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LARS ECKSTEIN

Belonging in Music and the Music of Unbelonging in Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing*

Forgive me asking: if it's really language, a matter of tending towards tonic, being driven back, how can fragments of phrase, motives, voices stacked into chords, moments that strain toward greater departure or return, how can these explain, begin to account for, the terrace of light, mottled rays guttering back to dark, joy, loss, the scent of my own ending in this syllable-free tune? Layman's answer please.¹

With the proclamation of 'absolute' music in the nineteenth century, the sister arts of music and literature moved into more or less separate realms. Especially during German romanticism, the platonic unity of *logos*, harmony and rhythm was renounced: Music was no longer to serve as a mere contextual commentary to verbal expression, but seen as the primary means of expression in itself. The emancipation of music from the word inevitably led to the need to define its meaning beyond the significations of verbal language. While literature – and this is of course especially true for the genre of the novel – was understood as mimetically representing and expressing the individual perception of the world as well as its social conditions, music was elevated to the ranks of a “true universal language”² transcending the individual and particular.³ As Arthur Schopenhauer puts it:

music [...] never expresses the phenomenon, but only the inner nature, the in-itself of all phenomena, the will itself. It does not therefore express this or that particular and definite joy, this or that sorrow, or pain, or horror, or delight, or merriment, or peace of mind; but joy, sorrow, pain, horror, delight, merriment, peace of mind *themselves*.⁴

This notion of a systematic separation of verbal and musical expression has proven to be a long-lasting one that permeates our thinking about art to this day. Thus, the reviewer of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of Richard Powers' latest novel *The Time of Our Singing*⁵ clearly echoes Schopenhauer in her estimation of

1 Richard Powers, *The Goldbug Variations* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992) 570-71.

2 Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Introduction to *Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik* (Leipzig, 1788) 2 (trans. LE).

3 It has to be acknowledged that the nineteenth century also witnessed the rise of programme music and symphonic poems, which, in a countermovement to absolute music, did try to mimetically represent or express personal experience.

4 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp, Vol. 1 (London: Trübner, 1883) 338.

5 Richard Powers, *The Time of Our Singing* (London: Heinemann, 2003). All page references in the text refer to this edition.

Powers' saga about a prodigiously gifted musical family entangled in America's preoccupation with race and belonging.⁶ While she admires Powers' prose when he writes about music, she complains that "[m]usic does not express the passion, love, longing of a particular individual, but passion, love, longing themselves. Literature instead needs individuality in order to not only go to the head, but also to the heart".⁷ Neglecting the importance of character, she claims, the novel's value suffers moreover from the systematic evasion of political judgement ("Der Roman stellt dar, doch er nimmt keine Haltung ein"⁸).

This estimation, however, underrates the complexity of Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing* because it misreads the novel's underlying conceptions of literature and music. In the following, I will take a closer look at how Powers in fact challenges absolute notions of music by negotiating them with conflicting ideas of the socio-political formation and the pragmatic functionality of musical expression. The novel offers highly conflicting views of music which are intimately linked to the desires and decisions of its individual characters. In a second step, I wish to then challenge the claim that the novel lacks political vision. On the contrary, *The Time of Our Singing* is an insistent statement against all notions of a possible ownership of culture; instead, it promotes a pervasive sense of hybridity which is not only reflected on the level of characters and thematic content, but also in its discursive structure.

I. Belonging in Music

The Time of Our Singing has a foundational scene from which its thematic organisation departs and to which it repeatedly returns: In spring 1939, the seminal open air concert of the black singer Marian Anderson on the Washington Mall in front of 75,000 listeners brings about the chance meeting of Delia Daley, daughter of a respectable black Philadelphian physician, and David Strom, a German-Jewish refugee who teaches physics at Columbia. Brought together by their mutual love of classical music, and enchanted by the transcendental beauty of Anderson's song which seems to momentarily suspend all historical and social barriers, Delia and David fall in love. Helping a lost black boy called Ode to find his family, they envision the possibility of creating a family of their own in a moment of epiphany. Consequently, they marry defying the resistance of Delia's community, and embark upon a life in southern Harlem. Against the daily animosities and challenges they suffer for publicly breaking the taboo of miscegenation, Delia and David Strom build a private world of songs, and it is in this musical realm that they attempt to raise their children Jonah, Joey, and their youngest, Ruth. A sense of belonging,

6 For a comprehensive list of reviews in both American and European journals and newspapers, see David G. Dodd, ed. *Richard Powers Reviews: The Time of Our Singing*, May 5, 2004, <http://www2.english.uiuc.edu/powers/bib/reviews_time_of_our_singing.htm>.

