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« It hypnotized, it entranced, it gave the listener visions of  
worlds beyond the borders of— » :  
polyphony beyond the borders of the page

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#### Résumé | Abstract

**FR** Dans les approches traditionnelles de la musicalisation de textes littéraires, l’expérience du lecteur a souvent été mise en marge du phénomène. Adoptant une approche interdisciplinaire qui s’appuie sur des connaissances issues d’analyses dites « reader-oriented » des relations musico-littéraires telles que récemment proposées par Delazari et sur des constatations réalisées au sein de la linguistique cognitive et d’approches linguistiques de la littérature, cet article offre une analyse approfondie de la nouvelle « Exposition », issue du recueil *Music for Wartime* de Rebecca Makkai. À travers l’exploration des effets engendrés par les moyens à travers lesquels la censure opère au sein du texte, cette étude de cas vise à montrer l’expérience de polyphonie que le lecteur peut en gagner et le rôle clé que joue cette expérience dans le pouvoir subversif de cette nouvelle traitant de censure musicale.

**Mots-clés** : censure, polyphonie, cognition, linguistique, lecteur.

**EN** In traditional approaches to the musicalization of literary texts, the reader’s experience has often been relegated to the margins of the musico-literary experiment. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach based on insights gained from Delazari’s recent reader-oriented examinations of musico-literary relations and observations made in cognitive linguistics and linguistic approaches to literature, this article provides an in-depth analysis of « Exposition », from Rebecca Makkai’s short story collection *Music for Wartime*. Focusing on the effects engendered by the means through which censorship occurs in the text, this case study aims to show how the reader may gain an experience of polyphony from Makkai’s prose work and how this readerly experience is key to the subversive power of this short story about music censorship.

**Keywords**: censorship, polyphony, cognition, linguistics, reader.

MARIE JADOT

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**1. Exposition**

**W**hile the kind of music she plays had been banned in her country on the grounds of its potential for setting people against the dictatorship's ideology, Sophia Speri secretly gave a piano concert. Her act of resistance was abruptly brought to an end as she was executed on the stage in the evening of the performance. Yet, as one of the soldiers who were ordered to silence the pianist is asked to give an account of the operation, it appears that the military men themselves listened to the recital for a while, instead of killing the musician from the start, as was expected of them. Through the interrogation of the soldier – the one-sided transcript of which constitutes Rebecca Makkai's short story – the authorities sought therefore to make sure that the music did not awake undesirable emotions among the dictatorship's very censorship troops.

This is, in a nutshell, the plot that the reader of « Exposition »<sup>1</sup>, from Makkai's collection *Music for Wartime*, is invited to reconstruct from the account of the unnamed soldier speaking in this short story about music censorship. The report, interestingly, has itself been censored : as hinted at above, only the soldier's answers to his superiors' questions have been transcribed, and censorship occurs at other levels in the text. Yet, far from achieving the univocality pursued through the silencing of discordant voices, this multi-layered censorship is, quite on the contrary, subverted from within.

Focusing on the effects engendered by the means through which censorship occurs in the text, this analysis aims to show how what appears, on the page, to be a single melodic line is, beyond its borders,

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Makkai, « Exposition », in *Id.*, *Music for Wartime*, New York, Viking, 2015, p. 145-151. The quote used in the title of this article is an excerpt from the short story to be found on p. 147.

repeatedly perceived in polyphonic terms. This article makes no empirical claims but rather presents a close reading informed by current musico-literary research that has removed the « bracket[s] »<sup>2</sup> placed around the reader in traditional approaches to musico-literary intermediality, and more particularly Delazari's recent reader-oriented approach to musicalization. That the reader's experience has often been relegated to the margins of the musico-literary experiment can among others be seen in Wolf's well-know *The Musicalization of Fiction*. In his discussion of the literary means that could make it possible for literature to suggest the simultaneous development of several distinct melodic lines, Wolf parallels one of the textual possibilities he identifies with the impression of polyphony that can be created in monophonic music by the use of the compositional technique known as implied polyphony, but he seems to deplore the fact that the simultaneity literature and monophonic music may achieve still has to be constructed in (respectively) the reader's and the listener's mind<sup>3</sup>.

In recent work<sup>4</sup>, arguing that « musicalization [...] is not only a textual phenomenon but also a readerly one »<sup>5</sup> and accordingly shifting the focus of word and music studies « from referential precision and structural equivalence across the arts to the problem of readerly experience of music through fictional narrative »<sup>6</sup>, Delazari has highlighted the relevance of looking beyond the borders of the page, at the reader's experience, in the study of musico-literary relations. Drawing notably on "Auditory Scene Analysis", he establishes insightful connections between the experience of musical polyphony and the reader's experience of literary polyphony.

