The Role of African American Music in E. L. Doctorow's *The March*

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of African American music in E. L. Doctorow's historical novel The March *(2005), with a focus on selected scenes in which this type of music occurs. It examines the emotions elicited in the protagonists as well as the atmosphere created or underlined by this music. Furthermore, it takes into account which musical instruments are employed and considers their significance in the book with regard to their symbolic meaning. It also investigates the extent to which African American music contributes to the development of the story. The name of the book refers to Sherman's March to the Sea, which took place towards the end of the American Civil War and when numerous former slaves were freed by Sherman's troops. The fate of the freed slaves, however, was rather complex, which is reflected in the characteristics of the music that they perform in certain scenes. The relevance of African American Music to Doctorow's work is highlighted by the fact that the author himself became world-famous chiefly for his novel* Ragtime *(1975), whose main protagonist Coalhouse Walker is a pianist of African American origin. The character's fictional father Coalhouse Walker senior appears as an African American banjo player in* The March.

Keywords

music in literature, E. L. Doctorow, *The March*, African American music, emotions

Introduction

Music and literature had in the past been regarded as sister arts. Written language is much more concrete in terms of conveying a message than is music; therefore, music very often tends to be employed when certain phenomena are inexpressible or unutterable.[1] The study of the relationships between music and literature falls into the field of interdisciplinary comparative literature. In a literary work, music can appear in various forms: music as a literary theme or thematization of music (Arroyas, Scher, Wiefandt),[2] the music of literature or musicalization of fiction (Wiegandt, Wolf),[3] and musical structures and techniques in literature (Arroyas, Scher).[4] Of these main roles, the first, i.e. music as a literary theme, is most relevant for the purpose of this paper.

In the case of E. L. Doctorow, both *Ragtime* and *The March* denote not only a given era or a historic event respectively, but each title also signifies a musical genre, indicating the importance of music in both works. What is more, several parallels can be found between the musical genres of ragtime and march in themselves, particularly with regard to the technique of the accompaniment of the former.[5] Furthermore, African American music plays a significant role in both novels, and

1 See Libor Martínek, *Literatura a hudba I/1, 2* (Opava: Slezská univerzita v Opavě, 2009), 12, 72.

2 Andrzej Hejmej, *Music in Literature*, trans. Lindsay Davidson (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014), 47.

3 Hejmej, *Music in Literature*, 47; Werner Wolf, "Intermedialität als neues Paradigma der Literaturwissenschaft? Plädoyer für eine literaturzentrierte Erforschung der Grenzüberschreitungen zwischen Wortkunst und anderen Medien am Beispiel von Virginia Woolfs 'The String Quartet'," in *Selected Essays on Intermediality by Werner Wolf (1992-2014)*, ed. Walter Bernhart (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2018), 16.

4 Hejmej, *Music in Literature,* 47.

5 See Lidia Bilonozhko, "Phonic Musicality as a Means of Recoding in E. L. Doctorow's Ragtime," *American & British Studies Annual* 9 (2016): 80, 83.

even protagonists of the same name are featured. Since *Ragtime* refers to a specific style of playing the piano and music is essential to the novel as a whole, one has to ask to what extent music plays a part in Doctorow's other works, in particular his later ones, especially as every book by this author is original in tone, structure and texture.[6]

In light of the fact that Doctorow's most famous novel is the aforementioned *Ragtime* (1975), in which music is central, as well as the fact that numerous references to music appear in a number of his other novels, such as *Homer and Langley* (2009), one has to ask to what extent the author himself was influenced by music and where this inspiration came from. While it is true that Doctorow's family members were seasoned musicians, the novelist himself did not study music at university, as he specialized in philosophy, literature, drama, acting and directing.[7] Doctorow himself was not employed in any occupation associated with music, since he worked mostly as a script reader, writer and university teacher.[8]

His mother was an accomplished pianist, his older brother a professional jazz pianist,[9] and his father was the owner of a musical instrument store.[10] As Doctorow himself revealed, music had been an integral part of his life, especially in his childhood, when he had listened to all sorts of records, tried out various musical instruments and took piano lessons for five or six years, although not very successfully.[11] In completing his works, he found music significant in the writing process: "Somewhere along the line the rhythms and tonalities of music elided in my brain with the sounds that words make and the rhythm that sentences have."[12]

