

# The Role of Music in E. L. Doctorow's *City of God*

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## ABSTRACT

*E. L. Doctorow became world-famous primarily for his novel Ragtime (1975), which references a distinct style of playing the piano that had a profound impact on the development of jazz. Music also plays a principal role in a number of the author's other works. This paper explores the role of music in one of his later novels, City of God (2000), with a focus on selected scenes in which music is represented. From the viewpoint of different modes of music in literature, namely the thematization of music, the sound layer and the musicalization of fiction, this contribution examines the emotions elicited in the protagonists in the scenes in question, as well as the atmosphere that the music creates or accentuates. It also takes into account which musical instruments are employed, including the symbolic meaning that one of them, the violin, carries. Furthermore, an investigation is presented as to what extent musical elements from other novels by E. L. Doctorow can be found, and in which respects this novel is unique. In City of God, the lyrics of jazz tunes emerge throughout the novel, thus the importance of this motif is discussed in detail along with the attention devoted to other major manifestations of music in this literary work.*

## KEYWORDS

music in literature, E. L. Doctorow, fiction, novel, *City of God*

## Introduction

Of the various manifestations of music in literature, the thematization of music is possibly the most obvious. This also serves as a basis for many literary critics who deal with music in texts. Apart from thematization, there are at least two other types of musicality in literature, which Andrzej Hejmej calls Musicality I and Musicality III (for him, thematization of music is Musicality II).<sup>1</sup> Musicality I encompasses the sound layer, into which the following features fall: onomatopoeia, rhythm, metre and other such elements.

The third type of musicality, namely musical structures, techniques and textures (in Wolf's terminology "musicalization of fiction"),<sup>2</sup> can merely be emulated by a literary work, as written literature is incapable of presenting them in their original form. This type of musicality can be exemplified by the fugue, the entire basis of which is polyphonic. As a result, the listener perceives multiple musical structures vertically and simultaneously, creating an effect which for obvious reasons is clearly impossible in literature. What is feasible, however, is to imitate the effects to some extent, for example through the repetition of certain motifs or themes, or protagonists and conflicts. Nevertheless, unlike in music, in literature these must be arranged horizontally, that is one after another, rather than vertically.

E. L. Doctorow himself did not study musicology as such, yet he did take piano lessons for several years and came from a musical background: his father was a music shop owner, his mother an accomplished pianist and his brother led a jazz band.<sup>3</sup> In Doctorow's own words, music

1 Andrzej Hejmej, *Musicality of a Literary Work*, chap. 2, Kindle.

2 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. Walther Bernhart (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2018), 16.

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

and the inspiration drawn from it played a substantial role in the origin of several of his works,<sup>4</sup> including *City of God*.<sup>5</sup>

The title of the book refers to a Latin treatise called *De civitate Dei contra paganos* written by St Augustine in the fifth century AD. Additionally, the meaning and sense of City of God constitute one of the main themes running throughout the book. Aside from this allusion, several narrative threads emerge, the central of which is a fictitious detective story comprising the motif of a mysterious disappearance of a cross from the church of St Timothy. Ultimately, this plotline leads to a relationship and later marriage between Pem the pastor of the church and Sarah, a rabbi.

Apart from this main narrative, some other plotlines occur: the book includes a rather substantial section that might be classified as a Holocaust narrative, which depicts Sarah's ancestors and their grim fates. Furthermore, the work is interwoven with the depictions of love affairs, references to popular movies as well as serious meditations on various topics: primarily religion, but also physics, the universe, philosophy, and more. Besides topics on religion, contemplation of the universe probably appears most frequently and conspicuously: "Do you know, Everett, what the anthropic principle is? It is quite simple: that our universe, having exploded into existence at an inflationary rate, and spent billions of years swathed in an opacity of gases before photons brought light into space and everything cooled..."<sup>6</sup>

Carrying many features of the postmodern novel, *City of God* also contains features of metafiction as well as numerous references and allusions to writers such as Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Irving, Whitman, Joyce and Yeats. Additionally, protagonists from Doctorow's other novels emerge in the narrative, for example Pemberton and McIlvaine from his macabre masterpiece *The Waterworks* (1995).

The presence of multiple narratives, plotlines, references, allusions along with the intermingling of these elements implies a polyphony which seems to emulate techniques used in musical structures (see above). In addition, the reader is exposed to numerous instances of intermedial intertextuality, a substantial part of which takes the form of quotations.