The readerly experience suggested above will be compared to implied polyphony and the way it works at the recipient's end by adopting an interdisciplinary approach that leans on insights gained from examinations of musico-literary relations as those presented by Delazari

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<sup>2</sup> Ivan Delazari, *Musical Stimulacra. Literary Narrative and the Urge to Listen*, New York-London, Routledge, 2021, p. XXI.

<sup>3</sup> Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction. A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*, Amsterdam-Atlanta, Rodopi, 1999, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ivan Delazari, *Musical experience in fictional narrative : William T. Vollmann, William H. Gass, and Richard Powers*, Hong Kong Baptist University, HKBU Institutional Repository, doctoral thesis, 2018. [https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1487&context=etd\\_oa](https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1487&context=etd_oa). [Retrieved on : 7/9/2021] ; Ivan Delazari, « Contrafactual Counterpoint : Revisiting the Polyphonic Novel Metaphor with Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* », *CounterText*, vol. 5, n° 3, 2019, p. 371-394. <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/pdfplus/10.3366/count.2019.0171>. [Retrieved on : 7/9/2021] ; Ivan Delazari, *Musical Stimulacra, op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Delazari, *Musical Stimulacra, op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Delazari, *Musical experience, op. cit.*, p. ii.

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and observations made in cognitive linguistics and linguistic approaches to literature. With the approach and in-depth analysis proposed in this article, I thus follow Delazari on his intermedial path and hope to contribute to the body of musico-literary research underscoring the role of the reader in lending the text its musical dimension. Lastly, as suggested above, this case study also aims to show how the experience of polyphony the reader may gain from Makkai's text is key to the subversive power of this short story about music censorship.

## 2. Development

### 2.1. Implied polyphony

Asked to explain how the intervention took place, the soldier from Makkai's one-sided dialogue short story starts by reporting the spectators' comments on the pianist before she began to play – listeners who, as can be seen from the excerpts below, were filled with admiration for the dissident pianist :

(1) The rumors we heard—on entering the theater—were thus : that Sophia Speri had refused several opportunities to leave the country, that she remained maniacally insistent on completing this final concert. That her husband had divorced and disavowed her, that he had fled. [Unintelligible.] I don't know, mind you, if this—it was what they said<sup>7</sup>.

(2) We heard a man say, “Ah, if she'd been a clarinetist, she might have run through the hills with her instrument. But she's married to the beast with ivory keys. She'd sooner cut off her own arms than run to a refugee camp in [redacted] with no pianos.” We did not engage him in conversation. This was heard in passing<sup>8</sup>.

(3) I don't recall. There—the only further talk was of the music, the sheet music.

That her brother had smuggled it into the country.

This is only what the woman was saying, a woman's voice in the dark.

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<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Makkai, « Exposition », *Id.*, *Music for Wartime*, *op. cit.*, p. 145. The excerpts consist of a single answer (see excerpt 1 for an example) or of several consecutive answers (as in excerpt 3) and have been numbered for ease of reference.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

That he had [unintelligible] the trick by reprinting each sheet of the piano score, along with mismatched lyrics to folk songs, confident that the border police could not pick out the tune. That the piece was thought unperformable by only two hands, a sort of composer's joke, you know, that it required at least three hands, with one pianist sitting on the other's lap<sup>9</sup>.

(4) The information, the story that we overheard—and again please remember that we did not take part, ourselves, in the—the story went that she'd been unwilling to trust a duet partner and had worked her own nail beds bloody<sup>10</sup>.

(5) Three years. And that she had even stretched her hands on a contraption like the one Schumann invented. Have you heard of this? It destroyed his hands, Schumann's. But then I suppose Sophia Speri understood this to be the last concert of her career. Perhaps she understood the risk.

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No, sir. I misspoke. Those were the speculations of others in the crowd. They weren't my—no<sup>11</sup>.

The experience of polyphony the reader might gain as early as the beginning of the soldier's account, I argue, can be compared to the sense of polyphony that a composer can create by, in Davis' words, « outlining multiple voices within a single instrumental line »<sup>12</sup>, *i.e.* by incorporating implied polyphony into his monophonic work. In terms of auditory stream formation theory<sup>13</sup>, the compositional technique referred to by musicians and musicologists as implied polyphony involves the perceptual splitting of one physical source, by which is meant a sequence of acoustic events originating from one location, into two or more auditory streams. While listening to a piece of monophonic music (*e.g.* a solo violin work) in which the composer makes use of implied polyphony,

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Makkai, « Exposition », in *Id.*, *Music for Wartime*, *op. cit.*, p. 146-147.

<sup>12</sup> Stacey Davis, « Implied Polyphony in the Solo String Works of J. S. Bach : A Case for the Perceptual Relevance of Structural Expression », *Music Perception : An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 23, n° 5, 2006, p. 423-446 : p. 423. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mp.2006.23.5.423>. [Retrieved on : 7/9/2021].

