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Proust and music: The anxiety of competence

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These few general remarks to begin with. What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless. I should mention before going any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means. Can one be ephetic otherwise than unawares?

Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable

Propped up in his bed, for all the world the quintessential fin-de-siècle invalid, Marcel Proust listened to the perplexing sound of music far away. He heard it from beyond the walls of his room, through a connecting tube: the famous théâtrophone, a permanent subscription telephone line that could connect Proust’s apartment in the boulevard Haussmann to a number of Parisian theatres, opera houses and concert halls. The operatic scenes that succeeded in penetrating those walls were not scenes at all: they were disembodied voices, issuing instructions for the visual imagination. Those moments that progressed further – onto the pages of A la recherche du temps perdu – were of course even less corporeal: both invisible and soundless. In the passage from opera house to author to novel, who can say how much was lost? All that remains are words, hundreds of thousands of them, pouring noiselessly into a space where the music has sunk without trace; the fevered patient added reams more supplementary material (inflation, substitutions, emendations) as fast as the opera came in through the wall, papering – soundproofing – the room with words.

These words can be a barrier: how are we to read (how hear) the purely literary manifestation of music? Such an interpretative act would be a kind of penetration similar to that effected by the music itself: it would mean breaking through the wall of words. It is clear that Proust himself consciously kept in mind this distinction between inside and outside. One of his favourite operatic moments, one he repeatedly dialled up with the aid of the théâtrophone, was the emergence from the castle vaults in Act III scene 3 of Pelléas et Mélisande:

GOLAUD:
Sentez-vous l’odeur de mort qui monte? […]
PPELLÉAS:
J’étouffe ici . . . sortons.

2 Other instances of music on tap in his bedroom, even live, could be cited: the command performances given there by the Poulet Quartet, for example. See George Painter, Marcel Proust (London, 1989), II, 168, and Ronald Hayman, Proust (London, 1990), 343.
3 A la rechercneh du temps perdu was originally published between 1913 and 1927, initially by Grasset and subsequently Gallimard. All quotations here will be from the new Pléiade edition (Paris, 1987–89; hereafter A la recherche) and C. K. Scott Moncrieff’s translation, Remembrance of Things Past, revised by Terence Kilmartin (Harmondsworth, 1983; hereafter Remembrance).
GOLAUD:
Oui, sortons. (*ils sortent en silence.* RIDEAU.)

**Scène iii: Une terrasse au sortir des souterrains.**

PELLEAS:
Ah! je respire enfin!

[GOLAUD: Can you smell the reek of death rising up? [. . .] PELLEAS: I’m suffocating here . . . let’s go outside. GOLAUD: Yes, let’s go. *They go out in silence.* CURTAIN. **Scene iii: A terrace at the mouth of the vaults.** PELLEAS: Ah! I can breathe again!] 4

In one sense Proust, confined to his bed, was imprisoned in his own stifling cave. The first-person narrator of the novel, not identical to Proust but sharing certain concerns (a neurosis about writing, for example), may on occasion stand in for him; at this stage, go where he cannot. The narrator is both inside, and telling, his own story: *A la recherche* is at once fiction and autobiography; Marcel both is and is not Marcel Proust. The material of the narrative has its basis in the outside world, including the pieces of music that Proust heard and loved; but the narrator has a special kind of insider’s knowledge: he can hear music that is fictional. It might seem as though we are characterising writing as the process by which physical material passing through a sensory aperture may be converted into immaterial concepts, music being the object in question, and the aperture, literary sensibility: the earpiece connected through the wall, issuing forth sound. A certain idea of hearing will indeed be integral to our approach, one that, like some recent opera criticism, asks about the capacity to hear and the reliability of the hearer. 5 We will home in on certain instances of hearing in the novel, asking what, if anything, we can aurally reconstruct from the verbal enactments.

Although the image of Proust in bed, writing furiously to keep up with the sound (or keep it at bay), is attractive, we do not intend to suggest that he was some kind of musical stenographer, subsuming into literary culture everything he heard. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that what is represented in *A la recherche* is not real music at all but Music – a nineteenth-century Romantic literary trope bearing little or no relationship with actual pieces, and this might very well modify the image we are putting together of his aural capacities. Proustian music is certainly mixed indissolubly with love (jealous love), with vice (often a troubled Proustian synonym for homosexuality – or at least for a hostile world’s perception of it), and with ideas of redemption: a combination of familiar Romantic modes. What makes *A la recherche* special is the role of music in the working out of an enabling aesthetic, of a way in which to write a novel.

If music in this novel were a completely literary construct, musicologists might wonder why it warranted their attention and expertise. But one of the most

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4 Debussy, * Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act III scenes 2–3. Proust mentioned the scene several times in letters, and even referred to it obliquely in the novel (*A la recherche* III, 208; *Remembrance* II, 842); see Painter, *Marcel Proust*, II, 168.

5 The obligatory point of departure for work of this kind is now Carolyn Abbate’s *Unsung Voices* (Princeton, 1991). If there is a new voice to be teased out from behind *A la recherche du temps perdu*, we follow the line taken by Abbate in not simply assuming that it must be the author’s.
significant composers within the book has carried into it with him one of the most
significant interpretative traditions of nineteenth-century music: the composition of
Ala recherche spanned the heyday of French Wagnerisme. Wagner is an object to be
read from differing perspectives, and we can choose to privilege, on the one hand,
all-too-familiar Music History facts, which often fail to take account of the
culture-wide influence of the composer, or on the other, the representation of
musical—historical givens, with a great deal of poetic licence.6

One literary-critical approach to the problem of this over-musical text has been
to conflate a Romantic conception of music with Wagnerian thematic structure, an
uncritical mapping of music on to text which takes for granted a dubious metaphor:
that the novel is ‘musical’ at the level of structure as well.7 Narrator and author are
neatly identified with one another: the novel that the narrator is to write is happily
accepted as being Ala recherche itself, and the inspiration of music is turned into the
magic ingredient that made it all happen. Such grand narratives are disingenuously
totalising. The underlying assumption is that Music is a means to explanation, rather
than its object. Music has not been broken down and investigated, but rather
transplanted – transposed – wholesale, as a ready-made metaphorical system, into
an alien environment.

Although listening closely only for the music in the text, we are well aware that
no strand of Proust’s work can be successfully isolated. The imbrication and
porosity of his writing is such that evocation and appellation draw forth constant
connections, both implicit and explicit: nothing takes place without being sucked
into a web of other happenings, explanations, themes. ‘Themes’ here should be
understood in two distinct but closely related senses: as critical reduction, which
seeks to explain through summary; or as privileged musical material repeated, the
sound consciously or unconsciously remembering itself. This may well be the source
of a large part of the reassurance critics draw from mentioning Proust and Wagner
in the same breath: both artists, as a consequence of the length and self-referentiality
of their work, run the same risk of thematisation. Themes like ‘Proust and Wagner’
or even ‘Proust and Music’ tend to be played out only in works of criticism, however,
not straightforwardly on the Proustian page. Rather than exposing any
Proustian structural subtext, this article will instead concentrate on the relationship
between music as an economy of cultural currency rather than a fixity of cultural
meaning, the idea of competence, and an anxiety about the assimilation of the
concept of music in and into Ala recherche as well as in fin-de-siecle literary culture
generally.