The March features the fortunes of various characters from both sides of a conflict, mingling fictional characters (the Jamesons – plantation and slave owners, Pearl – an ex-slave, Emily – the daughter of a judge, Sartorius – a German surgeon and colonel of the Federal army, Arly and Will – soldiers and deserters) with real figures of the era (Union Generals Sherman, Grant and Kilpatrick as well as President Lincoln). Furthermore, following the course of the Union army, the novel describes selected battles and military campaigns through cities such as Milledgeville, Savannah and Columbia. Finally, the novel portrays the feelings of both main and minor characters, evoked by the dramatic course of events in the war, which was always Doctorow's stated goal from the beginning of the writing process of his historical novels.[13] As music has been often noted to convey emotion,[14] in many cases the events of this novel are underlined and/or embellished by music, in particular in the form of musical literary themes and motifs.

6 See Carol C. Harter, and James R. Thompson, *E. L. Doctorow* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 1.

7 See John G. Parks, *E. L. Doctorow* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1991), 12–3.

8 See Parks, *E. L. Doctorow*, 13.

9 See Eric Homberger, "E L Doctorow Obituary," *The Guardian*, July 22, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/22/el-doctorow.

10 See Harter and Thompson, *E. L. Doctorow*, 2.

11 Judy Carmichael, "E. L. Doctorow: Jazz Inspired," *Jazztimes*, June 6, 2010, https://jazztimes.com/columns/jazzinspired/e-l-doctorow-jazz-inspired/.

12 James Campbell, "The Long View," *The Guardian*, January 14, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/14/featuresreviews.guardianreview28.

13 See Hana Ulmanová, "Prohry v každém dějství," afterword to *E. L. Doctorow. Pochod* k *moři*, trans. Veronika Volhejnová (Praha: Odeon, 2007), 300.

14 See Wolf, "Intermedialität als neues Paradigma der Literaturwissenschaft? Plädoyer für eine literaturzentrierte Erforschung der Grenzüberschreitungen zwischen Wortkunst und anderen Medien am Beispiel von Virginia Woolfs The String Quartet," 7.

In *The March*, references to music occur more than fifty times and take several forms, for example military music, piano music, African American music, and the music of nature. Despite this prevalence in the novel, no study or research paper has addressed this motif.

The 'black folks,' as African Americans are referred to throughout the novel, were freed by Sherman's troops and followed them, albeit not as an official part of the army. The tragic fate of the freed slaves is expressed by the mood of the music they perform in the novel, with a number of the characters featured as excellent musicians with outstanding improvisational skills, who play and sing for the entertainment of their community, also at times in the spirit of joy or elation.

Contrasting sounds

Music is first used as a sound which is counterpointed with that of the army, with the regular rhythm and beat of the marching soldiers, the "rumble of caissons" and "military blare"[15] replaced by "a rhythmless festive sound,"[16] the latter of which is compared to resonances occurring in nature, namely birdsong. What is striking here is the attribute "rhythmless," as one of the most distinctive qualities of African American music has always been a strong emphasis on rhythm as one of its crucial features.[17]

One explanation for this seemingly counterintuitive usage could be connected to the spontaneity of the people, who are so exhilarated that they simply do not follow any rhythmical patterns, but rather sing from their very nature, thus resembling the birds to which they are compared in the text. Another reason could be the startling contrast to the sounds of the army, including drumbeats, which play an essential role there. In the army, the main function of the drumbeat was to set the pace for the march, which is by definition structured, while the black folks, having been freed at last, let their expression run riot, a quality which is reflected in their extemporaneous musical performance.

The mood of the people is positive, as is the mood of the music, which is highlighted in a simile: "as if these people were on some sort of holiday and on their way to a church meeting or a picnic."[18] The description of the crowd includes children and their "high, piping voices,"[19] an atmosphere which contributes to the overall impression both the protagonists and reader receive. All in all, the sound of the black folks comes across as much more natural and more pleasant than that of the army.

