volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 5, Issue 2

Autumn/Winter 2022

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Fraser Riddell

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 September 2022

Date of Publication: 23 January 2023

Citation: Fraser Riddell, '"Musical under the touch of the Universe": Aesthetic Liberalism, Music and Vernon Lee's Essayistic Art of Resonance', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 5.2 (2022), 1-19.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v5i2.1663.g1776

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'Musical under the touch of the Universe': Aesthetic Liberalism, Music, and Vernon Lee's Essayistic Art of Resonance

Fraser Riddell

Durham University

> [A] band somewhere outside had begun to play […] a tune, by Handel or in Handel's style, of which I have never known the name, calling it for myself the *Te Deum* Tune. And then it seemed as if my soul, and according to the sensations, in a certain degree my body even, were caught up on those notes, and were striking out as if swimming in a great breezy sea; or as if it had put forth wings and risen into a great free space of air…
>
> Vernon Lee, 'The Use of Beauty' (1909).[1]

Vernon Lee's essayistic writings on music are underpinned by an ethical commitment to modes of relationality that sustain a vibrant connection between self and world. For Lee, certain styles of Western art music – most notably eighteenth-century Italian opera – facilitate through their formal and affective affordances experiences of spiritual and moral healthiness: a heightened awareness of one's personal agency and autonomy; an affirmed sense of stable, integrated selfhood; and a sympathetic openness to the claims of the other. Attending to the relational dynamics of Lee's essays allows us to register more fully the range of affective modes her works inhabit, and to think more carefully about the relationship between her ethical commitments and her distinctive treatment of the essay form. It also enables a more careful consideration of the place of Lee's writings on music within broader cultures of liberalism in the late-nineteenth century, one that manifests itself not only in the social and political claims made for music in her writing but also within the stylistic affordances of her experiments with essayistic writing.

From Lee's earliest published writings, collected in *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), to her final quasi-sociological work on practices of listening, *Music and its Lovers* (1932), Lee maintains a seemingly dogmatic preference for eighteenth-century music over and above other musical styles. As Carlo Caballero and others have noted, her discomfort about the music of Richard Wagner and other late-Romantic composers underpinned a number of her articles on

musical aesthetics, and provided the scenario for her best-known fictional work, the short story 'A Wicked Voice' (1890).[2] While Lee's early critics typically tended to dismiss such firmly held views as embarrassing examples of 'Puritanism' or 'Victorian judgmentalism', recent scholarship has allowed us to register more fully the complex affective dynamics that underpin such aesthetic commitments, ranging from nostalgia to anger, the 'spectral' to the 'strident'.[3] Yet despite this growing awareness of the tonal complexity of Lee's aesthetic essays, critics have nevertheless tended to overlook the playfulness of her essayistic style – her keen sense of the absurd, the sharpness of her irony, or the manner in which she recruits humour in support of her ethical ends.[4]

Lee's 'Signor Curiazio: A Musical Medley', first published in *Juvenilia* (1887), draws on such techniques to develop a model of ethical relationality, one which emerges by setting in contrast Lee's responses to eighteenth-century opera and nineteenth-century musical Romanticism. Examining the origins of the essay's conception and composition reveals the carefulness with which Lee recruited the essay form to further these ethical ends. In doing so, she participates in a Victorian essayistic tradition in which this most nebulous of literary forms – what Lee herself called 'an amphibious creature, neither fish, flesh, nor fowl' – becomes a vehicle for exploring fundamental questions about art, agency and subjectivity.[5] David Russell's work on the handling of the essay form in the nineteenth century has helpfully recognized its preoccupation with the promise of 'aesthetic liberalism': a belief that certain modes of experience (aesthetic) might sustain modes of relation by which people live together (liberalism).[6] The essayistic styles of writers such as Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, and Walter Pater, Russell suggests, work in different ways to articulate 'the experience of one's own aliveness in creative contact with the world', and seek to 'render this experience open and somehow more available to us'.[7] Such work participates in the broader 'ethical turn' within Victorian studies, here looking beyond the diegetic modelling of moral behaviours in realist novels which has been the focus of much scholarship, to consider instead the formal capacities of essayistic writing to articulate modes of intersubjective relation.[8] Similar work on liberalism in Victorian musical cultures, by Sarah Collins and others, has explored the

significance of music's 'liberal agency': promoting 'an openness or sympathy towards different forms of life', whilst foregrounding 'the possibility of experiential notions of individuality and freedom'.[9] Here, the category of 'liberalism' functions less as a descriptor of particular political allegiance and more as an exemplary ethical model of cognition, presupposing a self which is rational, autonomous, open-minded, sympathetic.[10] Lee's own politics, as Vineta Colby has observed, were consistent throughout her adult life in being 'liberal with socialist leanings'.[11] Her most explicitly political essays, collected in *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908), are representative of this stance in their castigation of philosophies that undermine notions of individual moral responsibility, self-determination, and rational reflection.[12]

