crowd wavers like a horizon-long bolt of crushed velvet. Its tone changes with every turn of light and tilt of her head. A mixed crowd, the first she's ever walked in, [...] out to celebrate the centuries-overdue death of *reserved seating*, of *nigger heaven*. Both people are here in abundance, each using the other, each waiting for the sounds that will fill their own patent lack. No one can be barred from this endless ground floor (p. 40).

In contrast to her everyday life, Delia is part of an integrated, desegregated community at this concert. For the first time she feels safe; within this mixed crowd she is not in danger of being attacked by those on the other side of the racial divide, because there is no such divide, only 'a horizon-long bolt of crushed velvet' whose 'tone changes with every turn of light'. What unites '[b]oth people [...] here in abundance', with 'each using the other' rather than one side being abused by the other, is music, 'the sounds that will fill their own patent lack'. Regardless of whether they are black or white, they all rejoice in Anderson's singing. Music thus appears to have tremendous powers: it integrates socially segregated groups and thereby puts an end to discrimination; it is the 'death of *reserved seating*, of *nigger heaven*'. For '[n]o one can be barred from' the basic experience of listening to its sound, 'this endless ground floor'. Obviously, these words are meant both figuratively and literally, with the 'endless ground floor' also referring to the concert venue. As it is a free, open-air concert on the National Mall, indeed '[n]o one can be barred' from it. The spatial setting – a horizontal plane with no barriers – is indicative, then, of music's integrative function.

In fact, space is semanticised throughout this scene. After Delia's perspective has been presented, David becomes the focaliser of the narrative. He, too, has come to Anderson's concert to enjoy the music of a woman who, 'when she sang for a room of Europe's best musicians a spiritual no one in the room could hope to have grasped, they grasped her anyway' (p. 38). Although the German-Jewish émigré shares virtually nothing other than his passion for music with the successful African-American singer, he, like the 'room of Europe's best musicians', 'grasp[s] her anyway'. When he hears her music, he feels close to her despite their differences. This development from emotional distance to closeness in their relationship is portrayed through an emphasis on the spatial distance between them. While there is a huge gap at first,

with David being '[f]ar to the northwest, a mile toward Foggy Bottom' (p. 40), the distance is continuously reduced in the course of the concert as the avid listener is drawn towards the singer's voice (pp. 42-43). Even more, while the crowd's 'tens of thousands of bodies' (p. 42) first appear as an 'eye-level wall of flesh' (p. 42), David also observes soon that '[n]o one can be barred from this endless ground floor' (p. 40) when he works his way towards the stage: 'No one stops him or asks for identification. No one knows he is foreign, German, Jewish' (p. 43). The immigrant is thus allowed to move from the margins to the centre, with 'the wall of people in front of him solid yet somehow always leaving a little space to fill' (p. 44). Music's ability to create an integrated community is not only inscribed by the novel in the fact that Anderson's concert takes place without access restrictions; also, this open, horizontal space is devoid of internal barriers, making it possible for everyone to move freely between centre and periphery.

It is this experience that becomes the basis on which Delia and David found their family. Given that their home country does not provide the integrated community that they caught a glimpse of that day, their family home must become this safe place, '[a]nd for pure safety, nothing beat music' (p. 9), they are now certain: 'Singing, they were no one's outcasts. Each night that they made that full-voiced sound [...] they headed upriver into a sooner saner place' (p. 13). The safe 'sooner saner place' that they long for is most palpable when the family engages in its favourite game, 'Crazed Quotations'. The rules are simple: one member of the family starts by singing a short melody; one of the others then has two repeats to come up with a musical quote that creates harmony when added to the first voice; then, it is again someone else's turn, and so forth. 'The game', as a result, 'produced the wildest mixed marriages [...]. Her Brahms *Alto Rhapsody* bickered with his growled Dixieland. Cherubini crashed into Cole Porter. Debussy, Tallis, and Mendelssohn shackled up in unholy ménages à trois' (p. 13). What matters is harmony and not colour. Thus, Brahms can be mixed with jazz, Cherubini collides with Cole Porter, and neither Debussy nor Tallis nor Mendelssohn stay 'pure' when the Stroms sing. The idea behind this free, desegregated use of musical material is that '[n]obody owns it' (p. 227). Since music is sound, which can be accessed and enjoyed by virtually everyone, '[n]o one owns even one note' (p. 463). It follows from this that such categories as 'white music' and 'black music' are contradictions in terms and cannot possibly exist.

