

The Mystery of the *Fuga per Canonem* Reopened?

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As her title suggests, Susan Brown claims to have solved the mystery of the source of Joyce's fugue in her article, "[The Mystery of the *Fuga per Canonem* Solved.](#)" In this piece, I will respond to Brown's claim with the aim of reopening the "mystery" to discussion, first by situating Brown's argument within the academic and genetic conversation surrounding Joyce's fugue, then by questioning some of Brown's conclusions, and finally suggesting other directions in which a genetic study of Joyce's musical sources might take us.

Since Joyce's initial claims about the existence of the *fuga per canonem*, critics have been both baffled and baffling in their attempts to apply fugal elements to the "Sirens" episode. It might even be safe to say that "Sirens" critics can be divided into two camps: those who believe in the existence of the *fuga per canonem* and those who do not. Those who disclaim the presence of the *fuga per canonem* tend to acknowledge the musicality of the episode, and then liberally interpret Joyce's use of musical terminology as both permission and a springboard to apply other musical metaphors to the episode. To name a few: Jack Weaver, Don Noel Smith and Scott J. Ordway classify it as a sonata¹; Tim Martin, A. Walton Litz, Stanley Sultan, and Alan Shockley explore it through leitmotif and operatic components; David Herman in "Sirens' after Schönberg" applies 12-tone Schönbergian atonalism; and Zack Bowen explores "Sirens" as a musical within the greater musical comedy of *Ulysses*.²

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It should be noted that Weaver in *Joyce's Music and Noise*, Ordway in "A Dominant Boylan: Music, meaning, and Sonata Form in the 'Sirens' Episode of *Ulysses*" and Smith in "The Sirens at the Ormond Bar: *Ulysses*" treat the form of the sonata in very different ways: Weaver's work is an attempt to establish all of *Ulysses* as a prolonged sonata (an exercise stemming from a suggestion by Pound); while Ordway's analysis is purely musicological imposition of the sonata form on the "Sirens" episode; and Smith treats it more as an analogy.

² Bowen hints at this idea in his article "The Bronzegold Sirensong: A Musical Analysis of the Sirens Episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*" and in his seminal *Musical Allusions in the Works of James Joyce: Early Poetry through "Ulysses,"* but only explicitly states this thesis in "Music as Comedy in *Ulysses*":

While all of these critics have attempted to demonstrate the merits of the shift in musical terminology, the trump card of Joyce's own words (which admittedly are never completely trustworthy) remains in the foreground. By contrast, Joyce's own musical terminology with regards to the episode is surprisingly consistent: of Joyce's often-quoted statements about musical structure in "Sirens," the most well-known come from his letters and schemas. For example, his letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver on August 6, 1919:

Dear Miss Weaver: ... Perhaps I ought not to say any more on the subject of the *Sirens* but the passages you allude to were not intended by me as recitative. There is in the episode only one example of recitative on page 12 in preface to the song. They are all the eight regular parts of a *fuga per canonem*: and I did not know in what other way to describe the seductions of music beyond which Ulysses travels. (*Letters* v.1, 129)

And also in the Gilbert-Gorman and Linati schemas, he refers to the technic of the episode as *fuga per canonem* in both instances. Finally, in the "Sirens" Copybook (II.ii.3), one of the 2002 NLI acquisitions, the doubly underlined title at the top of the copybook's inside cover reads "FUGA PER CANONEM" in capital letters.

To my knowledge, these are the only four instances in which Joyce himself labels his work as a *fuga per canonem*. The other often-cited statement attributed to Joyce comes from the recollection of Georges Borach, a Swiss businessman who met Joyce as one of his language students, and who took walks and dined out with him. During these encounters the two discussed *Ulysses* in some detail and presumably Borach later recorded his recollection of the conversation in German. The translated account appears in Willard Pott's *Portrait of the Artist in Exile: Recollections of James Joyce by Europeans* (and again in Ellmann's biography) as:

Zurich, June 18, 1918: 'I finished the Sirens chapter during the last few days. A big job. I wrote this chapter with the technical resources of music. It is a fugue with all musical notations: *piano*, *forte*, *rallentando*, and so on. A quintet occurs in it, too, as in the *Meistersinger*, my favorite Wagner opera. The barmaids have the upper parts of women and the lower of fish. From in front you see bosom and head. But if you stand behind the bar, you see filth, the