Lee's commitment to offering a positive account of the ways in which certain forms of aesthetic experience might sustain a healthy relationship between self and world places her at odds with a long intellectual tradition that has sought to problematize and challenge affirmative claims about the political and social efficacy of art.[13] Indeed, one of the potential sources of scholarly embarrassment about Lee's aesthetic essays is that their mood is far removed from the forms of critical affect that have traditionally been prized within such professionalized literary-critical study, whether the distanced quasi-scientism of certain iterations of New Criticism or the paranoia that might be seen to motivate what Paul Ricoeur has called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.[14] Yet, in this respect, her essays share a disposition that is similar to that which motivates the recent so-called 'post-critical turn' in literary scholarship. Rita Felski, for instance, has influentially called for a more capacious acknowledgment of the variety of affective attachments that our aesthetic experiences bring into being. 'What would it mean', Felski asks, 'to be less shamefaced about being shaken or stirred, absorbed or enchanted', or to 'forge a language of attachment as intellectually robust and refined as our rhetoric of detachment?'[15]

Many of Lee's most distinctive aesthetic essays are preoccupied with finding an appropriately 'robust' and 'refined' style for articulating what is at stake when we are 'shaken or stirred' in our encounters with art. At the same time, Lee's work – at least from the mid-1880s

onwards – insists that our aesthetic experiences directly impact upon our ethical capacities: our sense of duty to wider communities, our sensitivity to the feelings of others, our responsibility for careful reflection. Thus, far from being merely a descriptive exercise in capturing the phenomenological richness of aesthetic experience, her essays rather develop a distinctive account of the ethical role of art in sustaining a relation between self and other. The dynamics of this encounter can be demarcated by bringing Lee's works into conversation with the sociological theories of Hartmut Rosa, a philosopher working in the critical theory tradition of the Frankfurt School.[16]

Rosa's work offers a normative model of the 'good life', in which human flourishing is determined by 'the quality of one's relationship to the world'.[17] His concept of *Resonanz* [Resonance] describes a mode of relation characterized by an openness to a capacious range of cognitive, affective, and somatic experiences. Examples in our contemporary moment, Rosa suggests, extend from our relationship to the natural world to our engagement with the historical past, while also encompassing everything from aesthetic experience to the pleasures of physical exercise. Such 'axes of resonance' share in common their ability to 'fill the world with colour and sound and allow the self to be moved, to be sensitive and rich'.[18] Importantly, this 'resonant' mode of relation is neither narcissistic (in which the self finds itself replicated in the other), nor masochistic (in which the self is dissolved into the other). Rather, resonant experiences allow for self and other to engage in a dynamic process of mutually 'affecting and being affected'.[19] This comes into sharper focus through Rosa's turn to another acoustic metaphor: that of two pendulum metronomes, each running at a slightly different tempo. When these metronomes are placed next to one another on a hard stone surface they will continue to keep time independently. However, when placed on an elastic or flexible surface (such as a thin, raised wooden board), the metronomes will gradually begin to move towards each other and ultimately oscillate in perfect unison. This physical phenomenon encapsulates, for Rosa, the enabling function of a 'vibratory medium' (or 'resonant space') in allowing for new modes of mutually responsive relation to come into being.[20]

While Rosa's resonant subjects are shaped through such social and environmental conditions, they nevertheless reflect a bounded and autonomous model of selfhood which has much in common with Lee's 'aesthetic liberalism'. Despite their seemingly mechanistic synchronization, Rosa's ticking metronomes each represent individual subjects who 'speak with their own voice', rather than merely echoing each other: 'not merging in unity, but encountering another as an Other'.[21] Their ability to be moved by their respective presence is predicated on their 'constitutive inaccessibility': 'both subject and world [are] sufficiently "closed" or self-consistent' to retain their own distinctive sense of self, 'while also remaining open enough to be affected or reached by each other'.[22]

Lee's writings might be understood as a richly descriptive catalogue of her life-long exploration of the different 'axes of resonance' identified by Rosa – the historical, the aesthetic, the natural world, and the sensing body. The manner in which her enduring interest in the affective and ethical dynamics of relationality informs her choice of essayistic and dialogic literary forms has been noted by some of her most sensitive critics.[23] Here, the similarities between her approach and that of Rosa might emerge though a brief examination of her essay on what she calls 'aesthetic sociability', 'Nisi Citharam' (from *Laurus Nobilis*, 1909).[24] Like Rosa, Lee turns to an acoustic analogy – a 'lyre […] kept carefully in tune' – to articulate the value of an openness to the 'primæval everlasting affinities between ourselves and all things', in which 'our souls becom[e] musical under the touch of the universe'.[25] 'The essential character' of such an encounter, Lee concludes, 'is its being a *relation* between ourselves and certain objects'.[26] Significantly, this experience of openness can be properly sustained only where an individual maintains a clear sense of their own distinctive separateness from the claims of the other. For Lee, proper ethical 'maturity' comes only with the repudiation of a 'youthful instinct' towards 'union, fusion, marriage […] with what our soul desires'.[27] In place of this 'ownership' or 'complete possession', we should instead embrace those spontaneously occurring experiences in which an encounter with the non-self 'tak[es] us by surprise'.[28]

'Nisi Citharam' is also acutely sensitive to how certain experiences, such as the aesthetic, create an atmosphere that facilitates communication between self and other. 'The enjoyment of beautiful things,' Lee insists, is 'heightened by sharing': 'the aesthetic emotion […] intensified by the knowledge of co-existence in others'.[29] She evokes the significance of this encounter through another acoustic metaphor: it represents, she suggests, 'the delight in each person communicating itself, like a musical third, fifth, or octave, to the similar yet different delight in his neighbour, harmonic enriching harmonic by stimulating fresh vibration'.[30] Here, self and other retain their distinct identities: they never sound an *identical* note in a merely narcissistic echo. Rather, each sympathetically responds with a note that harmonically complements the other (the third, fifth or octave that might form one part of a consonant major chord). In doing so, they come together in their individuality not only to reinforce the intensity of their respective personal affective responses, but to create an emotional atmosphere that is in itself a newly formed product of their shared relational experience.