Put differently, music is assumed to be like a freely accessible 'endless ground floor' (p. 40). However, this logic is severely flawed, as the scene of Anderson's concert already reveals. For after the perspectives of Delia and David have been presented, there is a twist: The focalisation shifts once again, and this time the new focaliser is the performer herself, who stands up on stage, looks down at the crowd and 'is afraid' (p. 44). What she fears is not that her singing voice will fail her but how the public will react to its sound: 'The music will be perfect. But how will it be



heard?’ (p. 44). The question that concerns her, in other words, is what happens to the sounds of her music when they interact with the codes of a still widely segregated society. As she knows from past experience, in American society music is as much a matter of colour as it is of sound:

The one conservatory she long ago applied to turned her away without audition. Their sole artistic judgment: ‘We don’t take colored’. Not a week passes when she doesn’t shock listeners by taking ownership of Strauss or Saint-Saëns. She has trained since the age of six to build a voice that can withstand the description ‘colored contralto’.  
(p. 45).

That music is not an autonomous domain but inextricably tied to culture, society and thus to race has been an important lesson in Anderson’s musical education. The conservatory’s rejection on racial grounds taught her that it is a necessity for an African-American who wants to be accepted as a musician to not be seen as ‘coloured’. Only if one denies any black ancestry – first of all, by changing the *tone colour* of one’s voice – is one allowed to enter the musical world, which is also governed by white men. Only if her contralto is not perceived as belonging to a black person is she allowed to ‘own’ Strauss and Saint-Saëns. Even in the musical domain, power structures follow lines of racial demarcation, since music is never merely the sound of one’s voice, devoid of cultural meaning; it is always tied up with the socio-cultural conditions in which it is experienced.

These musical lessons, which Anderson received at the beginning of her career, still apply when she enters her makeshift stage on Easter Sunday 1939. At the peak of her career, though, it is not a conservatory but the Daughters of the American Revolution whose ‘sole artistic judgment [is] “We don’t take colored”’ (p. 45):

The DAR have shut their house to Marian Anderson, the country’s greatest contralto, recently returned from a triumphal tour of Europe, the sensation of Austria and the toast of the Norwegian king. [...] This same alto has just been barred from the capital’s best stage (p. 31).

It is at this point that the irony of it all becomes clear. While Anderson’s audience celebrates that ‘[n]o one can be barred from this endless ground floor’ (p. 40), she is only in front of them, because she has been barred from Constitution Hall. While they ‘celebrate the centuries-overdue death of *reserved seating*’ (p. 40), she has just fallen victim to this form of racial discrimination once again. Obviously, she did not choose to sing at a venue where the acoustics are awful and payment is out of the question; yet, seating is reserved at the stage of her choice.

The shift in perspective from audience to performer reveals that the meaning of Anderson’s music emerges in a complex interplay of its sounds and the sociocultural conditions in which it is experienced. In fact, the singer who is denied entry to Constitution Hall is *not* the ‘same alto’ that went on ‘a triumphal tour of Europe,



the sensation of Austria and the toast of the Norwegian king' (p. 31). In America Anderson will always be a 'colored contralto'; no matter how persistently she works towards rendering her music 'colorless', 'history leaves her no choice' (p. 44). Historical and social forces ultimately decide how music is heard and what its functions are. Again, the spatial setting underlines this point. Instead of a black woman taking centre stage at Constitution Hall, the reader is presented with a singer who is 'dwarfed under monstrous columns, a small dark suppliant between the knees of a white stone giant. The frame is familiar, a destiny she remembers from before she lived it' (p. 46). Of course, the 'white stone giant' is the colossal statue of Abraham Lincoln in his memorial. While Lincoln outlawed slavery in 1865, this fact is challenged by Anderson's very presence on the National Mall in 1939 and the role that is forced upon her. Though no slave in a literal sense, Anderson shares with her black ancestors the destiny of being not free to choose who she is and where she goes. Thus, as opposed to her audience, she does not see much change in history; a black person beneath a stony white man looks too familiar to her, 'a destiny she remembers from before she lived it'.

