

The Music of T.S. Eliot's Poetry: Integrating Live Performance, Poetry, Sound, and Video in a Multimedia Theatre Production of *The Waste Land*

Joyce Beetuan Koh* & Steve Dixon†

*Composer, Singapore, †LaSalle College of the Arts, Singapore

joyce@jbtkoh.net

Abstract

This paper examines the interactions between the various modalities – poetic text, live stage performance, sound design and video projection – in a 2013 theatrical production of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922). It particularly focuses on the creation of the sound design for the performance and how this relates to the themes and sensibilities of the poem, its inherent sonorities and what Eliot called 'The Music of Poetry' (1942). It explores the range of musical and compositional strategies employed for the project, from textual analysis to associative methods, and particularly emphasises the complex interweaving of and interactions between synthetic and concrete sound samples which complement and, it is argued, enhance the 'musical', imagistic and psychological elements within the poetic text. The performance, built on Eliot's 434-line poem, is a collaboration between Steve Dixon who produced, performed and created the video projections; and Joyce Beetuan Koh who composed the music and soundscape. The performance was directed for stage by Tony Knight.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, sonic composition

1. Introduction

In 2013, the authors collaborated to create a multimedia theatre interpretation of T.S. Eliot's iconic 1922 poem *The Waste Land*. The 50-minute performance features a live performer, Steve Dixon, and a complete pre-recorded sound design by Joyce Koh, which is linked to a projected full-length movie. On stage, Dixon recites and begins to 'relive' the poem, accompanied by Koh's atmospheric and complexly layered soundscape. On a screen behind him, the poem's imagery unfolds in an increasingly breathless stream of visuals (produced and created by Dixon). Meanwhile, Eliot's bizarre characters - from clairvoyante Madame Sosostris to Tiresias and Cleopatra -

appear as movie characters on screen, coaxing, seducing, and terrifying the man.

The Waste Land has previously had only a small number of staged performances, including a radio dramatisation by the BBC in 1938 (Sloane, 2001) and a celebrated solo theatre performance by Fiona Shaw (1996, directed by Deborah Warner). This paper particularly focuses on the creation of the soundscape for this new production and the ways in which the different sonic elements and compositional strategies relate to Eliot's conceptions of poetry and music.

2. 'The Music of Poetry'

Poetry has always had a close affinity with the sonic arts and music through their common concerns with auditory elements: rhythms, tempos, dynamics and sonorities. But there are few poems so closely aligned, indeed almost ontologically attuned to the notion of sound design and musical composition as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. A type of polyphonic tone poem, it adopts a symphonic structure filled with leitmotifs and polyrhythms, and what Lawrence Rainey has called an "insistent stress on music" (p42). Using a fragmented, mosaic structure brimming with cultural allusions, the poem's abstracted, ambitious and inspired composition might be argued as a direct literary response to Walter Pater's famous dictum that "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music".

Besides its inherent structural and 'vocal' musicality, the poem abounds with specific musical references. The themes and arias of three of Wagner's operas are insistent leitmotifs, while there are direct quotations and references to ragtime songs, water music, whisper music, singing children, nursery rhymes, whining mandolins, birdsong; and a record placed on a gramophone to restore normalcy following a loveless, violent sex scene.

Eliot's himself wrote of the importance of music in his work; and his first poems were called 'Preludes' while his last masterpieces were 'The Four Quartets'. In his essay *The Music of Poetry* (1942) he describes a 'musical poem' as one that has "a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meaning of the words which compose it, and ... those two patterns are indissoluble and one" (quoted in Chancellor p22). In our performance of *The Waste Land*, three new patterns are added, which we hope will likewise join harmoniously with the two pre-existing elements to become "indissoluble and one." These new elements are: a complex sound design; a full-length movie; and a live performer playing the poem's narrator and several of its characters. Both singly and in combination, each of these elements add fresh types of 'music' to the poetic mix - distinct

new rhythms, tones, sonorities, dynamics, consonances and dissonances.

3. Strategies of Composition

In composing the sound design, a number of different approaches and strategies were employed. Some involved close textual analysis and conceiving sonic responses to images, symbols and (explicit or implied) meanings. Others adopted a more intuitive and freeform approach of associative thinking and aural imagination.

One of the starting strategies was to analyse the poem in relation to its specific musical allusions and references. A primary aim was to identify features that are intrinsically musical, or directly reference musical scores and genres, as well as words or stanzas that potentiate musical manipulation. To take an example, the inherent musicality of the following passage (lines 346-358¹) provided a clear guide and impetus for a specific type of musical manipulation.