7 Felicitas von Lovenberg, "Amerikas Gunst der Fuge", in: *FAZ* (June 5, 2004) 44-45, qtd. 45 (trans. L.E.).

8 Felicitas von Lovenberg, "Amerikas Gunst der Fuge", in: *FAZ* (June 5, 2004) 44-45, qtd. 45.

which is denied to the Strom children by the outside world, is thus meant to be provided above all by music:

[F]or pure safety, nothing beat music. Each of the three children shared the same first memory: their parents, singing. Music was their lease, their deed, their eminent domain. Let each voice defeat silence through its own vocation. (9)

The vocations of the three children, however, turn out to be radically different: When the safe haven of music crumbles and their mother's mysterious death in a domestic gas explosion finally marks a brutal victory of the social over the private and artistic, they choose very different careers with very different applications of their common musical heritage. It is in the choices of the three Strom children that Richard Powers exemplarily negotiates the relevance of music in very specific personal circumstances and social realities.

The Strom children's approaches to music can be labelled aesthetic-transcendental (Jonah), pragmatic (Joey), and radically political (Ruth). The first of the three approaches is given most of the space in this respect since it is Jonah's career as an extraordinarily gifted professional singer that the novel most closely follows. It is rendered through the eyes of his brother Joey, who is less of a prodigy but nevertheless his congenial accompanist on the piano. Repeatedly interrupted by flashbacks to earlier events which are told in third person and cover the story of his parents and their early family life, Joey features as the homodiegetic narrator of the bulk of the novel. His largely chronological narrative recounts how Jonah and he go through professional training at major conservatories in Boston and New York, become increasingly popular through regional concerts and later tour the entire country after a successful recording with a small label. Jonah's break-through to international fame, however, only arrives after he leaves his brother and the U.S. behind and settles in Flanders where he forms an ensemble specialising in pre-modern vocal music.

It is no accident that *The Time of Our Singing* opens with a flash forward to Jonah and Joey's first major appearance at a nationwide musical contest at Duke University, an event the narrative will only catch up with some 200 pages later. This way, the novel immediately introduces the central conflict between music's liberating, transcendental potential and its social constraints. The boys perform Schubert's "Earl King" and John Dowland: And it is particularly with Dowland's "Time Stands Still" that Jonah leaves the audience spellbound:

Time stands still with gazing on her face,
Stand still and gaze for minutes, hours, and years to give her place
All other things shall change, but she remains the same,
Till heavens changed have their course and time hath lost his name. (3)

While the words to the simple melody may also be read as a tribute to the boys' mother, who, as we later learn, died shortly before this concert, it is also addressed to the power of music itself: The tune epitomises the potential of music to aesthetically suspend the socio-historical for the time of its performance. "Time stands still" during Jonah's song primarily not for the quality of the words he sings, but for the quality of his vocal interpretation harmonizing with the enveloping chords played by his brother. In Jonah's performances, *The Time of Our Singing*

thus indeed partly subscribes to the romantic notion of an ‘absolute’, ‘pure’ quality in music that transcends the historical, as E.T.A. Hoffmann for instance would have it:

Music unlocks an unknown realm to man; another world which has nothing to do with the world of exterior perception surrounding him, and in which he leaves all emotions that can be verbally classified behind in order to devote himself to the unspeakable.⁹

Throughout the novel, Jonah’s voice is associated with a sublime message of universal appeal and Powers does not tire of celebrating it in enthusiastic images:

Rivers did not change their course to track his sound. Animals didn’t fall dead or stones come to life. The sound that came out of him made no difference in the known world. But something in the hall’s listeners did stop, flushed out of hiding, exposed for two beats, naked in a draft of daylight, before bolting again for cover (213).¹⁰