6 The cultural currency of Wagnerisme in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France,
particularly as evinced by the writings of Baudelaire and Mallarme (the former’s essay,
Richard Wagner et Tannhiiuser a Paris [1861], and the latter’s sonnet Hommage a Richard Wagner
[1885], publ. 1886), has been well researched. The most interesting aspect of the Wagnerisme
phenomenon is its capacity for self-propagation: literary reception of Wagner is always, as in
the case of Ala recherche, potentially the reception of ideas about Wagner which are
themselves already literary digests. Thus, the music is represented only at one remove or
more, if at all.

7 The spirit of this approach is by no means dead: see Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Proust musicien
(Paris, 1984); translated by Derrick Puffett as Proust as Musician (Cambridge, 1989).
Certain musical echoes famously return through the novel – snatches of music that seem to assume disproportionate significance, and which are thus taken by critics to act as structural signposts.\(^8\) Central among these is the petite phrase, a fragment of music from a violin sonata by Vinteuil (a fictional composer), ‘heard’ at several points in the novel.\(^9\) The ‘hearer’ of this music is initially Swann, a gentleman we first meet in the narrator’s country village, but whose real life takes place in Paris. If there is a certain similarity between the narrator and Proust himself, Swann is in turn a highly specialised role model and Doppelgänger for the narrator, for reasons that will become clear. He has four important encounters with the sonata in question, and the piece is subsequently taken up by the narrator himself, prior to an encounter with Wagner, specifically with *Tristan und Isolde*\(^10\). Swann may be deemed a kind of intratextual palimpsest for Marcel, an important example being his miserable love affair (with Odette, a woman of doubtful moral virtue and undoubted stupidity; the affair referred to in the subtitle *Un amour de Swann*, the second part of *Du côté de chez Swann*), which precedes and partly predicts the course of the narrator’s affair with Albertine. Where Swann’s song is clear, however (he actually marries the object of his love), the narrator’s is always complex; the completedness of Swann’s story sets into relief the nebulousness of the narrator’s. Swann has, in this sense, the status of theme for the narrator: not only is the former’s presence recurrent (and thematic in the musical sense), but, in that Swann’s story is narrated in the third person, it is transformed into a theme on a grand scale (in the reductive, literary critical sense).

Swann’s neat thematisability should lead us to suspect that the connections between the two characters are not straightforward. In narratological terms, Swann should be on a par with the narrator; their respective statuses should be equal, give or take a little more emphasis on the first-person protagonist. But the equality between them is erased precisely because Swann’s story is written in the third person as though by an omniscient narrator. Everywhere else in the novel the first-person narrator assumes a necessarily ambiguous double status, existing both inside his own story and telling it – in telling Swann’s story for him, the narrator is quite literally putting him down. The narrator defines himself against Swann, and in this context we will see this from the quality of observations each is able to make about the petite phrase (and, later, from the narrator’s choice of a real composer, Wagner, to talk about at greater length).\(^11\) Swann, it seems, remains tied to the ‘meaning’ of a

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\(^9\) Mention is also made of Debussy, Franck, Fauré, Schumann and many other composers, both in their own right and as part of the composite that is Vinteuil. Wagner and his operatic corpus are of course referred to many times.

\(^10\) We stop short of Vinteuil’s Septet, a piece that appears only much later in the novel, and the hearing of which, in traditional readings of Proust, enables the narrator to set off on the final leg of his journey towards being a writer. Thematising projects have tended to add together all the musical moments of the novel as though there were some coherent and natural progression between them.

\(^11\) Proust originally assigned to Wagner (specifically to Parsifal) the function of mentor. He was to be the custodian of the Proustian Grail, a writer’s vocation. In the end Vinteuil’s Septet usurps this pre-eminent position.
snippet of a fictive composition, whereas the narrator moves on to deal with (canonical) signifying practices that have received much more critical endorsement. Is the issue of musical competence to be linked with that of the relative ‘reality’ of the cultural objects we find in *A la recherche*?

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The first time we ‘hear’ the petite phrase, Swann is hearing it for the second time. The Verdurin salon is the first of a series of party set-pieces where music is apprehended while being played for public consumption – albeit a rather select public.12 The musical phrase, at first hearing, had had a peculiar power to move him:

L’année précédente, dans une soirée, il avait entendu une œuvre musicale exécutée au piano et au violon. D’abord, il n’avait goûté que la qualité matérielle des sons sécrétés par les instruments. Et c’avait déjà été un grand plaisir quand, au-dessous de la petite ligne du violon, mince, résistante, dense et directrice, il avait vu tout d’un coup chercher à s’élever en un clapotement liquide, la masse de la partie de piano, multiforme, indivise, plane et entrechoquée comme la mauve agitation des flots que charme et bémolise le clair de lune. Mais à un moment donné, sans pouvoir nettement distinguer un contour, donner un nom à ce qui lui plaisait, charmé tout d’un coup, il avait cherché à recueillir la phrase ou l’harmonie – il ne savait lui-même – qui passait et qui lui avait ouvert plus largement l’âme, comme certaines odeurs de roses circulant dans l’air humide du soir ont la propriété de dilater nos narines. Peut-être est-ce parce qu’il ne savait pas la musique qu’il avait pu éprouver une impression aussi confuse, une de ces impressions qui sont peut-être pourtant les seules purement musicales, intemporelles, entièrement originales, irréductibles à tout autre ordre d’impressions.

[The year before, at an evening party, he had heard a piece of music played on the piano and violin. At first he had appreciated only the material quality of the sounds which those instruments secreted. And it had been a source of keen pleasure when, below the delicate line of the violin-part, slender but robust, compact and commanding, he had suddenly become aware of the mass of the piano-part beginning to emerge in a sort of liquid rippling of sound, multiform but indivisible, smooth yet restless, like the deep blue tumult of the sea, silvered and charmed into a minor key by the moonlight. But then at a certain moment, without being able to distinguish any clear outline, or to give a name to what was pleasing him, suddenly enraptured, he had tried to grasp the phrase or harmony – he did not know which – that had just been played and that had opened and expanded his soul, as the fragrance of certain roses, wafted upon the moist air of evening, has the power of dilating one’s nostrils. Perhaps it was owing to his ignorance of music that he had received so confused an impression, one of those that are nonetheless the only purely musical impressions, limited in their extent, entirely original, and irreducible to any other kind.]13

Here Swann recalls what had taken place at the level of his own ability to listen on that first occasion: he had been able to hear only the ‘material quality’ of the sounds, unable to grasp the musical phrase. Suddenly the narrator interposes his own voice,

hypothesising on the back of Swann’s dilettante groping for meaning that confused impressions are the only purely musical ones.\footnote{A conclusion apparently in line with the thesis of Proust’s 1908–9 critical essay \textit{Contre Sainte-Beuve précédé de Pastiches et mélanges et suivi de Essais et articles}, ed. Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris, 1971), in which acts of intuition are privileged over acts of intelligence. Although written before Proust had formulated his project for \textit{À la recherche}, and left unfinished, \textit{Contre Sainte-Beuve} forms the kernel of the later work. The narrator in this instance seems to credit Swann with the attributes of a good listener. At this, his second encounter with the sonata, Swann is only hearing a salon pianist play a reduction, but describes a note sustained – for two whole bars – \textit{above} the piano texture. To the extent that this novel is supremely about remembrance, Swann here fulfils several Proustian criteria for artistic success: remembering the sound of the original violin part as well as relying on his intuition (\textit{À la recherche} I, 208; \textit{Remembrance} I, 230).}

