Clockwork Symphonies: 
What Forster and Burgess Believed In 

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Introduction 

The British writers Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) and Anthony Burgess (John Anthony Burgess Wilson, 1917-1993) frequently use musical elements, especially Beethoven’s music, to construct plots and develop themes. Implications of these artistic choices are explored by Erick Alder and Dietmar Hauck in *Music and Literature: Music in the Works of Anthony Burgess and E. M. Forster*. Regarding Forster’s 1910 novel *Howards End (HE)*, Adler and Hauck state that “most of [Forster’s] critics class it as his most mature, profound, and complex book” (106-107). In an allusion to Forster’s memorable epigraph to *HE*, “Only connect,” Adler and Hauck pose a question about this novel and provide a tentative answer: “Does music connect? Yes and no” (110). How might music “connect” in *HE*? To cite one example, as the narrator reports, the second movement of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 in C minor connects with the character Helen Schlegel, producing hauntingly surreal effects in her mind during a concert performance. Similarly, in Burgess’s 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange (ACO)*, Alder and Hauck examine the author’s use of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 

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9 in D minor. Their interpretation of the symphony’s theme—“Through night to light” (115)—seems to “connect” with, and certainly reflects, the agonizing moral and spiritual development of Alex, the novel’s protagonist and narrator.

The purpose of this paper is to identify Forster’s and Burgess’s respective beliefs about life and art that may plausibly have led the authors to use musical elements, themes and motifs in their novels, as seen in *HE* and *ACO*. The paper aims to fill a gap in the criticism of these two authors. Even the study by Alder and Hauck does not compare Forster and Burgess directly, nor does it explore very deeply their reasons for using Beethoven’s symphonies in their novels. Other critics briefly note and discuss the musical elements in works by these two authors but also fall short of a thorough interpretation. Consequently, this study investigates Forster’s and Burgess’s motivations for putting musical elements in their works; the study itself is motivated by the fact that little is known and virtually no informed speculation has occurred regarding this matter. To fill the gap in the critical record, this paper is the first installment of a projected multi-part investigation into the beliefs of these two authors about the relations of literature and music—that is, of the two art forms to each other and to lived experience. In further studies, I will extend the discussion begun in this paper to include other works by Forster and Burgess.

Chapter I

Symphonies that “Connect” with Helen and Alex

Helen and Alex are fundamentally changed by listening to Beethoven symphonies. Before listening, they tended to think and behave in ways that might be considered childish. Afterwards, they have been mentally and physically transformed by the symphonies (unlike other characters in the respective novels). After hearing
Beethoven’s music, Helen and Alex start growing into adulthood as if they understand at last how to deal maturely with the world around them. Helen and Alex are the only characters in their respective novels who show their emotions openly, and their changing behavior parallels the themes and variations in the symphonies. In effect, the characters (and, by extension, the novels) would not be the same without the symphonies: the musical pieces are both the causes and the outward and audible signs of Helen’s and Alex’s inward and spiritual changes, and, as such, they are essential elements of both novels.

Unquestionably, in ACO, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is the crucial device that “connects” with the main character Alex to produce his transformation. According to Alder and Hauck, music is “Alex’s great passion” (Music and Literature 30). Burgess himself states that “what distinguishes Alex from most teenagers is that his tastes in music are classical: Bach, Mozart, above all Beethoven, whose Ninth Symphony becomes the novel’s dominant motif” (ACO iii). His taste for classical music persist, even though “Alex is forced to watch horror-films to the accompaniment of music by Beethoven” (ML 23). At the end of the novel, after undergoing hideous mind-controlling treatment, Alex recovers a sense of himself and speaks of his renewed joyful feelings: “Then I was left alone with the glorious Ninth of Ludwig van” (ACO 132). The transformed Alex expresses what he thinks, not in a controlled way but through his own feelings: “Oh, it was gorgeousity and yumyumyum. … And there was the slow movement and the lovely last singing movement still to come. I was cured all right” (ACO 132). He may be “cured” and outwardly changed, but his love for the musical classics has survived both his earlier brutal life as a violent street criminal, his ghastly psychological “treatment” by the authorities, and his final acceptance of maturity and social responsibility.