At the same time, however, the transcendental is balanced with the realisation that just like any verbal enunciation, musical performances are never mere aesthetic events, but created in specific contexts which infiltrate the generated musical message. Thus a member of the brother’s audience comes up to them and poses the question that has troubled them ever since the protective musical shell of their family started to crack: “What exactly are you boys?” (6). The brothers have to learn from early on that despite all claims of universality, music is loaded with cultural assumptions about its origin and social belonging, as well as about the origin and belonging of the artist who performs it. In his first major review, then, Jonah is accused of playing the “white culture game, even while [his] brothers are dying in the streets” (381). And Joey muses:

Music was that place where look fell away and sightless sound was all. But here was someone insisting the opposite: Music was just what we put on, after we put on ourselves. How a piece sounded to its listeners had everything to do with who was up there making the sounds. (381)

Jonah’s attempt at escaping the burdening presence of America’s preoccupation with race is based on an exclusive focus on the promise of transcendence. “Art”, as he puts it, “can’t beat this country at its own game. Art should not even try” (391). While, on the streets, African Americans move forward in their struggle for emancipation and desegregation – a struggle Joey and Jonah mostly follow through the unreal lenses of distant hotel room TVs – Jonah, in a contrapuntal countermovement, moves back in time to the very beginnings of written music.

9 [Die Musik schließt dem Menschen ein unbekanntes Reich auf; eine andere Welt, die nichts gemein hat mit der äußern Sinneswelt, die ihn umgibt, und in der er alle durch Begriffe bestimmbareren Gefühle zurücklässt, um sich dem Unaussprechlichen hinzugeben.] E.T.A. Hoffmann, Rezension von Ludwig van Beethovens 5th Symphony, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 3, ed. Friedrich Schnapp (München: ?????, 1963) 34-51, qtd. 35 (trans. L.E.).

10 The line “naked in draft of daylight” evokes the closing lines of T.S. Eliot’s “Burned Norton”: “Sudden in a shaft of sunlight / Even while the dust moves / There rises the hidden laughter / Of children in the foliage / Quick now, here, now, always – / Ridiculous the waste sad time / Stretching before and after”. *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber, 1974) 195. The association of Eliot’s sudden “laughter / of children” with Jonah’s song serves to underline the transcendental thrust of music and its power to momentarily elevate singer and audience beyond the “sad time / stretching before and after”.

Leaving Brahms, Schubert, Bach and even Dowland behind, he eventually turns to medieval music with his ensemble *Voces Antiqua*: “Jonah had decided to sing his way back *before* [race], into the moment before the slave trade, before genocide” (530). The move in time goes along with a move in space as he turns his back to America’s racial schizophrenia and moves to Europe. And indeed, Jonah’s escapist moves seem to be gratified: In Flanders, he does find artistic as well as personal fulfilment. It is therefore one of the novel’s supreme ironies that Jonah eventually dies in an L.A. hospital during his first tour with *Voces Antiqua* to the U.S.: Magnetically drawn into the Rodney King riots by a latent fascination, he falls victim to the African-American socio-political struggle at a moment in time when he seemed to have successfully moved beyond it.

While Jonah tries to abandon the socio-political in favour of an escapist transcendence in music, his sister Ruth embodies the exact opposite: She abandons music in favour of the socio-political. Perhaps the most musically gifted of all three children, she suffers immensely from her mother’s mysterious death, which she eventually attributes to a racist conspiracy. It follows therefore that she quits classical music for good at her mother’s funeral. In the following years, she embraces race and radical politics, becomes estranged from her white father and joins the Black Panther movement. Classical music, in her career, is seen as part of the white culture game: Music retains its legitimate position only if it is specifically black, and if it can be fruitfully employed in the political struggle against white supremacy. In Ruth’s approach, then, music is no longer ‘absolute’ or ‘universal’, but expressive of a very particular struggle, and part of the identity politics of very specific groups. After the death of her husband, Ruth therefore abandons music altogether and builds a school for underprivileged children in Oakland.