Lee's 'Signor Curiazio' is one of her most significant essayistic reflections on the relationship between music and the ethics of relationality. Its playful style – by turns ironic, indecisive, dogmatic, and long-winded – requires a reader who is not only carefully alert to Lee's shifting tone, but also patient enough to enter into the spirit of her digressive provocations. The essay opens with a puzzle: why does a fragment of melody from Domenico Cimarosa's opera *Gli Orazi e i Curiazi* [*The Horatii and the Curiatii*] (1796) continually 'come into [Lee's] thoughts' at the point at which she attempts to 'sum up [her] ideas about Wagner's theories and practice'?[31] To articulate the 'unexpectedness' and 'grotesqueness' (p. 107) of this intrusion of a 'fragment of consciousness' (p. 105) from the eighteenth century into her attempt to explicate the aesthetic principles of Wagner's musical Romanticism, Lee guides her reader through a 'roundabout' (p. 107) digression regarding a 'rococo' opera that itself concerns the staging of an opera – *Le Convenienze Teatricali* [*The Etiquette of the Stage*] (1794). In a long passage that follows, to which I will return below, Lee proceeds to invent an 'imaginary prologue' to this comic opera so that she can

evoke the 'utter scorn of dramatic propriety' (p. 132) of the eighteenth-century stage. Begging the 'patience' (p. 128) of her readers, Lee then advances to describe the style of Cimarosa's *Gli Orazi*. This is embodied in the contrast between the 'brutal grandeur' (p. 130) of its Roman plot and the 'ridiculously lovely' music to which it is set. Such 'musical peculiarities', Lee suggests, make the opera – and, in particular, the characterization of its lead role, Curiazio – 'a masterpiece of utter dramatic incongruity and insanity' (p. 133). Curiazio, Lee laments, is now 'inaccessible' to her readers 'except in musical archives' (p. 133) – a fact which permits another detour, this time to set up a comparison between Cimarosa's hero and the perhaps more familiar figure of Arsace in Gioachino Rossini's *Semiramide* (1823). This leads us back to Wagner, to Lee's 'astonishment' at the 'mysterious and inappropriate' (p. 138) intrusion of Cimarosa in the midst of *Tristan und Isolde*, and, more broadly, to the contrast between music which is 'constantly straining after dramatic effect' and that which is 'serenely and sweetly overlooking everything of the sort' (p. 137).

Only then does Lee turn to the abstract question in musical aesthetics with which the essay is notionally preoccupied: to what extent can music express 'individuality' (p. 141)? What is the relationship between apparently 'impersonal emotion' (p. 144) produced by abstract musical form, and our sense of the 'personality' (p. 145) of a character on the operatic stage? In addressing these questions, Lee pursues a striking comparison of the pre-tonal harmony of Palestrina and the chromatic harmony of Wagner's *Tristan*. Both harmonic strategies, she suggests, in their 'vagueness and aimlessness' (p. 152), represent 'music of the infinite, music about nothing at all, music without personality' (p. 151). For Palestrina and Wagner to refuse the 'definiteness of musical form' (here aligned with Classical tonal harmony) is to abandon 'the well-defined character of him who sings it' (p. 161). Recognising the implications of this, Lee argues, requires us to 'shift […] the ground of dispute from aesthetics to ethics' (p. 168).

The remainder of Lee's essay proceeds to develop an ethical theory of the relationship between musical form and her sense of relational 'resonance'. On the one hand, she presents eighteenth-century music as facilitating 'a sense of deep sympathy' (p. 106) between self and other,

an ethical response achieved through the effects of objective aesthetic emotions stimulated by musical form. On the other, she presents the 'vagueness and aimlessness' (p. 152) of music by Palestrina and Wagner as prompting a solipsistic withdrawal of the self from the claims of the other, an ethical stance she associates with a subjective emotional response to music's 'nervous' stimulation (p. 166). This distinction is developed in a series of evocative descriptions of musical form as something which enacts at a formal level the dynamic movement of the self in relation to other objects. The polyphonic texture of Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* (c. 1562), for example, consists of 'an eddying and whirling of strains perpetually revolving upon themselves; parts crossing and recrossing only to remain for ever isolated like disconsolate spirits wandering past each other, or stars moving about in crowded solitude' (p. 148). Such music models a mode of subjectivity in which one is trapped within the boundaries of the self, painfully aware of the existence and the claims of the other, and desiring a more intimate and sustaining relationship with them, but wholly unable to find a point of contact. Like the fixed celestial motions of the stars, Lee's 'disconsolate' Dantean 'spirits' are bound within repetitive cycles of a movement that hold them always at arms' length from those they dearly wish to touch. The music of the eighteenth century, in contrast, fulfils something of this desire for an ethical relation grounded in physical proximity. Here,

> duets […] between voices of similar pitch [offer] certain effects […] when the two parts touch, embrace, cling to one another, come in contact with painful intensity of dissonance, which must inevitably give us a sense of souls meeting only to part, the pathos of a human farewell. (p. 161).