In HE, Helen shows her passion through the ways she “connects” with
Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. This may be the most well known example of Forster’s use of Beethoven. As Helen psychologically experiences the Fifth Symphony, “Now comes the wonderful movement: first of all the goblins, and then a trio of elephants dancing . . . No; look out for the part where you think you have done with the goblins and they come back” (HE 46). The narrator describes the almost hallucinogenic images that pass through Helen’s mind during the concert performance of Beethoven’s Fifth:

The music started with a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end. Others followed him. They were not aggressive creatures; it was that that made them so terrible to Helen. They merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendor or heroism in the world. After the interlude of elephants dancing, they returned and made the observation for the second time. Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events, she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The goblins were right (46).

The way that Helen accepts the fact that “the goblins were right” is reminiscent of the scene in which Alex is “redesigned” to be a person with morality beyond his own control or will by “Ludovico’s” Technique, a term that ironically suggests the scientific misuse of the music of “Ludwig” van Beethoven.

The critic Fillion states that “Forster’s sympathies in both essay and novel lie with the visionary Helen” (DR 83). Fillion identifies one of Forster’s major themes arising from Helen’s experience of the bizarre images she imagines during the concert: “By denying the possibility of ‘splendor or heroism,’ her goblins uncover the ‘panic and emptiness’ in a world in which liberalism was rapidly losing ground” (Ibid. 84). Such political and moral implications of music will be explored further in this paper, in relation to both Forster and Burgess.
Chapter II

What the Symphonies Mean for Helen and Alex

Forster writes admiringly of music in his essay “The Raison D’Être of Criticism in the Arts” (1947), in which he affirms his belief that “music is the deepest of all arts” (*Two Cheers* 107). With wry subtlety, he insists that “we cannot understand music unless we desire to hear it” (118). Similarly, Burgess observes in *This Man and Music* the general conviction that “the symphony [is] the highest form of ‘pure music’” (73). Making the connection between music and literature explicit, Forster offers this assessment of the symphony in *Aspects of the Novel*: “When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom. Cannot the novel be like that?” (149-150).

Forster and Burgess incorporate Beethoven symphonies into their narratives in order to present Helen and Alex as seekers of freedom in their own lives. When novels and symphonies are combined, readers do not listen to the melodies but listen instead to the intended words and lines. In this spirit, Sandrine Sorlin interprets *ACO* as “linguistic symphony”: “While Beethoven sets Schiller’s words to music, Burgess sets music to words in his novel” (*Anthony Burgess: MLLM* 48). Languages can be more than language when they connect with music. We all are trying to adapt ourselves more or less unconsciously into our native language or, for some, into additional languages that enable us to express our feelings. Using languages that we already know is the only way to describe ourselves in words. However, to express the “real us,” the core of our essence, whatever that may be, the languages that are available tend to limit rather than empower our expressions. Therefore new languages might have to be devised to enable us to express ourselves fully—just, in fact, as Burgess did when he invented his own language in
ACO. This self-invented language, spoken by Alex, sounds like a combination of language, music, nature sounds and other noises. Its many sources and the variety of its sounds reflect Alex’s fragmented character and his multiple identities, if not multiple personalities.

During the concert in HE, Helen hears in the Fifth Symphony not what most listeners hear, but its personal connotations for her of “panic and emptiness.” When she hears and feels the full force of “panic and emptiness,” she draws herself into it; she dies emotionally, at least momentarily, overcome by the power of utter fear and loneliness. However, in the course of the novel Helen overcomes her “panic and emptiness,” and is spiritually reborn by the story’s end, as symbolized by her giving birth to a child of her own. By contrast, many of the male characters remain gripped by “panic and emptiness.” While the cultivated Helen overcomes her “panic and emptiness” to bring forth new life, the more sturdy, intellectually uncomplicated and business-oriented Wilcoxes ironically lose themselves in “panic and emptiness” even though their minds were not contaminated by listening to Beethoven’s Fifth (though possibly they were polluted by a fifth or more of Ballantine’s).