This story, then, of an African-American singer whose music is seen as a sign of racial reconciliation while she is nonetheless discriminated against, is juxtaposed with the story of the Stroms. Crucially, Delia and David's home school leaves out the lesson that Anderson had to learn very early in her musical education and which has remained pertinent ever since, that is, that the sound of music is always given meaning by social and cultural forces. With a particular emphasis on Jonah and Joseph, Delia and David's sons, Powers' novel then goes on to illustrate the dangers of leaving out this lesson and, in particular, of ignoring the power of race over music. While the chapter following the Anderson concert scene, 'My Brother as the Student Prince', tells, for large parts, of how the brothers become accepted at their conservatory through the musical skills that their parents taught them, it also starts to note 'the cracks in their curriculum' (p. 49). Just as Anderson's singing, the music of Jonah and Joseph is able to integrate white listeners and non-white performers, while the latter remain socially excluded. Beginning from the brothers' entry into Boylston Academy, instances proliferate that show how musicians, too, engage in discriminatory practices against blacks and in what Delia's father aptly calls '*the one annihilating game white's been playing*': '[H]ide the black man. Wipe him out' (p. 425). 'Everything about Boylston was white' (p. 50) and the school continues wiping out all colour, although 'Brown allegedly beat the Topeka Board of Education' (p. 67). Once again, this is most manifest in the organisation of space in the novel, with spatial discrimination serving as a clear indicator of racial discrimination. Jonah and Joseph are barred from Boylston's large dorms and accommodated in a smaller room on a separate floor, because several parents threaten to withdraw their children from the school if the

Strom brothers – the only thing about Boylston that is not white – are not kept apart and hidden (p. 67).

The story of the Stroms, together with that of Anderson, asserts that music does not have the power to create a level playing field, devoid of the barriers that are otherwise imposed in society. No one can be excluded from experiencing the sound of music, surely, but this does not mean that this experience is not controlled by the powers that be. Therefore, the uniting effects that the sound of music has in the narrative of *Our Singing* are only given room to unfold as long as they do not threaten white supremacy and that is for as long as the performance lasts.

### **The integrative function of musicalised fiction**

While *Our Singing* tells its readers about the long-term failure of music to integrate racially divided groups, it also *shows* the potential of music to bring people together temporarily, by creating moments in which the readers join the protagonists in their musical experiences. It almost goes without saying that the literary analysis of a novel cannot provide quantitative, empirical evidence for such an effect. Still, the reactions of critics can be used as an indicator that *Our Singing* makes its readers in fact hear music, rather than being merely fiction *about* music. Many critics agree that Powers' novel is 'art demonstrated rather than proclaimed' (Eder, 2003, par. 19): It 'convey[s] [...] tangibly and exaltedly the mechanism and the aesthetic effect in musical performance' (par. 3).<sup>3</sup> 'Instead of giving us a despairing feel for the infinite distance between words and things', Latour (2008) notes, 'Powers gives us – gives me at least – an incredible confidence [that] every *thing* can be carried in language' (p. 276). The 'thing' that is carried in the language of *Our Singing*, this article argues, is music. It is evoked through the musical structure of the novel as a whole as well as through the use of musicalising techniques in individual scenes.