We hear at this point strong resonances with the disingenuous self-justification of Proust’s contemporary French composers, principally Debussy, on whose sound-bites the ‘Impressionist’ label is mostly based. If any construal of music is being rehearsed uncritically by Proust at this point, it would appear on this evidence to be situated more in the French \textit{fin de siècle} than with Romantic tropes already half a century old. Comparing piano music with the sea, the movement of water on which the reflection of the moonlight is cast is described as ‘mauve’ (not ‘deep blue’ as the translation has it), in an expressive mode borrowed from late nineteenth-century French poetry. From Verlaine to Mallarmé, mundane objects are attributed unexpected colours.\footnote{See Vladimir Nabokov, \textit{Lectures on Literature}, ed. Fredson Bowers (London, 1980), 207–49, on the uses of the colour red in \textit{À la recherche}, and also Jean-Pierre Richard’s excellent essay, ‘La Faindre de Verlaine’, in his \textit{Poésie et profondeur} (Paris, 1955), 165–85, on the fading of metaphorical valency.} This, however, is only part of the post-Baudelairean synaesthetic effect that Swann is trying to put together. The ‘flots’ are smoothed over, attenuated, but the verb used (\textit{bémoliser}) means ‘to flatten’ only in the strict musical sense. Moreover, the instrument performing this flattening, that Verlaine favourite, the ‘clair de lune’, had a particular currency at the time in various poetic (and above all musical) manifestations.\footnote{Verlaine’s ‘Clair de lune’ (from the \textit{Fêtes galantes}) was set by several composers, including Debussy and Fauré. The metaphorical force of moonlight in \textit{fin-de-siècle} literary and musical referential terms was itself, however, already attenuated almost out of existence: Swann hears music in an inescapably nineteenth-century way.} This calquing of musical words is clearly not the same as the celebrated ‘musicality’ of Symbolist poetry: ‘bémolise’ juggles not only its \textit{exotic} semantic quality, imported from a ‘foreign’ technical language, but also its quite \textit{prosaic} meaning within that language. Does Swann think of the word because it is musical or because it contains the signifier ‘mou’, or ‘molle’ (‘soft’)? Although Symbolist thinking is culturally nearer to Proust’s writing than this new modulation – the use of technical words to undertake metaphorical work – we nonetheless sense a site of impenetrability. The wall between Swann and music remains unbreached; it seems to be an instance of the aporia with which we began.

Swann may have difficulty expressing how he hears music; the narrator, on the other hand, continually hints at ways of setting down music in words. When he is telling (in omniscient mode) Swann’s story, as the extract above shows, the key
process for this is memory. The text moves from the *sine materia* of the music’s quicksilver quality to a more practical view of the way memory works on music: ‘comme un ouvrier qui travaille à établir des fondations durables au milieu des flots, en fabriquant pour nous des fac-similés de ces phrases fugitives’. Swann’s memory furnishes him with a copy, or ‘immediate transcript’, of music. Transcription, as an act of writing, always draws attention to the poetic process – especially when it doubles, as it does here, as a mental process. To the extent that Swann’s memory provides him with the means of recognising, of re-creating, the musical continuum, it is as reductive as any musical commentary; but he still has a vivid sense of the wide expanse of its allusions: the little phrase seems to propose sensual delights of which he would never have conceived without the music – delights he then finds he cannot do without. At home, later, he compares himself to a man into whose life a female passer-by has walked, enriching it with a new beauty, though he is unsure if he will ever see her again.

This evokes further familiar discourse identifying music with the feminine and the elusive – and the sexually corrupt. Swann talks of ‘possessing’ the sonata; of procuring himself a copy, of having it (words whose sexual connotations are common to both languages). For Swann, wanting to know music is an achievable act of memory, rather than an eternally unsatisfied desire in the Romantic-syphilitic tradition. It is as if, even at this early playing of the music in question, Swann is not satisfied with the approbation of the narrator: in terms of the play of voices in the text, he is deaf to the warning that he has heard all there is to hear (that his initial confused impressions were the right ones). Swann is trapped in cliché throughout the passage – so much so, as we have read, that the very word ‘sonata’ brings on images of moonlight – but nonetheless, as secondary protagonist in *A la recherche*, he is permitted a relatively high degree of reflexivity. His epistemology is always self-consciously circumscribed by confirmable details, and untainted by personal opinion:

Il s’efforçait de ne jamais exprimer avec cœur une opinion intime sur les choses, mais de fournir des détails matériels qui valaient en quelque sorte par eux-mêmes et lui permettaient de ne pas donner sa mesure. [...] Parfois malgré tout il se laissait aller à émettre un jugement sur une œuvre, [...] mais il donnait alors à ses paroles un ton ironique.

[He took care never to express with any warmth a personal opinion about anything, but instead would supply facts and details which were valid enough in themselves and excused him from showing his real capacities. [...] Sometimes, in spite of himself, he would let

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17 ‘Like a labourer who toils at the laying down of firm foundations beneath the tumult of the waves, by fashioning for us facsimiles of those fugitive phrases’ (*A la recherche*, 206; *Remembrance*, 228). A digression away from Swann’s perspective is taking place, the content of which (metaphorical musing on labour or fabrication in the musical context) will have important ramifications.

18 Once again Swann’s imagination turns out to be populated with nineteenth-century intertexts. This well-worn trope, the unknown female passer-by, was immortalised by Charles Baudelaire in ‘A une passante’: ‘Fugitive beauté / Dont le regard m’a fait soudainement renaitre, / Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité? / ... Car j’ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais, / O toi que j’euve aimée, ô toi qui le savais!’ In *Tableaux parisiens* from *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris, 1964), 114.
himself go so far as to express an opinion on a work of art, [. . .] but then he would cloak his words in a tone of irony.]19

For Swann knowledge is possession, the appropriation of names. At this stage he rejects the inexpressible in favour of what he can rationalise – verbalise – to himself. Yet his naming of music is fraught: he has an anxiety of competence.

When we ‘hear’ the petite phrase for the second time, it has been transformed into the ‘national anthem’ of Swann’s and Odette’s – as yet chaste – love. The couple are serenaded again at the Verdurin salon with this musical extract: their status as couple, in fact, is itself coupled with a musical object; the music pre-empts their love, coming before it, and preserves it. The petite phrase is a seal of Swann’s love, triangulating with the dyad of their affair, like a satellite orbiting their world, bouncing signals back at them – or at least at Swann. The causal chain linking Swann to Odette is put together soundlessly, but the music is transformed into the outward manifestation of a possible union. Much more sure of his material – in the sense both of the composition of the phrase in question and the way he will articulate it verbally; sure of his lines, as it were – Swann this time yields to the Romantic definition: music at once an erotic signifier and a fleeting, regretted presence. At this moment of naming the petite phrase their national anthem Swann feels that he can detect disappointment in it:

[It seemed to be aware how vain, how hollow was the happiness to which it showed the way. In its airy grace there was the sense of something over and done with, like the mood of philosophic detachment which follows an outburst of vain regret. But all this mattered little to him; he contemplated the little phrase less in its own light [. . .] than as a pledge, a token of his love, which made even the Verdurins and their young pianist think of Odette at the same time as himself – which bound her to him by a lasting tie.]20

The standard English version here fails to capture the importance of the word ‘souvenir’ by translating it as ‘token’. If music, the petite phrase, is a ‘souvenir’ of a love as yet unconsummated, then it is already a token, yes, but of a memory – of an event that has never taken place. Swann projects himself into the future of a love that will be over – to savour a Schadenfreude of combing over one’s memories after an affair collapses – before the affair has even happened.