Fillion offers political and moral interpretations of the way that Helen and the Fifth Symphony connect: “Helen’s resolving victory at the end of the symphony also seems to shore up the tenets of liberal-humanism, with its trust that the moral philosopher-statesman will prevail over the forces of prejudice and violence” (DR 84). In the same spirit, as Forster’s narrator observes, “Beethoven chose to make all right in the end” (HE 47). By contrast, when Alex describes himself in the past tense as “There was me, that is Alex” (ACO 3) or “There was me, Your Humble Narrator” (132), he means that he does not belong to his past life anymore, having been reborn as an adult through his searing personal connections with Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.
Chapter III

What the Symphonies Show Helen and Alex

Michelle Fillion describes in *Difficult Rhythm (DR)* how Helen and her sister Margaret listen to Beethoven’s Fifth “as Forster’s ‘music itself’ (Margaret) or ‘music that reminds me of something’ (Helen)—reflects the realist and visionary perspectives that the novel attempts to reconcile” (83). Fillion also observes that “the uncultured Wilcoxes are absent, missing the chance to learn something about life at a Sunday concert” (*Ibid.* 83). In this way, Fillion suggests that Helen learns something about life at the concert and the Wilcoxes learn something about life bitterly from Helen later in the story. As Helen “had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse” (*HE* 46), she matures into an adult who understands the world more deeply than before, but her maturation requires her to undergo various trials before she achieves transformations of character. Beethoven’s Fifth has shown her an image of the process she must follow until she attains the right to make her own choices with freedom and dignity. Helen’s experience of the symphony anticipates the trials and transformations she must undergo throughout the novel. Her struggles with the complications of life parallel the melodies of the Fifth Symphony in a tragic but ultimately affirmative way.

In both *HE* and *ACO*, people who do not care for music and do not listen to it tend to fail. The Wilcoxes fail in *HE*; Dr Brodsky fails in *ACO*. He says “I know nothing about it [music] myself” (85), and consequently sees Ludovico’s Technique fail with Alex despite its initial success. The ‘treatments’ are ended when Alex no longer a young man, decides to start “a new-like chapter beginning” (141).

Burgess explains how he organized the chapters in *ACO*: “The book was written in twenty-one chapters (21 being the symbol of human maturity) divided
into three sections of exactly equal size” (*ABACO* xvi). In the end of the stage version of *ACO*, Alex says “Amen” and sings:

> Do not be a clockwork orange,
> Freedom has a lovely voice.
> Here is good, and there is evil —
> Look on both, then take your choice.
> Sweet in juice and hue and aroma,
> Let’s not be changed to fruit machines.
> Choice is free but seldom easy —
> That’s what human freedom means! (51)

Burgess observes about his own process of writing the novel *ACO*: “What I had tried to write was, as well as a novella, a sort of allegory of Christian free will” (xvii). As he states as “Christian free will,” the story is full of such Christian themes as death and rebirth. The prison charlie (the Prison Chaplain) who understands the difference between right and wrong, tells Alex, “The question is whether such a technique can really make a man good. Goodness comes from within” (63).

When Ludovico’s Technique is imposed experimentally on Alex, the Chaplain asks “He [Alex] has no real choice, has he? Self-interest, fear of physical pain, drove him to that grotesque act of self-abasement. Its insincerity was clearly to be seen. He ceases to be a wrongdoer. He ceases also to be a creature capable of moral choice” (*ACO* 94). Then, when Ludovico’s Technique seems to have worked on Alex, the Chaplain sighs and says, “God help the lot of us” (96). As the Chaplain prays, God appears to answer his prayers by saving Alex from Ludovico’s Technique. When Alex is restored to his true self after Ludovico’s Technique, he is no longer the old Alex, but an adult who knows the difference between good and evil. As Forster observes, “this knack of turning dullish stuff
into great stuff is characteristic of Beethoven” (*Two Cheers* 126). In a parallel way, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony turns Alex into an adult.

**Conclusion**

What things or characters are connected by the symphonies in *HE* and *ACO*? In *HE*, as the Fifth Symphony’s number “five” suggests, five male characters and five female characters “connect” and are connected in ways that develop the themes and the plot, as if in harmony with the symphony. Helen, the central character in the novel, gives “shouts of infectious joy” (332) at the end of the story: “We’ve seen to the very end, and it’ll be such a crop of hay as never!” (332), an affirmative cry which suggests that she has attained a productive life free from the control of “panic and emptiness.” On the other hand, Alex, who had been living in the world of men, realizes that finding a woman in his life is important for him to discover and create his new self, a development which may be suggested by the chorus of men and women in the Ninth Symphony.