## Manifestations of Music in the Novel

Of the various occurrences of music in this novel, it is jazz tunes which play the most important role as performed by a band called the Midrash quartet. The significance of these compositions is emphasized by the fact that they are clearly marked out in the text, orthographically distinguished by means of indentation, a different font, and division into strophes, italics and titles. In addition, they appear throughout the whole novel, some of them recurring in the same version, others slightly modified. What is more, these sections are unequivocally delimited by the following

4 For example, musicality in *Ragtime* (1975) has been examined by Lidia Bilonozhko in her article "Phonic Musicality as a Means of Recoding in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*," *American & British Studies Annual* 9 (2016): 75–84. The novel *The March* (2005) was analysed by the present author in his article "The Role of African American Music in E. L. Doctorow's *The March*," *American & British Studies Annual* 12 (2019): 145–54.

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

6 Doctorow, *City of God*, 259.

introductory sentence: *The Midrash Jazz Quartet Plays the Standards*, which serves as some sort of leitmotif used each time the lyrics emerge, functioning therefore as a kind of a musical feature itself. The main themes of the lyrics constitute love, music, existence and women, including erotic and sexual dimensions.

Of the numerous quotations and extracts which can be found throughout the book, a two-strophe “standard” – as the lyrics are repeatedly introduced in the text – might serve as an illustrative example. What is more, three of the motifs stated above appear in this sample – love, music and women. In this case, it is love for a woman manifesting itself through music: not clearly defined yet genuinely internal. Apart from the level of meaning and sense, the dimension of the musicality of verse is also fairly obvious, especially the emulation of the syncopated rhythm (the third line of the second stanza – “of love and youth and spring”):

THE SONG IS YOU

I hear music when I look at you  
 A beautiful theme of everything I ever knew  
 Down deep in my heart I hear it play  
 I feel it start and melt away ...

Why can't I let you know  
 The song my heart would sing  
 What beautiful rhapsody of love and youth and spring  
 The music is sweet  
 The words are true  
 The song is you!<sup>7</sup>

In addition to this, this song illustrates the effect of reverberation in the form of an imitation technique: the woman as the addressee of the song is replaced by the town: “The song is you, big town, you were always my song across the oily river [...]”<sup>8</sup> On the next page, the second stanza of the song comes to the storyteller’s mind and is quoted anew, conveying its persistence.

As far as musical instruments are concerned, some typical of jazz bands are mentioned, namely piano, saxophone, guitar and bass. However, unlike in other novels by Doctorow, such as *Ragtime*, there is no single instrument which could be regarded as paramount, although the violin does carry a symbolic meaning.

It is true that a rather substantial section is devoted to the image of the violin spider with the “pure thin high-pitched tone it emits.”<sup>9</sup> This creature appears to act as a devilish symbol. Providing a stark contrast to the overall spiritual atmosphere prevailing throughout the novel, this vision includes the brutal killing of a human being unable to defend themselves: “Doing a bit of intelligent military reconnoitring before it chooses the tenderest place to bite into with its mandibles and begins to suck through its proboscis the blood, its food.”<sup>10</sup>

7 Doctorow, *City of God*, 231.

8 Doctorow, *City of God*, 231.

9 Doctorow, *City of God*, 219.

10 Doctorow, *City of God*, 219.

As for other manifestations of music in *City of God*, the reader will come across passages approaching musicological discussions; for instance, there are extracts dealing with music and science, composition, the origin of music, and the perception of popular songs, not unlike in Doctorow's later novel *Homer and Langley* (2009). One potentially illustrative example is a passage on the theme of how to produce a hit, in which triviality is emphasized in terms of voice range, accompaniment and rhythm. The idea is that for a song to become popular it cannot be complicated, as ordinary people would probably not be able to appreciate or learn it: "Of great songs, standards, composers will tell you the basic principle of their composition: Keep it simple. The simpler, the better. You want untrained voices to handle it in the shower, in the kitchen. Try to keep the tune in one octave. Stick with the four basic chords and avoid tricky rhythms."<sup>11</sup>

Further on in the passage, the "standards" are compared to religious music, in particular hymns, as well as other genres, especially romantic ballads. It is the hymn which is of relevance here, especially with respect to the leitmotif of the novel as a whole, all the more so, as one of the standards is referred to as "God-given," also reflecting the book's title.<sup>12</sup>