<sup>13</sup> Albert S. Bregman and Jeffrey Campbell, « Primary auditory stream segregation and perception of order in rapid sequences of tones », *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, vol. 89, n° 2, 1971, p. 244-249, p. 244, [http://webpages.mcgill.ca/staff/Group2/abregm1/web/pdf/1971\\_Bregman\\_Campbell.pdf](http://webpages.mcgill.ca/staff/Group2/abregm1/web/pdf/1971_Bregman_Campbell.pdf). [Retrieved on : 7/9/2021] ; Stephen McAdams and Albert Bregman, « Hearing Musical Streams », *Computer Music Journal*, vol. 3, n° 4, 1979, p. 26-43 : p. 26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4617866>. [Retrieved on : 7/9/2021] ; Albert S. Bregman, *Auditory Scene Analysis. The Perceptual Organization of Sound*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1990, p. 9-11.

we may thus perceive the single melodic line that we are actually presented with as forming two or more distinct lines of melody, as if two or more instruments were playing.

As observed by Davis in her research on the use of this compositional technique by Bach in his solo string works, implied polyphony can be achieved in various ways<sup>14</sup>. What I want to focus on here is the fact that implied polyphony may sometimes create simultaneously streamed voices<sup>15</sup>. We may in other words perceive a simultaneity of voices from the single voice we are actually listening to. It is this aspect of the experience of implied polyphony that I wish to compare to the reader's experience of the soldier's report. In the same way as a music listener presented with a single melodic line may hear simultaneously sounding voices, the reader faced with the single voice of the soldier may be invited to perceive the comments of the attendees he quotes as forming simultaneous auditory streams. What may prompt this perception of a simultaneity of voices from the single voice of the soldier who reports a series of positive comments is the recurrence of the verb *hear* throughout the soldier's rendering of the attendees' comments. The repetition of this verb of perception and variations thereon may indeed lead to a verticalization in the mind of the reader, who may namely be led to superimpose the attendees' voices his<sup>16</sup> attention is drawn to and conceptualize them as concurrent streams.

In fact, the mental superimposition I suggest is triggered in the reader's head while processing the soldier's report might even be conceived of as a *re*-verticalization of the attendees' voices, which were most probably sounding simultaneously in the concert hall in the evening of the recital. The simultaneity that literature cannot achieve might thus be said to be achieved through its reliance on the experience brought about in its recipient, which might be captured in terms of what Delazari refers to as the construction of a « mental score » in his discussion of literary polyphony in William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*. Commenting on the « constraint imposed by the literary medium », he points out that the « reader's job » is to put the parts together into a « mental score » where he can picture and experience their simultaneous interaction<sup>17</sup>.

In the following paragraphs it will be argued that the reader might be invited to stack yet another voice into the mental score he is setting up while reading the soldier's answers. On top of the repetitions

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<sup>14</sup> Stacey Davis, « Implied Polyphony », art. cit., p. 434.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 435.

<sup>16</sup> For sake of readability, I will use he/him/his to refer to the reader, but this should be understood as being gender-neutral.

<sup>17</sup> Ivan Delazari, « Contrafactual Counterpoint », art. cit., p. 388.

mentioned above, he might note another recurrent feature that might indeed lead him to think that the soldier's own voice too was part of the polyphonic praise he is mentally reconstructing.

## 2.2. Negation, mental spaces, and multiple voices

As might be seen in the excerpts cited in section 2.1., the soldier's relaying of the attendees' comments is interspersed with personal statements by the soldier, notably negative constructions in which he points up the fact that he did not take part in the praise about the pianist :

(6) We did not engage him in conversation. This was heard in passing<sup>18</sup>.

(7) —and again please remember that we did not take part, ourselves, in the—<sup>19</sup>.

Negation, in Nahajec's words, « constructs non-events, non-states and non-existence »<sup>20</sup>. Why then mention something that does not exist? Why add statements about what is not ? If such references to non-existence « seemingly have little to contribute at the surface semantic level of communication », Nahajec goes on, « viewed as a pragmatic phenomenon, negation, as a cooperative process between speaker and hearer, writer and reader, operates to activate implied rather than explicit meaning »<sup>21</sup>. Nahajec's approach to negation as a pragmatic phenomenon builds on Jeffries' view of negation as a « conceptual practice »<sup>22</sup>, which, Nahajec explains, is among others supported by mental spaces theory<sup>23</sup>. Mental spaces, in Fauconnier's terms, are mental constructs, cognitive representations prompted by language<sup>24</sup>. In the mental spaces framework