Here Swann elides two conceptions of musical theme: hearing immediately equivalent to meaning and content given up only gradually over time. For him the

19 A la recherche I, 207; Remembrance I, 229.
20 A la recherche I, 215; Remembrance I, 238.
petite phrase already hints at how it will be developed, shows its thematic potential. He deliberately avoids deciding whether music should be construed as instant gratification or within a self-consciously virtuous tradition of structural hearing. If any musico-literary structural analogy is applicable to A la recherche, it seems only to be a product of Swann’s unconscious; but, as will become clear later, thematic working-out is an important idea for the novel in even more literal (rather than literary) ways. The music has meaning, signifies to Swann, even as it resists his attempts on it. It is at once ignorant of, and knowing about, his love story. Odette’s crassness puts his illusion into relief:

‘Qu’avez-vous besoin du reste?’ lui avait-elle dit. ‘C’est ça notre morceau.’ Et même, souffrant de songer, au moment où elle passait si proche et pourtant à l’infini, que tandis qu’elle s’adressait à eux, elle ne les connaissait pas, il regretta presque qu’elle eût une signification, une beauté intrinsèque et fixe, étrangère à eux.

[‘Why do you want the rest?’ she had asked him. ‘Our little bit; that’s all we need.’ Indeed, agonised by the reflection, as it floated by, so near and yet so infinitely remote, that while it was addressed to them it did not know them, he almost regretted that it had a meaning of its own, an intrinsic and unalterable beauty, extraneous to themselves.]21

Something important is said here about comprehension. The music continues to be alien, even as it is being apprehended, because knowledge of it, Swann now concedes, is necessarily an admission of its resistance. There is a hard centre of otherness that deflects the hearer’s projections.

Swann’s partial realisation – about the illusory nature of his relationship both with music and with Odette – is fleshed out in the third ‘hearing’. At yet another dinner given by the Verdurins, Swann tries to treat the petite phrase as a friendly ear: his anthropomorphism shifts from that of the unknown woman to the (sexually unappealing) figure of the confidante:22

Sous l’agitation des trémolos de violon qui la protégeaient de leur tenue frémissante à deux octaves de là – et comme dans un pays de montagne, derrière l’immobilité apparente et vertigineuse d’une cascade, on aperçoit, deux cents pieds plus bas, la forme minuscule d’une promeneuse – la petite phrase venait d’apparaître, lointaine, gracieuse, protégée par le long déferlement du rideau transparent, incessant et sonore. Et Swann, en son cœur, s’adressa à elle comme à une confidente de son amour, comme à une amie d’Odette qui devrait bien lui dire de ne pas faire attention à ce Forcheville.

[Beneath the restless tremolos of the violin part which protected it with their throbbing sostenuto two octaves above it – and as in a mountainous country, behind the seeming immobility of a vertiginous waterfall, one descries, two hundred feet below, the tiny form of a woman walking in the valley – the little phrase had just appeared, distant, graceful,

21 A la recherche I, 215; Remembrance I, 238–9.
22 Notice the gender of Swann’s personification of the petite phrase: more than just grammatically feminine in A la recherche, it is entirely consistent with many other nineteenth-century representations of music.
protected by the long, gradual unfurling of its transparent, incessant and sonorous curtain. And Swann in his heart of hearts, turned to it as a confidant of his love, as to a friend of Odette who would surely tell her to pay no attention to this Forcheville.]23

Confidantes, of course – like unknown beautiful women passing wistful artistic types in the street – are, properly, silent. They listen to confidences; they are repositories of secrets; their job is hearing. And yet the phrase can only be listened to, it only appeals. It cannot hear the appeal Swann is making, and this different prosopopoeia – of the phrase as distant confidante – reinforces its satellite function relative to Swann’s consciousness. Identifying it as a voice that might speak, and speak for him – in this case to his errant lover – goes some way towards bringing it under his control. Notwithstanding Swann’s doomed attempts at some kind of lyric address to the music, therefore, we may relate what emerges from the illusion of the petite phrase as expression of emotional life more closely to artistic life: we become aware that, rather than seeking understanding, Swann’s discourse reflects his rhetorical intentions. He abandons hearing in preparation for speech.

4

Swann’s fourth and final hearing of the Vinteuil sonata, at a soirée held by Mme de Sainte-Euverte, is more than a remembrance: it is a reliving of the time when he was happy in love, and it is excruciating. Swann is no longer in love with Odette, though still connected to her through jealousy. The little piece of music returns his past to him as though it were the present: ‘Il retrouva tout ce qui de ce bonheur perdu avait fixé à jamais la spécifique et volatile essence; il revit tout’.24 And yet the relation between the petite phrase and his love, as we have seen by tracing its origins in the text, is purely fictitious. A series of precipitations and misprisions has linked the phrase to Swann’s understanding of love, and by metonymy – almost because Odette happened to be there when the phrase was being played – to a particular woman. Musicians are, of course, familiar with this kind of identification; indeed, it is how, in one way or another, we have always attempted to understand texted musical works. Connections have been made, meanings forged, by virtue of contiguity, in the score, of word and music. (The same wrong-headed insistence that fixed ‘meaning’ always be present is a feature that many of our analyses risk sharing with Swann.)

We have arrived at some kind of crossover: music in the text, in Swann’s descriptive efforts, has approached the position of text in music. This interdisciplinary switch matches the exchange being prepared in the extracts from the novel: the voice of the narrator increasingly intrudes into that of Swann, and indeed it is the narrator’s views we shall shortly be hearing. The importance of the idea of critical description, of providing names for objects that do not yet have them (objects of recent creation), has also increased: we are about to leave the domain of private meanings and enter the canon.

23 A la recherche I, 260; Remembrance I, 288 (Forcheville is Odette’s probable lover).
24 ‘He now recovered everything that had fixed unalterably the specific, volatile essence of that lost happiness; he could see it all’ (A la recherche I, 340; Remembrance I, 376).
Swann persistently tries to tie the petite phrase to his own affairs: the mistake he makes lies in attempting to marry artefact to lived experience. Moreover, he doesn’t realise his error, and goes on to repeat it, this time gambling much higher stakes, casually invoking the gold standard of the Ur-love affair:

La phrase de Vinteuil avait, comme tel thème de Tristan par exemple, qui nous représente aussi une certaine acquisition sentimentale, épousé notre condition mortelle, pris quelque chose d’humain qui était assez touchant. Son sort était lié à l’avenir, à la réalité de notre âme dont elle était un des ornements les plus particuliers, les mieux différenciés.