"Sirens could rightly be termed a modernist musical comedy, untraditional only in its antisentimental conclusion [...] It is also a musical within a musical, a score and a libretto for the action and the musical setting of the rest of the novel" (Bowen 130).

empty bottles on the floor, the ugly shoes of the women, and so on – only disgusting things. Since exploring them in this chapter, I haven't cared for music any more. I, the great friend of music, can no longer listen to it. I see through all the tricks and can't enjoy it any more.' (Borach 72)

Needless to say, given that this is the only occasion in which Joyce is recorded as referring to “Sirens” as a fugue rather than a *fuga per canonem*, one cannot help but question whether Borach's recording of the word “fugue” is strictly accurate. Since Joyce appears to go out of his way to refer to it as a *fuga per canonem* in all other recorded instances, perhaps we should give more credence to Joyce's handwriting than to hearsay. Although, admittedly, what an author claims about his own work cannot be blindly trusted, I fear that a remembered conversation can be trusted even less.

At the risk of over-flexing some fairly well-worn arguments, I will quickly summarize some of the hydra-headed discussions surrounding Joyce's *fuga per canonem* in order to situate Susan Brown's article within the field of fugal criticism. In most cases, critics take Joyce's label and apply *aspects* of the fugue to the episode. For example, in “Strange Words, Strange Music: The Verbal Music of ‘Sirens,’” Andreas Fischer applies the principles of counterpoint, polyphony, and onomatopoeic organization; Anthony Burgess in *This Man and Music* examines the “sound of words” (Burgess 135) and he adheres to the idea that “literature has no power to imitate the sound of music [and] Joyce knew all along that he could not reproduce the form of a fugue” (141). Similarly, in *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*, Harry Levin also acknowledges the fugue, then dismisses “polyphonic prose [as] a loose metaphor” (Levin 74), and instead explores how sound effects are achieved through the juxtaposition of onomatopoeia and imagery (74-78). As such, these critics focus increasingly on ways in which one can read the literary text as music: vertically and horizontally.

Those who do engage with the actual form of the fugue tend to descend into extremism. To name one, in “Mining the Ore of ‘Sirens’: An Investigation of Structural Components,” Margaret Rogers tries to impose the 8-tone scale onto the opening lines of the episode, eliminating letters so that only those that correspond

with the piano keyboard are present. She even goes so far as to associate words ending in “-ing” with the key of G and those in “-ine” with E (Rogers 266).³

Finally, there is one more train of thought to be followed: the one that addresses the tricky issue of the *fuga per canonem* versus fugue. Numerous critics have recognized the confusion between canon and fugue. Notably, Lawrence Levin states that

Joyce’s thorough musical background, his near mania for correctness of detail and accuracy of technical and factual materials, and the fact that he himself states that he based the entire chapter on the *fuga per canonem*, which took him five months of concentrated effort to complete, indicate that the Sirens episode is structured along the lines of the canon, not the fugue, and it is in accord with the canonical rules that we must attempt to analyze and to evaluate this chapter. (Levin 13)

After making this distinction, Levin attributes the eight parts of the fugue to “Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy (the sirens), Bloom, Simon Dedalus, Lenehan, Boylan, the piano tuner, Dollard, and Pat the waiter, with Cowley, Lidwell, Kernan, and Goulding functioning as free counterpoint, and with flight and pursuit, loneliness, Martha, Molly, and the conversations and songs serving as thematic material” (14). In “Musical Form as Narrator: The Fugue of the Sirens in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*,” Nadya Zimmerman does not agree: “Joyce lived in modern times when the *fuga per canonem* had already developed into the fugue. Hence, Joyce’s characterization of the chapter as a *fuga per canonem* is not a sixteenth-century description, but a twentieth-century statement, indicating that the chapter incorporates both fugal and canonical rules” (Zimmerman 110). Using the same character model as Levin, Zimmerman argues for the fugue by claiming that the eight major voices or characters of the chapter are the “eight regular parts” and “by conflating each character’s identity with that character’s formal role,” Joyce is able to create “the simultaneity that only music possesses” (117). Although both of their arguments are compelling, the discovery of Copybook II.ii.3 and the eight terms listed on the back of the front cover forces critics to rethink the designation of the “eight regular parts.”

