

Music in literature

Many writers have tried to capture the intangible power of music in words. Debut novelist Jessica Duchon chooses her favourites, from Tolstoy to Jilly Cooper

Published: 17 July 2006

Music begins where words end. Attempting to convey its intangible yet visceral power is therefore one of the most frustrating endeavours any music-loving writer can undertake. But it's also among the most enticing. Novelists in many genres have attempted it, and despite the difficulty, have often done the art of music proud. I've just taken a terrifying dive into this myself.

The idea for my book *Rites of Spring* struck me during a performance of Stravinsky's ballet score *The Rite of Spring*. With terrifying energy, it portrays a ritual in which a prehistoric tribe forces a young girl to dance herself to death, a human sacrifice to ensure the return of spring. Well, families are today's tribes; and when emotional winter sets in, children suffer most. In my novel, a young girl with balletic aspirations, Liffy, begins to starve herself when her parents' marriage crumbles. She is virtually trying to dance herself to death to save her tribe.

I've no idea whether the galvanising power of music shines out from the background of my tale as I'd intended. But I do know that this book wouldn't have existed without it, so it seems a good time to look at some of the musical fiction on the shelf - much of it distinctly intimidating.

Leo Tolstoy

The Kreutzer Sonata

No other writer has latched on to the sexual power of music quite as astutely as Tolstoy. This celebrated short story slices open the equation of musical partnership with sexual partnership, inspired by the elemental drive of Beethoven's violin and piano sonata of the same title. Tolstoy places music at the centre of his tale of jealousy and violence among a group of characters whose behaviour is horribly skewed from the start. The wife and her lover play the Kreutzer Sonata together; the lover is a distinctly unappealing person, but no more so, we observe, than the tormented husband. The force of Beethoven comes to symbolise the physical passion that the husband both craves and loathes, and from the musical incarnation of which he is permanently excluded.

Ivan Turgenev

The Song of Triumphant Love

Turgenev was in love with a famous singer, Pauline Viardot, and eventually moved in with her and her husband; it's not impossible that one of her children may have been his. This peculiar short story presented music as black magic in a love triangle that offers disturbing resonances with his situation. In Renaissance Italy, the young Valeria has to choose between two suitors, a musician and an artist. She marries the artist. Five years later, the musician returns. Playing a strange Eastern violin, he bewitches Valeria into enchanted dreams, sleepwalking and worse. The ending, in which she feels the stirring of new life in her womb, suggests obliquely that this child may have been conceived through the musician's occult powers. Music, Turgenev suggests, can cast a spell more potent than human passions.

Marcel Proust

Swann's Way

A "little phrase" from a violin sonata by "Vinteuil" draws Proust's Swann into moods more subtle than mere longing or nostalgia. Almost every violin sonata composed in France during the fin-de-siècle era has been championed as the inspiration for Vinteuil's - Saint-Saëns, Franck, Fauré - and any of them would do: Proust has homed in with remarkable precision on the quality of ineffable yearning, partly sensual, partly pseudo-religious, to which composers of his time were drawn. He chisels out the music's effect on Swann's thought patterns while the character attempts to grasp the fleeting emotions it inspires. What music lover has not at some time been mesmerised by a sound that seems to speak directly to their deepest self? Here Proust comes close to elucidating the most indefinable sensations of musical response.

Ann Patchett

Bel Canto

During a house concert by a famous American soprano in a Latin American banana republic, terrorists besiege the building and make hostages of all within. But matters don't proceed as one might expect. The difference is made by the singer, Roxanne, whose voice and personal radiance command respect from everybody and the power of whose music lifts captors and captives alike towards a higher plane of existence. Isolated inside the house, the terrorists and their prisoners of many nationalities have only one language in common: music, especially Roxanne's singing. They are gradually inspired by this to evolve a startling modus vivendi based on co-operation and mutual support. Of course, confronting the real world, such bizarre symbiosis can't last. The idealistic story has the power of a fable, almost a myth; and it's a direct tribute to the transformative power of music.

Vikram Seth

An Equal Music

This novel is a tender tour de force, a sensitive evocation of musicians' lives in contemporary London, and a fascinating, often heart-rending exploration of the fear and processes of loss. The violinist hero, Michael, is threatened with the confiscation of his beloved violin; Julia, his former girlfriend, is a pianist undergoing the tragedy of losing her hearing; and Michael has already lost Julia, who has married another man and become a mother. The whole book is permeated by the significance of music and the characters' devotion to it despite the heartache that goes together with its rewards. It reaches its quiet conclusion in the sound of Bach, whose Art of Fugue is described as "an equal music". Michael, finally moving beyond pain, discovers that "It is enough, it is blessed enough, to live from day to day and to hear such music - not too much, or the soul could not sustain it - from time to time."

Louis de Bernières

Captain Corelli's Mandolin

Faced with "Heil Hitler", Captain Antonio Corelli ripostes: "Heil Puccini". Is it coincidence that the power of music underpinned a truly beautiful book that became a runaway success in the mid 1990s? Louis de Bernières evokes the world at war - the Greek island of Cephalonia being a particularly enchanting corner of it; and as this exquisite enclave undergoes the threats, traumas and tragedies of the conflict, and subsequently a devastating earthquake, music, epitomised by Antonio's mandolin playing, emerges as the strongest note of hope, making friends out of enemies at least for a while, and deepening his relationship with the Greek girl Pelagia into a love that will last a lifetime. But as times grow harder and the tragedies intensify, perhaps music is not simply the strongest note of hope, but the only one.

Joanna Trollope

The Choir

The refined music of a cathedral choir lies at the heart of Joanna Trollope's popular novel, which is really about the inexorable nature of change. Everything in Aldminster is in flux: the cathedral, the council and the choir itself, which is threatened with closure. Devotion to its music-making unites the characters, from the young choirboy, Henry, to the screwed-up lanthe, daughter of the dean and in love with Henry's mother's lover, who instigates a recording that will save the choir. The Choir worked beautifully as a TV serial, not least because music is part and parcel of the action: it drives these fallible individuals to actions they would otherwise never take. The power of music to bring people together is celebrated.

Jilly Cooper

Appassionata

The irrepressible Jilly Cooper bounds headlong into the world of classical music, especially the intrigues of orchestras in which (at least in this book) it's difficult to keep track of who's been to bed with whom. The power of music may drive some of the characters, but music also inspires the power hunger of a few

outsized egos. Abby, nicknamed L'Appassionata, is a superstar violin soloist who sets about transforming herself into that most tricky of entities, a female conductor wielding the baton over her orchestra, including a dishy horn player called Viking. Populated by sleazy conductors, sleazier agents, critical critics and horny musicians on all instruments, Appassionata is a lurid read. But even these musicians are shown giving their all for their art.

E M Forster

Howards End

Probably no author today would dare to describe the scherzo of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in terms of a goblin "walking quietly over the universe from end to end". Yet this extended passage, during which the sisters Margaret and Helen Schlegel attend a performance of the work, remains one of the most famous musical descriptions in English literature. The symphony proves the catalyst for Margaret's fateful meeting with Leonard Bast, a young clerk from a lower social class. And the music is not only a means towards the fulfilment of the novel's underlying theme, "only connect", but also crystallises the undercurrent of passion that induces Margaret to break away from the constraints of her family. The goblin isn't gratuitous: Forster wants us to experience Beethoven through Margaret's ears and to sense it connecting her with matters beyond the tangible, notably her own subconscious.

'Rites of Spring' by Jessica Duchon is published in paperback by Hodder & Stoughton on 27 July, price £6.99. ISBN 0 349 83931 7