This music presents a model of autonomous individual subjectivity, in which the self admits a relation with the other that requires the admission of one's vulnerability to the 'painful intensity' and 'pathos' that might arise from genuine social contact. Importantly for Lee, Cimarosa's music cements and reinforces the boundaries of the social self, necessary for meaningful relation with the other. It 'gives us a sense of clearness, of separateness […] of co-ordination and completeness' which, Lee emphasizes, 'is cognate to the moral nature of the living man or woman' (p. 161).

Like many of Lee's aesthetic essays, 'Signor Curiazio' represents an attempt to weigh the abstract claims of aesthetic philosophy against the actual experience of an encounter with an artwork. In this respect, Lee participates in a well-established tradition of English essayistic writing on aesthetics, of which John Ruskin and Walter Pater are perhaps the most representative figures, that is deeply circumspect about systematizing or dogmatic theories of art's social and personal significance.[32] Here, Lee is implicitly in dialogue with the formalist musical aesthetics of Edmund Gurney, whose treatise *The Power of Sound* (1880) she had reviewed positively in 'Impersonality and Evolution in Music' (1882).[33] Lee and Gurney held each other's work on music in mutual high regard. In July 1881, Gurney commented to Mary Robinson that 'he read all [Lee's] things with great interest & that [Lee] was the only writer on music whose career he watched with interest'.[34] Even in 1897, by which time Lee had immersed herself in the works of a hugely wide range of contemporary European aesthetic theorists, she still referred to Gurney as the one 'whom I admire above all other writers on aesthetics.'[35] Gurney's central claim is that the particular aesthetic-emotional force of music arises through listeners' perception of musical form. The formal structures of absolute music, he argues, appeal to a distinctive 'musical faculty' – a cognitive function which has evolved to allow listeners to experience pleasure that arises, say, from the 'ability to construe and enjoy a number of successive tones as a unity'.[36] In locating the origins of musical pleasure solely within the formal aspects of music, Gurney set himself against other prominent traditions in nineteenth-century aesthetics and psychology, such as associationism, which understand emotional responses to music as related to the listeners' individual memories and social experiences. In 'Signor Curiazio', Lee attempts to find a way to reconcile the 'impersonality' of Gurney's stance with her own sense that music is deeply connected both with our sense of self, and our ability to sustain a resonant relationship with others. In Gurney's terms, she suggests, music offers 'emotion […] but emotion is not a man or a woman, it is not an individual' (p. 144). Yet such a view conflicts with her deeply felt sense of the 'personal' ethical relation modelled through the characters in eighteenth-century opera. Ultimately, Lee squares her

own views with those of Gurney by concluding that 'when we have got to musical form, we have got also to musical personality, for they are in reality one and the same thing' (p. 153). Musical form, Lee insists, retains an ability to enact forms of spiritually healthy – and deeply personal – modes of social relation. Such modes of relation, she insists, are predicated on a model of stable, coherent, and autonomous model of liberal selfhood.

The ability of eighteenth-century music to reaffirm this liberal self – to leave us feeling 'reposed and refreshed' (p. 171) – is set in stark contrast with the music of Wagner. In her ethical critique Lee returns repeatedly, both in this essay and elsewhere, to two key issues germane to my interest in how the 'resonance' of certain aesthetic experiences facilitate or limit relationality. Firstly, Lee argues that Wagner's music gains its effects only by holding up a narcissistic mirror in which listeners find themselves reflected. So structurally disorientating and affectively overwhelming is this music, she suggests, that listeners are unable to experience the objective aesthetic emotions awakened by musical form. They are merely confronted with their own pre-existing subjective emotional experiences. Whilst listening to *Tristan*, the listener becomes introspectively and solipsistically detached from the interpersonal connections that sustain their moral selves: 'unconscious of the theatre, of the spectators, of the actors, almost of the music and almost of our real selves […] our past, our present, our future – all the things about which we think, after which we strive, all gone, forgotten' (p. 172). This music promotes 'neither sympathy with virtue, nor admiration for beauty'. Rather it presents a sustained communing with egotistical emotions that ostensibly arise from the characters on stage, but in fact have their origins in the materiality of the listener's body: 'the buzz of their blood is in *our* ears, the palpitation of every one of their arteries is throughout *our own* bodies, the choking of their voice is in *our* throats' (p. 173). In 'The Religious and Moral Status of Wagner' (1911), Lee attacks Wagner's music in similar terms for rendering listeners 'passive and self-centred', 'isolating the ego' so that it is reduced to 'knowing only its own fluctuations and desiring only its own intensification'.[37] Wagner's repeated leitmotifs, which emerge from the 'confused flux' of the surrounding music, work as a strategy to delude the

listener into thinking that they are engaging with objective musical content.[38] In fact, she suggests, 'the recollection of such moments […] makes you think afterwards […] that it must have been the music (in reality barely listened to and not all followed) which told you all the secrets you have really been telling yourself'.[39]