Joey’s career, in turn, is always torn between the extreme choices of his brother and sister, between the promise of aesthetic transcendence and the immersion in the socio-political. The chronicler of his family’s fate, he is the one who tries to negotiate the centrifugal powers that drive his family apart. Committed to everyone but himself, he is fascinated by the genius of his brother and doggedly accompanies his career, despite his self-doubts: “I looked at [Jonah], begging, a black accompanist, an Uncle Tom in white tie and tails, willing to be abused by anyone, most of all by my brother, if we could only go on living as if music was ours” (405). After a spell as a bar pianist in Atlantic City, Joey even follows his brother’s call to Flanders to become a member of *Voces Antiqua* and gets a last taste of music’s promise of transcendence. At the same time, however, he remains true to the memory of his family and Ruth in particular, whom he eventually joins in her Oakland school as a teacher. It is here that he finally encounters a third way between the extremes posed by Jonah and Ruth. Not unlike Heinrich Bessler and Kurt Weill’s challenge to ‘absolute’ music with their concept of ‘*Gebrauchsmusik*’, Joey eventually comes to rate the pragmatic in music over the purely aesthetic. Just like Weill, who characterises his artistic programme as follows:

For us, the first question is: is what we do of any use to a general public? The question whether what we do is art comes only second, because this will only be answered by the quality of our work.¹¹

Joey eventually becomes interested in the question of ‘how to do things with music’. In his classroom, therefore, there is “song everywhere, each time any child turned his or her head” (587). And he explains:

It had never occurred to me that I could help make something happen in the actual world. It had never occurred to Ruth to bother doing anything else. [...] I learned more in my first years of teaching [...] that I’d learned in the forty years before that. More about what happened to a tune on its way back to *do*. (587)

The pun here is obvious: The Italian ‘do’ is the tonic of the basic C-scale and signifies a coming full circle in a musical progression. But read as an English ‘do’, it signifies the return of music to the functional realm, as a key not to transcendence, but to learning, or pleasure, or communal understanding as it was practised in Jonah, Joey and Ruth’s childhood.

Powers thus carefully counterpoises divergent ideas about what music is and does in the intricate interplay between artistic beauty, socio-political reality and personal desire. The narrative discourse on music is crafted throughout in contrapuntal con- and dissonance with the individual development of the major characters and their social surroundings. If the reader expects any resolution, however, he or she will not be gratified: Jonah, Joey and Ruth’s approaches to music remain standing in paradoxical coexistence. It is thus that Powers uncovers the inevitable ideological undercurrent in all definitions of what music actually is or does. *The Time of Our Singing* makes it quite clear that to strive for the ‘universal’ is to wilfully neglect political and historical context, that to radically politicise is to wilfully sacrifice aesthetic promise, that to pragmatise is to deliberately sacrifice transcendence.

II. The Music of Unbelonging

If *The Time of Our Singing* refuses to unravel the complexity of music’s philosophical positioning between aesthetics and pragmatics, the personal and the political, this does not imply that it lacks in ethical vision. As I wish to argue in the following, the novel decisively votes for an encompassing liberation from the restrictive powers of tribalism, even if it acknowledges them as a very real and burdening presence. This, however, is not achieved by stressing associations of the ‘pure’ and ‘ahistorical’: On the contrary, it is performed by an insistence on the power of ‘hybridity’ in music and, by extension, in writing about music.

The notion of ‘impure’ musical expression is introduced first and foremost in the way the Strom family creates music before Delia’s death. The family’s favourite

11 [Die erste Frage für uns lautet: ist das, was wir machen, für eine Allgemeinheit nützlich? Eine zweite Frage erst ist es, ob das, was wir machen, Kunst ist; denn das entscheidet nur die Qualität unserer Arbeit]. Kurt Weill, “Die Oper – wohin? ‘Gebrauchsmusik’ und ihre Grenzen”, in *Musik und musikalisches Theater: Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Stephen Hinton und Jürgen Schereba (Mainz: ???, 2000) 92-96, qtd. 92 (trans. L.E.).

pastime is a game called “Crazed Quotations”, in which one of the family starts singing a tune which is to be answered by another member throwing in a contrapuntal line taken from a wholly different song, and so forth:

The game produced the wildest mixed marriages, love marriages that even the heaven of half-breeds looked sidelong at. Her Brahms *Alto Rhapsody* bickered with his growled Dixieland. Cherubini crashed into Cole Porter. Debussy, Tallis, and Mendelsohn shacked up in unholy ménages à trois. (13)

What we dealing with here is an obvious blending of classical, notated music with the African American oral tradition and its foregrounding of the improvisational mode rooted in the creative principle of call-and-response. The “love marriages” and “half-breeds” created in this game thus of course mirror the very real, biological cross-cultural experiment of the Strom family that unites David’s German-Jewish background and Delia’s African American heritage. What is more, however, the racial hybridity of the Strom family, as well as their idiosyncratic way of creating music is mirrored on the discursive level. This may exemplarily be illustrated in the way that the novel employs its references to the tradition of vocal music.

