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*Magdalena Popiel*  
University of Warsaw

## INTEGRATING MUSIC WITH FICTION: IAN MCEWAN'S LIBRETTO FOR MICHAEL BERKELEY'S OPERA *FOR YOU*

### Abstract

The article undertakes to prove that Ian McEwan is an ambitious and versatile writer who is not afraid of experimenting with forms which are on the borderline of literature and other arts. It presents McEwan as a literary artist having a wide professional knowledge of music. The analysis focuses on McEwan's opera libretto *For You* which is a problematic work for any literary analysis as, being a multimedia narrative text type, it stands on the borderland between literature and music. The article analyses the interdependence of these two spheres considering the libretto as a complex artistic text – which refers to music at various interpretation levels: the language, style, plot and construction – and sheds new light on the narrative complexities of the text/music interaction.

Over the years of his literary career, although he has been widely known as a short story writer and novelist, Ian McEwan has also shown his great interest in other forms, such as children's fiction, as well as genres designed for other media: television plays, screenplays, film adaptations, and the oratorio. That interest originally resulted from the writer's temporary tiredness with the subject matter of his short stories and first novels. McEwan recollects he felt "trapped by the kinds of things [he] had been writing" (Haffenden 1985: 173) and that "[he] had written [him]self into too tight a corner" (Begley 2002 [2010]: 96). On the other hand, once he got himself busy with work for other media he became very much attracted by the totally new possibilities these forms offered to a writer accustomed up to then only to the forms of a short story and a novel. He felt liberated from the usual limitations:

Choosing a new form in which to write bears some resemblance to travelling abroad; the sense of freedom is no less useful for being illusory or temporary. The

new place has its own rules and conventions, but they are not really yours, not quite yet. What you notice first is the absence of the old, familiar constraints, and you do things you would not do at home. (McEwan 1989: xxi)

It is not at all surprising, therefore, that in 2008 McEwan decided to experiment with yet another form, namely a libretto for an opera. His choice does not come as a surprise for those who know that McEwan's has always loved classical music. He has a wide knowledge of it and often mentions his favourite composers and pieces:

Of all music, it's Bach that continues to hold me. There are pieces that I first heard when I was sixteen and loved, and they haven't dimmed. [...] I listen to the keyboard partitas or certain cantatas and enjoy them with the same intensity I did in 1965 (Roberts 2010: 196).

Asked about music in his fiction, he explains why he values music more than other forms of art:

I take a lot of pleasure in [music]. I admire musicians and composers. Perhaps more than any other art form, music consistently delivers satisfaction and formal perfection that are only ever found in the best poetry. Novels [...] are never perfect all the way through [...]. Also music's lack of meaning has infinite appeal. Of course we all bring meaning *to* it, but what it actually is saying is beyond us, beyond words (Roberts 2008 [2010]: 194–195).

The opera *For You*, which is already the second joint project of McEwan and the composer Michael Berkeley (after their first collective work, the oratorio *Or Shall We Die?*, 1983) met with a fairly favourable reception. It was praised for its “up-to-date scenario” (Clark 2008), “conversation style” (Walker 2008), “classic McEwan themes handled with a clever, witty verbal economy” (Holden 2008) and “elegant, two-act structure, in a rhythmic, clear prose” (Driver 2008). Critics liked the libretto, finding it “ironic, blisteringly funny, fast-paced, pithy and with a surprise comeuppance for the ghastly main character” (Morrison 2008), and the libretto's “very terse and contemporary” (Khandekar 2008 [2010]: 177) language. And yet there were also more critical voices suggesting, for instance, that McEwan's libretto and Berkeley's score did not fit well together, that they did not complement sufficiently one another: “Berkeley has poured most of his ideas into the busy instrumental score, which tends to snatch attention from the stage and frequently leads a life of its own” (Clark 2008). Another critic was even more severe while discussing the text and music connection, or rather the lack of it, saying that Berkeley's score “gallops harum-scarum around the words without helping us truly to invest in the characters” (Fisher 2008). The libretto itself also received some unfavourable comments, such as the one about its redundancy: “too much of McEwan's text is overwritten, cluttered

with adjectival detail. The opera begins and ends with Frieth rehearsing with an orchestra, and it is when music is discussed that the text seems most self-conscious and squirmingly embarrassing” (Clements 2008).