Secondly, Lee suggests that the somatic emotional force of this music is so intense that it challenges the coherence of the self, rendering it unable to form relations with new objects: 'our real selves […] have melted away have disappeared, have melted away' (p. 172). In 'Beauty and Sanity' (1895), modern music – of which Wagner's *Tristan* serves as the representative example – threatens the coherence of the social self: in its appeal to subjective emotional excess it is guilty of 'melting away […] the soul's active structure, its bone and muscle, till there is revealed only the shapeless primæval nudity of confused instincts'.[40] Such music, Lee argues, 'sells its artistic birthright', which is to afford to listeners 'a vast emotional serenity […] wherein they can lose themselves in peacefulness and strength'.[41] Both of these issues come into sharper focus in 'Out of Venice at Last' (1925). Here Lee draws direct parallels between the 'days of moody isolation of my self' that she always feels when in Venice and her experience of Wagner's music, which 'conspire[s] to melt and mar our soul' with its 'ungraspable timbres and unstable rhythms and modulation'.[42] Listening to this music, she suggests, confronts one with 'a self fluctuating and shifting in stagnation like the shallow and stagnant Venetian waters'.[43] In its enervating emotional plenitude, it offers no possibilities for forming new relations between self and world ('the stimulus of […] fragment forcing us to furnish what it lacks out of our own heart and mind').[44] Rather, it merely prompts a solipsistic turn inwards as it invokes a nostalgic sense of lost possibility: 'it brings up, with each dip of the oar, the past, or rather the might-have-been'.[45]

This contrast between the ethical significance of Wagnerian romanticism and eighteenth-century Italian opera similarly informs Lee's essay 'Botticelli at the Villa Lemmi' (1882), where she once again turns to the latter in order to consider strategies for sustaining a vibrant relationship with the world.[46] For Lee, the 'incongruous hotch-potch' of such Italian opera makes it uniquely

well-placed to 'bring art into life' by creating an atmosphere where one's focus hovers between aesthetic and social worlds.[47] This manifests itself within the formal affordances of the music itself, at the level of the demands placed by the performance on listeners' styles of attention, and in the modes of sociality that opera-going might promote. When listening enraptured to symphonic music in the concert hall, Lee suggests, 'our minds are tied as with a ligature'.[48] Italian opera, in contrast, allows for audiences' minds to follow the contours of their own inclination: 'the melodies may be taken or left at will […] they are not forced upon us whether we be fit to enjoy them or not'.[49] Implicitly, the motivic complexity of nineteenth-century orchestral music requires of the listener an intense mode of sustained close attention, figured here (with a characteristic musical pun) as akin to the mental strangulation of a 'ligature'. In contrast, the comparative melodic simplicity and the prevalence of formally predictable *da capo* arias in eighteenth-century Italian opera, alongside the often-incidental relationship between musical and narrative content in such works, means that a listener is relatively free to let their minds wander. Indeed, for Lee, the opera itself becomes defined by the pleasures of distraction:

> An opera is a sort of little epitome of life: you move, look about, follow an action with eyes and mind, look at faces, dresses and movements, take in words and sights; see and chat with your friends; and if, with all this, you listen to music, it is *freely*, as you would listen to the sound of birds among the numerous impressions of a walk in the country.[50]

Lee's syntax here invites us to partake in the freely wandering, open attention that she most prizes. Framed by the familiarity of second-person address, her prose leads the reader through a succession of sensory perceptions and bodily movements – not random, but following the moment-by-moment imperatives of one's curiosity. If, at first, we merely 'look about', our roaming eyes soon begin to take pleasure in 'faces, dresses, movements'. What matters most is that one is able to form the attachments that arise most organically in relation to one's own wants and desires. In this respect, listening '*freely*' models an exemplary form of liberal cognition. Indeed, the act of listening to music, she suggests, might very well be altogether incidental to one's experience of the opera: it is relegated to the end of this long sentence, and falls far behind a 'chat with friends'.

Lee's opera-going is simultaneously an aesthetic and a social experience or, as Hartmut Rosa might say, one in which the aesthetic creates the 'resonant' atmosphere in which new forms of social relation might emerge.[51]

Lee's commitment to the ethical importance of these resonant experiences is also sustained through her distinctive handling of the essay form. The particular stylistic idiosyncrasies of 'Signor Curiazio', for instance, come into sharper focus when understood in the light of the essay's genesis and publication history. As Linda K. Hughes has demonstrated, Lee shrewdly targeted her essays for publication in a range of journals, typically with a view to subsequent publication in book form.[52] Lee had initially hoped to place 'Signor Curiazio' in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1882, but the piece was ultimately not accepted for publication. Her correspondence with William Blackwood concerning the essay is instructive for the insights it gives into Lee's conception of the form she adopted for the piece. The idea for 'a study of Wagner or rather Wagnerism' was initially suggested to Lee by J. M. Langford – a senior editor at the magazine, who shared with Lee an interest in eighteenth-century music – following the publication by Blackwood of Lee's article 'Mozart: A Study of Artistic Nationality' in May 1882.[53] 'Mozart' was one of a number of densely-argued articles on musical aesthetics that Lee published between the late 1870s and the early 1880s, characterized by what Lee herself called 'scientific heaviness'.[54] In pitching her piece on Wagnerism in November 1882, Lee made clear to Blackwood that she wished to present her future 'musical papers' for *Blackwood's Magazine* in 'the shape rendered (I may now say without too much vanity) popular by my book *Belcaro*'.[55] In order to give Blackwood a sense of the 'form more original & artistic […] in which [she] should prefer to convey any future musical ideas to [his] readers', Lee forwarded to Blackwood a spare proof copy of an essay from *Belcaro* (likely to have been 'Cherubino', a musical piece which, as Lee boasts to Blackwood, was 'spoken [of] in the most flattering way' by reviewers in *The Academy* and elsewhere).[56] Blackwood responded that 'he had no objection to throwing it into the form you suggest' – and invited Lee to send the piece to him at her leisure.[57]

