

KRISTINA HOLM

“HORRORSHOW FOUR-IN-A-BAR”

MUSIC IN ANTHONY BURGESS’S *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE*

In *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Anthony Burgess pairs a deep love of violence with an appreciation for classical music in his narrator, Alex DeLarge. Music is developed alongside Alex’s ability to choose violence over docility and is also employed to stress Alex’s embodied dialectic of barbarity and civility. Initially, the novel’s use of music enables the reader to chart Alex’s desire for violence, although music is later inverted to represent a means of punishment for Alex’s past crimes. This inversion of music maps onto the slow death of Alex’s interest in criminality, which reveals the unresolvable relationship between barbarity and civility that haunts a British society that rests its decorative laurels on a foundation of violence.

In Part One, Alex’s arousal by classical music charts his appetite for violence. Burgess plays with music to heighten emotion for Alex, as music frequently precedes the “ultra-violent” acts committed by Alex and his “droogs.” When Alex hears a woman in the milkbar singing a few bars of “Das Bettzeug,” he has an immediate physical reaction (32): “little malenky hairs on [his] plott [stand] endwise” and he feels “the shivers crawling up like slow malenky lizards and then down again” (32). When Dim disrespects the singer by making a “lip-trump” and laughing, Alex strikes him (32). This possessive, violent anger over the disrespect of classical music occurs again when an ‘old drunkard,’ whom Alex and his companions eventually assault, sings and burps so uncontrollably that there could have been “a filthy old orchestra in his stinking rotten guts” (16). Even a brief encounter with a decorative bust enflames Alex’s desire for violence; he breaks into the home of the “old ptitsa” and he sees “the gulliver and pletchoes of Ludwig van himself,” which Alex considers to be “the loveliest malenky veshch any malchick fond of music [. . .] could ever hope to viddy” (67). These allusions to music (the opera, the orchestra, and Ludwig van Beethoven) both anticipate and magnify Alex’s desire for violence, as he respectively strikes, assaults, and kills his victim *du jour*.

While Alex is extremely protective of classical music being mocked, he uses music to ridicule the victims of his violent acts. His victims' screams, in combination with Alex and his accomplices' laughter, generates a discordant and perverse soundtrack that provides an orchestral backing for their criminal acts. They frequently use "lip-music" as a form of disrespect and "smeck" at each other's ability to be violent (15; 25). Their victims "belt out death and destruction to the four winds of heaven" (13): for example, they sing while Alex cracks "into [them] lovely," they "let out little malenky creeches, like in time to the like music of old Dim's fisty work," and they even go "creech creech creeching away in very horrorshow four-in-a-bar" (18–27). Alex is the conductor of his own macabre orchestra—one that fills the otherwise noiseless space when he is away from his speakers and records.

Alex does not respect all music, though; when pop music does force its way into Alex's head, it is only met with disdain and annoyance. Most of Burgess' references to contemporary music are fictional—most likely for the purpose of avoiding a historical anchor to which critics can tie the novel. The only allusion to an artist who inhabits the reader's world is that of Pete's mask made in the form of Elvis Presley, a relic in Burgess' future London, alongside the likes of Benjamin Disraeli, Henry VIII, and "Peebee Shelley" (12). To Alex, pop music is what *others* listen to and enjoy: he condescendingly identifies it under the same genre as his classical music only because that is what they call it (7). Alex associates it with the grotesque and the mundane, both which appear to disgust him equally. For instance, at the Korova milkbar, a woman dances to a "Berti Laski" song by "pushing her belly out and pulling it in" (6); around the city, "middle-aged middle-class lewdies" watch "some big famous stupid comic chelloveck or black singer" on the television (21); and Alex begrudgingly deigns to listening to the "pathetic pop-discs [. . .] moaned by two horrible yarbleless like eunuchs" in an endeavor ensnaring two young girls for his "strange and weird desires" (50–51). This contempt for music associated with adolescence estranges Alex from a particular youth group, as his infatuation with classical music promotes him to an ambiguous point between youth and maturity.

Alex embodies a dialectic accommodating both youth and maturity, as well as one of both barbarism and civility. Burgess aligns Alex's choice in listening to classical over popular music with his choice in performing acts of violence over docile subjectivity. This decision-making ability makes him a frightening threat—he is amply (and arguably even precociously) intelligent. He possesses the mental capabilities to excel in an adult environment, as displayed by his knowledge of concert music and his allusions to

Elizabethan dialect, and yet he embraces London youth's vicious, criminal underworld. It is no wonder Alex "had to have a smeck" when he reads an article on "how Modern Youth would be better off if A Lively Appreciation Of The Arts could be like encouraged," especially when Alex's appreciation of "Great Music" only "sharpens [him] up" making him "feel like old Bog himself" (46). This article—and the disparity that runs alongside it—resonates with Todd Avery's (2006) writing on radio modernism, as both refer to the troubled boundaries between artists and violence. Avery writes that Britain attempts to promote and maintain a high level of culture among its citizens by appointing a "Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) in 1940" (59). Both Burgess' fictional article and Britain's actual CEMA fail to register the absence of a connection between the respect and love for cultural *products* (like choral music) and the respect for and compliance to cultural *expectations* (like societal institutions). As well, both allude to the disquieting existence of orchestras in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War—official camp orchestras played "operetta melodies, opera excerpts, and classical music such as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony" (Fackler). Alex's vehement love for classical music is metonymic for the existence of a culture that appreciates the beauty of orchestral music, and yet participates in horrific genocide. The shocking contrasts in this affiliation prefigure the drastic measures that Burgess' fictional government takes in stripping Alex of his choice to connect the civility of music with extreme violence.