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<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Makkai, « Exposition », in *Id.*, *Music for Wartime*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Nahajec, « Negation and the creation of implicit meaning in poetry », *Language and Literature*, vol. 18, n° 2, 2009, p. 109-127 : p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Lesley Jeffries, *Critical Stylistics. The Power of English*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> Lisa Margaret Nahajec, *Evoking the Possibility of Presence : Textual and Ideological Effects of Linguistic Negation in Written Discourse*, University of Huddersfield, University of Huddersfield Repository, doctoral thesis, 2012, p. 78. <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/17537/1/lnahajecfinalthesis.pdf>. [Retrieved on : 7/9/2021]

<sup>24</sup> Gilles Fauconnier, *Mental Spaces : Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language* [1985] Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 16.

developed by Fauconnier, which has come to be taken as analytical perspective in some linguistic explorations of the use of negation in literary texts<sup>25</sup>, negative utterances are considered as « *space-builders* »<sup>26</sup> because of their property to conjure up the corresponding affirmatives. According to cognitive linguists, negatives indeed inevitably set up a « corresponding positive mental space »<sup>27</sup> in which the thing being described as absent in the negative construction is conceptualized.

Thus, what mental spaces theory draws our attention to, to paraphrase Nahajec, is that understanding an absence depends cognitively on the conceptualization of its presence<sup>28</sup>. Coming back to the questions one might ask oneself about the point of referring to something that does not exist, such references to non-existence might be semantically uninformative, but Makkai might very well be exploiting the cognitive processes involved in understanding expressions of absence, all the more so as *repeated* reference is made to what is not. Processing the soldier's repeated negative assertion of his engaging in the polyphonic praise resonating in the concert hall that evening, the reader may draw the inference that the corresponding affirmative conjured up in his mind, which might be captured in terms of what Jeffries nicely describes as an « alternative scenario »<sup>29</sup>, is in fact the actual scenario, from which the soldier clumsily tries to exclude himself in front of his superiors to satisfy them; clumsily, because by adding these negative utterances, the soldier evokes the very alternative he tries to censor. Put differently, the soldier's concern to distance himself from the attendees he quotes, which one may see reflected in his reiterated reference to his not taking part in the chorus of praise for the pianist, betrays a need to separate himself from them, and this need might well arise from the fact that his voice was to be heard together with the listeners'. As announced earlier on at the end of the previous section, the negations occurring at the syntactic level<sup>30</sup> in (6) and (7) and the soldier's self-interruption in (7), where his self-censorship goes as far as biting back the word he was going to use before realizing he should avoid using it in front of his superiors, might thus be said to

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<sup>25</sup> For references to such analyses see Lisa Margaret Nahajec, *Evoking the Possibility of Presence*, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Gilles Fauconnier, *Mental Spaces*, *op. cit.*, p. 17. Emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser, *Figurative Language*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 148.

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Margaret Nahajec, *Evoking the Possibility of Presence*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Lesley Jeffries, *Critical Stylistics*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>30</sup> Syntactic expressions of absence that Jeffries and Nahajec identify as prototypical forms in the open-ended range of ways they list in their typologies of the linguistic expressions that can function as « textual vehicles » for negation, *ibid.*, p. 108 ; Lisa Margaret Nahajec, *Evoking the Possibility of Presence*, *op. cit.*, p. 129. Jeffries' term « textual vehicles » (p. 110) is taken over by Nahajec.

prompt the reader to set up a mental score where the soldier's voice coexists with the listeners' voices. Makkai, it seems, is thus using negation to outline yet another voice, the soldier's, for the reader to picture in the polyphony praising the pianist.

As can be seen in the excerpts I have hitherto focused on, the positive alternative that gets to be conceptualized at the reader's end is also evoked in (5) where the soldier does let slip his own admiration for the musician's talent and courage right now in front of his superiors – and, as the horizontal bar may indicate, keeps so much doing so that his following answer is left out –, before heavily negating that these were his own reflections :

(8) No, sir. I misspoke. Those were the speculations of others in the crowd. They weren't my—no<sup>31</sup>.

Once again, the corresponding affirmative that those were his own reflections is conjured up in the mind of the reader, who is most likely led to think that the soldier, who is now engaging in what was said then, did also engage in the chorus of praise in the evening of the recital.

Taking a closer look at the use of syntactic negation in the construction « They weren't my—no », I further argue that this utterance does not only expose all the more the positive alternative that has been conjured up in (6) and (7), but, importantly, also gives the reader to understand that the officials themselves mentioned it. To develop this idea, I draw on another useful approach to negation, that proposed by Nølke<sup>32</sup> in the Scandinavian Theory of Linguistic Polyphony (ScaPoLine) he elaborated with his fellow researchers and applied by Nørgaard<sup>33</sup> to the analysis of literary texts. The ScaPoLine framework holds that negative constructions can be understood as containing multiple voices or viewpoints. Zooming in on the above negative construction through the lens of the ScaPoLine, we can distinguish the following two points of view :

Viewpoint 1 : « these were my (*i.e.* the soldier's) [reflections] »

Viewpoint 2 : « viewpoint 1 is not true »

“Scandinavian Polyphonists”, as they are called, are not only interested by the linguistic coding of polyphony, but also look at

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<sup>31</sup> Rebecca Makkai, « Exposition », in *Id.*, *Music for Wartime*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

<sup>32</sup> Henning Nølke, « The semantics of polyphony (and the pragmatics of realization) », *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia*, vol. 38, n° 1, 2006, p. 137-160.