The letter that Lee subsequently sent to Blackwood to accompany the submission of 'Signor Curiazio' to the magazine is interesting for what it suggests about the form of Lee's essay.[58] Here, she characterizes her essayistic technique as an attempt to 'attack the subject in a sidelong fashion'.[59] She justifies her decision with reference to a number of factors, all of which demonstrate an acute sensitivity to the demands of both the literary marketplace and the needs of her readers. She aims to write in a form that is distinct from the 'perfect flood of books, pamphlets, review and newspaper articles' on Wagnerism which 'overwhelmed the public' following the first London staging of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in the summer of that year.[60] At the same time, she hopes to animate technical questions of musical aesthetics in a manner that avoids the 'dryness of abstract musical disputes'.[61] Indeed, she regrets that her recently published 'scientific piece on music' in the *Contemporary Review*, 'Impersonality and Evolution in Music', 'appears to be Sanskrit to all my friends'.[62] Her final aim is to appeal to those readers who may be 'repelled by the weariness of Wagnerism' by intermingling her material on *Tristan und Isolde* with reflections on eighteenth-century Italian opera.[63] Lee first saw *Tristan* at Drury Lane in London on Saturday 24 June 1882, with Mary Robinson (the first production of the opera in the United Kingdom). She wrote to her mother the following day that the opera 'bored [her] much more than expected'. 'There are some fine pieces', she noted, 'but the whole effect is insupportably monotonous & tedious'. In returning to 'the grotesque musical world of the 18th century', instead, Lee responds to the 'lamenting' of 'all [her] friends', who assumed that she had given up writing about this period after her first book, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880).[64]

The 'sidelong fashion' in which Lee reformulates the 'scientific heaviness' of her subject in 'Signor Curiazio' reflects her long-standing concern with finding an appropriate style for writing about music. In a letter to her friend and mentor Henrietta Jenkin in 1875, Lee contrasts what she sees as two opposing 'intolerable' extremes in such writing.[65] On the one hand, stand technical treatises dominated by 'lectures on fourths and false fifths', which render their authors 'narrow minded', having 'lost all suppleness of mind from excessive study of counterpoint'. On the other,

a tradition of Romantic idealist writing on music – of which E. T. A. Hoffmann is perhaps the most representative example – defined by its fixation with 'shapeless clues about the soul'. Practitioners of such 'morbid' writing, she suggests, risk becoming 'limp, faded and quasi-hysterical from indulging too much in emotional mysticism'. Explicit here is Lee's concern with the way in which the demands of certain strategies for writing about music might risk distorting what is most valuable in one's distinctive intellectual and emotional relationship with the artform. In charting a course between desiccated, pedantic intellectualism and self-indulgent poetic rhapsodizing, Lee positions herself in the tradition of an aesthetic liberalism that simultaneously values both careful rational reflection and an openness to the possibility of self-transformation through one's deeply personal aesthetic encounters. Her thoughts on music, she admits to Jenkin, may ultimately strike some readers as 'strange or even insufferable', but she nevertheless hopes to develop a style that allows her to articulate her 'ideas on the subject […] insidiously and slowly'.

Lee's 'slow' style in the essays collected in *Juvenilia* has certainly been recognized by both her sympathetic and less patient critics – what an anonymous reviewer in *The Spectator* called her 'habitual abuse of the *tempo rubato*'.[66] Yet the relationship of such slowness to the wily, cunning 'insidiousness' of a writer who ludically entraps her readers by playing the long game has been less widely noted. In 'Signor Curiazio', this becomes the central formal strategy through which Lee cultivates a space for resonance in her handling of the essay form. Here, the openness of the self to new objects is sustained through modes of humour and irony that work against the premature foreclosure of the reader's sympathetic imagination. Indeed, the exclamation with which Lee begins her essay – 'Nonsense! I said to myself' – should immediately alert us to the significance of the 'irrelevant' (p. 102), the 'absurd' (p. 132), and the 'preposterous' (p. 140) in how Lee pursues her aims. This is most marked in her keen awareness of the place of digression, indecision, and reversal – in what she calls 'these most vagabond of musical dissertations' – as her argument unfolds. She repeatedly begs the reader's indulgence whilst often purposely stretching the limits of this tolerance: 'the business is a little roundabout' (p. 107); 'we shall get to it presently, and you

must have patience for the moment' (p. 128); 'now we come to the really curious part of the matter' (p. 139). Elsewhere, she develops an argument in one direction only to then abandon that line for a different approach ('let us face it again; or rather let us attack it from another side' (p. 146)), or reveals that a certain view she has propounded was, in fact, something of a red herring all along ('when I persisted in talking about this […] I was perfectly aware that…' (p. 160)). In other instances she establishes a position on a particular question, only then to admit her indecision: 'Yet I am not so sure about it…' (p. 165). By the time Lee reaches the final paragraph of her long essay – 'thinking over all this, and reverting to the point from which I started' (p. 176) – the reader might be forgiven for feeling that her 'reversion' to the 'start' is as much a sly admission of her wilful inconclusiveness as an attempt to demonstrate that she has elegantly settled the question at hand.