The fact that McEwan does not limit himself to novels, even though they unquestionably constitute the largest part of his writings, but also engages himself in other media, undoubtedly testifies to his great creative potential. However, as David Malcolm rightly observes, other than pure literary forms pose both content-related and technical problems for a literary critic as these forms include and largely depend on visual and auditory elements and thus, if they are not to be treated as texts only, require a different, specialised terminology (e.g. connected with television, film or music) and approach (2002: 182). That is to say, to fully and exhaustingly analyse McEwan’s television play, film script, oratorio or libretto one has to have a wide knowledge of television, film or music. That would entail an interdisciplinary comparative study, i.e. study confronting one discipline with another or others (Hejmej 2008: 87). Literary analysis, on the other hand, by definition, focuses on only literary elements ignoring all the rest.

As Keir Elam points out, operatic narratives, unlike novelistic ones, exist in two different forms, that is, in “dramatic” texts – the musical score and the libretto – and in “performance” texts – productions which visualize those dramatic texts (1980: 3). This article will stand in the middle and look at the libretto as a written text but in the context, taking into account its relation to the score, the opera in general, and also discussing the text’s musical elements. It is worth emphasising, though, that a pure literary analysis that studies a written text is not easy in the case of this particular edition of the libretto<sup>1</sup> as what one finds written on the libretto’s very first page, before Act 1, is a detailed note of the opera’s world premiere followed by a listing of the opera’s conductor, director and cast. Thus, visual and auditory elements are referred to even before one has a chance to look at the libretto’s actual text.

Both McEwan and Berkeley point to and emphasise text-music mutual relations. McEwan describes the process of writing the libretto as engaging not only his usual creative powers but also his ability to think in musical, rhythmical terms:

The libretto isn’t poetry, but I became very aware of my inner ear and its sensitivity to what you might call ‘sprung rhythm’. Basically, it’s measured prose. I didn’t try to think about what Michael would do with it musically, but I did imagine breathing the phrases (Khandekar 2008 [2010]: 178).

Berkeley’s music served McEwan as a final touch of a paintbrush – or, we should rather say, a baton – giving him a lot of freedom in the process of creating the characters: “I realised I could afford to be cool with the characters because Michael’s music would bring a warmth to them”. McEwan

also stresses the influence of music on the language employed – “the presence of music encouraged me to heighten the words a little” – elaborating his argument on the example of a particular scene:

When Charles takes the horn-player Joan to bed, and he fails to get an erection, she says, ‘They say an erection never lies, but this is also eloquent.’ In life, no one would reach for a generalisation like that (Hewett 2008).

Music also influenced McEwan in a more general way; he claims to have derived inspiration from the tradition of classical operas while working on the structure of the libretto, especially when deciding about the inclusion of passages to be performed by all the characters together: “One thing I took from the classics is the ensemble pieces. It was good to write sextets. I love *The Barber of Seville*<sup>2</sup> and we were very keen to have ensembles that grew in complexity, where all the characters end up expressing themselves at once” (Khandekar 2008 [2010]: 177). What is interesting, the very form of the opera influenced the plot. McEwan, strangely and uncharacteristically for himself, seems to pass moral judgement on his protagonist as *For You* ends with Charles being led away by two policewomen and his words “I am already in hell” (68). According to McEwan, this “Don-Giovanni-like” (another reference to the opera’s tradition), “curiously moral” end, the fact that the wicked protagonist is punished at last for his sins, came to him as a natural consequence of the form: “Something about the opera convention leads one to do this”. McEwan admits that he “would never do that in fiction” (Unsigned 2008). Taking all this into consideration, while analysing the libretto one has to remember all the time that it is not a plain written text, such as a short story or a novel, but a part of the complex artistic enterprise and thus, by being very closely related to its co-existent element, music, it gains its context and full meaning only at the moment of the opera’s performance.