The feelings of the character of Emily, however, might be seen as quite different from those described above. The black folks are joined by Wilma, a former slave girl and Emily's personal servant. Since Emily, the daughter of a judge, has had a close relationship with her personal servant, which is proven by her giving Wilma her mother's hope chest and forcing her to accept it as her

15 E. L. Doctorow, *The March: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2005), 33.

16 Doctorow, *The March*, 33.

17 See Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans. A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 162, 195.

18 Doctorow, *The March*, 33.

19 Doctorow, *The March*, 33.

"last instruction,"[20] the black folks' parade and the subsequent loss of her last companion at this stage of the story might be seen as emphasizing Emily's loneliness.

Crossing Ebenezer Creek

Not only the occurrence of music, but also its absence is significant. In the introductory part of the ninth chapter, a retinue of black folks accompanying the army is described. This is evocative of the actual historical event of the Union army crossing Ebenezer Creek.[21]

Special attention is devoted to Wilma, who has joined other former slaves and has been helping a man who reminds her of her former master, Judge Thompson. The moment the trail becomes hazardous, the music falls silent: "The people had stopped singing and the women held the children to them tightly."[22] The narrow way lined with swamps prevents them from singing, as they need to concentrate solely on proceeding carefully. Another reason appears to be fear aroused by the dangers lurking now at every step. The silence which has set in can be seen as foreshadowing an unfortunate twist in the fate of the black folks, one which is prefigured by Wilma's foreboding "premonition,"[23] as well as children having started crying, as if they had a similar intuition. In addition, the gloomy atmosphere is intensified by a darkened sky. It is especially the absence of music which underlines the severity of the situation in which the black folks now find themselves. Musicologist Eileen Southern has documented how music, and above all singing, accompanied virtually any activity performed by African Americans at that time.[24]

These fears eventually come true once the soldiers cut off the pontoon bridge over which they have all just crossed. Panic is driven by justifiable paranoia that the group is being chased by the Rebs, i.e. slave hunters. Some of the black folks try to swim across the river; many of them fail and drown. Yet some are rescued, including Wilma, mostly thanks to African American Union soldiers, with one of them helping Wilma escape from the water. As the reader later learns, this is Coalhouse Walker, himself a musician, who is to become Wilma's boyfriend.

The scene and the chapter is framed by music, with its absence at the beginning an ominous sign of a bleak destiny, and ended by a hopeful sign of better times ahead in the form of the salvage man, who turns out to be a musician later in the story.

Coalhouse Walker

As mentioned above, Wilma later becomes acquainted with a man named Coalhouse Walker, who saves her after she and other former slaves have been abandoned when crossing the river. The man's name is a clear allusion to the main protagonist of Doctorow's *Ragtime*, as well as to Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas.* Furthermore, taking into account the eras in which both of these

20 Doctorow, *The March*, 33.

21 See John F. Marszalek, *Sherman's March to the Sea* (Abilene: McWhitney Foundation Press, 2005), 94.

22 Doctorow, *The March*, 69.

23 Doctorow, *The March*, 70.

24 See Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 161.

protagonists appear, Coalhouse Walker could be seen as Coalhouse Walker Jr.'s father. Unlike his possible son, however, the character in *The March* is not a piano player, but plays the banjo, which is an instrument that was typically used in African American bands of the period. The banjo was one of the most widespread musical instruments used on plantations at that time,[25] used alongside the fiddle to accompany dancing.[26] The banjo was regarded as a unique instrument, being able to engender all sorts of different passion in the dancers.[27]

Not only does Coalhouse play an instrument, he also sings "some old song."[28] His voice is referred to as deep, adding to the creation of the impression of what the music might have sounded like. In this scene, music accompanies the pleasant atmosphere in which Wilma, along with the other black folks, find themselves; her initial worries earlier in the day seem to have been overcome: "and it turned from a day full of worry for her to a good time with people she wouldn't have known but for the holiday season and the freeing of Savannah."[29]

Coalhouse's adept playing surprises Wilma and results in some listeners joining in and beginning to perform music spontaneously by clapping their hands and dancing. Wilma has realized she is slowly but surely finding her way in a new situation. She, like the others in the group, will forge their new destiny: "some still working where they'd been slaves, but they had a way about them now, and she supposed she was getting to it too."[30] Both Walker and his music contributes to the feeling of gladness "to be alive,"[31] not only in Wilma, but also in the others present.

