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This essay is based upon a paper given at the 'Warner Re-visited' Symposium held in Dorchester, Dorset under the auspices of the University of Exeter in June 2012.

Sylvia Townsend Warner's academic knowledge of the structure of music and her ability as a musician are little known. She is acknowledged as a writer of amusing and erudite letters, polished prose and highly individual poetry but not as a composer and an impressively scholarly and proficient musicologist. To date, no research has been undertaken into Warner's use of this musical knowledge in her writing, and whilst a substantial amount of explanatory musicological information is given, this essay is not a treatise on early music. Warner's fictions sometimes include reflections on music and musicians; the short stories 'The Music at Long Verney'¹ and 'The Foregone Conclusion'² are examples; and most memorable of all is the novel *The Corner That Held Them* (Warner 1988). The latter part of this account of life in a fourteenth century nunnery stages a remarkable scene in which

¹ Warner 3-18

² Warner *Stories* 33-36

Warner uses her knowledge of musicology to show, in a fictional depiction of polyphony, the power of music to reflect change and create connections across social divides.

An enduring theme in Warner's fiction is the exploration of the individual: both inner life and outward presentation: 'Few have written as well as she did about the lonely, the eccentric, the voluble and the old, and few have had as strong a sense of the touching absurdities and vagaries of human behaviour' (Warner *Stories* 1988, Publishers note, flyleaf). This encapsulates what is intriguing about Warner's fiction, and her exploration of humankind is given superlatively in this passage of the novel. Warner writes of universal anxieties and a quest for enlightenment and knowledge that transcends time and place.

Warner is not alone in using music to signal change, transformation and paradise in her writing. John Milton and George Eliot were musicians as well as poets and writers and both used music, particularly vocal music, to explore the human condition: here too music is aligned with concepts of paradise. Comment on these areas of similarity with Warner's writing about the music of the *Ars nova* will be included in this essay.

As a young woman Warner received a thorough musical training from Dr Percy Buck at Harrow School where her father was also a master and had the title 'Head of the Modern Side'. By 1911 she was 'composing regularly, setting favourite poems to music and writing among other things a set of piano variations'.³ That Warner was an exceptional musician can be inferred from the much-cited assertion that she was going to study with Schoenberg in 1914 but was prevented by the outbreak of the First World War.⁴ In 1916 aged twenty three Warner was studying Tudor Church Music with Dr Richard Terry of Westminster Cathedral and working with him on its transcription into modern notation. The notation of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries would have been unrecognisable to modern musicians without special

³ Harman 21-22

⁴ Ibid. 26

tuition. (In this instance ‘modern’ is taken to mean the late nineteenth century to the present.) There were no bar lines to regulate the metrical beat of groups of notes and the rudimentary time signature, for rhythmic purposes, was the breve; eight times the length of the crotchet, which is the most common unit of measuring the length of a note in the twenty first century. Warner’s collaboration with Terry underpins the scholarly musicological expertise shown in *The Corner That Held Them* in the chapter ‘Triste Loysir.’ This chapter also deploys a detailed knowledge of music that was being sung two hundred years earlier than the manuscripts that Warner was to study and transcribe for the Carnegie (UK) Trust financed *Tudor Church Music* volumes to which she contributed so substantially as a researcher and editor between the years 1917 and 1929.⁵ Examples of Warner’s knowledge of early music can be found in articles and papers that she wrote during the years that she worked on the Carnegie project. An outstanding example is 'The Point of Perfection in XVI Century Notation', written in 1919 for the Musical Association.⁶ It is an extended essay concerning the use of a small dot placed above the stave with the object of defining and articulating the rhythmic structure of a single part. Warner also contributed a chapter entitled 'Notation: the Growth of a System' to the Introductory Volume of the 1929 edition of the *Oxford History of Music* under Buck's editorship:

It must be premised that the novelty of measured music was merely the novelty of something in a new place. There was nothing new about periodic rhythm; no one, I imagine, supposes that the golden age of plainsong was

⁵ Searle 69-88

⁶ Warner 53-73

accompanied by a complete atrophy of the impulse to dance, or that church bells were rung with a devout avoidance of keeping time.⁷

The writing is recognizably Warner's; the language, the intricately constructed sentences and unexpected use of humour in an academic reference work are typical of her individual writing style. In the chapter Warner describes the development of the formal representation of musical sounds and rests during the Middle Ages and beyond and outlines the function of notation; that of expressing the relationship of pitch (or interval) and time (or measure).