Both Forster and Burgess loved Beethoven and his symphonies, and this is certainly a major reason why they used the symphonies in their novels. However, both writers loved Beethoven and his music in complex ways. Forster, in his essay “The C Minor of That Life” (1941), identifies what Beethoven discovered through his own music: “Beethoven has found himself, that he is where he most wanted to be, that he is engaged in the pursuit of something outside sound–something which has fused the sinister and the triumphant” (*Two Cheers* 125). Burgess puts Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in the highest position of all music. He says, “As for the Ninth, we can ignore analysts’ assertions of the primacy of tonal unity, with D minor struggling towards D major” (*This Man and Music* 79). The code “D” suggests “Alex” and we understand that he struggles to escape minor-key
situations—that is, rather dark ones—in the course of his progress through life.

Through the fifth and ninth symphonies, Helen and Alex “find” themselves and the directions in which they should go forward in life. At the same time, they accept the existence of something beyond human understanding, an influence which leads them toward their respective futures. The symphonies suggest to them that there is something beyond human experience in their lives if they listen to the music with their “inner ear” (*LWBG* 69).

For Helen and Alex to realize the presence of something beyond human understanding, they had to be exposed to the opposite of “good” or “right” suggested by the symphonies. As Burgess interprets good and evil, “Man is defined by his capacity to choose courses of moral action. If he chooses good, he must have the possibility of choosing evil instead: evil is a theological necessity” (*ABACO* xvii). Affected by the presence of evil, both Helen and Alex undergo a spiritual death. However, this is the necessary precondition for them to attain a new life of their own following a spiritual rebirth. The symphonies, which may function as God, make Helen and Alex see the world in its cruelty, full of “panic and emptiness.”

As an illustrative side-note, Burgess similarly explores the issues of death and God through musical themes in his narrative of the main character Enderby in another of his novels, *The Complete Enderby:*

Well, you die then, gasp your last, then you’re sort of wandering, free of your body. You wander around and then you come into contact with a sort of big thing. What is this big thing? God, if you like. What’s it, or shehit, [sic] like? I would say, … like a big symphony, the page of the score of infinite length, the number of instruments infinite but all bound into one big unity. This big symphony plays itself for ever and
ever. And who listens to it? It listens to itself. Enjoys itself for ever and ever and ever. It doesn’t give a bugger whether you hear it or not.” (429)

While reading an author’s intentions clearly is not always possible, it is plausible to say that Forster and Burgess use classical music in their works because they believe that listening deeply to serious music helps people identify important issues and themes in their life and can, potentially, lead them toward spiritual enlightenment. Both authors implicitly trusted the power of music. As Burgess’s Enderby says, perhaps as Burgess’s spokesman, “Oh, God. Well, believing is neither here nor there, you know. I believe in God and so what? I don’t believe in God and so what again? It doesn’t affect his own position, does it?” (CE 428).

Believing in music, Alex says, “You can start your Ode to Joy” (ABACO 50). After all, “God knew what he was doing” (LWBG 75).

Literature, for both Forster and Burgess, was the best medium in which to explore their beliefs in the spiritually regenerating power of music. In fact, to understand their intentions at all one must appreciate what the musical elements and structures are doing in their works: the stories—their narrative structures and the characters themselves—are connected by musical pieces. Nevertheless, if we understand the significance of the symphonies and other musical elements in Forster’s and Burgess’s works, then the authors’ metaphoric statements about life in their novels can open up for the readers as well. What Forster and Burgess suggest through their literary works is what Beethoven suggests in his musical compositions: the colossal inner struggles of human beings to transcend their own nature and transform themselves spiritually.

In the next installment of this series of papers, I will examine the religious backgrounds of Forster and Burgess in relation to their musical backgrounds. Both men were raised as Christians, and both strayed from orthodoxy in later life; both
were piano players, and both were playwrights who adapted their own literary works and those of others to stage versions with music. I would like to end this paper with some words by Burgess that sum up what he, and Forster, and I myself believe: “Literature is not easy, but without literature we are lost.” These words are inscribed on a window of the building that houses the International Anthony Burgess Foundation in Manchester, England. I would ask all readers of literature to remember and ponder them.

Bibliography


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