Hagen (2005), in his review of the novel, even claims that 'when Powers [...] "sing[s]," you note the pages so you can return to them, like numbered tracks on your favorite CD' (p. 92). Indeed, *Our Singing* is interspersed with scenes in which a musical performance is rendered in such a way that the text itself seems to issue the music. Upon explaining to his sons that time is not linear but relative to space, David takes them to a concert at the Cloisters in Upper Manhattan, thus giving rise to one of the most striking renditions of musical performance in the novel. It begins as follows:

It doesn't occur to me [Joseph], at the age of seven, that a person might luck upon such a song only once a lifetime, if ever. [...] I will look for this group throughout my life—on vinyl, then tape, then laser pit. I'll go to performances in hope of resurrection and come away empty. I'll search for these singers my whole life, and never come any closer than suspect memory. [...] Who knows how good those singers really were? For me, they filled the sky (p. 160).

The passage connects David's 'secret of time' (p. 150) to the experience of music. Time is not only relative in theoretical physics but also with regard to music. While Joseph's life goes on, the music that he heard that day at the Cloisters remains present. Age loses its significance, because if 'a person might luck upon such a song only once a lifetime', all other musical experiences are positioned in relation to this moment rather than to one's date of birth. For his brother's audience, it will be the performance that earns him the title 'America's Next Voice' in relation to which he is seen for a lifetime, even though '[h]e's just twenty' (p. 3) and 'he'll live another third of a century' (p. 4). 'This is the moment when the world first finds him out' (p. 4) and Jonah – 'as alone as birth' (p. 214) – enters public consciousness.

However, given that Jonah's performance as 'America's Next Voice' opens *Our Singing*, it is not only in the world of the characters but also in the world of the readers that he is first 'found out' at this moment. Similarly, in the concert scene at the Cloisters the novel introduces musical performers at the same time to an intratextual and to the extratextual audience of the novel. Neither of them is given sufficient information about these singers, so that they will in fact both look for them 'on vinyl, then tape, then laser pit' and 'go to performances in hope of resurrection' (p. 160) together. Even more importantly, though, Powers' novel integrates its readers and characters by involving the former also in the musical experience at the Cloisters itself. The question 'Who knows how these singers really were?' (p. 160) is not rhetorical but performs an important act, inviting the reader to join the narrator in imagining how the music 'really' sounded. It is only after this invitation has been extended that the text starts to imitate the music through formal devices. The short sentence 'For me, they filled the sky' (p. 160) is an imaginary content analogy, which paraphrases the effect of the music in terms of an imaginary content that the narrator attributes to it.

In the next paragraphs, the text continues and intensifies its use of musicalising techniques:

There is a sound like the burning sun. A sound like the surf of blood pumping through my ears. The women start by themselves [...]. *Keee*, the letter-box slots of their mouths release – just the syllable of glee little Ruth made before we persuaded her to learn to talk [...].

Then *reee*. [...] Four lips curve upon the vowel, a pocket of air older than the author who set it there. [...]

I hear these two lines [...] speed away from each other, hurling outward, each standing still while the other moves (pp. 160-161).

While contents in the form of images are still attributed to the music ('a sound like the burning sun', 'like the surf of blood pumping through my ears'), musical imitation now also involves techniques that affect the textual signifiers. The onomatopoeic expressions '*Keee*' and '*reee*' exemplify the text's use of word music. '*Keee*'

is juxtaposed with an image of Ruth – Delia and David’s third child – as a gleeful toddler, who is not yet willing to talk but utters musical sounds. With the rhyme *Kee/glee* strengthening the connection to this image, the sound of the song’s first voice is evoked as joyful, bright and ‘untainted’ by meaningful language. The sentence fragment ‘Then *reee*’ marks the entrance of a second voice, also through phonetically imitating its sound. It appears at the beginning of a new paragraph, which expounds solely on this voice, just as the preceding one has dealt exclusively with the first voice. Thus, the structure of the literary text also comes to imitate the polyphonic music that is described. While in the music ‘two lines [...] speed away from each other, hurling outward, each standing still while the other moves’, in the text each line is described separately through a continuous, linear succession of words, thus just as well unfolding and ‘speed[ing] away’ while the other line stands still.<sup>4</sup>