Warner explains that the inflexions which occurred when the liturgy was recited developed into plain chant. It was soon realised that more than one note could be sung for every note of the chant and the development of polyphonic music was underway.

Simply expressed this is the art of creating musical texture, usually with at least three vocal parts, each having an independent melody and sung simultaneously. The thirteenth century repertory of early polyphonic music called organum from the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris 'contains settings of the liturgical chant in which the choir sings the chant in unison and during the part of the chant normally sung by a soloist, one or more additional voices accompany the original chant'.⁸ It is probable that Warner knew of this outstanding collection of early polyphonic liturgical work. As Georgiades states, 'the steadily recurring rhythmic patterns, or so-called rhythmic modes, in the organum mirrored the forms of poetic meter'.⁹

Warner comments on the use of poetic meter in church music. She explains that the chosen meter would dictate how the words were to be sung; the number of stressed and unstressed syllables occurring in a line of chant would vary according to which poetic metre was chosen from the five basic rhythms; iambic, trochaic, spondaic, anapaestic and dactylic:

⁷ Buck 74

⁸ Kelly 22

⁹ Georgiades 29

Scholars and Churchmen might avoid regular scansion in Church music, but they studied and practised it in the poetic metres; and when the exigencies of the exciting new art of polyphony made it necessary to contrive some method of regularizing both the composition and the notation of scanned music, it was to the poetic metres that they turned.¹⁰

Warner's personal response to polyphony is given in a diary entry. She had attended a performance of Thomas Tallis' forty-part motet *Spem in Alium* and wrote of it: 'It was like the Milky Way, a glimmering unaccountable tissue . . . slept at the Imperial Hotel, my head still ringing with the shining stir of the motet, and the choirs tossing Creator one to another'.¹¹

Warner's scholastic knowledge of this important advance in liturgical music is used to great effect in the chapter 'Triste Loysir' as she writes about the redeeming joy of singing the startling new polyphonic music, the *Ars nova*, in the most unlikely setting of the filth and pestilential squalor of a leper house. Here Warner uses her knowledge powerfully to inform us that this music, and its construction, was at that time revolutionary and readers could be forgiven for expecting such intense and forceful writing to be the climax of the novel. Philip Hensher in his Introduction to the 2012 Virago edition of *The Corner That Held Them* writes: 'The ecstatic discovery of the *Ars nova* by Henry Yellowlees in a leper house is one of the most accurate and truthful episodes in musical endeavour in any novel'.¹²

Discounting any idea of intense and forceful writing, Warner explained to her friend the American composer Paul Nordorf, that *The Corner That Held Them* 'has no plot and the

¹⁰ Buck 74

¹¹ Warner unpublished diaries, 1929

¹² Hensher xii

characters are innumerable and insignificant'.¹³ This novel without a plot could be said to signal experimental writing by Warner who, by studying a musical practice that was unusual and unconventional in its day, chose to reflect these attributes in a social setting in the narrative of *The Corner That Held Them*.

In the novel the sense of immediacy is as original as the music of the *Ars nova*; by portraying the everyday life and passing of five prioresses, four bishops, novices that come, go and die young, a rogue nun's priest, a disgruntled steward, sundry others and a leper house, Warner creates a totally believable fictional world that is palpable: a 'tour de force of worldliness, wisdom and controlled irony . . . a masterly piece of contrived realism'.¹⁴

With a narrative stance that moves between detachment and focus Warner's experiments in this novel mirror the complexities of the music of the *Ars nova* about which she writes, and it is the use of her musical knowledge and imagery that shape the chapter 'Triste Loysir'. As Gillian Beer suggests:

Her training as a transcriber of music and her gifts as a musician move into the pacing and timbre of her writing: she has a particularly acute ear for the nuanced hesitations of dialogue: the narrative presence of her work relies often on the unvoiced rests between sentences for its effect, and she also draws freely on musical experience in describing emotional states.¹⁵

¹³ Warner 91

¹⁴ Harman v

¹⁵ Beer 18-31

The power of 'Triste Loysir' lies in an animated conversation about a new form of music and the changes to one man's life that occur because of it. The conversation takes place between the leper house chaplain & Henry Yellowlees the Bishop's steward and illuminates the central role that the *Ars nova* plays in the novel.

This new style of musical technique was developed in the early fourteenth century and flourished in France and the Burgundian Low Countries. It rapidly gained ascendancy over plain chant, or 'church note',¹⁶ the traditionally monophonic and unaccompanied music of Christian liturgy. Its principles were outlined in a treatise, the *Ars nova notandi*, or new technique of writing music, written in 1322 and attributed to Phillipe de Vitry, a French composer, theorist and cleric who became Bishop of Meaux. In the treatise Vitry describes the developments in musical technique which would enlarge the notational system set out by Franco of Cologne in about 1280 and which had been the first attempt to stabilize the relationship between the shape of the note and its value. 'Vitry developed three levels of notational division with note values spanning from long to breve, from breve to semi-breve and from semi-breve to the newly-defined note-value of the minim'.¹⁷ These note values in combination gave a wide range of sub-division, so that the notes when sung by voices ranging from treble to bass gave liturgical music significantly increased complexity and depth. Mensural music, or as the chaplain of the leper - house would say, 'music in measure',¹⁸ was a term originally used to distinguish the notation of polyphony from the monophony of plain chant. 'In mensural notation two relationships are measured: the proportional relationship between a note and the next note higher or lower in value, and the speed relationship between sections of music in different time signatures'.¹⁹ The significance of the new notational

¹⁶ Warner 202

¹⁷ *Cambridge Music* 96-99

¹⁸ Warner 202

¹⁹ Pryer 763

system was that rhythmically complex music could now be written in a much clearer way than had previously been possible. The effect of this great change brought about by the *Ars nova* was to create music of a far greater expressiveness and variety than that of the thirteenth century. In his dialogue with Henry Yellowlees, the chaplain is equally enthusiastic about the ‘prolations’. In early notation this was the relationship between the minim and the semi-breve and how these notes were sung. If the prolation was major there would be three minims to the semi-breve, if ‘minor’ only two, the length of the note defining the musical curve.

Vitry was also concerned with the technique now called by the modern term of isorhythm in his treatise. This technique uses a repeating rhythmic and melodic pattern which can form the main structure of the piece. The melody in the tenor part was often repeated but not always to synchronize with the rhythmic repeat, thereby effecting variations and extensions for both patterns and adding further complexity to the musical sounds produced. Isorhythm is important in the context of the chapter because it is used in the *Kyrie* by Guillaume de Machaut, a French composer and poet, and which Henry Yellowlees sings in the leper house and experiences as ‘paradise itself’.²⁰ The interplay between tradition and innovation gives some indication of how complex the new music had become and its complexity is mirrored in this passage of the novel in which Warner is carefully preparing the ground for the revelation that Yellowlees will experience in the leper house.

In ‘Triste Loysir’ Warner demonstrates the practical difficulties of learning the techniques of the *Ars nova*. When asked by the chaplain if he could read music at sight Yellowlees replies, ‘What sort of music? I can read church note of course’.²¹ The chaplain clarifies the elements of the new notation:

²⁰ Warner 203-4

²¹ Ibid. 202

No, no! . . . music in measure. Do you understand the prolations? Well, I can soon teach you. See, these red notes are to be sung in the triple prolation. And these red minims, following the black breve, show that the breve is imperfect. Bear that in mind and all will be simple.²²

However, Warner shows emphatically that all was not simple. Singing ‘Triste Loysir’ Yellowlees ‘felt himself astray, bewildered by the unexpected progressions, concords so sweet they seemed to melt the flesh off his bones’.²³ Here is the first intimation of a transfiguration of the loathsomeness of leprosy and it presages Yellowlees’ thoughts on his experiences at the leper house as he leaves the next day.