Not only does the book include numerous references and allusions to various authors across different centuries and periods, as noted above, it also explicitly mentions a number of composers and singer-songwriters as well as their works and/or songs (Bach and Mozart alongside Berlin and Dylan) by means of which music is represented. For instance, Ludwig van Beethoven is mentioned as a namesake of Ludwig Wittgenstein in passages dedicated to this linguist and philosopher. In reference to his biography, it is emphasised that this was not mere coincidence, but rather the deliberate intention of his parents, who had admired the composer.<sup>13</sup> A ubiquitous spiritual dimension is present here as well, claiming that both understanding Beethoven's music and Wittgenstein's thought is supposed to be "redemptive."<sup>14</sup>

Similarly to in *Homer and Langley* (2009), there are references to film music as a specific genre. In the example below, it is understood as an inseparable part of the artistic expression: "You receive what you see, you don't have to think it out. You see that lit and dressed scene, hear the music, see the facial expressions, bodily movements, and attitudes of the costumed and hairdressed actors – and you understand. Moviegoing is an act of inference."<sup>15</sup>

Further to this, there is the image of the pianist accompanying the plot. In the vast majority of cases, the music contributes to the overall atmosphere of a given scene to, in Doctorow's words, "go along with the action."<sup>16</sup> The author depicts the bad manners of cinema-goers, who are in fact disturbing and distracting to the intended artistic expression, thus making it impossible for the few dedicated watchers (and listeners) to distinctly perceive the performance: "some poets in the audiences thought if they could only record the audiences talking back to the film [...]"<sup>17</sup>

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11 Doctorow, *City of God*, 198.

12 Doctorow, *City of God*, 198.

13 See Doctorow, *City of God*, 85.

14 See Doctorow, *City of God*, 191.

15 Doctorow, *City of God*, 214.

16 Doctorow, *City of God*, 237.

17 Doctorow, *City of God*, 237.

The experience of a cinemagoer watching a film in the darkness passes into another standard performed by the Midrash Jazz Quartet. The theme of the first stanza appears to be transience (especially the line “time hurries by, we’re here and gone”),<sup>18</sup> whereas the second is perfused by the desire for love, facilitating a confrontation with life’s difficulties (“and we can face the music together”).<sup>19</sup> The lyrics are followed by what could be regarded as some sort of interpretation in which a longing for a sense of life and its essence are central. In addition, in the course of the interpretation, the expression “face the music” is repeated and expanded upon, an effect which approaches a treatment with a short motif in music, regardless of the form in which it is applied.

The next passage turns to dancing and its significance. Although it is apparent that the interconnectedness of music and dancing is very close, the speaker describes the rapport between the dancers as “another voice of the music” which flows as an “uncanny harmony.”<sup>20</sup> Consequently, this intimate relationship is not seen here merely as another dimension of music, which it indeed is, but as a supplementary aspect.

The setting moves later to a nightclub in which there is a dancing performance going on. The very expression “nightclub” is repeated six times, making it significant and, at the same time, intrinsically linked to the notion of the dark, which is further fuelled by the contrasting bleak image of the beggars outside the place. Leaving this aside, repetition is one of the basic and most apparent features of music and, in this case, the frequency of the word’s distribution indicates its musical function in this context.<sup>21</sup>

Towards the end of this section, the timelessness of music and darkness – in contrast to the ephemeralness of human life – is emphasized:

Darkness has won.  
The music goes on  
Your dance is done  
The music goes on.<sup>22</sup>

As is the case in Doctorow’s other novels, such as *The March* (2005), it is the human voice which merits considerable attention, particularly its musical qualities, including terminological musical classifications such as soprano, alto and baritone. Therefore, the description of a given voice forms an integral part of the characteristics of several protagonists, both main (Sarah, Pem) and minor ones (a nurse in the sanatorium whose voice quality is characterized as “a thin, lovely soprano”),<sup>23</sup> singing a song of which part of the lyrics are quoted in the text:

Oh, shine on, shine on harvest moon, up in the sky.  
I ain’t had no lovin’ since January, February, June or July...<sup>24</sup>

18 Doctorow, *City of God*, 156.

19 Doctorow, *City of God*, 156.

20 Doctorow, *City of God*, 158.

21 For more examples on repetition see below – musical language.

22 Doctorow, *City of God*, 160.

23 Doctorow, *City of God*, 245.

24 Doctorow, *City of God*, 245.

Within this scene, several of the above-mentioned manifestations of music in literature can be demonstrated, from the thematization of music (playing a musical instrument), through the quotation of a song's lyrics, to the erotic dimension, which is created not only by the meaning and sense of the verses, but also through the nurse's personal charm.