Structural analogies to music can not only be detected in individual scenes, though; they are also characteristic of the structure of *Our Singing* as a whole. The polyphonic organisation of the novel has frequently been noted, but there is little agreement among scholars on what exactly the contrapuntal lines in the text are. Reher (2010) argues that Jonah and Joseph’s story and the history of the Strom family constitute two strands between which the novel shifts, so as to evoke polyphonic music. This theory, however, fails to account for the passages where neither the story of the Strom brothers nor that of their ancestors is told, but rather historical figures, such as Anderson, are at the centre. Conversely, Reher’s strict classification cannot accommodate those passages in which *both* Jonah and Joseph’s story and that of their family – which naturally overlap – are told. A more coherent arrangement of the novel in contrapuntal lines emerges if one considers its two different narrative voices. Significantly, shifts between these voices often appear together with a shift between the story of the Strom family, which tends to be narrated by Joseph as a first-person narrator, and the history of American race relations, which is usually told by an omniscient third-person narrator. These ‘two narrative strands’, according to Sauerberg (2006), ‘interweave in a contrapuntal series which has far more dissonance than harmony, but which manages to end on a satisfactory tonic note’ (p. 17).

Sauerberg hints at those instances in the novel where the contact of the Stroms with the problematics of race creates tension or even violence. Still, the contrapuntal music that is imitated by shifting between the history of American race relations and the Stroms ‘end[s] on a satisfactory tonic note’. In its very last scene *Our Singing* returns to Anderson’s concert on the National Mall and reveals that Delia and David encounter their – time traveling<sup>5</sup> – grandchild in the crowd that day. Robert first asserts the irreconcilability of his grandparents’ racial difference by quoting a Jewish saying: ‘The bird and the fish can fall in love. But where they gonna build their nest?’ (p. 630). According to this proverb, people from different races

may come close with each other but will be unable to build a home together. For the concept of race in America does not allow for mixing; an American home can only be either black or white, in the water or in the trees. However, Robert immediately refutes this saying by playing with its words and mixing the categories at will, thus suggesting that it is possible after all to be racially hybrid and to have a home: ‘The bird and the fish can make a bish. The fish and the bird can make a fird. [...] The bird can make a nest on the water. [...] The fish can fly’ (p. 631). In this way, Robert ‘sing[s] himself into existence’ (p. 631), since his grandparents will found on the basis of this experience a mixed home of which he then is an offspring – a ‘bish’ or ‘fird’, so to speak.<sup>6</sup>

The saying of the bird and the fish, though, does not only appear at the harmonious end of Powers’ novel. In fact, it is a recurring phrase with a representative function, which constitutes a leitmotif within the polyphonic structure. While its phrasing is slightly modified each time it occurs, it always links the respective situation to the larger question of whether and how two people from different races can share a home. In the course of the novel its variations increasingly indicate that building a mixed home is an extremely dangerous undertaking. When the house of the Stroms explodes, killing Delia in the blast, the ‘traditional nonsense question’ (p. 13) is finally turned into a ‘murderous question’ (p. 144). With his house gone up in flames and his wife having fallen victim to an attack which in all likelihood was racially motivated, David is left with only one answer to this question:

Her ‘Balm in Gilead’ careened into his Cherubini. Her Brahms *Alto Rhapsody* bickered with his growled klezmer. Debussy, Tallis, Basie: For the length of that collage, they made a sovereign state where no law prevented that shacking up, such unholy harmonies. This was the only composition Da ever wrote down, his one answer to the murderous question of where the fish and the bird might build their impossible nest (p. 144).

When David’s five-part composition is performed at his wife’s funeral, a mixed home in which hybridity is accepted and seen as an opportunity rather than as a threat becomes again tangible. As their former games of ‘crazed quotations’, in which ‘[h]er Brahms *Alto Rhapsody* bickered with his growled Dixieland’ and ‘Debussy, Tallis, and Mendelssohn shackled up in unholy ménages à trois’, this performance ‘produce[s] the wildest mixed marriages’ (p. 13) and conjures up a home without racial barriers. The difference, however, is that, at Delia’s funeral, it has become evident that such a home is ‘impossible’; it can only be maintained ‘[f]or the length of that collage’ (p. 144). As the music fades, so does its uniting effect and the ‘sovereign state where no law prevented that shacking up, such unholy harmonies’ (p. 144).