The next piece that is sung is the Kyrie from the *Messe de Notre Dame* by Machaut which is the earliest surviving complete polyphonic setting of the Mass Ordinary composed as an entity. Machaut was highly educated, reading and writing in both Latin and French. He could only have achieved this in an ecclesiastical environment, possibly in Rheims but probably in Paris. As Leech-Wilkinson states: ‘This would seem the most likely explanation for his early adoption of *Ars nova* compositional techniques – his motet *bone pastor* is one of the clearest examples of the influence of Phillippe de Vitry’.²⁴ There is a link here with Warner, Milton and Eliot as Machaut was known principally as a poet and only to a much lesser extent as a composer of music.

Unusually at this time Machaut wrote the *Messe de Notre Dame* for four voices instead of the usual three. A tenor voice would probably have sung the ‘cantus firmus’ part but as the *Cambridge Music Guide* explains ‘the flowing contrapuntal lines, with long melismatic

²² Ibid. 202

²³ Ibid. 203

²⁴ Leech-Wilkinson 14

phrases on extended vowel sounds, make the tenor *cantus firmus* part barely audible',²⁵ giving Warner the musical licence for three voices to perform in the chapter 'Triste Loysir.' A leper, a professional singer in his former life, is summoned by the chaplain to join him and Yellowlees to sing the *Kyrie*. Warner's use of simile highlights the antithesis of his abject physical presence, 'he seemed to glimmer like bad fish'²⁶ with the glorious beauty of the music: 'If the song *Triste Loysir* had seemed a foretaste of paradise, the *Kyrie* was paradise itself'.²⁷ This passage has several strands which Warner intertwines cleverly. An underlying sense of a journey is present, beginning with Yellowlees' physical journey to the leper-house:

Before vespers, he said to himself, I shall be in country I have never seen before. So it was; though he could not be certain where the familiar changed to the unknown, the change had taken place.²⁸

In this juxtaposition of 'familiar' and 'unknown' in a single sentence, Warner introduces a thread of uncertainty, and the steward's thoughts on Francis of Assisi, 'What . . . had [he] done but lay a new egg in an old nest?',²⁹ are pertinent to what he will shortly learn: Warner has set the stage for a revelation for Yellowlees.

This is the beginning of new thinking for the steward; an intellectual journey into the unknown brought about by the transformational experience of the music he shares in such extraordinary circumstances; and importantly it is the power of music, not of religion, that Warner is highlighting here. An example of Yellowlees' revelatory new thinking is his dawning acceptance of the leper, the most reviled of social outcasts. This is underlined by the

²⁵ *Cambridge Music Guide* 96-99

²⁶ Warner 203

²⁷ *Ibid.* 203-4

²⁸ *Ibid.* 202

²⁹ *Ibid.* 202

realisation that the leper and the chaplain frequently came into close contact in order to sing this wonderful music. His initial revulsion at this manifestation of contagious disease is, in the short space of an evening, supplanted by the thought of ‘how many an hour these two must have spent together . . . bent over the same music-book, their love of music overcoming the barrier between life and death-in-life’.³⁰ Warner emphasizes the transcendental nature and importance of this music for these two individuals. The chaplain’s love of the music is made clear when he says of the *Kyrie* ‘I tell you, there has never been such music in the world before’,³¹ whilst the leper’s excitement at singing the *Kyrie* knows no bounds: ‘Again! Let us sing it again!’.³² The unusual circumstances in which three voices sing a work he must have known and remembered from another, more wholesome life, is both cathartic and joyous: the leper, too, is transformed.

This explicit combination of socially disparate voices shows the political implications of polyphony; none of the voices are dominant; they are independent yet harmonizing and each has its equally important melody. They differ, and by differing they achieve a harmony akin to that of the *Ars nova*. Despite being from different walks of life and differing circumstances, the perspectives of the three men merge in the narrative as do their voices in the polyphony that they sing.

