

---

## **MUSIC IN TOLKIEN'S WORK AND BEYOND**

Review by Eduardo Boheme Kumamoto

Music in Tolkien's Work and Beyond, ed Julian Eilmann and Friedhelm Schneidewind; Walking Tree Publishers; 2019. Paper, vii + 474 pp; \$32.00. Cover: black letters on peach, with a painting of Gunnar playing his harp in the snake pit, by Anke Eissmann.

If the quality of the 21 articles in Music in Tolkien's Work and Beyond varies, as expected in such a large collection, they all have much to teach. In general lines, the book deals with many aspects of music in different books by Tolkien or in works inspired by them, often establishing a relationship between the aural qualities of his prose and poetry and music. The articles were divided into five thematic sections.

The opening article, by Chiara Bertoglio, focuses on the "Ainulindalë" and reveals how the Music of the Ainur relates to medieval polyphonic techniques. Even when singers had to "behold a fixed *cantus firmus* [...] and a rigid set of rules" (15), there was still some freedom allowed for improvising. Bertoglio mirrors this compromise between following a model and improvising in Tolkien's "Ainulindalë": Eru Ilúvatar's themes were the *cantus firmus* around which the Ainur built their music in a form of collective improvisation.

The article written by Michaël Devaux and Guglielmo Spirito takes a biographical approach, reconstructing Gregorian chants, especially the *Kyrie Eleison*, that Tolkien would probably have heard at mass during his years at the Birmingham Oratory, at Oxford, and during his 1955 holidays in Assisi. Their study leads to an almost "Barfieldian" discussion on the shortcomings of the English translation for the Greek word *eleison*. The clear explanation of difficult concepts and the piecing together of evidence that sheds light on Tolkien's life is praiseworthy.

Nancy Martsch's article discusses musical improvisation in the context of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, approaching the songs both as "true history", i.e., regarding Tolkien as the editor and translator of the Red Book, and as "feigned history", placing Tolkien in his Primary World position of author. Martsch also lists pre-Lord of the Rings songs that Tolkien wove into that book by adjusting the lyrics. Her overarching conclusion is that Tolkien rarely wrote songs with tunes in mind, but rather wrote poems and ascribed them as songs to characters.

Łukasz Neubauer focuses on the "Lament for Boromir". His analysis of the poetic form and "sequential organisation" in the song, favoring the emotional appeal and suspense, is a highlight of the article, and the study on the symbolism of the wind, drawing on biblical references, is also interesting, as is the discussion on the possible Christian implications of the whole scene.

Closing the first part, Jörg Fündling's article, also about the "Lament for Boromir", discusses how Tolkien could have been influenced by Rudyard Kipling's "The English Flag", which is formally and thematically similar. The author's arguments are built coherently and convincingly, and he does not imply that Tolkien would have written some pastiche of Kipling's work. Instead, Tolkien "remembered [Kipling's] invocation of the winds" and reworked it in a brand-new poem.

Elizabeth A Whittingham opens the second part of the book discussing some roles played by music in Tolkien's *legendarium*. Songs can be used as a means of *commemoration* of past events and of *communion*. *Creation* is also, unsurprisingly, a function of music, exemplified by the "Ainulindalë", and a tool for *battle* and *enchantment*. The author concludes that "song is the most powerful force in the universe for destruction, creation, and renewal." (156)

Bradford Lee Eden's article shows that "Tolkien definitively favored a strong relationship between music and language", as evidenced by the many allusions to music in Tolkien's "new works". Eden's strongest discussion concerns "The Story of Kullervo" and the expanded edition of A Secret Vice. The allusions to music in other recent works are acknowledged but not deeply analyzed. Yet, the inventory of quotations may help future studies focusing on each of these books.

Lynn Forest-Hill's article on minstrelsy in The Lord of the Rings demonstrates how this form of art has a "fundamental function in the asserting of social and cultural identities through the preservation and transmission of historical information". (190) The author shows that minstrelsy in The Lord of the Rings is not professional, and that one of its functions is to disseminate cultural history by means of translation, just like in the Primary World. Perhaps the most compelling argument in this excellent article is that Tolkien, unable to publish The Silmarillion, "smuggled" some of its material into The Lord of the Rings.

Leaving poetry aside, Maureen F Mann deals with the musicality (i.e., "phonaesthetic pleasure") that readers find in Tolkien's prose. Her argument is based on the "Essay on Phonetic Symbolism", where Tolkien briefly discusses this theory by which sounds could communicate meaning. Mann presents many examples of Tolkien's prose in which devices normally associated with poetry surface, such as alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm. The underlying point is not that reading Tolkien's work silently is deleterious, but that reading it aloud is even more profitable.

Petra Zimmermann's article discusses something as important to music as sound: silence. She explores how silence is found in the landscapes of Middle-earth, often associated with negative contexts. But the absence of sounds is also a means of listening close, which is not restricted to the characters inside the story: the readers themselves, through Tolkien's descriptions, would also be capable of hearing "inwardly what is written on paper." (241)

Opening the third section, Renée Vink talks about dance and song in three Beren-and-Lúthien texts. Her study demonstrates that although music has always been central to that story, the "Tale of Tinúviel" is more dance-oriented, evolving into the more song-oriented "Lay of Leithian". Her article relies very much on statistics, which is a great method to validate her points.