[Vinteuil’s phrase, like some theme, say, in Tristan, which represents to us also a certain emotional accretion, had espoused our mortal state, had endued a vesture of humanity that was peculiarly affecting. Its destiny was linked to the future, to the reality of the human soul, of which it was one of the most special and distinctive ornaments.]25

Swann’s language is all marriage, touching, linking: he is desperately trying to ground art in experience. And our attribution of opinion to Swann, as opposed to the omniscient narrator, runs into trouble. ‘Nous’ signals an opening out of the narrative into the tentative formulation of a general law about music, just as the comparison with Tristan, a canonical intertext, signals a deliberate widening of the frame of reference. Had Un amour de Swann been published on its own, this blurred free indirect speech would be relatively unproblematic. A text that sets up third-person against first-person narration, however, forces us to work out the underlying assumptions informing clashing narrative voices. Once again, this looks like the narrator of Un amour de Swann endorsing Swann’s critical faculties, but the reception models are different. Swann’s, as we have seen, is a late nineteenth-century Humanist (redemptive) conception of the work of art, while in the first-person narrator’s later musing, there is a clear sense of the artwork standing independently of its creator. Will the narrator, then, make a virtue of this separation: does he celebrate, rather than regret, as Swann does, the strangeness of the musical object?

When the first-person narrator, the young Marcel (enamoured of the daughter of Swann and Odette, but also confusedly entranced by Odette herself), hears the Vinteuil sonata, it is ironically Odette who plays it to him. Later, he too finds he knows it without being able to remember it. It becomes latent in his mind. A telling comment is passed about this memorable non-memory:

Pour n’avoir pu aimer qu’en des temps successifs tout ce que m’apportait cette Sonate, je ne la possédai jamais tout entière: elle ressemblait à la vie. Mais, moins décevants que la vie, ces grands chefs-d’œuvre ne commencent pas par nous donner ce qu’ils ont de meilleur.

[Since I was able to enjoy everything that this sonata had to give me only in a succession of hearings, I never possessed it in its entirety: it was like life itself. But, less disappointing than life, great works of art do not begin by giving us the best of themselves.]26

Swann’s anxiety about reception competence – about whether the work of art has anything to tell us, and, more importantly, whether he himself can decode its

25 A la recherche I, 344; Remembrance I, 381.
26 A la recherche I, 521; Remembrance I, 571.
message – here becomes fused with an anxiety about the artwork’s own competence: to manage its future independently; to survive. Just as he says we only understand in successive phases, the narrator seems to be appealing for understanding on behalf of the poor misunderstood artwork, battling to carve its own posterity. At this lofty sentiment, however, biographical accountancy can restrain itself no longer. What we are dealing with is not a Gesamtkunstwerk, but a tiny fictional musical phrase. The time has come to call up for ourselves some kind of ‘hearing’ of what the author had in mind. It won’t be easy: the petite phrase has – as do many of the characters and anecdotes in A la recherche – not one, but multiple origins.

The ‘Vinteuil Sources’ are hinted at by Proust in a dedicatory letter to Jacques de Lacretelle, and picked up in Painter’s biography. Proust informs us that ‘la phrase charmante mais enfin médiocre d’une sonate pour piano et violon de Saint-Saëns, musicien que je n’aime pas’ is the basis of the petite phrase. Painter tells us that Proust repeatedly asked his friend Reynaldo Hahn to play this little tune for him, and that it was in effect the ‘national anthem’ of Proust’s love for Hahn (see Ex. 1). Proust goes on to say that he would probably have been thinking of the Good Friday music from Parsifal in the description of the soirée Sainte-Euverte. Later at the same event, when the piano and violin talk to each other like two birds, he tells us he was thinking of a Franck sonata. There are also suggestions that a ‘prélude de Lohengrin’, a ‘chose de Schubert’, and a ‘ravissant morceau de piano de Fauré’ were all in his mind when he was writing Swann’s encounter with the petite phrase at the Verdurin salon: the origins of the little phrase thus shift across several pieces of ‘real’ music. Swann was able to re-create in his memory the violin part from hearing only a piano reduction at that event, but Proust’s creative memory has gone further, effortlessly combining textures and themes from completely different works. No wonder Marcel ‘never possessed it in its entirety’: the sonata does not exist to be possessed. We have explored how Swann tries to co-opt the sonata for his own purposes, and how a reference to Tristan signals confusion between Swann’s voice and an omniscient narrator’s (one of many such slippages in the novel). Understanding musical competence seems to boil down to self-justification for both Swann and Marcel, who here seems to be running the risk of wanting the sonata to make meaning for him as well. As though prompted by some unconscious memory – some return of the repressed – Marcel, as Swann had before him, also has a look at Tristan.

Almost two thousand pages later, in La Prisonnière, the narrator has a little time to himself (when he is not spying on his own errant lover, Albertine), and sits down

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28 ‘The charming, but ultimately mediocre, phrase from a sonata for piano and violin by Saint-Saëns, a musician I don’t like.’
29 See also Nattiez (see n. 7).
Proust and music

Ex. 1 Saint-Saëns, Violin Sonata No. 1 in D minor, 1885 (bars 76–83)

at the piano to play the sonata. Once again, the petite phrase bears the weight of a character’s nostalgia, in this case harking back to a once-desired future as an artist, the music enlisted to sustain a retrospective structure. Were this the whole story, however, the narrator would fail to distinguish himself from Swann, since both characters would then be reducible to a trope of nostalgia — and perfect readability. Instead, the Vinteuil sonata, a fictive composite itself made up of half-remembered, half-invented music, is replaced by a real piece: Tristan und Isolde. When Swann listened in public, he was thrown back upon himself, and music brought back to him painful memories in their entirety, apparently obeying the Proustian law of the involuntary. Even when mentioning Tristan, he has implied that pieces of music should be enslaved as ‘captives divines’ to ensure human immortality. Here, however, the musings of the narrator in private performance are instead drawn outwards into a far wider frame of reference:

En jouant cette mesure, et bien que Vinteuil fût là en train d’exprimer un rêve qui fût resté tout à fait étranger à Wagner, je ne pus m’empêcher de murmurer: ‘Tristan!’ avec le sourire

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30 A la recherche III, 664; Remembrance III, 155. On the preceding page, a note from Albertine — reassuring the narrator that she will return home — clearly names him Marcel. The narrator’s name — hence his Identity — is a famous Proustian acrostic. Is it significant that, at a moment of musical discovery, the narrator also ‘comes out’ from behind his onomastic vacillations? Does this de-cipherment signal the presence in the text of an authorial manifesto, or is it merely further textual seduction, leading us to useless biographical aporia?

31 A la recherche I, 345; Remembrance I, 381.
qu’a l’ami d’une famille retrouvant quelque chose de l’aïeul dans une intonation, un geste du petit-fils qui ne l’a pas connu.