As a result, both the music and the young nurse's attractive appearance have an impact on the listener in the fictional world, who is "intently bewildered."<sup>25</sup> Apart from the narrator, there are other listeners, in particular other patients, who have been made alert by the music, yet in a positive sense (evidenced by a smile on one of their faces). Another patient, unable to sing along, is merely capable of waving to the rhythm. Eventually, after being invited to join in, even the storyteller himself adds his baritone and joins in, singing a number of old songs as part of a trio.

Later on the nurse is joined by the patient McIlvaine, one of the main protagonists from the above-mentioned novel *The Waterworks*. The quality of his voice is in stark contrast to that of the patient, which is characterised as "sepulchral" with a scent of "fierce humour."<sup>26</sup> The group continues on to sing "Sentimental Journey," the theme of which is old memories. This phenomenon strongly correlates with Albion Simms's song from Doctorow's novel *The March*. Both Simms and McIlvaine are patients at the end of their lives, and the ability to sing songs from their childhood is one of the last joyful activities they are able to partake in.

Not unlike in the previous cases, a religious and/or spiritual dimension is present throughout the scene: it can be seen in the lyrics ("the parson's waiting for me and my gal"),<sup>27</sup> in the nurse's facial expression reminiscent of a prayer ("The nun sings with her eyes closed. She has to be Hail Marying in her mind."),<sup>28</sup> in the narrator's self-reflective remarks ("Lord, what have you done to me?"),<sup>29</sup> and in his ultimate overwhelming feeling of being deeply moved, which results from recalling singing the well-known hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God."

Given the fact that the book bears the title *City of God*, the interconnectedness of music and prayer can also be found elsewhere in the novel, be it in the form of the quality of voice, especially of women ("her melodious, deep voice of prayer knows whereof it speaks"),<sup>30</sup> or in a speculation over how prayers may sound once the Earth is overpopulated ("the prayers of mankind will sound to heaven as shrieks").<sup>31</sup>

It is not only the word image of human voice and certain protagonists which occur in other novels by Doctorow. When it comes to music, certain apparent autobiographical features can be traced in his works, *City of God* being no exception. Though not as autobiographical as *World's Fair* (1985), some of these features are clearly perceptible, perhaps the most striking of which is the mother figure portrayed as a pianist: "My mother was a musician, a pianist of resolute seriousness. For her, music was central to the education of a human being."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, this recurring image

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25 Doctorow, *City of God*, 245.

26 Doctorow, *City of God*, 246.

27 Doctorow, *City of God*, 245.

28 Doctorow, *City of God*, 246.

29 Doctorow, *City of God*, 246.

30 Doctorow, *City of God*, 13.

31 Doctorow, *City of God*, 256.

32 Doctorow, *City of God*, 44.

tends to work as a sort of leitmotif, a technique known from the realm of music, applied here in the field of fiction. Two other examples taken from passages later in the text are given: “My belief is a reasonable inference from the fact that my mother was a pianist and believed it a fact that music was essential to life [...]”<sup>33</sup> and “my mother, Ruth, a resolute woman, a gifted pianist who had at a much earlier age fallen in love with a dreamer.”<sup>34</sup>

The autobiographical nature of the mother’s characterisation as an accomplished pianist is highlighted by both the first-person narrator and the fact that the third extract presented here comes from a section entitled “Author’s Bio.”<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the significance of these autobiographical elements should not be overstated: Doctorow did not study the violin, nor was his brother a concert pianist. In reality, Doctorow studied the piano for about six years, while his brother led a jazz band, as noted above. Nevertheless, it can clearly be seen that the musical background of the novel is at least in part formed on the author’s own experience.

Not only music, but also the rendering of other sounds plays an important role in a number of the novel’s passages. Various kinds of sounds, noises and tones can be heard. Firstly, machines such as wheels, planes and motors are often featured. The significance of these types of sound is greater than it might seem at first; first of all, they occur at least ten times throughout the book, either on their own or in combination with other manifestations of music. More often than not, there is more to this than a mere description of a sound produced by a given machine or a part of it as is the case in this example:

I found myself listening to the clacking wheels, applying rhythms to them, making up songs in my head to go with the rhythms, but somehow these songs were in my mother’s voice, or my father’s, and the voices were really more in the nature of evanescent images of my mother and father, and the images more like fleeting sensations of their beings, momentary apperceptions of their moral natures, which caused me to call out, as if they could be brought to resolution as my whole real mother and father.<sup>36</sup>

This description is part of a dream-like episode in which the narrator is travelling by train in terrible conditions and awful circumstances, putting the reader in mind of the Holocaust transports. In this passage, the music in the narrator’s mind serves as a sort of starting point for further evocations. The rhythm, in fact, provides a basic pattern onto which the melodies of songs are grafted, stemming perhaps from the narrator’s own childhood memories. At the end of the extract, it is evident how vivid this vision must have been. In any case, it is the inconspicuous monotonous sound of the train wheels which has evoked them.