The most eccentric aspect of Lee's quest for resonance in 'Signor Curiazio' is the inclusion of the 'imaginary prologue' (p. 108) with which she begins her essay. The passage represents a long flight of fancy on the behind-the-scenes absurdities that underpin the making of an eighteenth-century opera, from the tensions between composer and librettist to the self-obsession of the principal singers. It evokes a tradition of comic operatic treatments of the subject, perhaps most notably in Mozart's *Der Schauspieldirektor* [*The Impresario*] and Salieri's *Prima la musica e poi le parole* [*First the Music and then the Words*], which were first performed as the first and second parts of an Imperial entertainment at the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna on 7 February 1786. The prologue is characteristic for the self-awareness with which Lee indulges her stylistic slowness. Indeed, the essay's speaker toys with her readers' impatience in this indulgently long-winded digression. A number of lengthy paragraphs begin with the word '[f]inally' or '[a]t last'. The prologue incorporates a number of much-delayed arrivals, a languorous description of the hours spent by the composer 'ingeniously powdering his wig', and a report of the *primo uomo* 'stretch[ing] himself gracefully on a sofa'. Lee, in short, stubbornly refuses her readers' demands to get a move on. Not only is the plot of the prologue recounted in a way that is knowingly tiresome, but its speaker seems to revel in presenting us with details out of logical sequence. When first introduced to the

'Poet', for instance, we are, in effect, both told and *not told* the name of this man 'whom subsequent events may possibly identify with Antonio Sografi' (p. 109).

Precariously balanced between irreverence and irrelevance, the prologue might seem to some readers a perfect example of what Virginia Woolf derided as Lee's 'slack & untidy' style, with its 'ligaments […] too loose'.[67] Yet its self-conscious needling of the reader's impatience signals its more careful intent. The passage animates the essay's broader concern with resonant atmospheres of relationality: it evokes at length a lively, chaotic inter-personal connectedness, characterized by messy compromises and the reconciling of clashing egos. Its wilful digressiveness releases the reader from the demands of argument or analysis, and instead creates space, perhaps, for new modes of relation. In Cosmo Monkhouse's review of *Belcaro* (1881), the poet and critic observed that Lee's distinctive 'way of conveying ideas […] has an effect of creating activity in the reader's mind which no other mode can equal'. This 'continuous and delightful stimulation of thought', he suggests, will inevitably lead her readers towards 'conversation, dreaming, speculation, and all kinds of pleasant and healthy mental exercise'.[68] Monkhouse implicitly articulates the cognitive styles of an aesthetic liberalism that is expressed through the digressions, diversions and indecisions of the Victorian essay form. Far from promoting introspection or solipsistic withdrawal – an accusation often levelled against Lee's most obvious model, Walter Pater – Lee's essays encourage an imaginative and engaged sociality: they are a starting point for discussion, the opening up of creative reflection, an invitation towards a renewed relationship with the world.

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[1] Vernon Lee, 'The Use of Beauty', in *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909), pp. 1-40 (pp. 14-15).
[2] Carlo Caballero, '"A Wicked Voice": On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music', *Victorian Studies*, 35.4 (1992), 385-408.
[3] See, for example, Vineta Colby, 'The Puritan Aesthete: Vernon Lee', in *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 235-304; Christa Zorn, 'The Handling of Words: Reader Response Victorian Style', in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 174-92 (p. 178); Martha Vicinus, '"A Legion of Ghosts": Vernon Lee (1856–1935) and the Art of Nostalgia', *GLQ,* 10.4 (2004), 599-616; Patricia Pulham, 'Violence and the Pacifist Body in Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*', in *Conflict, Nationhood and Corporeality in Modern Literature: Bodies-At-War*, ed. by Petra Rau (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 46-63 (p. 46).