With this necessity in mind, at last we come to Brown’s “The Mystery of the Fuga per Canonem Solved,” where she tries to distinguish between “fugue” and “fuga

³ For a more thorough critique of the problems posed by Rogers’ figurative musicalization of the text, see Shockley’s *Music in the Words: Musical Form and Counterpoint in the Twentieth-Century Novel*.

per canonem” by sourcing the 8-part outline written on the back of the front cover of Copybook II.ii.3. Brown begins by pointing out the lack of interchangeability between the terms fugue and *fuga per canonem* (which she interprets to mean “a round (as in ‘Three Blind Mice’ or ‘Fr[è]re Jacques’),” (Brown) and attributes Joyce’s use of the term to an “error [committed] while skimming” *Grove’s Music Dictionary* (henceforward referred to as GMD). According to Brown, Joyce would have had to use the dictionary because his knowledge of music theory was “bogus to none.”

During this process of “speed reading” (Brown), Joyce apparently hurriedly and sloppily transcribed the italicized terms from Ralph Vaughan Williams’s definition of the fugue in the second edition of the GMD (1906): “Joyce, as was his pattern cribbing from esoteric sources, is often inaccurate, sloppy, incomplete, illogical, and impressionistic” (Brown). Brown’s confidence in GMD as a source is rooted in the presence of the term “*fuga per canonem*” in the dictionary. It should be noted that the presence of the term and this particular edition of Grove’s has been previously argued as a potential source by Gudrun Budde in “Fuge als literarische Form? Zum Sirenen-Kapitel aus ‘Ulysses’ von James Joyce.”⁴

In an elaborate reconstruction of Joyce’s reading technique, Brown hypothesizes about the process by which Joyce transcribed the eight terms into the copybook, and explains that Joyce translated the terms from English into Italian because he often “thought in Italian.” She uses Gilbert’s sweeping generalization – which is actually a gloss on why *M’Appari* is being sung in English – as further justification: “To the Dubliners, music was essentially an Italian art, and they always liked to allude to songs by their Italian names even though the opera whence they came was by a non-Italian composer and usually sung in English” (Brown, quoting Gilbert’s footnote).

After attempting to elucidate some of the terms on Joyce’s list by correlating them against the dictionary, Brown concludes by noting that “Gilbert italicizes many of the same terms which are italicized in Williams,” and since Gilbert claims to have “reproduce[d] ‘word for word’ information given him ‘by Joyce,’” then Joyce must

⁴ The gist of this article is also presented (in English) and critiqued in Werner Wolf’s *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* and Alan Shockley’s *Music in the Words: Musical Form and Counterpoint in the Twentieth-Century Novel*.

also have been using the *Grove's Music Dictionary*. Thus, the mystery of the *fuga per canonem* is solved.

While Brown's article presents fruitful input into the conversation surrounding Joyce's fugal techniques, it unfortunately falls into the category of one of the many hydra-headed arguments: for every solution presented, two or more questions could be asked. For example, her problematization of the fugue versus the canon: I have already addressed this discrepancy by questioning the use of Borach's recollection as a source in light of the uncertain conditions of its transcription and communication. As Lawrence Levin writes: "We can safely clear the initial hurdle by maintaining that Mr Borach in reporting a conversation with Joyce confuses in his own mind the *fuga per canonem* with the fugue. This is understandable because the line of demarcation between the two is not generally understood by the average musical dilettante" (Levin 12).

As for why Joyce would need to use a music dictionary, Brown's justification is rooted in what she perceives as Joyce's ignorance of musical forms, which would also explain the discrepancies between Joyce's list of eight parts and GMD. Quoting Herring, Brown justifies Joyce's note-taking: "when in unfamiliar waters, Joyce skimmed" (Brown). But would music have been an unfamiliar territory for Joyce? Brown argues yes, and cites Grandt: "'Joyce had limitations that would preclude a comprehensive understanding of the abstract elements of the fugue.' Grandt adds that Otto Luening, who spoke at length with Joyce about contrapuntal and polyphonic music, "does not believe that the fugue serves as a governing framework in 'Sirens'" (76)" (Brown). While Luening does claim that Joyce's guitar playing was weak and that he could not read full musical scores, other musicians and listeners have said the polar opposite. Joyce wrote musical settings and, according to Judge Eugene Sheehy, "When [his mother] was not present [to accompany him] he played by ear his own accompaniments" (Sheehy 12). Burgess writes: "Joyce could read music and play the pianoforte, and he had a phenomenally beautiful tenor voice" (Burgess 134). And composer George Antheil remembers:

Conversation with Joyce was always deeply interesting. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of music, this of all times and climes. Occasional conversations on music often extended far into the night and developed many new ideas. He would have special knowledge, for instance, about many a rare music manuscript secreted away in

some almost unknown museum of Paris, and I often took advantage of his knowledge. (Antheil 123)

Brown's main justification for GMD as a source is the presence of the words *fuga per canonem* (GMD 114), "soggetti" (116), and the italicization of certain elements of the fugue. However, despite Brown's attempts at fitting Joyce's list to her source, there are many discrepancies for which Brown provides problematic validations. For example, Joyce's use of Italian is more open to interpretation than Brown recognizes. Although Savio has reported that Joyce sang "only in Italian; in fact, he said our language was the only one fit for singing because the stresses fall on the next to last syllables of most words" (Savio 50), he is equally known for having "compared the English language to an organ for its sonorous wealth" above the protestations of those who "preferred the French language for its precision and musical quality" (Power 83). Either way, we have no way of *really* knowing in which language Joyce thought. That being said, Brown's theory that Joyce translated the source into Italian is not really such an issue; it does however become problematic when so many elements of the source itself require heavy interpretation for them to *be* the source.

In order to explain the presence of some terms and the absence of others, as well as the order in which Joyce's list of terms appears, Brown contradicts herself to argue that he failed to comprehend the very source she has posited as the basis of his musical understanding, and that his choice of terms is a product of dilettantish reading and music comprehension. However, if Joyce were only concerned with "typographical distinction" (Brown), then why has he not recorded all of the italicized terms, like "answer" (GMD 116), "reply" (116), "fugato" (118), "inverted" (118), "extra entry" (118),⁵ "devices" (118), "augmentation" (118), "diminution" (118), "inversion" (118), "cancrizans" (118), "close [...] stretto" (119), "The Fugue on a Choral" (120), and "The Accompanied Fugue" (120)? Even in his application of the terms, if one were following the gist of the dictionary entry, why would Joyce apply Vaughan Williams's descriptors for the subject ("*real*") to the countersubject in his list? Why would Joyce apply the codetta to the Exposition rather than the first

⁵ Brown confusingly associates the term "extra entry" (GMD 118) with Joyce's use of "divertimenti" in his list.

introduction of the subject and answer (again as described in the dictionary entry)? Brown justifies these and the sequential differences between GMD and Joyce's list by emphasizing Joyce's "inaccurate and incomplete cribbing" (Brown), but this argument does not stand up against the numerous reports of Joyce's meticulousness. As evidenced by Joyce's many requests for sheet music, words, etc. in his letters, Joyce was quite particular about transcription when it came to music.

Furthermore, Brown's argument that Joyce was "attracted to the one term in Italian in the entry" (Brown), "Soggetti" (GMD 116), is belied by the Italian reference in the GMD entry to "andamenti (see ANDAMENTO)" (116) in the paragraph directly above the reference to soggetti. Taken together, the Italian terms that do not quite translate to Brown's interpretation of Vaughan Williams's entry, the inexplicable change in the sequential order, and the exclusion of some terms but the inclusion of others, cast doubt on the theory that GMD was Joyce's definitive source for the fugal structure of "Sirens." Brown's final line of reasoning which points us in the direction of Stuart Gilbert's *James Joyce's Ulysses* because "Gilbert italicizes many of the same terms which are italicized in [Vaughan] Williams" (Brown) seems in the end only to suggest that perhaps Gilbert was using GMD, a fact further supported by his consultation with Professor Curtius to explain the more complicated musical terms and the application of musicology onto the opening section of the episode.

Despite my disagreement with Brown's identification of Grove's as her source, I have no single source to offer in its stead. Prior to the acquisition of the 2002 manuscripts, Gudrun Budde posited that André Gédalge's *Traité de la fugue* might be a potential source, with its list of eight essential parts of the "*fugue d'école*":

- 1° le sujet;
 - 2° la réponse;
 - 3° un ou plusieurs contre-sujets;
 - 4° l'exposition
 - 5° la contre-exposition;
 - 6° les développements or divertissements servant de transition aux différentes tonalités dans lesquelles on fait entendre le sujet et la réponse;
 - 7° le stretto
 - 8° la pédale
- (Gédalge 8)