Secondly, sounds made by people are represented (such as kicking, clacking or scratching) over the noise at sports venues, sounds from animals (mostly birds) as well as sounds and noises associated with natural phenomena (such as water, wind and explosions). At times, this might even lead to synaesthesia, thus reinforcing the perception of sound with visual stimuli, as is the

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33 Doctorow, *City of God*, 85.

34 Doctorow, *City of God*, 126.

35 Doctorow, *City of God*, 126.

36 Doctorow, *City of God*, 142.

case in this example featuring birds which stems from a description of a parachutist's feelings in finding himself in a "great resounding sea of lightning-lit darkness."<sup>37</sup>

The songbirds flutter in and out of rusty cans, grackles huddle in TV cabinets, gulls bomb old sofas with the clamshells of paella, and when flocks of rock doves go cooing and pecking over fields of chicken bones, the bones clack like train tracks, clink like wind chimes, shiver and shirr like shuffled cards, bongo and bop, and chickuh-chick-chick like a hot marimba band.<sup>38</sup>

As is obvious from the introduction earlier in the section from which this extract has been taken, this passage is part of a description of the City of Birds, a dump near Madrid. In this case, there is the thematization of music (i.e. the description of the sounds produced by birds) along with a sound layer (clack, clink) and, last but not least, an emulation of a musical style (shiver and shirr, bongo and bop, chickuh-chick-chick). It is apparent that in this example, all three manifestations intermingle and complement each other.

This aforementioned imitation of a musical style involves another important feature which is present in the novel, namely musical language. It is evident that the language features (at the level of words or expressions) are, above all, alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhythm, beat and, of equal importance, the creation of neologisms which are aimed at the conveyance of the sound perception described.

However, it should be noted that isolated words are not the only form of musicality at the sound level in the novel. Numerous extensive extracts written in free verse (an apparent allusion to Whitman) can be considered musical, for example as part of the elements mentioned above from the author's biography: "One eyebrow rose, the eye opened, the slightest smile was called back from her fading life."<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, certain typical features of musicality in literature at the language level can be observed, such as enumeration in the case of the contemplation of lullabies: "Perhaps they [mothers] learned to soothe their squirming simian babes by imitating the sounds of moving water, the gurgles, cascades, plashes, puddlings, flows, foods, spurts, spills, gushes, laps, and sucks."<sup>40</sup>

Another feature, one which could be regarded as similar, is repetition, perhaps most obvious in an experimental, apparently musical passage with a spiritual dimension: "Torah text pointers silver, Torah text pointers wood, Torah text pointers silver or wood in the shape of small hands with index finger extended, Torah finials engraved silver, Torah finials gilt leaf, Torah binders silk, Torah binders linen,..."<sup>41</sup> This confirms the interconnectedness of prayer and music. Though the extract is obviously not a prayer per se, its form emulates it in quite a conspicuous way.

Though not musical in terms of the sound layer, expressions from the realm of music are at times used metaphorically, as is the case with Sarah Blumenthal's vivid characterisation: "the infectious smile that breaks out and, for an instant, ambiguously suggests itself as prelude to tears."<sup>42</sup>

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37 Doctorow, *City of God*, 181.

38 Doctorow, *City of God*, 241.

39 Doctorow, *City of God*, 126.

40 Doctorow, *City of God*, 139.

41 Doctorow, *City of God*, 189.

42 Doctorow, *City of God*, 144.



## Conclusion

Music plays a significant role in E. L. Doctorow's *City of God*, being represented in various ways in numerous scenes evenly distributed throughout the novel. It is employed in three primary manifestations, the sound layer, thematization of music, and imitation of musical structures and techniques (musicalization of fiction). In several cases, especially in passages permeated with music, the three types of musicality may be combined.

Jazz tunes, in particular their lyrics, constitute the most prominent representation of music in this literary work. In addition, several other forms of musicality can be identified: musicological discussions, film music, sound, noises, tones, and, last but not least, musical language. With the exception of the violin in one scene, no particular musical instrument conveys a heavily symbolic meaning comparable to the use of instruments in other novels of Doctorow. Apart from musical elements which can be found in the other works, such as descriptions of the human voice, the use of musical terminology, and certain autobiographical features, it is above all the representation of the spiritual dimension of music which is unique to this novel, the reoccurrence of which is reminiscent of *leitmotif*, a technique frequently utilized in music.

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