<sup>33</sup> Nina Nørgaard, « Disordered collarettes and uncovered tables : Negative polarity as a stylistic device in Joyce's "Two Gallants" », *Journal of Literary Semantics*, vol. 36, 2007, p. 35-52.

« the realization of polyphony at the utterance level [...] [,] where the interpretation process takes place »<sup>34</sup>. The ScaPoLine thus makes a distinction between the « polyphonic configuration » and the « polyphonic structure »<sup>35</sup>, which respectively encapsulate « the polyphonic interpretation of the utterance »<sup>36</sup>, and « the set of instructions for polyphonic interpretation yielded by the linguistic form »<sup>37</sup>. The existence of the two viewpoints detailed above is thus said to be coded in the linguistic form by the presence of negatives, which, in Nørgaard's words, « carr[y] the instruction that the sentence encompasses more voices – or viewpoints – than one »<sup>38</sup>. In the interpretation process, Nølke explains, the interpreter (*in casu* the reader) will attempt to identify the sources of the different points of view at play, *i.e.* the discourse entities held responsible for the viewpoints<sup>39</sup>.

The polyphonic configuration resulting from the process the reader engages in as he tries to work out who holds Viewpoint 1, I argue, is one in which he is made to hear that the soldier took part in the praise about the pianist through the very voice of his superiors. Given the use of negation in the first part of (8), where the verb “misspeak” – which can be paraphrased as « fail to convey the meaning one intends by one's words »<sup>40</sup> – reasserts that the soldier seeks to make statements that meet the expectations of his superiors, it does not seem logical to hold the soldier responsible for the negated positive (*i.e.* Viewpoint 1). On the contrary, the viewpoint reacted to through this negative construction appears to belong to the officials themselves, who, faced with the admiration expressed by the soldier, must have made the confrontational statement that he supposed a lot, before challenging him by mentioning something like “ You took part in these talks, didn't you? ”.

Such an experience as the above might be described as an experience of polyphony from a single melodic line being split into two streams in the mind of the reader, who can hear the multiple voices coded in the linguistic form. The devices used in the soldier's solo line are obviously different from the techniques Bach may use to outline multiple voices within his solo violin line to create a sense of polyphony in the ear of his listeners, but in both cases an underlying polyphonic structure leads a one-voiced surface to be perceived in polyphonic terms at the

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<sup>34</sup> Henning Nølke, « The semantics of polyphony », art. cit., p. 140.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145-147.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>38</sup> Nina Nørgaard, « Disordered collarettes », p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Henning Nølke, « The semantics of polyphony », art. cit., p. 146-147.

<sup>40</sup> John A. Simpson and Edmund S. C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989.

recipient's end.

### 2.3. Experiencing polyphony, again

As the interrogation unfolds, the soldier is asked to describe the music played by the pianist. As might be seen in the following excerpt, in which syntactic negation once again occurs alongside typographic expressions of absence, the soldier's account proves once more to be double-voiced :

(9) Here is where I'll stumble in my explanation. It was hypnotic. The music. The very reason it had been banned, I'm sure. It hypnotized, it entranced, it gave the listener visions of worlds beyond the borders of—

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No, not our national borders. I mean the borders of the human heart.

If I might request more water . . .

I thank you for your patience.

I was saying, perhaps, that it prodded the heart with lust and ambition and false hope<sup>41</sup>.

Just as in (7) earlier on, the em dash in « the borders of— » in the above passage might indicate that the soldier deliberately leaves his sentence unfinished because he realizes that he is going to say something he should not. The soldier's self-interruption is then immediately followed by a horizontal bar – which might again stand for an answer that was altogether censored –, which is itself immediately followed by a negative construction encoding a positive viewpoint that again stemmed from his interlocutors. Indeed, recording these expressions of absence, the reader is led to think that the positive alternative he is prompted to picture was mentioned by the soldier's superiors themselves, who, faced with the soldier's hesitations, must, again, have challenged him by saying : “ The borders of our nation, that's what you think, don't you? ”.

In a clumsy attempt to convince his superiors that he does not attribute such a power to the music played by the pianist, the soldier thinks up something else, *i.e.* « the borders of the human heart ». Such a phrase, however, arguably only emphasizes his responsive feelings to the

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<sup>41</sup> Rebecca Makkai, « Exposition », *Id.*, *Music for Wartime*, *op. cit.*, p. 147-148.