[As I played the passage, and although Vinteuil had been trying to express in it a fancy which would have been wholly foreign to Wagner, I could not help murmuring ‘Tristan,’ with the smile of an old family friend discovering a trace of the grandfather in an intonation, a gesture of the grandson who has never set eyes on him.]32

He deliberately – physically – overlays the Vinteuil sonata with the vocal score of the opera: ‘Et comme on regarde alors une photographie qui permet de préciser la ressemblance, par-dessus la Sonate de Vinteuil, j’installai sur le pupitre la partition de Tristan’.33 The palimpsestic overlaying of Vinteuil with Wagner is signalled in a glorious nexus of Proust’s favourite explanatory metaphors: first in terms of genealogical recognition, the idea of family likeness between musicians; then the photograph is enlisted as a guarantee of authenticity; and finally in terms of the literal overlaying of fiction with an extra-textual referent, Vinteuil’s score is replaced by Wagner’s. But once again, there are biographical grumblings. Although Vinteuil’s music is a composite, that composite is not utterly devoid of its own foundations in extra-textual referents, and the most clearly signalled source, the Saint-Saëns sonata, bears no trace of the Wagnerian echo which is here supposed to catalyse Marcel’s thoughts on music and artistic creativity. In Example 1, there is not a Tristan chord in sight, although the passage in Proust alludes to a type of artistic influence – or rather, to a critical procedure – which has become familiar to us all. Spotting harmonic indebtedness to Wagner (especially Tristan und Isolde) was almost as popular a mode of Wagner reception as was the categorisation of leitmotifs – so much so that Debussy ironised the relationship in Pelléas et Mélisande.34

On the basis of this formal trope of musical knowledge – a passage that sounds convincing until you know its real source, a strikingly banal and totally un-Wagnerian piece of music – can we only say that the ‘real’ Tristan is increasingly fictionalised as the book progresses? Are we to be blocked by the incommensurability of two media, end with happy aporia? Vinteuil is a plausible but non-existent composer, whose piece has a theme that represents meaning for Swann and pure structure for Proust critics – as such playing out perennial oppositions regarding ‘theme’ in Wagner’s music: leitmotifs made to function both as material coherence and as interpretative clues. Tristan, on the other hand, is supposed to be the real Tristan. Each piece, under the weight of long narrative monologues, seems at this stage to have been pressed into the shape of an exclusively literary object. The narrator is not hearing, as Swann is, but reading (the score is on the piano music-rest in front of him). While the narrator’s commentary is much more sophisticated than Swann’s, he ostensibly does no more than read back to us music we are expected to know:

32 A la recherche III, 664; Remembrance III, 155.
33 ‘And as the friend then examines a photograph which enables him to specify the likeness, so, on top of Vinteuil’s sonata, I set up on the music-rest the score of Tristan’ (A la recherche III, 664–5; Remembrance III, 155).
Proust and music

Autant la progression de l’orchestre à l’approche de la nef, quand il s’empare de ces notes du chalumeau, les transforme, les associe à son ivresse, brise leur rythme, éclaire leur tonalité, accélère leur mouvement, multiplie leur instrumentation, autant sans doute Wagner lui-même a eu de joie quand il découvrit dans sa mémoire l’air du père, l’agrégea à son œuvre, lui donna toute sa signification.

[And, no doubt, just as the orchestra swells and surges at the approach of the ship when it takes hold of these notes of the pipe, transforms them, imbues them with its own intoxication, breaks their rhythm, clarifies their tonality, accelerates their movement, expands their instrumentation, so no doubt Wagner himself was filled with joy when he discovered in his memory the shepherd’s tune, incorporated it in his work, gave it its full wealth of meaning.]35

The point he extrapolates from his description – about artistic memory chancing on hitherto lost mental objects and using them to put the finishing touch to artistic products – might easily be made about A la recherche as well: the distant echo of Wagner’s music may be read in the context of the novel as reflexive, a gesture towards its function in structuring this section of the narrative, and indeed to the similar function of involuntary memory in the whole of Proust’s work. Not only that, memory’s power to illuminate is as relevant to the stage action of Tristan Act III scene 1 as it is to composer or novelist: thematic recurrence alludes not only to the act of remembering itself, but furthermore, in a poietic context, to prescience – in its beginning is its end:

HIRT:
Öd und leer das Meer!
(Er setzt die Schalmei an den Mund und entfernt sich blasend.)

TRISTAN: (bewegungslos, dumpf)
Die alte Weise –
was weckt sie mich?
[...]
Muß ich dich so verstehen,
du alte ernste Weise,
mit deiner Klage Klang?
Durch Abendwehen
drang sie bang,
as einst dem Kind
des Vaters Tod verkündet.

[SHEPHERD: Desolate and void the sea! (He puts his reed to his lips and departs, playing.)
TRISTAN: (motionless, dully) That old tune? / Why does it waken me? [...] Must I understand you thus, / you ancient, solemn tune / with your plaintive tones? / Through the evening air / it came, fearfully, / as once it brought news to the child / of his father’s death.]36

The old tune’s pre-existence in Tristan’s memory is a layer of reflexivity: he, Wagner, the narrator and Proust all use acts of remembering to achieve closure in

35 A la recherche III, 667; Remembrance III, 158.
36 Tristan und Isolde, Act III scene 1, lines 24–6 and 258–64.
their respective signifying projects. Tristan understands the shepherd's melody by transposing its association with death on to his own situation: his own end is nigh. Wagner calls up the gondolier's song from his past in order to evoke the strangeness of hearing a long way off that Tristan the character experiences; the Schopenhauerian Will is at last left behind. Both the narrator and Proust himself, of course, are prompted by the recollection of Tristan the opera, and so for this section of the novel at least, the transition is made between fictional and real music.

But do we approve of Proust's description – in a certain sense, his appropriation – of music pre-existing in our own memories? Do we mind that he thus muffles its voice, literally circumscribes it? The opera Tristan that Marcel plays through, although related by artistic influence to another, better-known opera of the same name, seems to be an entirely literary thing. We, his more-or-less musically competent readers, may experience Proust's transposition of operatic text into fiction less as the final brushstroke that allows the artistic project to reach closure, and more as the stultifying ossification of sound and vision in language that we resist, with varying degrees of success, on a daily basis. These questions, then, heard from a musicological position, sound like coming down to the degree of technical savoir-faire we demand of Proust the music critic. The representational rectitude, as it were, of the passage has to do with critical competence, with the use of right-sounding language. If language is to subsume music, we ask of Proust, let it be the language with which we are all familiar, whose representational capacities we can gauge. After all, the latter has its own, equally arbitrary metaphorical structures: how would Marcel have understood the shepherd's pipe to be a 'transposing' instrument in the musical sense? Nonetheless, we should naturally prefer our own circumscriptions to the narratorial self-righteousness which asserted that musical appreciation is necessarily nebulousness, to shore up Swann's musical (in)competence on first hearing the petite phrase. There, the narrator of A la recherche really did seem to be making a virtue of necessity, and bowing to his character's (or was it his own?) anxiety of competence.

Marcel's technical terms, as he describes the 'grand mouvement d'orchestre' – rhythm, tonality, instrumentation – seduce the reader into experiencing the music narratively in a knowledgeable way. What seems at first 'hearing' to be Proust's musical credibility, however, may simply turn out to be a kind of musicological couleur locale. In common with practically all fin-de-siecle French Wagnerians, Proust

37 Whereas Nattiez argues for an authentic source of the alte Weise in a Venetian gondolier's song, Abbate prefers to interpret the connection as one of otherworldliness and distance: 'What Wagner describes is of course less some ethnomusicological exercise than the experience of hearing phenomenal music at a distance and outside one's own consciousness. It is the otherness or outsidedness, the phenomenality of the gondolier's song, that resonates most powerfully into the “Alte Weise”' (Unsung Voices, 266 n. 23). Wagner's remarks on its origins are to be found in Prose Works, trans. William Ashton Ellis (London, 1892–9), V, 73, while Nattiez's interpretation is in Proust as Musician, 16.