The Time of Our Singing abounds with musical works that are performed, listened to or spontaneously created by the Strom family. In addition to such ‘textual’ thematisations,¹² however, the perhaps most obvious thematisations of music are in the paratext: Almost all chapters that come in first person and mark Joey’s largely chronological account are furnished with chapter headings either referring to song titles or major operas. The choice, here, is as eclectic as in the Strom family’s favourite game. It ranges from Humperdinck in “My Brother as Hänsel” (62) to the spiritual “Deep River” (585) and (probably) Mozart’s “Requiem” (619), covering, among others, Orff in “In Trutina” (65), Purcell in “My Brother as Aeneas” (109), Monteverdi or Gluck in “My Brother as Orpheus” (165), Rossini or Verdi in “My Brother as Othello” (238), Mahler in “Songs of a Wayfarer” (427), Wagner in “Meistersinger” (525) and Schuller in “The Visitation” (553). Whilst, in the beginning, the chapter headings refer to songs or operas which actually feature in the story – Humperdinck’s opera *Hänsel und Gretel* is indeed performed by Jonah and other students – this changes during the course of the novel. Increasingly, the chapter headings do not refer to actual musical events, but solely function as undercurrents establishing intertextual dialogues. Thus, even a chapter as early as “My Brother as Aeneas” does not refer to any operatic performance, but ironically comments on Jonah’s forbidden relationship with a white student. The chapter “My Brother as Orpheus”, which is primarily concerned with Jonah and Joey’s first major performance of Schubert and Dowland, marks the irrevocable loss of their mother whom, as the boys have to realise, no song can bring back to life. “My Brother as Othello” ironically labels an episode in which Jonah has an affair with his white music teacher, an elderly opera diva who claims to “love [his] people” (256). “Don Giovanni” recounts Joey’s first love affair during the time he works in

12 Cf. Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999) 70.

Atlantic City; “Meistersinger” is the title chosen for Joey’s adoption into Jonah’s *Voces Antiquae* group in Flanders, and so forth.

We are not dealing here, then, with ‘musicalisations’ in the narrow sense of Werner Wolf’s coinage of the term.¹³ At least to the eyes and ears of someone without extensive training in the rhetoric and structures of classical music, like myself, the surface narrative does not seem to adopt any specific formal or expressive qualities of the various musical pieces it evokes. Joey Strom’s voice retains an idiosyncratic, consistent narrative quality that is very hard to associate with any particular musical style. What is primarily at stake here, rather, is the creation of polyphony in a truly Bakhtinian sense: Every narrative episode in the novel is juxtaposed to the narrative content of a song or opera in what Mikhail Bakhtin would call a “double voiced discourse”.¹⁴ The surface narrative, to speak in musical metaphors, consistently harmonises with an embedded, contrapuntal story line that undercuts the sole authority of the first. The tales of Othello, Aeneas, Orpheus or Don Giovanni thus ironically comment on Jonah and Joey’s experiences primarily on the level of story; all those readers with a sufficiently broad musical education may then additionally associate the sounds of operatic versions by Verdi, Purcell, Gluck or Mozart, in an eclectic soundtrack of “crazed quotations” taken from all domains of vocal music.

The novel’s uniting theme that pervades the level of narrative discourse, theme and character, then, is a celebration of productive impurity, of hybridity in the Bhabhaian sense. Homi Bhabha, himself taking his cue from Bakhtin’s notion of double-voiced discourse, stresses the “in-betweenness” of every cultural enunciation, insisting on the mutual dependencies of conflicting camps in the process of creating their own subjectivities. Only on these grounds can it be ensured that “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew”.¹⁵ The novel subscribes to this philosophy on several levels: The narrative discourse of *The Time of Our Singing* reaches its polyphonic complexity only in relation to a wealth of other musical stories that surround it. The same principle holds also true for the novel’s conception of its major theme: Music, disregarding whether performed with the aim to politicise, teach, or achieve transcendence, is suggested to be deeply impure in nature. As Jonah muses, “[a] piece was what it was only because of all the pieces written before and after it. Every song sang the moment that brought it into being. Music talked endlessly to itself.” (58). It is only in a perpetual dialogue of cultural productions and reproductions that music can evolve. Very much in this vein, eventually, on the story-level the categories of race and even of time are dismantled as highly insecure constructs. A crucial role is given here to the Strom children’s father David, a

13 Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999).