This relationship between music and violence foreshadows Part Two of *A Clockwork Orange*, in which Alex's beloved classical music remains in the realm of violence, but is now associated with the punishment for his crimes. Burgess sets Alex apart from the rest of the prisoners immediately with his "rabbit to play the starry stereo" during the religious hymns, and the prison chaplain's allowance of him to "sloshy holy music by J. S. Bach and G. F. Handel" while reading the Bible (87–89). Alex is permitted these liberties byway of what the prison authorities see as his background and intellectual ability. Alex's benign and curious intelligence is further accented when the reader discovers that it in fact engages a manipulative ploy. Externally, Alex is studying the Bible and listening to orchestral music; internally, he is imagining "starry yahoodies tolchocking each other" (89). This deceptive performance of civility—while drawn from legitimate knowledge—is propelled by a deep desire for the violent. Alex is a "sufficiently intelligent young man" that is "not without taste," but is persistently encompassed by "this violence thing" (128). Here, Alex embodies the reality of English civilization and its responsibility for a history that is dependent on violence. Walter

Benjamin writes to this, stating “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). Alex is indicted by the system as an indictment of the system itself.

In the novel, the government’s solution to this dialectic is to remove what is considered the “barbaric” from the whole that is Alex. His dream of the “Slaughter of Elysium” (80) materializes when all that is paradise to him (acts of ultra-violence and classical music) becomes associated with debilitating nausea—and thus slaughtering his own constructed Elysium”. The noises of suffering “malchicks” and “devotchkas” once created a background harmony for Alex, but now the “agonizing screams” that are played to him during his Ludovico treatment make him instead “feel sick” (115–117). Alex is now the one forced to “creech” (117). Likewise, the mockery that Alex participates in during Part One is reversed: he is now the object of ridicule as the “grinning and smeking malchicks” do their work on the screen (131). Beyond the projected images that Alex is forced to watch, the invigilators and medical personnel also contribute to the mockery of Alex’s panic and physical suffering. Dr. Brodsky and the others around him “smek quite loud” at Alex’s request to stop the film, and the “under-veck” who takes Alex to and from his treatment laughs and sings his “hound-and-horny popsong” louder when Alex snarls at him to “shut it” (118–120). Alex’s loss of control is further emphasized in his later nightmare, in which he feels “paralysed” when given the chance to do the “ultra-violent on a young ptitsa”—in response to this display of ‘weakness,’ the “malchicks” have “a real gromky smek” at Alex (124–125).

Not only does the figurative music of mockery turn against Alex, but so too does classical music during his Ludovico treatment. During the viewing of a Nazi-made tape, Alex hears classical music and realizes that it is Beethoven’s last movement of the Fifth Symphony (127). When Alex protests that it is “not fair on the music,” for Beethoven “did no harm to anyone,” Dr. Brodsky explains the persistent affiliation between brutality and high culture (128–130): “the world is one, life is one. The sweetest and most heavenly of activities partake in some measure of violence—the act of love, for instance; music, for instance” (130). In the government’s desire to eliminate violence from Alex, they also choose to eradicate any ability of his to enjoy the beauty of music—a spoil of civilization. Just as the war-torn world illustrates the bind of barbarity and civility, so too does Alex exhibit the inseparable entanglement of beauty and violence.

In the third and final section of *A Clockwork Orange*, the tension of this dialectic is not resolved for Alex by any state institution—classical music and violence remains

perpetually intertwined throughout the novel despite government efforts. Nor does Alex decide to stop committing acts of violence after experiencing them through the eyes of a victim. In the penultimate chapter, the reader sees Alex warmly welcoming back his fantasies of carving “the whole litso of the creeching world with [his] cut-throat britva” while listening to “the lovely last singing movement” of Beethoven’s Ninth (199). Alex, we are told, is simply “growing up” in the novel’s final chapter (211). This naturalized maturing process chooses for Alex a wife over rape, creation over murder, and soft “*Leider*” over the “trombones and kettledrums” of the orchestra (206). It is not Alex’s choice, but rather his embedded genetic code that forces him to put down his “britva” and imagine instead a son in his arms (211); this maturation is simply the organic variant of the Ludovico treatment. The ultimate dialectic containing barbarity and civility continues to perpetuate as Alex, akin to Britain’s national identity, still holds within himself a violent past despite designing a civilized future.

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