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tune and hence the ambiguity of his position vis-à-vis the regime he serves, so that, as might be seen in what follows, he hastens to silence his forbidden thoughts through expressing the contempt he is expected to feel for the music : « I was saying, perhaps, that it prodded the heart with lust and ambition and false hope ».

Together with excerpt (9), the excerpts quoted below, where the soldier goes on describing the music and the musician, let see a profound duplicity in the soldier, who must deal with what beats in his heart and what he knows his superiors want to hear. Put differently, these excerpts lay bare the existence of a voice singing positive feelings in the soldier's head, which, as they slip through his lips, his public, official voice comes to erase :

(10) Like every star in the heavens had dropped a fine, taut string, and the stars had wrapped these strings around the earth. Like something our grandmothers used to sing.

Which is to say, it was wicked. To trick us, even us, in this way<sup>42</sup>.

(11) The audience—when the light appeared, yes, they saw her. They screamed, but I could not see which way they moved. I assumed most of them were leaving. Please recall that there was no light, except on Miss Speri.

She was beautiful.

I apologize, yes—I mean to say that she remained on the bench. That she continued playing<sup>43</sup>.

Here too, an experience of polyphony might be gained at the reader's end. Indeed, the expressions the soldier systematically uses to erase the positive feelings he could not help putting across (*i.e.* « I was saying », « Which is to say », « I mean to say »), just as negation, necessarily conjure up what they attempt to erase, so that the reader is only reminded of the inner voice sounding in the soldier's head, which is recalled to his mind as he processes the latter's endeavours to silence it. As a result, the reader may thus hear the two voices together.

Turning now to the last part of the interrogation, it can be stated that the reader might again experience a sense of polyphony from the single voice of the soldier. As the officials repetitively enquire whether the soldier remembers the music to which he has allowed himself to listen, the latter answers in the negative :

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

(12) Yes, even with the—please do understand, sirs, that I cannot recall a note of the music. It was complicated, not a child’s ditty that lodges in the ear unbidden.

I could not. Not a note<sup>44</sup>.

(13) I believe so. Not to unhear music, but to forget it. Are they not the same ?

The only way a lost tune, a truly lost tune, may return, is if one happens to hear it again. Surely you don’t wish to suggest that our new President could permit such an oversight as to allow a second performance of the—<sup>45</sup>

(14) In that moment ? I was not trying to recall the music in that moment. I was committed to my duty.

I swear to you that it does not. You could chop us open from head to foot, you could pull our hearts from our chests, and you would not find the notes<sup>46</sup>.

In a kind of repetition with variations, the negating devices used by the soldier to deny his remembering the music seem to be more and more convincing. Because of negation’s properties, this repeated denial of the tune’s presence in his mind nevertheless turns out to have the effect opposite to the one that was intended. Indeed, once again these negative assertions conjure up the corresponding affirmatives. Like a composer outlining multiple voices in his monophonic music to create a sense of polyphony at the reception end of his work, Makkai, it seems, is once more relying on the way expressions of absence work at the processing level to make multiple voices emerge from the soldier’s seemingly univocal denial. On top of the negating devices occurring across syntax in « I cannot recall a note of the music » and « I could not. Not a note » (12), which conjure up the positive alternative, the auditory effects engendered by repetition in this second statement likely contribute to the reader’s conceptualization of a voice singing the notes in the soldier’s head. Likewise, while it denotes an absence, the negating device occurring across lexis (« forget ») in the soldier’s reflections about the possibility of forgetting music in excerpt (13) simultaneously evokes his having remembered the music<sup>47</sup>, and hence the presence of the music in his mind.

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<sup>44</sup> Rebecca Makkai, « Exposition », in *Id.*, *Music for Wartime*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, there can only be a forgetting of something if there is a remembering of that something first – in the same way as there can only be a losing of something (see « lost » in 13) if there is a presence of that something first.

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In a similar way, the affixation of the prefix *un-* in « unhear » (13) highlights the fact that the soldier's hearing of the music did happen and, taken together with the negative assertion « I was not trying to recall the music » in (14), produces a « vivid mental picture »<sup>48</sup>, to use Jeffries' words, of the soldier's endeavour to remember the music he heard. What is more, the reader, I argue, is also made to hear that the music is present in the mind of the soldier through the voice of the officials themselves. Indeed, the soldier, with « Not to unhear music, but to forget it » seems to be echoing his superiors, who seem to have suggested something like “It should be possible to unhear music, or rather, to forget it”, a suggestion with which they themselves evoke the positive alternative of the notes being inscribed in the soldier's mind, music which they want to erase from the soldier who pretends not to remember it. Evoking one more time the presence of these notes in the soldier, the last statement of the soldier's obstinate denial reads : « I swear to you that it does not. You could chop us open from head to foot, you could pull our hearts from our chests, and you would not find the notes » (14).