Berkeley describes the opera’s creation process as not two separate works which were only united at the very moment of the opera’s first and each next performance, but as the result of a close writer – composer cooperation during which the libretto influenced the score and vice versa: the music decided about the path of the plot’s development:

One of the great things about working with a writer on an original libretto is that it unfolds as you go along. Ian would feed me the text as he wrote it and I would play back to him what I’d done with it. He then used that as a reference point for what was coming next. So that meant that the music itself was integral to the narrative (Khandekar 2008 [2010]: 177–178).

Another text-music relation mentioned by the composer is connected with the opera’s frequent and sudden mood shifts: “Ian writes very precisely,

and I needed to negotiate the shift of musical mood from comic to tragic equally accurately, which was a real discipline” (Khandekar 2008 [2010]: 178). One of the musical means Berkeley used to express the atmosphere of the plot was tuning up of Charles’s orchestra (mirrored by the real, Berkeley’s orchestra tuning up) which, according to the composer became “a metaphor for confusion and chaos” (Morrison 2008). However, the text–music close relation was sometimes an obstacle. Berkeley recollects, for instance, that he had troubles with composing Charles’s piece *Demonic Aubade*: “I actually found Ian’s words [i.e. Charles’s lines during the performance of *Demonic Aubade*] quite uplifting, whereas I knew that he wanted them to sound overblown and distasteful” (Morrison 2008). In general, though, Berkeley praises McEwan’s style as a natural source of inspiration for him: “Almost every line gives you musical ideas” (Unsigned 2008).

The libretto consists of two acts, the first one including six scenes, the second one – four. McEwan’s love for music helped him decide on the protagonist: “My interest in music made me want to put a composer at the center of the story” (Khandekar 2008 [2010]: 196). The plot centres around Charles Frieth, a man in his mid-sixties, an eminent composer and conductor, who runs preparations for the performance of one of his early compositions as well as the premiere of his latest piece *Demonic Aubade*. Charles is a very selfish man and also a womaniser. He constantly neglects and cheats his wife Antonia, humiliates and exploits his secretary Robin and, at the same time, is blind to his wife and her doctor Simon’s growing affection for each other and his housekeeper Maria’s obsessive love – Maria deludes herself that Charles reciprocates her feelings and, moreover, that he sends her encoded secret messages (in which she echoes Jed from *Enduring Love*).

In Scene One, Act 2, which shows Antonia in hospital and Charles next to her bed, Antonia sings a song which throws light on her relationship with Charles. Recalling one particular image from their past – “a couple on a London bridge/in an early evening snowstorm” – she describes how it was at the beginning, when they walked “[h]and in hand” and were “wild in love”; how many plans they had and how much they cared about each other, “with no idea how grown-up life/could uninvent their love”. Charles remembers that stroll well, because they were on the way to “[his] first concert/at the Festival Hall”. Antonia adds that the evening was the first performance of Charles’s oboe concerto, which was supposed to be his “love letter” to her. They both seem to be absorbed in pleasant memories when suddenly Antonia remembers that “one month later, [he] fucked the oboist”. And it was not one incident, but, as she puts it, then “began the endless succession” of Charles’s infidelities which, as she bitterly admits, “[they] kindly called [his] ‘work’”. Once Charles became more and more famous, everything changed. Their relationship were no longer intimate and loving, as if deafened by

“a roar of delighted applause”, “loud praise”, and “parties”. Charles’s “musical ambition swelled” and he grew in importance “to the shape of a lion” leaving Antonia in his shadow, “shrank[ed] to the size/of a household mouse”. When he travelled to give concerts in various places, she stayed at home knowing about “women in far-off places”. And she had nothing to relieve the pain and no one to comfort her. They had no children as even that sphere of their life was controlled by Charles’s egotist ambition – “[h]is work wouldn’t tolerate children” – and so she was completely alone in the “silent and cold” house. Still, though, she “waited for [him] to come back”, as if nothing had happened, with not a word of complaint: “I said nothing at all”.