Jennifer Roger's article discusses, from the point of view of ethnomusicology, two "outcast" characters of Tolkien's time-travel narratives: Fíriel and Ary Lowdham. The main point is that both are critical to Tolkien's time-travel stories, defining "the relationship of the mortal outcast to his or her community and universe." (278) The author further reveals the theme of the "mortal quest for paradise" in three songs of the Primary World. The connection between the songs and Tolkien's work could have been better explained, but the comparison invites further study on musicians that may have drawn inspiration from Tolkien's books.

Angela P Nicholas's article discusses the musical richness in a single character, Aragorn. She starts by tracing back the character's musical ancestry to his Elvish and Maian origins and describes Aragorn's moments of recitation and singing. Nicholas also argues that the character's varied upbringing was responsible for his rich knowledge about the different peoples' "history, lore and culture." (315) Nicholas points out that songs *about* Aragorn prophesize his ascension to the throne and that his story with Arwen was the Divine Plan, mentioned in a letter by Tolkien, to ennoble the Human Race.

Closing the third section, Sabine Frambach's article provides a panorama of the music made by evil characters. After defining "evil" as something destructive and selfish, the author briefly covers Melkor's dissonant role in the "Ainulindalë" and the Orcs' songs in *The Hobbit*. Frambach also explores Sauron's music in his strife with Felagund and Gollum's dual character, which allows him to sing "dysfunctional music". Wholly evil characters, on the other hand, are limited to "functional music", "to demonstrate power, to generate fear, and to mock opponents". (336)

The penultimate section opens with Heidi Steimel's article on orchestral works that were inspired by Tolkien's stories. The author successfully cracks "the shell of works that may be hitherto unknown [...] to tempt the reader's appetite for more." (346) Steimel's precise descriptions of the orchestral sounds and how they relate to Tolkien's stories provide great guidance for readers who listen to the recommended pieces.

John Holmes's article explores, in very Tolkienian fashion, one single word which reveals layers of meaning: "harp". After showing how Tolkien's modesty prevented him from poking his nose in other fields of knowledge, and yet how philology helped illuminate other disciplines, Holmes examines Tolkien's references to the harp in his various works, fictional or not, and establishes many connections with other texts, such as Psalm 137 and *Beowulf*. Holmes's discussion on the philological depth of the word "harp" is the icing on the cake. Excerpts drawn from unpublished manuscripts by Tolkien are an invaluable addition.

Following Holmes, Allan Turner's article briefly discusses how music, "particularly music that is perceived only indirectly [...] creates a liminal area between the real and the unreal." (390) The most important examples are drawn from *Smith of Wootton Major* and its accompanying essay. Since Turner does not dwell much on his valuable examples, his article is bound to be a great conversation starter for further exploration on the liminality created by music in Tolkien's works.

The section closes with Rainer Groß, who undertakes a speculative study on how "portative organs" might have been in Middle-earth. For the author, the elves might have favored an "almost floral aesthetic" (405); the dwarves, whose hands are tough and strong, would require more robust instruments, while the hobbits' portatives would accord to their short size. The author's "hands-on" approach, providing his own designs, is interesting, revealing how the readers' perception of Tolkien's different races can be translated into objects.

In the last section, Anja Müller's writes about Wagner's Ring and Tolkien's Ring. Whether Tolkien's Ring owed anything to Wagner's is, to her, "entirely irrelevant" (415), since her focus is on the non-hierarchical "relationship between pretexts [...] and texts". (414) Müller dwells on the similarities and differences between the two rings, and discusses Tolkien and Wagner's theoretical views on Fantasy, arguing how the former author dismissed drama as a conveyor of fantasy, in direct opposition to Wagner's thoughts.

Patrick Schmitz offers a study on the functions of music in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and in Patrick Rothfuss' *The Kingkiller Chronicles*. Schmitz recalls Julian Eilmann's arguments on the functions of music in Tolkien and demonstrates that many of them can be found in Rothfuss' work. While the comparison seems apposite, and well conducted, I missed more information on whether such similarities evolved independently and to what extent Rothfuss was directly influenced by Tolkien, if at all.

The last article, by Tobias Escher, talks about music in Tolkien-related video games. After explaining the nature and functions of this type of music, Escher talks about the "Tolkien Music Style Guide", by Chance Thomas, which provides reference for music design in Tolkien-related games, suggesting the "palette of instruments, vocal qualities, stylistic traits and signatures" of each race. (457) This article is singularly instructive, and the language is mostly accessible to laypeople.

"I love music" was the epigraph chosen by the editors to set the tone for the whole book. In that same letter No. 142, Tolkien also says that "the efforts spent on trying to teach [him] the fiddle in youth, have left [him] only with a feeling of awe in the presence of fiddlers." Mutatis mutandis, a similar feeling is aroused by the contributors of the book, experts in their fields, whether musicology, theology, philology, or literature. If at times some of the articles seem to leave one or another topic little explained, that evidences that the subject of Music in Tolkien's works will undoubtedly bear even more fruit in future studies.