*If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine tree
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water*

While the irregular phrase structure prompts the composer to respond with a mixed meter organisation, the rhythm and

¹ Parenthesised numbers indicate lines in *The Waste Land*.

repetition of words - water, rock, drip, drop – also suggests a quick and lively tempo. The section conjures aural images of water, in varied forms, and initial planning for this section involved using concrete water sounds. This was confirmed following Dixon's completion of the associated video images comprising a montage of images of dry rock faces with one single shot of a flowing jet of water from a primitive hose extruding from a rock. The final sound sequence used three distinct water sounds: water flowing from a spring; water cascading into an echoey, subterranean cave, and the reverberant close-up sound of a single water droplet. The first related directly to the hose image (operating as though it were diegetic sound) while the latter two reflected the text's obsessive desire for water amongst the desert rocks on screen: as false aural mirages that 'haunted' the arid film scene.

The sense of frustration and confusion expressed by the text's repeated conditional phrases such as "if there were water and no rock" (348-9) also suggested a disturbed psychological state that could be further explored in the sound design. This involved creating an increasingly intense collage structure progressing through the three pre-recorded samples. The movement from one to another became increasingly dramatic not only by virtue of the changing tempi and characteristics of the water sounds but also through their associated emotional qualities (gentle gushing, hard splattering, ominous dripping). As the sequence builds, the final water droplet sounds are compressed and heard in increasingly quick succession, evoking the sense of accelerating distress and panic inherent in the text. The climax is reached as these rounded sounds become rudely interrupted by the intervention of sharp and jarring metallic sounds as a block of ice is smashed in a machine. The sound then cuts to silence, for the final, fatalistic line to be delivered: "But there is no water" (359).

Another example of the use of constructing a sequence of different water sounds to dramatic effect occurs in the short (10 line) fourth part of the poem, entitled "Death by Water". Relating the narrative of a drowned sailor, the filmed visual sequence features the statue of a heroic mythical figure within a fountain in Trafalgar Square in London. The first part of the soundscape is a very concrete recording of water gushing, to correspond as realistically as possible with the imagery. This is layered with the hum of traffic, and the close-up sounds of flapping wings, synchronised to birds flying across the screen frame. Over the course of the sequence, the gushing sounds turn into bubbling water effects, evoking the sensation of being underwater, as though drowning. This effect had been prefigured earlier during the clairvoyante, Madame Sosostri's prophecy and warning to "fear death by water" (55). The sequence ends with a surprising and visceral sonic effect in synchronisation with the onscreen image, a 'focus-pull' from the statue's head to the fountain water behind him. At this point, the previously quiet, low-pitch 'underwater' sound suddenly and shockingly reverts back to the first, high-pitch 'gushing' sound, and at maximum volume.

4. Leitmotifs

The water theme is one of *The Waste Land's* prominent leitmotifs, which also runs through the Wagnerian operas so central to the poem's allusions and characters, from the songs of the mermaid Rheinmaidens in *Das Rheingold* to the young sailor's opening aria in *Tristan and Isolde*. Four lines of his song are quoted exactly (31-34) in Eliot's poem, and in response Koh took an exact quotation from a different part of Wagner's score, the double bass monody at the end of the Prelude (bars 106 to 110), while in counterpoint on stage, Dixon sang the sailor's aria. The reasons for the musical choice were two-fold: firstly, the ominous character and sonority of the low register is used as a premonition to the later scenes of ill-fated

passion and the images of the desolate and empty sea ["Od' und leer das Meer' (42)]. Secondly, the contour of the melody with an expressive rise of an interval of a minor sixth, evokes the erotic and sensual undertones of the Hyacinth garden episode which follows.

Instead of an exact quotation of the monody played by a double bass, it is transcribed for a synthesizer to accompany Dixon's onstage interaction with the on screen character of the 'hyacinth girl'. The otherworldly synthetic quality suggests a breathlessness and heightened sense of reality, emphasising this episode's exploration of youthful sexual awakening.

Another key strategy was to use certain concrete sounds as reoccurring motifs, just as Eliot has his own recurring literary and musical leitmotifs. Different samples of crackling fires were used to create a range of visceral and psychological effects. It is the very first 'musical' effect heard in the performance, accompanying the poem's famous "April is the cruellest month ..." opening. The sound is electronically processed in different ways, but continually evokes a sense of edginess and unease, providing an unsettling underscore to the first 18 lines, in deliberate contrast to the film projection which shows beautiful images of grand, rolling European landscapes through the seasons.