This scene serves as a prime example of one of the leading musical practices by African Americans at that time, that is music for entertainment. Several characteristic traits can be demonstrated here. First of all, there is dancing, which was an inherent part of such musical performances. The inextricable nature of the two arts, music and dance, can be regarded as a remnant of the original cultural heritage of indigenous African music. Notably, some African languages do not have different expressions for 'music' and 'dance,' with the idea encompassed in a single word.[32]

Another distinctive feature here is improvisation; the people around Coalhouse Walker join in in an extemporaneous way, and the result is anything but a performance which has been carefully prepared in advance. It is exactly this quality of African American music of that era that represents a counterpoint to the European tradition, in which listeners are usually subject to music composed by somebody else, not the performer, and the listeners do not take an active part in the performance. In the case of African American music, the relatively clear distinctions among performer, composer and audience are usually blurred and to a degree merge with one another.[33]

25 See Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 171.

26 See Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 172.

27 See Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 203.

28 Doctorow, *The March*, 95.

29 Doctorow, *The March*, 94–95.

30 Doctorow, *The March*, 95.

31 Doctorow, *The March*, 95.

32 See Greg Harrison, *Strains of Freedom. A Philosophical History of African American Music and Slavery* (Middletown: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018), 80–1.

33 See Harrison, *Strains of Freedom*, 52, 183.

It is not clear whether the next section is sung by Coalhouse, as this is not explicitly stated. This ambiguity might be attributed to the aforementioned active participation of the others present, which was so imperative in the mode of this music during the Civil War era.[34] Due to the song's structure, it reminds the reader of a children's nursery rhyme, but at the same time bears a symbolic, sexual, meaning: a girl imagining a man instead of a lemon. This interpretation is supported at the beginning of the subsequent passage, which can be read as jealousy on Wilma's part: "There were young girls there from the kitchen and she could see what they were thinking, so she didn't let him from her sight."[35]

It is highly possible that the girls' attraction to Walker is enhanced by the content of the aforementioned song, and, further, the image of a singer surrounded by girls and women could be viewed as an archetypal element, reminiscent of a ritual which can be traced back to African roots.[36] Be that as it may, the main effect is that, for obvious reasons, his girlfriend Wilma feels quite uneasy.

African American Music and Freedom

Even before Africans and African Americans were introduced to Christianity, religious rites and rituals have always played an intrinsic role in the lives of this population. Christian-based music became an essential part of prayers, expressed in psalms, hymns and spirituals.[37] Contrary to popular belief, however, the conversion of slaves to Christianity was in fact discouraged by the planters, the vast majority of whom would drive out missionaries encouraging and fostering conversion.[38] The conversion of slaves was only slow and gradual, and religious services were initially held mostly in secret.[39] Nevertheless, Christian elements, mostly in the form of verses taken from the Bible, gradually became a fundamental component of religious and spiritual songs,[40] combined with a distinctive and unmistakable method of expression.[41]

One such process is depicted in chapter sixteen, towards the end of the first part of the novel during which the applications of black folks to be allotted property are being assessed and/or approved. Many of applicants are hopeful for a bright future and pray to God to bring about the approval, which can be regarded as a key step to freedom: "Not loudly—they were singing for themselves, a prayerful hymn, so that this blessed thing that was happening would continue to happen."[42] Just as the previous scene, this one is also based on a real event which took place on 16 January, 1865.[43]