### 3. Recapitulation

Used throughout the report to signal that the interrogators did not understand some parts of the soldier's account, the indication « [unintelligible] » might be seen as a self-reference encapsulating the functioning of Makkai's text. Like a composer relying on the processing level for the polyphony pursued by the incorporation of implied polyphony into his solo violin work to be audible, Makkai seems to be exploiting the cognitive processes involved in comprehending negation for her one-voiced short story to be repetitively experienced polyphonically at the reader's end.

Coming back to my point of departure in the claim that the multi-layered censorship used by the state to impose its univocal ideological message is subverted from within, I intend the Recapitulation of this article to show how censorship might be said to be undermined through the very tools used to apply it, and through the univocality aimed at being upset by the experience of polyphony the reader may gain.

Returning to section 2.1., we can see that the univocality aimed at by censorship is not only undermined through comments praising the

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<sup>48</sup> Lesley Jeffries, *Critical Stylistics*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

pianist's act of resistance and virtuosity being relayed through the mouth of one of the soldiers who were charged with the task of silencing her, *i.e.* one of the dictatorship's censorship (human) tools, but also through the possibility of their being drawn, in the reader's mind, into the simultaneity of voices into which they were initially to be heard in the evening of the performance. The cognitive processes involved in understanding negation in the soldier's preventive, but clumsy, self-censorship, as suggested in section 2.2., may also lead the reader to stack the soldier's own voice into this polyphonic praise.

As became clear in the subsequent phases of the analysis, the reason why only the soldier's answers have been transcribed most probably lies in the fact that the voices of the officials had to be left out in order not to let transpire their doubts as to the impact the pianist and her music may actually have had on the soldier. Due once again to the very censoring devices used in the soldier's monophonic line, these voices the state sought to silence could be seen to emerge in the reader's mind, where they might be heard together with the soldier's in a mental simultaneity thwarting the attempt to vehicle the univocal message that the pianist did not awake admiration in the soldier and that her music did not impact him.

Similarly, the soldier's self-censorship as he tries to silence his inner voice in section 2.3. was undermined through its own mechanism, resulting, as proposed, in an experience of polyphony at the reader's end, where the duplicity presented diachronically on paper may be experienced in terms of hearing two voices together.

Lastly, though, on a surface reading, the soldier's denial in the last part of the interrogation seems to be univocal, I suggested that it can result in the subversive readerly experience of hearing multiple voices concurrently denying and evoking the tune's presence in the soldier's mind.

On a final note, the black rectangles such as in excerpt (2), which are used to black out information, allow the reader to insert his own ideas, so that his own voice seems to have been included in this implied polyphony.

#### 4. Coda

By way of coda to this article, I want to return to the statement « I could not. Not a note », the auditory effects of which were highlighted in

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the discussion of the last part of the interrogation. Mentioned there as an instance of the « kind of repetition with variations » that can be observed in the last part of the short story, it can also be considered as a smaller-scale instance of the varied repetition on multiple levels that, as can be seen from the present analysis, characterizes Makkai's text. Such a varied repetition on multiple levels, interestingly, is one of the most striking features of the piece of music the author had in mind when writing, or composing, her short story – as, to her, « writing is music », she once remarked in an interview about *Music for Wartime*, it's « very auditory », it's « all about sound »<sup>49</sup>. In the writer's own words about the « Music for Wartime Playlist » referred to on her website, « Scarbo », the third movement from Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*, is « the kind of music I had in mind for the secret and doomed concert in which a pianist gives her last performance, and of a nearly impossible work »<sup>50</sup> – a piece « thought unperformable by only two hands »<sup>51</sup>, to quote one of the comments praising the pianist's virtuosity in her story.

In their discussions of the piece, critics and musicians agree on the virtuosity of Ravel's « Scarbo ». In her conversation about the last part of this keyboard triptych with pianist Perlemuter, who studied the whole of Ravel's music for solo piano with the master himself<sup>52</sup>, Jourdan-Morhange notes that the composer, corresponding with one of his friends, declared that he wanted to write a more difficult work than Balakirev's *Islamey*<sup>53</sup>, which, like « Scarbo » thus, is viewed as one of the most difficult pieces in the repertoire for solo piano. The complexity of Ravel's virtuoso composition, which, as Perlemuter puts it, « requires a transcendental technique »<sup>54</sup>, is also captured by Jankélévitch in these particularly evocative terms :

*Scarbo* [...] est comme l'encyclopédie diabolique de tous les pièges, obstacles, chausse-trapes qu'une imagination inépuisable peut tendre sous les

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<sup>49</sup> Liz Wyckoff, « The Echoes You Leave in People's Ears: An Interview with Rebecca Makkai », *Covered with Fur*, August 2015. <http://www.astrangeobject.com/cwf/the-echoes-you-leave-in-peoples-ears-an-interview-with-rebecca-makkai-liz-wyckoff/>. Emphasis in original. [Retrieved on : 7/9/2021].