The use of fire sounds within the score was later used as a metaphor for lust, and underscores one of the sections alluding to the mythological story of the rape of Philomel (97-103). Fire is itself a central theme in *The Waste Land* which Cleanth Brooks has linked specifically to 'the sterile burning of lust' (Brooks, 1939). 'The Fire Sermon' is the poem's third and longest section, which concludes with a meditation on the inability to transcend earthly desires, Buddha's insistent chant "burning burning, burning burning" (308) and St. Augustine's plea to God to "pluckest me out" (309).

5. 'What the Thunder Said'

A three-minute section of the poem's final section, 'What the Thunder Said' demonstrates the way that the soundscape is conceived to develop according to a progressive, accumulative structure interweaving and interrelating both concrete and synthetic sounds.

The swarming "hooded hordes" of people (369) are interpreted on screen scurrying ants in macro lens close-up, accompanied by heavily processed synthetic insect sounds. As the film shot changes to a volcano, this gives way to the 'organic' concrete sounds of chirping crickets, while the synthesised sounds metamorphose into violently accented zipping sounds in synchronisation with birds who dart and fly across the scene. The bird sounds metamorphose again into concrete city bird sounds as the names of "falling" cities are read out (374-6). For the 'whisper music' sequence (from 379), the birds' 'voices' transpose to a woman's whispering, synthetically treated to also evoke the sense of a wind. The purpose was to establish an association between the sounds of the wind and human breath. They share similar sonic qualities and are suggestive of the imageries of life and death. As Brooks puts it, two paradoxes - that "living devoid of meaning is death" and that there is in "sacrificial death, an awakening to life" - permeate the poem" (Brooks, 1939).

In the next sequence ["bats with baby faces" (380-385)] the whispers are accelerated and change pitch, while new layers are added to the texture with whispery wind sounds and the synthetic flapping of wings. By the end of the sequence, the woman's whispers turn into painful wails and deadly cries, in grotesque correspondence to the "voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells" (385).

Concrete sounds return with a fanfare of church bells as the chapel ('perilous') is revealed on screen, and the synthetic flapping wings transpose into the concrete sounds of

real pigeons. They flap around and land upon the Karyatides statues that surround the chapel on screen, and the sound is amplified to unsettling, menacing effect.

The chapel section's sinister overtones and themes of dryness, death and decay are emphasised and heightened through the sonic treatment of the woman's whispers and the flapping wings. These two elements are then transformed and dramatically accelerated as the poem (and film) segues into the image of a cockerel, whose (concrete) morning call announces a violent rainstorm. The woman's synthetic whispering metamorphoses into a radically different type of 'vocalisation' - the concrete staccato squawks and clucks of chickens – while the sound of flapping wings are slowed down and treated to become harder and more percussive, suggesting firstly, a cock fight, and then distant thunderclaps.

As rain begins to fall, the bass sounds become even deeper and more reverberant. They then transpose into a heavily synthesised improvisation around Wagner's watery E flat opening to *Das Rheingold*, which is employed as the performance's key recurrent musical leitmotif.

6. Conclusion

Paul Chancellor suggests that what Eliot once termed the "music of poetry" is indispensable to *The Waste Land's* meaning and that "purely aural qualities such as rhythm, sonority, verbal orchestration, and tempo" are keys to unlocking its ideas, symbols and significance (p. 21). Dixon and Koh's production consciously sought to utilise sound design to provide further sonic layers which could enhance an audience's understanding and appreciation of Eliot's text, and reinforce its currency and relevance for a contemporary audience. In Chancellor's article, he describes Eliot's work as "poetry in which two dreams cross – a dream in words and a dream in music" (p21). He also reflects that music offers a constant reminder to the reader that poetry is similarly a "performance" and that "only by *experiencing* it as complete sentient,

imaginative human beings can we arrive at its meaning." (p31) While the 'meaning' of *The Waste Land* will always remain difficult and multifaceted, the extra 'dreams' of a sound design, live performance recitation and parallel movie intersect and cross over the two 'dreams' that Chancellor conceives as central to Eliot's work. The aim and hope is to interact, commune with, complement and uplift Eliot's language, characters and images into a distinctive and meaningful new articulation of a rich and compelling audience *experience*, and a *performance* that celebrates and encapsulates the "music of poetry".

References

Sloane, Patricia. (2001). "Richard Wagner's Arthurian Sources, Jessie L. Weston, and T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'". *Arthuriana*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 30-53.

Chancellor, Paul (1969). "The Music of "The Waste Land"". *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 21-32.

Brooks, Cleanth. *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. (The University of North Carolina Press, 1939).

Rainey, Lawrence. *Revisiting the Waste Land*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005)