David’s one answer, then, to the question of where the fish and the bird can share a home without being subject to racial hatred is not a simple assertion of music’s power to integrate different people. Clearly, music has failed to do so, providing

his mixed-race family with anything but a safe home. David's performance rather answers by showing that, while music is able to accommodate different races in a shared 'nest', the existence of this integrated place is restricted to the duration of the music's performance. Just as Debussy, Tallis, Basie, klezmer and Brahms, Cherubini and spirituals can come together in a piece of music, a white man and an African-American woman can unite for the length of it; within music's aesthetic experience there is no law that prevents this 'shacking up, such unholy harmonies' (p. 144). Of course, the lawlessness of the aesthetic sphere is also an invention of Western culture – to be sure, 'no aspect of music is capable of being understood independently of the wider gamut of social and cultural processes' (Shepherd & Wicke, 1997, p. 33). Be that as it may, within this very enclosed realm, music is allowed to create 'a sovereign state' (p. 144), which is largely independent from the existing social norms.

## Conclusion

Powers' *Our Singing* is certainly a novel that avers the long-term failure of music to unite people from different ethnic backgrounds. It repeatedly presents its readers with scenes of harmony and unity only to then deconstruct the supposed integration through music. Music, it purports, is not independent from society and culture; its sound is never immediately accessible, providing a universal means of communication and integration beyond the purview of power, but always already tied up with cultural processes. In summing up, it also becomes clear that this is where the two central themes of *Our Singing* – music and race – converge. In spite of what their materiality may entail, it is the way in which they are culturally constructed that ultimately determines their power. Irrespective of the integrative potential of its sonic material, it is social and political forces that decide whether music is able to create permanent alliances. And even though the concept of race has no material basis whatsoever, the cultural meanings that are attached to it render it immensely powerful.<sup>7</sup> In a white-dominated, segregated society white power thus prevails over the power of music in the long run; the disintegrative power of race trumps the integrative power of music. However, for the length of a musical performance, there is no law that prevents 'the wildest mixed marriages' (p. 13), and it is here where the sound of music can indeed function as a means of integration by affecting listeners from diverse backgrounds. This result – that music has an integrative power, although it fades as soon as the music fades – has made it possible for this article to further argue that Powers' novel itself has uniting effects by being a piece of musicalised fiction in the sense of Wolf (1999). It has thus been ventured that while, intratextually, the music in *Our Singing* is unable to permanently integrate people, extratextually, the musicalisation of the novel succeeds in bringing Powers' readers in and connecting them with the characters' experiences. By 'playing' music whose



sound reverberates with almost everyone, *Our Singing* is able to integrate its readers with its characters. Still, the fact remains that these integrative effects, too, are restricted temporally and extend only as long as the performance lasts.

This is what music as a complex system of cultural codes and material sounds can accomplish, then. While there is no such thing as an immediate experience of its sound, which unites all human beings no matter where they come from, music's aesthetic experience, at least, is constructed in such a way that it opens up a temporary space that allows integration across culturally imposed barriers. Hence, the common paradox in music history that performers of colour integrate mixed audiences while being themselves discriminated against – think again of Anderson or, for that matter, Cab Calloway, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Cole Porter, ... Likewise, the Stroms remain excluded from society, while their performances include everyone. By fleshing out this paradox, *Our Singing* lays open the political ramifications of music's status as a highly interrelated system of codes and sounds. The sound of music is too tied up with the existing societal structures to change them in any direct, simple way; only in its aesthetic experience can people come together for a short period of time and imagine a more integrated society.

