

Hearing the 'Sirens' call of Joyce

Readers often claim that James Joyce wrote musical prose.

But Margaret Rogers goes a step further. She believes, based on hints left by Joyce, that the Irish writer hid a musical composition in the words of a chapter of his 1922 novel "Ulysses."

For the past several years, Rogers and local composer Sigmund Snopek III have been turning the words of the 11th chapter of "Ulysses" into an elaborate fugue.

They're not merely setting words to music. No, Rogers believes she's found a secret code in the words of the "Sirens" chapter in which key letters of the words stand for musical notes.

Joyce scholars responded favorably, she said, when she published her music and an explanatory paper in the prestigious James Joyce Literary Supplement.

"The Sirens Fugue" that Snopek wrote based on her research will debut next weekend at Irish Fest. Four vocalists and a string quartet, aided by synthesizers, handbells, pennywhistles and an accordion, will perform at 6 p.m. Aug. 16, 3 p.m. Aug. 17 and 8 p.m. Aug. 18 in the Irish Fest Theater at the festival.

Rogers, a singer/composer, was born in Kewaunee, but lived much of her life in Chicago before moving to Milwaukee. She has sung with the Chicago Symphony Chorus. Snopek is best known locally as a wild-man

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James Joyce

rockers, but he's also a composer of classical music who has had a symphony performed by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra.

Rogers also loves puzzles as much as she loves music. She worked for a time at Chicago's Oriental Institute, deciphering Hittite cuneiform. No doubt that experience prepared her to unravel the mystery of Joyce's "Sirens."

In 1988, Rogers was studying in a graduate seminar at the University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee with Janet Dunleavy, a Joyce scholar.

Rogers had previously written a 30-minute chorale, "The Babble of Earwigs," based on the ten 100-letter words found in Joyce's

experimental novel "Finnegans Wake" (1939). She performed it for an international convention of Joyce scholars at UWM, who were impressed. Dunleavy told her that Joyce claimed he wrote a fugue in the "Sirens" chapter, and since Rogers liked puzzles, why not try to solve this one?

Joyce sang well enough as a youth that he nearly won a prestigious tenor competition as a young man. He remained a dedicated listener and operagoer, who also dabbled in promoting concerts and singers.

In studying the chapter, Rogers came to realize that Joyce used a 16th century musical practice called *soggetto cavato*, or "carved subject," in his composition. In this technique, the letters *a b c d e f* and *g* in written words stand for musical pitches. So the phrase "bronze by gold," the opening words of the chapter, contain the notes *b e b g d*.

The first 63 lines of the "Sirens" chapter are a kind of literary prelude, foreshadowing all that is to come. And, it turns out in Rogers' musical scheme, they also are a musical prelude that outlines the fugue.

A fugue is a musical composition for a number of instruments or voices in which a subject is announced in one voice and then developed contrapuntally in strict order by each of the other voices. The separate parts, while complete in themselves, interact with each other to create a musical whole.

Music

By Jim Higgins

THE SIRENS FUGUE. Performances at 6 p.m. Aug. 16, 3 p.m. Aug. 17 and 8 p.m. Aug. 18. Irish Fest Theater tent, Irish Fest, Maier Festival Park. Fee with festival admission.

CEILI MOR, a preview of Irish Fest. 7 to 11 p.m. Thursday, Maier Festival Park. Free for people attending Irish Fest Summer School, otherwise \$3 for adults, free for children 12 and under.

IRISH FEST. 4 p.m. to midnight Aug. 16. Noon to midnight Aug. 17. 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Aug. 18. Henry W. Maier Festival Park. Admission: \$7 at the gate, \$4 for seniors, free for children 12 and under. Free admission from 4 to 5:30 p.m. Aug. 16.

In 1989, based on Rogers' research, Snopek began writing the "Sirens" fugue. While Bach and his peers had to imagine the sounds of quartets and choruses in their heads while writing, Snopek used ultramodern synthesizers to hear his work as he went along, including such touches as bells and handclaps.

Joyce's words are the building blocks of the fugue, but it "sounds like Snopek" because he arranged the material, Snopek said. Another composer, such as John Downey, could have taken the same material and written a completely different fugue in his own style, Snopek said.

Joyce enriched his literary musical composition by assigning leitmotifs, or recurring phrases, to key characters in the chapter. So Leopold Bloom is described as blue Bloom — he's melancholy because his wife is about to consummate a tryst with her lover. His musical interval is a diminished fifth, so he's literally got the blues, Rogers said.

But while vocalists will sing some of Joyce's text, the "Sirens" fugue is not an operatic-type composition with a story line. It's more abstract than that, Rogers said.

Kathleen Matts (soprano), Annie Dennison (alto), Ian Bourg (tenor) and John Foss (bass) will sing the fugue. The string quartet will include Pasquale Laurino (violin), Susan Dominguez (violin), Chantal Racine (viola) and Emery Cardas (violoncello). Other musicians will include Carol Meves (flute), David Bohn (accordion and hand bells) and Snopek (synthesizers and pennywhistle.)

"Ulysses" is the story of a single day in Dublin: June 16, 1904. Its major characters are Stephen Dedalus, a defiant young artist who's also the hero of Joyce's earlier novel "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"; Leopold Bloom, a middle-aged advertising salesman; and Molly Bloom, his beloved but unfaithful wife.

Each of these three is a stand-in for a character in Greek myth

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— Bloom for Ulysses, the epic wanderer; Molly for Penelope, his wife; and Stephen for Telemachus, his son. Joyce took the events of the myth and echoed them in the plot and style of his novel.

The "Sirens" chapter of his novel alludes to the episode in which Ulysses has himself tied to the mast of his ship so he can hear the seductive music of the Sirens without being lured to his doom. In the novel, Bloom stops in the Ormond Bar at 4 p.m. to refresh himself, where he encounters Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy,

the barmaids who are Joyce's sirens.

In Joyce's scheme, each chapter of the novel is associated with a particular art form. The art form for the "Sirens" chapter is music.

"I wrote this chapter with the technical resources of music," Joyce told his friend George Borach in 1919 a few days after he finished it. "It is a fugue with all musical notations: *piano*, *forte*, *rallentando*, and so on."

But, according to Richard Ellman's 1959 biography of Joyce, the five months he spent writing "Sirens" took its toll on the author. Joyce told Borach:

"Since exploring the resources and artifices of music and employing them in this chapter, I haven't cared for music any more. I, the great friend of music, can no longer listen to it. I see through all the tricks and can't enjoy it any more."