In this passage Warner uses the art of music to underline her political belief in social equality and inclusion; what Yellowlees learns in the leper-house about the necessity for human compassion, generosity, and an understanding of others is a model for all. Warner is didactic here, writing powerfully of revolutionary new music as an instrument for positive change and the breaking of boundaries: the new music superseding the old and the outsider, the leper,

³⁰ Ibid. 204

³¹ Ibid. 204

³² Ibid. 204

accepted as an equal. Both attest to Warner's underlying premise that music can transcend earthly concerns. This radical concept is further confirmed by Yellowlees' thoughts of a potential new life for himself as he rides away from the leper house next morning: 'I could be happy living like that . . . nursing the music book among the mutton bones, having forsaken this world to live in the fifth element of sound'.³³ Warner's final image imprints the lesson indelibly: Such music, and such squalor! . . . never had he seen a house so dirty, or slept in a more tattered bed. But out came the music as the kingfisher flashes from its nest of stinking fish-bones.³⁴

Shortly after this Yellowlees' wish is partially granted. Whilst not quite in the 'fifth element of sound', he is benefitting from his new musical knowledge as he is 'fanned into a personal secretary-ship'³⁵ by the new Bishop, himself 'a considerable musician',³⁶ and one who enjoys an intellectual discussion about music with this once lowly clerk. This is a substantial improvement of Yellowlees' position in life and his passion for the *Ars nova* is solely responsible for this advancement. In reality '*Ars nova* had waylaid him: the man who arrived at Esselby was not the man who had set out . . . *Ars nova* had worked its will on him'.³⁷ The transformational power of music as an instrument of change and transformation is explicit here. Warner's use of the kingfisher simile is devastatingly accurate; Yellowlees' drab and utilitarian life is lifted onto another, more intellectual level and coloured by his relationship with his new employer. Here Warner implies that their shared love of music will ensure that Yellowlees' talents will continue to be appreciated and nurtured: his future is assured.

³³ Ibid. 205

³⁴ Ibid. 205

³⁵ Ibid. 269

³⁶ Ibid. 269

³⁷ Ibid. 218

It might be useful in clarifying Warner's use of music in this way by briefly considering how two other English writers, John Milton and George Eliot, have written of transformational change using music and sound. Both wrote poetry in which the powerful effect of music underlay the story, but they wrote their own interpretations of passages from the Old Testament where the story is proscribed, and neither displays in the poems discussed below Warner's creative sense of immediacy and involvement. For Milton music was a pathway to Heaven. Eliot, however, was not Christian and therefore her intention regarding music in her writing should, perhaps, not be construed as having a 'heavenly' purpose. In this she is akin to Warner who shunned all forms of organised religion and was particularly hostile towards Catholicism. For her music was an earthbound art and one that could go beyond earthly concerns in its impact on the individual and society. Warner is free from the religious preoccupations, traditions and societal constraints of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries of Milton and Eliot and can proclaim the transformational power of music on humankind in her unconventional and powerful writing.

Whilst a student at Cambridge Milton composed an academic musical exercise entitled *De Sphaerarum Concentu (The Music of the Spheres)* which was presented as an oratorical performance, probably at Christ's College. Like Warner's exposition of the *Ars nova* it is linked to an innovation or supposed discovery in music theory: Milton, like Warner, was espousing a musical theory of another age. The term 'music of the spheres' is given to the results of an experiment with the sounds made by hammers on iron said to have been carried out by Pythagorus in the sixth century. He recognised that the first hammer, half the size of the second, produced a note an octave higher than the second when struck.