Now, when Antonia is seriously ill, Charles suddenly asks her to let him show her he has finally “come back”, just as she has always wanted. He wants them to “cross another bridge together”. But it is too late now. Antonia is not alone anymore as she knows she is loved by her doctor Simon, gratefully receiving his attention and care. Moreover, knowing Charles for all those painful and sad years, she is sure that his sudden supposed change and repentance are not true as there is something else that makes him act in that way: “This is not sorrow, or a change of heart,/but blind possessiveness”. Charles wants to keep Antonia out of his greed and jealousy; love or at least attachment have nothing to do with his behaviour. And indeed, when by the end of the scene Charles is asked by Simon to leave Antonia’s room, he cannot restrain himself from showing his true face and yells furiously: “she’s my wife and she *belongsto me!*”<sup>3</sup>.

Scene Four, Act 2 shows exactly what Charles is like. Clearly, he has subordinated all his life to the art’s needs, to his music. To everything he does, or does not do, how he treats other people, in brief, what he is like, Charles has one and only possible answer – that is what art demands from him, the artist. Blinded by his ambition and hypocrisy, he closely resembles McEwan’s another character – Clive from *Amsterdam*, also a composer with an overblown self-regard – in professing his life’s motto ‘everything for the sake of art’:

The artist can’t see the suffering he causes  
to those around him. And they will never  
understand the purity of his goal, how the heat  
of his invention won’t melt  
the ice of his heart.  
He must be ruthless!  
No religion, no purpose except this:  
make something perfect before you die.  
Life is short, art is for all time –  
History will forgive my ways because  
My music outstared the sun. (61–62)

Charles claims it is art that makes him the person he is. He tries to convince others, or perhaps even himself that “[h]e must be ruthless!”, as if it was impossible to be simultaneously a good man and a great artist. He claims the artist does not realise he hurts the others; at the same time, ironically, being well aware of the fact that he indeed is a cause of suffering of the people around him. And yet Charles is totally convinced that the very fact of being an artist makes him a kind of superhuman who has special rights and whose motives will not and cannot ever be understood by those who have no contact with art and do not understand it. Charles explains all these complex moral intricacies of the art–life relationship by two vivid antagonistic metaphors of “the heat of invention” and “the ice of heart”. Still, however much pain he brings to others, he feels fully justified by the work of art he creates and, moreover, no matter how much and how gravely he sins, his goal – music – remains pure all the time. Obviously, just as Antonia argued in the hospital scene, there are no signs of repentance in his voice. On the contrary, he seems to be a cold-hearted person, if we may use an expression which nicely correlates with the heat – ice metaphor, for whom it is just so, he is just so, and there is nothing he can do about it.

The passage also shows that Charles’s intentions are not as pure as he thinks, or that he might be insincere even to himself, as he clearly states it is his wish to satisfy his own ambition that stands behind all his deeds: “make something perfect before you die” which in his case means creating “music that [would outstare] the sun”. Therefore, it is not art in itself which directs him but rather his strong egoistic desire for fame. Moreover, he does not care about others in the belief that he, like any other artist, should be judged only from a distance of time. Once it happens, though, he is sure he will be forgiven for the reason that he created something absolutely brilliant. His music is the only “purpose” of his life, his only “religion” as well as his shield against any possible reproaches he might expect from others who do not know what it means to be an artist. However, there is little time to achieve his goals, Charles is not a young man anymore, therefore he knows he must focus on composing rather than on the others’ feelings, as the music, his music, will outlive him and stay forever as an immortal sign of his genius.

McEwan’s reasons for creating such a character as Charles are twofold: the first one being more general and the second more specific. On the one hand, he treats the profession of composing metaphorically: “I found it irresistible to write a story about a composer, because I find the act of composing such an interesting metaphor for creativity in its purest sense” (Khandekar 2008 [2010]: 177). In other words, McEwan’s idea behind the libretto was to show by using a specific example of a composer some general truths and generalisations about the artist’s work with a special focus on what constitutes the core of it: creative skills. It is worth noticing here that defining creativity in such general

terms allows to make various analogies between composing and other forms of art, such as writing, as both writing and composing involve a kind of ‘narration’. A composer uses other means of expression but, similarly to a writer, in a way, tells a story. Moreover, by making a composer the leading character of the libretto and by admitting that his main interest is in the creative powers, McEwan introduces the elements of the *Künstlerroman* pattern, going beyond the generic convention of the libretto. *For you* then turns out to be another example of a hybrid form in McEwan’s literary *oeuvre*.