34 See Harrison, *Strains of Freedom*, 72.

35 Doctorow, *The March*, 95.

36 See Steven Cornelius, *Music of the Civil War Era* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 186.

37 See Harrison, *Strains of Freedom*, 181.

38 See Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 170.

39 See Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 179.

40 See Cornelius, *Music of the Civil War Era*, 118.

41 See Harrison, *Strains of Freedom*, 182.

42 Doctorow, *The March*, 124.

43 See Marszalek, *Sherman's March to the Sea,* 119.

In essence, hymns were central to the music sung by black slaves of the Antebellum era and well into the Civil War.[44] Singing served as a form of prayer and its emotional impact was usually said to be so strong that it "touched many a heart."[45] Most likely, the "blessed thing" of their singing in this scene is achieving freedom, a ubiquitous musical theme in African American music at that time.[46]

Wilma and Coalhouse are part of the queue waiting to be granted a few acres of land. Their application is, however, dismissed, for they are not married. This forces them to take quick action, as their subsequent discussion away from the crowd touches upon music as a possible future means of Coalhouse earning a living. In response to Coalhouse's uncertainty about what he could do if they moved to a big city, Wilma suggests: "You know music. You play music. Got a fine voice. I heard you. You made those people happy, picking on that banjo."[47]

Coalhouse, however, rejects such an option vehemently, claiming that he would prefer to work physically, laboring in the field. In his view, in fact, it would be the ownership of his own land which would make him free as opposed to making music for a living. He does not intend, however, to renounce music completely; he still genuinely wants to perform, but for himself, not for others: "[A free man] sings and dances for himself, not nobody else."[48] His view here might be related to a common practice in the Antebellum Era in which black slaves performed for the white plantation owners and their families.[49] Though not a slave himself, it is entirely possible that Coalhouse declines to make his living by performing because of its similarity to this practice. In effect, Wilma agrees to his stance and together they set out to search for a preacher to marry them.

In summary, the role of music in this chapter is twofold: firstly, it underlines the thankfulness of the black folks to God for being allocated a piece of land to work on, which they perceive as a turning point on their way to liberty. The second aspect is closely related to the first, in the sense that possession of land and working on it is, at least in Coalhouse's view, superior to earning money by performing music for other people's entertainment. Instead, Coalhouse dreams about being able to make music only after working for his own pleasure, hence feeling completely free.

Pearl's Flashbacks

As the illegitimate daughter of Mr. Jameson and her slave mother, Pearl is another key figure with connections to African American music. Not only does she play the drum, though not very skillfully, she also recalls the past in the form of flashbacks of her and other black slaves working hard on the plantation in Georgia and the "soulful singing"[50] they engaged in.

44 See Cornelius, *Music of the Civil War Era*, 122; Harrison, *Strains of Freedom*, 197.

45 Cornelius, *Music of the Civil War Era*, 122.

46 See Cornelius, *Music of the Civil War Era*, 132; Harrison, *Strains of Freedom*, 181.

47 Doctorow, *The March*, 126.

48 Doctorow, *The March*, 127.

49 See Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 175.

50 Doctorow, *The March*, 240.

This recollection is elicited by the coming of spring, a season which is generally linked with a positive feeling, transcending the drudgery of everyday life. This emotion has a religious dimension in that Pearl envisages "the real, true Massah,"[51] highly likely Jesus Christ, addressing her and showing her flowers in bloom, a phenomenon her stepfather cannot influence, which is evidence of the mortal's restricted power. Singing is a response to the bleak fate of her community being forced to labor all day in the fields. This mood is also reflected in the "soulful" characteristics of their song, i.e. deeply emotional, full of love and sadness. Apart from this general description, however, there is no indication of the particular pieces of music the black slaves sang back then.

It has to be said that singing was integral to virtually any kind of work in the fields. Slaves were even encouraged to sing by masters and overseers, although songs imbued with the sort of mood Pearl recalled, that is sadness and sorrow, were strongly discouraged[52] as incurring the master's displeasure.[53] The singing on the plantation can therefore be interpreted as part of Pearl's deep-rooted memory from her childhood. Emotionally, that music must have been full of sadness and love, possibly much to the masters' and/or overseers' discontent.

A contemplation of the ongoing fate of the black folks is presented in part three, chapter three, section nine. The omniscient point of view falls on Pearl again, who is trying to fall asleep but cannot help thinking about the fate of her fellow refugees. She ponders upon the deteriorating African American camp for former slaves that she has seen and experienced earlier that day.