14 Cf. M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 2000) 259-422.

15 Cf. Homi Bhabha, “The Commitment to Theory”, in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 19-39, qtd. 37.

Columbia physicist devoted to the general theory of relativity. David Strom advocates that on the basis of theoretical evidence, time is also essentially hybrid in nature. As he puts it: “Every spot on earth has its own clock. Some have reached the future already. Some not yet. Each place grows younger at its own pace. There is no now, nor ever will be” (160). It is on these grounds that the novel formulates its ultimate vision in the face of everyday tribalism. As Joey claims towards the end of the novel evoking the memory of his father: “An old German Jew proved it to me, lifetimes ago: Mixing shows us which way the time runs. I have seen the future, and its mongrel” (623). In a decidedly political way, *The Time of Our Singing* preaches against notions of cultural ownership, in a musical quest for the unbelonging.

However, at the same time Powers makes it painfully clear that his optimistic vision is just that: A vision, continually frustrated by historical experience. As we often tend to forget, Bhabha’s ‘third space’ is but a discursive term, and we can not actually physically step into ‘third spaces’ to escape everyday racialism and bigotry. In fact, the novel’s structural design negates any notion of emancipatory progress. This much is implied in the arrangement of motifs, characters and places which, despite a superficially straight forward narrative development, evokes a circular rather than linear structure. In a way that Joseph Dewey marked as characteristic of all of Power’s fiction, *The Time of Our Singing* intricately combines elements of traditional realism with a sustained sense of postmodern technique.¹⁶ A single example will have to suffice: The Washington Mall, for instance, not only features as the hopeful setting of David and Delia falling in love in 1939. It also serves as the setting where David’s estrangement from his daughter Ruth during the Martin Luther King speech in 1963 becomes painfully obvious, and as the place to which Joey takes Ruth’s children for the Million Man March remembering the victims of racial violence in 1995. By layering and repeating the temporally disparate experiences of three generations of the Strom family, *The Time of Our singing* employs the Washington Mall as a mnemonic site in which heterogeneous memories and visions eventually discursively blur, overlap and return in palimpsestuous coexistence. Eventually, the inversion of temporal progress culminates in descriptions of Ruth’s youngest son Ode, who deliberately and uncannily mirrors the lost black boy by the same name whom David and Delia had helped at the Marian Anderson concert. The novel’s overall tone, therefore, is downbeat, even though it closes with the upbeat vision of productive hybridity: David Strom’s optimistic promise of a mongrel future struggles desperately with his father in law’s resonating insistence that “[n]o one’s ever freed anybody with a song” (36).

16 “His novels evidence an audacity in narrative structuring, a fondness of scale, a love of elaborately terraced sentences, an encyclopaedic command of arcane knowledge, a broad use of referents drawn from high and low culture [...] – each a defining element of much postmodern fiction. Yet few writers in the post-Pynchon era have demonstrated as well a command of the elements of traditional realism: rich storytelling, robust themes, nuanced characters”. Joseph Dewey, *Understanding Richard Powers* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2000) 3-4.

The Time of Our Singing, as a novel, thus mirrors the conceptions of music it brings across via the characters Jonah, Joey and Ruth: As an encyclopaedic novelist of ideas, Powers uses the fictional family saga to transport a vast array of knowledge, clearly educating, as it were, attentive readers in the history of Western Music, the theory of relativity or America's racial history. He is moreover deeply political, in a pervasive statement against tribalism and notions of cultural ownership which is implicit in the treatment of theme, content and style. Nevertheless, however, a sense of resignation with the historical and sociological realities is palpable, a resignation which is countered by the recurrent evocations of perfect beauty in the celebrations of Jonah's singing voice. Like music, *The Time of Our Singing* is a strange, but ingenious hybrid, paradoxically suspended between pedagogical potential, political agenda, and a thrust toward aesthetic transcendence.