<sup>50</sup> Rebecca Makkai, « Music for Wartime ». <http://rebeccamakkai.com/work/music-for-wartime/>. [Retrieved on : 7/9/2021]. The « Music for Wartime Playlist » and the author's comments on it are to be found on the webpage « Book Notes – Rebecca Makkai “Music for Wartime” », July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, from the literature and music website *Largehearted Boy*: [http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2015/07/book\\_notes\\_rebe\\_3.html](http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2015/07/book_notes_rebe_3.html). [Retrieved on : 7/9/2021].

<sup>51</sup> Rebecca Makkai, « Exposition », in *Id.*, *Music for Wartime*, op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>52</sup> See Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, « Preface », in *Ravel According to Ravel* [1988], trans. Frances Tanner, Harold Taylor (ed), London, Kahn & Averill, 2005.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

doigts du virtuose : notes répétées, trilles, accord alternés, traits vertigineux, étude de staccatos pour le poignet... Impossible à la main de prendre des habitudes : *Scarbo*, par ses interruptions brutales, par les réadaptations continuelles qu'il impose au pianiste, brise toutes les innervations musculaires à mesure qu'elles se fixent<sup>55</sup>.

As alluded to above, Ravel's use of repetition in « *Scarbo* » involves more than the repeated notes Jankélévitch refers to in his overview of the difficulties posed to the pianist who sets out on this tortuous Ravelian journey: detailing the composer's craftmanship, Leong and Korevaar show how Ravel's varied repetition is to be seen from the smallest to the largest levels of the piece<sup>56</sup>.

Next to repetitions and sudden silences, which we also find in Makkai's text, another essential characteristic of « *Scarbo* » is the « orchestral effects » desired by the composer. Asked to comment on this work, Perlemuter points up the great importance Ravel indeed « attached to the orchestral effects in this piece »<sup>57</sup> and relates how, when he « worked at *Scarbo* with the master »<sup>58</sup>, the latter told him that he « wanted to make an orchestral transcription for the piano »<sup>59</sup>, and gave him indications as to how specific passages should sound (« like a double bassoon », « like a side drum », « like kettledrums »<sup>60</sup>). From Perlemuter's report, his interviewer concludes : « He must have imagined it played by an orchestra when he conceived it »<sup>61</sup>. As for the repetitions and sudden silences, no exact equivalence is at stake, since Ravel's keyboard piece does not share the monophonic texture of the kind of solo work to which I have compared « *Exposition* » (*i.e.* a solo string work infused with implied polyphony), but the experience of polyphony the reader might gain from Makkai's text might well be paralleled with the orchestral effects, or multiple voices, Ravel wanted the listener of his solo piano work to hear ; as if not one, but several instruments were playing.

Returning to Jankélévitch's notion of a « fiendish encyclopedia of traps, obstacles and snares », this phrase is not only very suitable to describe the complexity of the piece ; it can also be seen as a wink at Bertrand's devilish dwarf *Scarbo* in the poet's eponymous prose poem, a mysterious being of which Ravel's piece « *Scarbo* » is in fact the musical

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<sup>55</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Ravel* [1956], Paris, Seuil, « Points », 2018, p. 107.

<sup>56</sup> Daphne Leong and David Korevaar, « Repetition as Musical Motion in Ravel's Piano Writing », in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel. New Perspectives on the Music*, Rochester (NY), University of Rochester Press, 2011, p. 111-142.

<sup>57</sup> Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel, op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35-36.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

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portrayal<sup>62</sup>. Indeed, Ravel actually took the poems « Ondine », « Le Gibet » and « Scarbo » from Bertrand's collection of sixty-six prose poems *Gaspard de la nuit : Fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot* as the basis of his piano triptych<sup>63</sup>. Composing a prose work that, as this analysis proposes, may produce musical effects comparable to the effects of the piece for solo piano she had in mind while writing her story, Makkai, with this prose piece of her collection, might be said to be perpetrating the cycle of intermedial inspirations and allusions initiated by Bertrand. While mentally developing the implied voices of her « Exposition », a title in which we may see another reference to Ravel's « Scarbo », *i.e.* its sonata form, Makkai's reader, in a way, was thus also made to hear the very piece the state sought to censor.

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<sup>62</sup> See Leong and Korevaar's analysis in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel, op. cit.*.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* The full title of Ravel's work is *Gaspard de la nuit : Trois poèmes pour piano d'après Aloysius Bertrand*.