On the other hand, such a complex character as Charles is a great possibility – for the writer that has always been very much interested in psychology – of going deep into what it means to be a human, social being: “I wanted to explore the world of a creative obsessive and the way people are mesmerised by the power of that sort of genius” (Khandekar 2008 [2010]: 177). *For You* is, therefore, also a deeply psychological text which examines characters endowed with extreme features, such as Charles, who is “a creative obsessive”, and Maria, who is obsessed about him, in extreme circumstances. McEwan’s wish has been clearly realised in the plot. After all, if it was not for Charles’s absolutely “mesmerising power” Robin would not suffer all the humiliation and whims as well as accept his hard, routine, physical work:

Sixteen hours of writing out parts –  
thirty-two bars for his latest squeeze,  
then he wants to change the orchestration,  
now he’s unhappy with the strings –  
I’m so tired these notes are swimming before my eyes like drunken fish.  
The rehearsal starts this afternoon.  
My kingdom for a computer program –  
But the old fool won’t allow it. (45)

In the passage above Robin wishes he had a computer which would make his work a lot easier and faster. The funny side of it is that it seems it is McEwan himself who stands somewhere behind praising the computer’s advantages, just like in one of the interviews in which he describes how his style of working has changed over the years; the long way from a pen to computer – according to McEwan, an ingeniously designed machine which seems to work nearly as perfectly as a human brain:

In the seventies I used to work in the bedroom of my flat at a little table. I worked in longhand with a fountain pen. I’d type out a draft, mark up the typescript, type it out again. [...] In the mideighties I was a grateful convert to computers. Word processing is more intimate, more like thinking itself. In retrospect, the typewriter seems a gross mechanical obstruction. I like the provisional nature of unprinted material held in the computer’s memory–like an unspoken thought. I like the way

sentences or passages can be endlessly reworked, and the way this faithful machine remembers all your little jottings and messages to yourself (Begley 2002 [2010]: 94).

Above all, however, it is Maria who epitomises a state of obsession and fascination with a genius – in her case, it is Charles’s genius. She states that openly, when in her solo she dreams about having Charles just for herself. Ignoring the fact that she seems to be just as possessive as the object of her love, it is important to notice the way Maria expresses her desires. It is Charles’s music Maria wants as for her Charles and his music fuse into one: “To drive all women from his life!/Then all his music would be for me [...]” (18). For Maria, madly in love with Charles, he is “the most exciting man in the world”, simply “a god” (17) whom she worships and for whom she is ready to kill poor Antonia – the most tragic figure in the libretto.

Interestingly, the fact that Charles is a composer, and that he actually holds a rehearsal, opens up a possibility of the play-within-a play convention, or rather its musical variation, as what we have here is a musical piece (an aubade in the concerto form) performed within the form of an opera. That must have complicated the work of both Berkeley and McEwan. The former had to “[...] create a musical voice for Charles that says something about his character and that fits into the organic whole of the opera” (Khandekar 2008 [2010]: 177). The latter must have included in the libretto musical descriptions and references, such as: “The discordant sounds of orchestra warming up. Violins on open strings, sudden runs on brass, woodwind etc.” (3) in the stage directions to Scene One, Act 1, or “The tuning-up continues. The A is sounded and taken up” (60) in the directions to Scene Four, Act 2. In the main text, Charles gives his orchestra a professional instruction: “Let us try again, from letter D,/the tutti marked piano...” (4) or he expresses a critical comment: “There was a note, a broken note,/an F sharp that should have been a G,/a hot needle in my ear./It was the French horn./You, yes you, my dear” (6). On another occasion he lists percussion instruments:

Clash and suspended cymbals, tam-tam, roto-tom,  
timpani, bass drum, temple blocks,  
mark tree, side drum, vibraphone [...] (47)

All these musical references prove that McEwan, as usual<sup>4</sup>, has done the research and has prepared himself very well for writing the libretto because his knowledge and understanding of the professional musical terminology is indeed outstanding.