Of all the images going through her mind, making music is the most elaborated on. The reader is provided both with the mood and genre (a sad, prayerful hymn) as well as the subject matter (their fate).[54] This time the music is compared to natural phenomena (wind and earth). Unlike in the previous case, here Wilma feels a strong sense of common identity, including guilt in that she was not one of the former slaves when her wagon was passing their camp. Quite the contrary: she was wearing army clothes, was satiated, had a soldier as her boyfriend. She was now associated with those who were indifferent to the black folks, despite their high hopes after being released, even initially considering Sherman almost as their savior. However, since their negative experience while crossing the river following the army, they have become well aware that General Sherman is not enthusiastic about them at all and indeed has practically left them to their fate.

All these uncertainties and insecurities, above all whether and for how long they will remain free, must have been reflected and expressed in their music. It sounded to her (and to the reader's imagination) like some kind of soft lament, a wailing for their destiny. This sorrowful tone was, in fact, the largely prevailing mood of slave songs during the Antebellum Era and into the Civil War.[55] This quality recurs again at the end of Sherman's march, when it becomes evident that the Northern liberators were not as enlightened as they had hoped for. The apothegm "You may die poor but you won't die a slave,"[56] sung by the Yankees themselves filled the air. As a result, this

51 Doctorow, *The March*, 240.

52 See Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 161.

53 See Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 165.

54 See Doctorow, *The March*, 253–254.

55 See Harrison, *Strains of Freedom*, 168ff.

56 Cornelius, *Music of the Civil War Era*, 137.

awareness must have been mirrored in the mood of the past songs sung by African Americans to which Pearl is referring.

In contrast to her earlier recollection, the music in this flashback is much more vivid and powerful. Firstly, it is because her memory is much fresher, as they had passed the camp on the same day. Secondly, although mentioned last in the list during the description of her vision, the reference to music is elaborated on by means of similes, characteristics and the subject matter involved: the black folks' tragic and uncertain destiny, at least for the time being. Lastly, it is the internal clash between her feelings of affiliation and alienation, along with the resultant self-reproach, which appears to be the main reason for her inability to sleep.

Conclusion

Due to its extemporaneous nature and spontaneity, African American music forms a stark contrast to both the military music and the piano music performed by Mrs. Jameson. It also frames an emotionally powerful scene in which many of the freed slaves following the army drown in the river, having stopped singing earlier on, as if they had a premonition of what is to happen. Yet at the end of this section there is a faint ray of hope, as Wilma Jones, Emily's former servant, is saved by Coalhouse Walker, who turns out to be a banjo player. Later in the story, Coalhouse plays the banjo and sings. The spontaneity with which other African Americans join in and dance is not only distinctive of their performance, but is also reminiscent of an archetypal element, almost a ritual. In addition, the song provides a sexual dimension, resulting in Wilma's jealousy of her boyfriend at this stage of the story, owing to other girls' admiration of this musician. The same couple is featured while the freed slaves are allotted their own piece of land, where they listen to a prayerful hymn. In the same scene, Coalhouse vigorously rejects Wilma's idea of him making a living as a professional musician, favoring the cultivation of his own piece of land instead. In both cases, freedom is the main theme. The songs of sorrow accompanying drudgery in the fields are part of Pearl's reminiscences of her childhood. The bleak mood of the songs she hears in the camp of the freed slaves contribute to her sense of reproach due to her split identity, as she is marching with Sherman's army now, a group which behaves indifferently towards the freed slaves and their destiny.

All in all, African American music in the novel accentuates the main themes of many of the hymns sung at that time, that is sorrow and longing for freedom. In addition, music for entertainment is depicted in one scene as performed by Coalhouse Walker on the banjo, an instrument with which certain traditions of indigenous origin are incorporated such as extemporaneousness, spontaneity and collective performance, all of which is evocative of an archetypal ritual. Pearl's flashbacks present two typical functions of African American music in the Antebellum and Civil War era: singing while laboring in the fields, and singing in the camp of 'contrabands,' that is the freed slaves following Sherman's army.[57]

57 See Marszalek, *Sherman's March to the Sea,* 90–91.

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