38 We opened with Proust hearing music from afar on the théâtrophone, an idea that harmonises neatly with this moment in the opera (both Proust and Tristan are listening to piped music).

39 '[Before the] great orchestral movement [that precedes the return of Isolde]' (A la recherche III, 667; Remembrance III, 158).
Proust and music

had little experience of Wagnerian opera (except for the théâtrophone). He heard mainly selections of the composer’s music at the Concerts Lamoureux, which in 1900 were at the Cirque des Champs-Elysées, with orchestras like the Pasdeloup and the Colonne. Furthermore, any immediate musical reaction to the sound of Tristan has been erased over the protracted composition of *A la recherche*: in the original sketches for this scene, the narrator was to be playing the piano in preparation for hearing some Wagner at the Concerts Lamoureux; in the final text, the concerts are happening, but without the narrator’s presence. If Proust had so little direct contact with Wagner’s music, what better solution for the man of letters than to mug up on him using a book? That book, it seems, was Albert Lavignac’s classic of wagnérisme, the *Voyage artistique à Bayreuth*, published in 1897. Here is Lavignac’s admonition after a trip to hear Parsifal:

> I had devoted several weeks to a deep study of *Parsifal*, so that there could be no surprises in store for me […] but […] I had not read a single note of *Tristan and Isolde*, a few fragments of which I only knew from poor performances.

> Now this is what happened; the two days of *Parsifal* were for me two days of the most pure and never-to-be-forgotten happiness. […] But as for *Tristan*, I understood nothing at all, nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing. Is that clear?

> It takes a certain amount of courage to confess these things, especially when one has succeeded in penetrating the innumerable beauties of *Tristan and Isolde*, but I wish my sad example to be of service to others, and therefore it is necessary to relate it.

Taking seriously Lavignac’s call for diligent study of Tristan at the piano is exactly what we see the narrator do in the passage we have been looking at. Neither Marcel the narrator nor Marcel the invalid author, however, is contemplating the voyage to Bayreuth – or indeed to the Concerts Lamoureux just around the corner: their training is for writing, not for hearing.

The *Voyage artistique à Bayreuth* – as you’d expect, given its date – represents a catalogue-type analysis of Wagner’s works, and, as such, a particular, thematic, way of knowing and remembering – of assimilating – music. It plainly addresses Proust’s

40 *A la recherche* III, 665; *Remembrance* III, 155.

41 Translated by Esther Singleton as *The Music Dramas of Richard Wagner* (London, 1898). There is evidence that Proust was familiar with this work, in its fifty-seventh printing by 1903; see Nattiez, *Proust as Musician*, 17–18: ‘What Lavignac says, even if his facts are wrong, corresponds too closely to Proust’s own poetic processes to be ignored’. Some of Lavignac’s (biographical) facts were wrong, and the places where his inaccuracies – and prejudices – match Proust’s own betray most clearly the latter’s reliance on the *Voyage artistique à Bayreuth*. The solecism Proust most obviously shares with Lavignac is mistaking the date of composition of the Good Friday music in Parsifal:

> PROUST: ‘*L’Enchantement du vendredi saint* is a piece [morceau] that Wagner wrote before he ever thought of composing *Parsifal*, and which he inserted [introduisit] afterwards’ (*Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 274).

> LAVIGNAC: ‘It is called *The Spell* (or *The Enchantment*) of Good Friday. It is also sometimes called *The Flowering Meadow*. It was written long before the rest of the score’ (*The Music Dramas of Richard Wagner*, 467).

Actually, it wasn’t, and Proust’s regurgitation of this assertion is what closely links him with Lavignac’s book. The citation of Adolphe Adam (1803–56) as an archetypally shallow and un-Wagnerian composer constitutes another such link: see *A la recherche* III, 665 (on Adam’s *Postillon de Longjumeau*); *Remembrance* III, 156, and *The Music Dramas of Richard Wagner*, 25.
anxiety about the culture-wide ineffable power of music, but does he employ its injunctions in order to justify an anxious need to subjugate music to text? How competent is Proust’s use of Tristan? We might seem to have reached our conclusion already, condemning Proust for dilettante use of Wagner through the medium of another commentator.

In ending thus, however, we would have done no more than rehearse our own interdisciplinary difficulties: music and text demanding different competencies, their integration endlessly problematic. While musicologists usually look at texts as imports into pieces of music (poetry set as song; plays adapted into opera), this is an instance of the reverse arrangement, but concluding that there is similarly little, or no, dissolution of one into the other would be too easy. Moreover, given the way we have approached the problem, it would inevitably mean preserving intact one critical discourse – musicological – by the non-admission of the comparable literary one, represented here by our poor novelist. If, as we began by saying, we want to avoid a simple mapping of music on to text that relies on a rather naïve equivalence between structure and a certain Romantic valuation of Music, we also want to avoid a similarly neat set of deconstructionist tropes of aporia, in which music is blank unreadability. Perplexing words, or those whose technical meaning is unknown, do not necessarily fracture the text beyond repair. Our difficulties connecting what Proust says with the real music that we know can be understood either as capitulation to the exigencies of literariness or simply as a difference in dialect: musicological discourse is self-evidently linguistic, and Proust’s contribution to it, when it is on the subject of real rather than imaginary music, is merely one among others. His metaphors have slightly different valences, but musicologists’ problem with Marcel’s terminology might be that, rather than sounding foreign, it sounds too close for comfort like a brand of criticism (dilettante, literary) that they would like to think they have left behind.

But reading further on in the passage about Tristan, another kind of observation about Proust’s use of opera is possible. Strenuous work is going on, work that encourages the jostling of competing discourses rather than the circumscription of one by another. We suddenly find that Marcel has stopped trying to describe Tristan ‘in his own words’, and has moved instead to talking about workmanship: ‘Chez lui, quelle que soit la tristesse du poète, elle est consolée, surpassée – c’est-à-dire malheureusement un peu détruite – par l’allégresse du fabricateur’. He is troubled by Wagner’s apparent ‘habileté vulcanienne’, his Vulcan-like skill. Having praised the brushstroke, the ‘coup de pinceau’ of an ‘illumination rétrospective’ that brings the unity of a grand nineteenth-century artwork into its rightful place, he becomes worried by the possibility that what then looks original is just ‘labeur industriex’:

42 ‘In him, however great the melancholy of the poet, it is consoled, transcended – that is to say, alas, to some extent destroyed – by the exhilaration of the fabricator’ (*A la recherche* III, 667; *Remembrance* III, 158).
Serait-ce elle [cette habileté vulcanienne] qui donnerait chez les grands artistes l’illusion d’une originalité foncière, irréductible, en apparence reflet d’une réalité plus qu’humaine, en fait produit d’un laboure industrieux? Si l’art n’est que cela, il n’est pas plus réel que la vie, et je n’avais pas tant de regrets à avoir.