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## Notes

- 1 Sound studies is 'the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival' (Sterne, 2012a, p. 2). Although studies of *sound culture*, *sonic culture*, *auditory culture* and *aural culture* covered roughly the same area of inquiry, *sound studies* has become the accepted name of the field, with editors now using it self-confidently to entitle large anthologies such as *The Sound Studies Reader* (Sterne, 2012b), *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2012) and *Sound Studies* (Bull, 2013).
- 2 This article assumes 'that the word "race" [...] refers to nothing that science should recognize as real' (Appiah, 1990, p. 277). Yet, secondly, '[b]ecause people come to think of themselves as

“raced,” as black and white, for example, these categories, which correspond to no natural kinds, attain a social reality’ (Mills, 1998, p. 48). They will therefore be used straightforwardly and without quotation marks in the following.

- 3 See also Birkerts (2003, pars. 5, 8), Dempsey (2003, par. 11) and Miller (2003, par. 12).
- 4 Apart from imaginary content analogies, word music and structural analogies, the evocation of vocal music through associative quotation is another musicalising technique that is heavily used in *Our Singing*. At various points the novel quotes the lyrics of a famous song, which is then evoked in the reader’s mind so as to accompany the subsequent reading process. To name only a few of the quoted songs: Carl Orff’s ‘In Trutina’ (p. 71), Gustav Mahler’s ‘Wer hat dies Liedlein erdacht?’ (pp. 145-146), Johann Sebastian Bach’s ‘Bist du bei mir’ (pp. 147, 234, 619-620), Franz Schubert’s ‘Gute Nacht’ (p. 194) and ‘Erlkönig’ (p. 212), ‘We Shall Overcome’ (p. 271), ‘We Shall not Be Moved’ (p. 271), The Supremes’ ‘Stop! In the Name of Love’ (p. 316), The Beatles’ ‘Help!’ (p. 317), Nina Simone’s ‘My Baby just Cares for Me’ (p. 317), Cab Calloway’s ‘Yaller’ (p. 447), Hildegard of Bingen’s ‘O Ignis Spiritus Paracliti’ (p. 532).
- 5 Note that some moments in *Our Singing* ‘fulfill relativity’s implicit promise of time travel’ (Mendelsohn, 2003, par. 11) and ‘draw [...] on the implications of David Strom’s theoretical work [as a physicist] that [...] refutes the persuasive logic of past, present, and future’ (Dewey, 2002, p. 206). In these moments the novel loops the stories of people from different generations into each other, thus breaking with the notion of a linear progression of time. It also offers an explanation for these moments: Given that time in music is not linear but relative to space, as the concert at the Cloisters has demonstrated, some musicians are actually able to ‘warp[] the space-time continuum’ (p. 12) and to ‘overthrow[] space and time’ (p. 11). Thus, Anderson ‘can rival the greatest Europeans in tearing open the fabric of space-time’ (p. 41) and, during their musical games, the Stroms ‘crawl[] through loopy timelike holes [...], five lines braiding in space, each one curling back on the other, spinning in place’ (p. 11). According to the novel’s logic, then, it is also possible for Robert to ‘crawl’ back through a ‘loopy hole’ to the Anderson concert in 1939.
- 6 Besides representing ‘fird’ and ‘bish’ by being of mixed racial heritage, Robert combines in himself the various talents of his white and black ancestors: ‘He was his mother all over again, doing voices, tilting his head and squinting like the latest ridiculous adult’; he has also received some of David’s talents, so that ‘[m]ath was his sandbox’; and his singing voice, which ‘anchored the whole alto section’, is Delia’s inheritance (p. 602). By being thus gifted in not only one but many different areas, he also testifies to the creative and epistemological potential that hybridity holds.
- 7 This equally applies to time, the third theme of the novel. Even if time is relative to space from a scientific point of view, it nonetheless must be lived through as though it was linear, since this is how it is socially and culturally defined in twentieth-century America.

Moreover, *Our Singing* argues for a relatedness between the physical concept of space-time and time in music. Especially with regard to this point, it is important to note that this article, which focuses on the integrative function of music, is not in any way exhaustive. The preceding pages have merely touched on the relation between time and music in *Our Singing* and certainly much more can and needs to be said about this aspect of the novel elsewhere.