As Simon Jackson explains:

From these experiments into the mathematical nature of music, Pythagorus and his followers derived a musical model of the universe. Inheriting the idea of the earth surrounded by concentric spheres, Pythagorus suggested that the spheres created musical sounds as they moved, corresponding proportionately to their size and position . . . this idea of the ‘music of the spheres’ has been resonant through history.³⁸

There is little doubt that Warner would have read Milton. She would certainly have known of the ‘music of the spheres’ if not from original Pythagorean concepts, then from the earliest printed treatise on music the *Theorica Musicae* by Franchinus Gaffurius. A fifteenth century edition of this work, which was first published in 1480, was purchased for the Carnegie Tudor Church Music project in 1918 and would have been available for Warner to use. It should be noted here that Warner worked from the very earliest available musicological texts and as Collins-Judd states: ‘Gaffurius’ examples are among the first instances of printed polyphonic music’.³⁹ Warner’s knowledge of Latin is known from a Report to the Carnegie Trust from Richard Terry, then Editor-in-Chief of the *Tudor Church Music* Committee: ‘The work of providing English words for Latin motets has been ‘speeded up’ . . . Miss Townsend Warner is doing volume II of Byrd’s *Cantiones*’.⁴⁰

The ‘music of the spheres’ is evident in Milton’s later epic poem *Paradise Lost*; the joyous singing of the angels signifies this music which is heard by Adam in Paradise. This verse also gives the information that the music of Milton’s heavenly choir is polyphonic:

Celestial voices to the midnight air

³⁸ Eliot, Online article

³⁹ Collins-Judd 21

⁴⁰ Carnegie GD281/38/47

Sole, or responsive each to other's note . . .
 With heavenly touch of instrumental sounds
 In full harmonic number joined, their songs
 Divide the night, and lift our thoughts to heaven.⁴¹

Here Milton is stating the transcendental power of music and its ability to create harmony, rapture and a pathway to God. Even in hell the disgraced angels still sing and the 'partial' nature of their song could imply polyphony:

Their song was partial, but the harmony
 (What could it less when spirits immortal sing?)
 Suspended hell, and took with ravishment
 The thronging audience.⁴²

George Eliot, an admirer of Milton's poetry, also writes of the power of music to transcend and transform. In her epic poem *The Legend of Jubal*, 'the mighty tolling of the far-off spheres' (unpaged online article) and the hammers of Pythagorean theory are very much part of Jubal's awakening to the possibilities of the positive effect that music could have on mankind living harmoniously on earth. Jubal's passion echoes Yellowlees' initial response to singing the music of the *Ars nova*; he is led astray by the unexpected progressions and sweet concords of unknown music:

Jubal, too, watched the hammer, till his eyes,
 No longer following its fall or rise

⁴¹ *Paradise Lost*, Bk. IV, 682-8

⁴² *Paradise Lost* Bk. II, 552-5

Seemed glad with something that they could not see
 But only listened to some melody . . .
 Then, as the metal shapes more various grew,
 And, hurled upon each other, resonance drew . . .
 And skyey spaces in the spaceless thought,
 To Jubal such enlarged passion brought . . .
 Concords and discords, cadences and cries . . .
 Some rapture more intense, some mightier rage,
 Some living sea that burst the bounds of man's brief age.⁴³

The 'music of the spheres' is also evident in an earlier poem of Eliot's entitled 'O May I Join the Choir Invisible' in which she echoes Milton's sentiments in the lines 682-88 from *Paradise Lost* quoted above, relating them more firmly to a life on earth :

So to live is heaven:
 To make undying music in the world,
 Breathing a beauteous order that controls
 With growing sway the growing life of man.⁴⁴

So it can be seen that the chapter '*Triste Loysir*' is exceptional by any standard. The hallmarks of Warner's writing are here: wit, irony and detailed historical knowledge of the period. Her characters 'come bursting out of the texture' she creates in this novel.⁴⁵ Her exploration of the responses of the human heart to emotion and circumstance, the basis of so

⁴³ Online article

⁴⁴ Online article

⁴⁵ Warner [pp.53] – 55

much of her writing, is extended here, and in this passage from *The Corner That Held Them* she uses her scholarly knowledge of early music as the medium for this exploration.

The message is clear: music may enhance any life, be available to all in mutual enjoyment, stand outside any class structure that society seeks to impose, and it can offer glimpses of a paradisaical view of human connection across differences and affliction.

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