*For You* is rich in other musical references of various kind. For instance, in stage directions, there appear different musical forms, such as “Trio” (7), “Song” (19, 39, 51), “Sextet” (35), “Tutti” (36), “Duet” (48). From the

perspective of Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality (Genette 1997: xviii-xix) – with its five subtypes: intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, metatextuality and hypotextuality – the musical forms mentioned should all be classified as architextual elements, that is, elements in the text which relate to this text's generic rules, in this case to the generic taxonomy of a libretto to an opera. Other examples of architextuality in the libretto are its internal division into acts and scenes, or the division into roles.

At the level of narrative language, music serves as a witty metaphor for Antonia. When she sees Charles in bed with yet another girl, a horn player Joan, she reproaches him for his repetitive romances, ironically asking:

Is this the flute whose husband owns a bank,  
or the harp with the autistic son,  
or the cello with the house in Wales? (34)

She also, in a way, warns Joan by telling her what always happens to Charles and his lovers, asking her if Charles has already given her a musical promise which means nothing else than a “solo of thirty-two bars” and “a concerto”, and, in fact, opens Joan's eyes to the harsh reality, calling her “but one variation on a theme” (35). A while earlier, Joan, grateful to Charles for his decision to add into the score of *Demonic Aubade* a new part for the horn, mentions two famous opera's classics: “Not since Britten, not since Mozart,/did the horn have such a friend” (23). And it is another, witty and subtle, example of the play-within-a play convention, since either one of these two particular names or both of them, among some others, are mentioned by critics in various reviews of the opera as Berkeley's source of inspiration in general as well as the source of the score's little quotes<sup>5</sup>. There is also a quotation from another opera, Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, when Charles recollects his and Antonia's once happy past: “and as we walked/we were singing from *The Magic Flute*,/Mann und Weib und Weib und Mann” (41). And if in our analysis we treated the libretto as a pure text, it would be an example of an “intersemiotic quotation”, that is, a quotation taken from another field of art which has been subjected to the process of recontextualisation; here a musical quotation reduced to its verbal dimension (Hejmej 2008: 73, 79)<sup>6</sup>.

McEwan's libretto, in a literary analysis, must be considered as far more complex text than any of McEwan's short stories or novels precisely because of its equally significant component – music – to which it refers at various levels of interpretation: the language and style, plot or construction. One might say, though, that the libretto is full of various references to music as in McEwan's other novels, such as *Amsterdam*, *Saturday* or *On Chesil Beach*. However, there is one basic difference: while music in the novels makes them

just richer in terms of their plot and narrative style, it is the question of life and death in the case of the libretto. Here, the musical score is an integral part of the text. Only music may breathe life into its written, non-performed and thus un-concretized version; without its score the libretto simply does not exist. Nor does opera without its libretto.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ian McEwan, *For You. The libretto for Michael Berkeley's opera*. London: Vintage, 2008 (All quotations from the libretto are taken from this edition).

<sup>2</sup> The full title: *The Barber of Seville, or The Useless Precaution*, an opera by Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868).

<sup>3</sup> Italics added.

<sup>4</sup> Other examples of McEwan's thorough preparations are his scientific reading before writing *Enduring Love*, his observation of a neurosurgeon's work before writing *Saturday* and his journey to the Arctic before writing *Solar*.

<sup>5</sup> See Khandekar, "Dual..." in: Roberts (ed.), 177, 178; Clark, "For You..."; Walker, "For You..."; Holden, "Sex, havoc..."; or Driver, "For You...".

<sup>6</sup> See also Linda Huchon and Michael Hutcheon, "Narrativizing the End..." in: Phelan and Rabinowitz (eds.), 441–450.

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