[Could it be [this Vulcan-like skill] that gave to great artists the illusory aspect of a fundamental, irreducible originality, apparently the reflection of a more than human reality, actually the result of industrious toil? If art is no more than that, it is no more real than life and I had less cause for regret.]43

All along, we have listened carefully for anxiety in this text; but here, conversely, the narrator suffers from it less than we: his musings on theme and reminiscence in Wagner (always problematic for us) have led him away from finished structural complexes to unfinished, mechanical work. By hearing construction rather than Structure, as it were, he escapes Swann’s nineteenth-century concern with through-composition always as an inevitable expression of potential – hence, notionally whole – and imagines a more Modernist, technological poiesis. Marcel wants art to be a ‘réalité plus qu’humaine’ – he often seems to invest music with just this quality – so if it were just hard work, art would be ‘no more real’ than life, and he would not need to regret failing to become a creative artist himself. This moment of doubt rejoins Swann’s attitude to music, but where Swann allows the indecision to take over and disable his life, the narrator here shifts the argument he is having with himself up a gear:

Je continuais à jouer Tristan. Séparé de Wagner par la cloison sonore, je l’entendais exulter, m’inviter à partager sa joie, j’entendais redoubler le rire immortellement jeune et les coups de marteau de Siegfried.

[I went on playing Tristan. Separated from Wagner by the wall of sound, I could hear him exult, invite me to share his joy, I could hear the immortally youthful laughter and the hammer-blows of Siegfried.]44

Marcel is playing from a partition, and a cloison is also a partition. To recall for a moment our opening, Proust, the other Marcel, is also walled-up; indeed cloison is a fascinating term throughout A la recherche, signifying a permeable membrane through which information may pass in both directions. We find it in situations where an élite public is on show to an inferior mass, acting as a protective but transparent barrier between classes (at the theatre, for example, where the action in the baignoires is as interesting to the viewing public as anything on stage). We also find cloisons at moments of acute vulnerability where the act of mediation between two selves is of paramount importance and difficulty, and requires delicate staging. What pass through the cloison sonore between Marcel and Wagner here, however, are hammer-blows.

43 A la recherche III, 667; Remembrance III, 158–9.
44 A la recherche III, 667; Remembrance III, 159. Proust seems delighted by these extra-musical referents – he mentions the scarf-waving signal in Tristan – and especially ‘phenomenal’ sound like the shepherd’s pipe, and the hammer-blows in Siegfried. He transforms the nacelle of Lohengrin into an aeroplane (see below). He loves the idea of music being grounded in the material, in humble details; Wagner remains honest, and does not try to obliterate reality with art.
Far from tearing down the delicate mediation between piano player and composer, as one might think, this phenomenal sound, this imported memory, is the privileged conduit by which opera takes off for Marcel:

En qui du reste, plus merveilleusement frappées étaient ces phrases, l’habileté technique de l’ouvrier ne servait qu’à leur faire plus librement quitter la terre, oiseaux pareils non au cygne de Lohengrin mais à cet aéroplane que j’avais vu à Balbec changer son énergie en élévation, planer au-dessus des flots, et se perdre dans le ciel.

[But the more marvellously those phrases were struck, the technical skill of the craftsman served merely to make it easier for them to leave the earth, birds akin not to Lohengrin’s swan but to that aeroplane which I had seen at Balbec convert its energy into vertical motion, glide over the sea and vanish in the sky.]45

Not only does he seem to come to terms with the problem of what the technical skill underpinning a work like Wagner’s opera signifies, he leaps excitedly to an open-ended synthesis of the jostling demands of opera to be heard with the requirements of silent contemplation, or reading. (He is listening to himself playing the score as well as reading it back to us.) It is a synthesis that serves to elevate the Wagnerian machine still higher:

Peut-être, comme les oiseaux qui montent le plus haut, qui volent le plus vite ont une aile plus puissante, fallait-il de ces appareils vraiment matériels pour explorer l’infini, de ces cent vingt chevaux marque Mystère, où pourtant, si haut qu’on plane, on est un peu empêché de goûter le silence des espaces par le puissant ronflement du moteur!

[Perhaps, as the birds that soar highest and fly most swiftly have more powerful wings, one of these frankly material vehicles was needed to explore the infinite, one of these 120 horsepower machines – brand-name Mystère – in which nevertheless, however high one flies, one is prevented to some extent from enjoying the silence of space by the overpowering roar of the engine!46

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45 A la recherche III, 667–8; Remembrance III, 159.
46 A la recherche III, 668; Remembrance III, 159. Much later in the novel, during the First World War, Robert de Saint-Loup, friend of the narrator, and a soldier, talks admiringly of the German bombers in the night sky over Paris: ‘“Et ces sirènes, était-ce assez wagnerien, ce qui du reste était bien naturel pour saluer l’arrivée des Allemands, ça faisait très hymne national, avec le Kronprinz et les princesses dans la loge impériale, Wacht am Rhein; c’était à se demander si c’était bien des aviateurs et pas plutôt des Walkyries qui montaient.” Il semblait avoir plaisir à cette assimilation des aviateurs et des Walkyries et l’expliqua d’ailleurs par des raisons purement musicales: ‘Dame, c’est que la musique des sirènes était d’un Chevauchée! Il faut décidément l’arrivée des Allemands pour qu’on puisse entendre du Wagner à Paris.”’ [“And then the sirens, could they have been more Wagnerian, and what could be more appropriate as a salute to the arrival of the Germans? – it might have been the national anthem, with the Crown Prince and the Princesses in the imperial box, the Wacht am Rhein; one had to ask oneself whether they were indeed pilots and not Walkyries who were sailing upwards.’ He seemed to be delighted with this comparison of the pilots to Valkyries, and went on to explain it on purely musical grounds: ‘That’s it, the music of the sirens was a “Ride of the Valkyries!” There’s no doubt about it, the Germans have to arrive before you can hear Wagner in Paris.”] (A la recherche IV, 338; Remembrance III, 781.) The German bombers ‘font apocalypse’. The Ring has, naturally, often been associated with other apocalyptic visions: a more recent dramatisation of precisely the same idea was incorporated by Francis Ford Coppola into his film Apocalypse Now (U.S.A., 1979). Inevitably, it is the ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ that the insane American commander plays as his helicopters attack a Viet-Cong position.
The hammer-blows that import opera for Marcel by displaying its workings – the creakings and groanings and extra-operatic referents – both instantiate and deny the Vulcan-like skill by which he was afraid Wagner was deceiving us. He seems to decide, if only temporarily and in the context of this particular digressive speculation on Wagner, that a powerful machine might be just as productive of an ascent into the sublime as a soundless, more ethereal, transubstantiation.

We have been returned to structure by a less Romantic route. Swann’s use of the petite phrase was as real to him as it was an obvious illusion to the reader, both because it is fictional and because Swann attempts to justify his actions on the basis of an illusory set of significations he attributes to its power. The petite phrase, by turns mystery woman, confidante and national anthem – even, finally, a harbinger of doom – resists all such attempts at meaning-making. When it comes to the narrator’s encounter with Tristan, however, a wholly different model of reading music emerges. Marcel’s delight in isosonic motifs, which might lead us to suspect a lack of technical expertise, reveals itself as a side-effect of strenuous effort to understand the poietic process. Opera may well be impossible to realise within literary terms, but the ‘mystère’ that turns out to be, or turns into, an aeroplane is pleasing evidence of the debris left after hard work, and this is perhaps where interdisciplinary work will reap its own rewards. Rather than submit to the exigencies of aporia, letting music and writing fall between two stools, such hammering out may be where musicality within textuality can meaningfully exist.