[4] Some recent notable exceptions include discussion of Lee's 'leisurely, even playful attitude' in Catherine Maxwell, 'Vernon Lee's Handling of Words', in *Thinking Through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 282-97 (p. 285); and the function of irony in Lee's literary criticism in Alex Wong, 'Vernon Lee's Problem with Landor', *Cambridge Quarterly* 45.2 (2016), 135-56.
[5] Vernon Lee, *Ottilie: An Eighteenth-Century Idyl* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1883), p. 7.
[6] David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 4.
[7] Ibid.
[8] See Rebecca N. Mitchell, 'The Ethical Turn', in *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff and Talia Schaffer (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 226-36; Amanda Anderson, *Psyche and Ethos: Moral Life After Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[9] Sarah Collins, 'Aesthetic Liberalism', in *Music and Victorian Liberalism: Composing the Liberal Subject*, ed. by Sarah Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1-12 (p. 9).
[10] For a discussion of how such modes of 'liberal cognition' became formalized, see Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
[11] Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2003), p. 272.
[12] Vernon Lee, *Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908).
[13] See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
[14] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 33. For a discussion of the origins of this phrase, see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 14-51.
[15] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. xiv.
[16] For a concise introduction to Rosa's work and a discussion of its relevance to literary studies, see Rita Felski, 'Good Vibrations', *American Literary History*, 32.2 (2020), 405-15.
[17] Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, trans. by James C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), p. 5.
[18] Ibid., p. 9.
[19] Ibid., p. 166.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., p. 447.
[22] Ibid., p. 174.
[23] See Catherine Maxwell, 'Vernon Lee's Handling of Words', p. 286-87; Joseph Bristow, 'Vernon Lee's Art of Feeling', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 25.1 (Spring, 2006), 117-39.
[24] Vernon Lee, 'Nisi Citharam', in *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909), pp. 41-76.
[25] Ibid., p. 43.
[26] Ibid., p. 52.
[27] Ibid., p. 51.
[28] Ibid., p. 52.
[29] Ibid., p. 49.
[30] Ibid., p. 54.
[31] Vernon Lee, 'Signor Curiazio: A Musical Medley', in *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questio*ns, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1887), I, pp. 317-94 (p. 102; p. 101.) Hereafter cited in the text parenthetically.
[32] See Stefano Evangelista, 'Things Said by the Way: Walter Pater and the Essay', in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, ed. by Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 241-57.
[33] For Gurney's musical aesthetics, see Sarah Collins, 'Utility and the Pleasures of Musical Formalism: Edmund Gurney, Liberal Individualism, and Musical Beauty as "Ultimate' Value"', *Music and Letters*, 100.2 (May 2019), 335-54.
[34] Vernon Lee, letter to Matilda Paget, 26-28 July 1881, in *The Selected Letters of Vernon Lee*, ed. by Amanda Gagel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 320. For a detailed consideration of Lee's musical formalism, see Fraser Riddell, *Music and the Queer Body in English Literature at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 43-47.
[35] Vernon Lee, letter to Mary Costelloe Berenson, 4 November 1897, in Mandy Gagel, 'Selected Letters of Vernon Lee' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Boston University, 2008), p. 590.
[36] Edmund Gurney, *The Power of Sound* (London: Smith, Elder, 1880), p. 112; Edmund Gurney, 'On Some Disputed Points in Music', *Fortnightly Review*, 20 (1876), 106-30 (p. 130).
[37] Vernon Lee, 'The Religious and Moral Status of Wagner', *Fortnightly Review*, 95 (May 1911), 868-85 (p. 885).
[38] Ibid, p. 881.
[39] Ibid., p. 882.
[40] Vernon Lee, 'Beauty and Sanity', *Fortnightly Review*, 64.58 (August 1895), 252-68 (p. 261).
[41] Ibid.

[42] Vernon Lee, 'Out of Venice at Last', in *The Golden Keys and Other Essays on the Genius Loci* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1925), pp. 73-77 (pp. 74-75).
[43] Ibid., p. 74.
[44] Ibid., p. 75.
[45] Ibid., p. 76.
[46] Vernon Lee, 'Botticelli at the Villa Lemmi', in *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1887), I, pp. 77-130. The essay was first published in *Cornhill Magazine*, 46 (August 1882), 159-73.
[47] Ibid., p. 106.
[48] Ibid., p. 126.
[49] Ibid., p. 125.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Rosa, *Resonance*.
[52] Linda K. Hughes, 'Vernon Lee: Slow Serialist and Journalist at the *Fin de Siècle*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 50.1 (2021), 173-202.
[53] Letter to William Blackwood, 1 May 1882, *Letters*, I, p. 356; Vernon Lee, 'Mozart: A Study of Artistic Nationality', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 131 (May 1882), 635-53.
[54] Letter to Matilda Paget, 24 July 1882, *Letters*, I, p. 384. See 'Musical Expression and the Composers of the Eighteenth Century,' *New Quarterly Magazine*, 8 (April 1877), 186-202; 'Comparative Aesthetics', *Contemporary Review*, 38 (Aug 1880), 300-26; 'The Art of Singing, Past and Present,' *British Quarterly Review*, 72 (Oct 1880), 318-42.
[55] Letter to William Blackwood, 11 November 1882, *Letters*, I, p. 399.
[56] Ibid.; 'Cherubino', in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: Satchell, 1881), pp. 129-55.
[57] Letter to William Blackwood, 11 November 1882, *Letters*, I, p. 399; Blackwood recorded his response in the margin of the first page of Lee's letter.
[58] Letter to William Blackwood, 20 December 1882, *Letters*, I, p. 400.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.; 'Impersonality and Evolution in Music,' *Contemporary Review*, 42 (December 1882), 840-58.
[63] Letter to William Blackwood, 20 December 1882, *Letters*, I, p. 400.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Letter to Henrietta Jenkin, 28 January 1875, *Letters*, I, p. 188.
[66] 'Vernon Lee's "Juvenilia"', *Spectator*, 28 January 1888, pp. 143-44.
[67] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 1: 1915-1919*, 20 April 1919, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 266.
[68] Cosmo Monkhouse, 'Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions', *The Academy*, 511 (18 February 1882), p. 112.