The *fugue d'école* translates into the “school fugue,” or the type of fugue one would have been given in a music theory class as an exercise, and it reached “its climax in two texts published in Paris in 1901 – Théodore Dubois’ *Traité de contrepoint et de fugue* and André Gédalge’s *Traité de la fugue*” (Horsley 108). Most of the terms used in *Grove’s Music Dictionary* are a result of the standardization of the terms from the school fugue, and in fact, the school fugue became the “rigid form within which the student practiced definite composition techniques” (Horsley 269) in the second quarter of the nineteenth-century. The ideas of nineteenth-century French music theory were “shaped by the Italian tradition that stemmed from the teaching of Padre Martini” (270) whose fugue became the foundation for the *fugue d'école*: “Martini’s fugal prototype is a tightly knit series of sections – each a full exposition in all parts of the subject and answer – articulated by passing cadences” (270). It also included modulations into relative keys, a stretto exposition, and a “short coda with a dominant pedal [which brought] it to a close” (269).

Despite the merits of Budde’s source, there is still the question of whether Joyce would have consulted Gédalge, and, again, not all of the elements of Gédalge’s list correspond with Joyce’s list. If we were to consult some of the titles that appear in Joyce’s notes, for example on page 11 of Notebook 1.ii (again, part of the 2002 NLI acquisition), there appears the following:

Musical Antiquarian Society
Percy Society
John Wilbye: Works
Hawkins – History of Music (c 104)
Burney – History of Music
Rimbault – Bibliotheca Madrigaliana (pp 11-28)
Davey – History of English Music

Of particular note from this list are the references to Hawkins and Burney, who were both pioneers in the field of music history, and were the first musician historians to create an extended and general record of the living history of music. Both had very different approaches to music history: Sir John Hawkins’ two-volume *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (1776) is an attempt at exhaustively tracing the pattern of music history, starting with Ancient modes and ending with the then present day. Charles Burney’s four-volume *A General History of Music*

examines the development of music in practice. Unlike Hawkins, Burney travelled to collect his material and anecdotes; for example, *The present state of music in France and Italy: or, the journal of a tour through those countries, undertaken to collect materials for a general history of music* (1773) catalogues the distinguishing elements of the music he heard while travelling through France and Italy. Hawkins and Burney naturally engaged in a petty rivalry of sorts, as evidenced by Burney's satire *The Trial of Midas the second*, wherein he critiques Hawkins' dry and pedantic approach to music.

In connection with the fugue, in his *History*⁶ Burney defines the following terms:

Canon, a composition in which the parts follow each other in the same melody and intervals

Contrapuntista, one skilled in the laws of harmony, a composer
[...]

Fugue, a flight or pursuit; a *fugue* differs from a *canon* only in being less rigid in its laws; a *canon* is a perpetual *fugue*: the first, or leading part gives the law to the rest in both; but, in the course of a *fugue*, it is allowable to introduce episodes and new subjects
(Burney v-vi)

Both Burney and Hawkins were concerned with the fugue and the rules that govern it. Writing much later, Henry Davey's *History of English Music* (1895), which also appears in Joyce's list of texts, is more of an odyssey through the development of English music through representative composers -- from the invention of composition by John Dunstable in 1400-20 (Davey 1) to a rant about the decline of music in the nineteenth century -- but it also examines the history of the first appearances of the fugue.

To reiterate, I would not argue that Joyce was dependent upon any one of these sources for the structure of his *fuga per canonem*. Rather, I believe that his knowledge of music and his awareness of the conversation surrounding fugal forms, was sufficient to have informed the eight terms that form an outline of the structure he intended to pursue, and possibly a checklist of the order in which they will be pursued. In short, the list is indeed, as Mike Groden argues: Joyce's "indication to

⁶ These terms all reappear in Burney's *General History of Music*, but it was more succinct to reproduce them in the list form that appears in *The Present State of Music in France and Italy*.

himself of a fugue's structure, which he apparently planned to superimpose onto an episode that was already partially drafted" (Grodén 44). More specifically, it is the indication to himself of *his* fugue's structure. As such, instead of treating Joyce's list as notes from a dictionary entry, a more productive train of thought would be to examine the superimposition of these elements of Joyce's *fuga per canonem* onto the "prefugal" (and post-fugal) episode, and, as Ferrer has suggested, to examine "the starting point of the parodic strain that characterizes the style of the central episodes of *Ulysses*" (Ferrer 63).

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