

2 In Perfect (a)Synchrony

Queer Style in *The Line of Beauty*

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In Alan Hollinghurst's oeuvre, entanglements of time, aesthetics, and sexuality play pivotal roles. His narratives often oscillate between settings that range from pre-World War I to contemporary Britain and demonstrate how the political, legal, and cultural status of homosexuality has developed in the country throughout the decades. By contrast, many of Hollinghurst's predominantly male protagonists appear more invested in the aesthetic and sexual pleasures of life than in the drastically changing political landscapes surrounding them, often turning a deliberately blind eye to what is happening around them. They are "out of sync" with the signs of the times. These tense constellations of art, eros, and time share a deep-rooted fascination with the *fin de siècle* and late 19th-century aestheticism. Hollinghurst is generally considered "a novelist who is peculiarly *not* of his own era" and whose writing is more informed by "'the homophile' fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century" rather than by his own contemporaries (Mitchell 2016, 174; see also Johnson 2014). Looming large among these influences is Henry James, whom Hollinghurst follows closely "in his exquisitely contrived literary sensibility, his concern with the upper classes, the unmasking of desire's implication in webs of power and money, and the deployment of an ironic narrative mode" (Mathuray 2017, 3).

None of Hollinghurst's novels engages with James more overtly than *The Line of Beauty* (2004).¹ Set in 1980s London during the Thatcher administration, the novel tells the story of Nick Guest, a young Oxford graduate lodging in the Notting Hill townhouse of the wealthy family of Tory MP Gerald Fedden, whose son Toby is a former classmate (and secret crush) of the openly gay Nick. While Nick drifts across the mid-80s aimlessly propelled by desire, drugs, and growing concerns over the imminent HIV crisis, one of the few constants in his life is his fascination for Henry James, on whose famed literary style he is (rather unsuccessfully) trying to write a doctoral thesis. The narrative, which spans the years 1983 until 1987, conveys "the archetypically Jamesian experience of the 'trapped spectator'," gradually transforming Nick from a self-proclaimed connoisseur of Jamesian irony into its involuntarily ironic victim (Eastham 2006, 523–24).

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This chapter adds a layer of intermediality to the entanglements between Hollinghurst and James in *The Line of Beauty*. More specifically, I consider the queer potential of Hollinghurst's quasi-Jamesian style in exploring his use of music as an aesthetic manifestation of Nick's queer (a)synchrony. The theoretical foundation of my analysis is twofold. On the one hand it builds upon Carolyn Dinshaw's temporal conception of queerness as "forms of desirous, embodied being that are out of sync with the ordinarily linear measurements of everyday life, that engage heterogeneous temporalities or that precipitate out of time altogether" (2012, 4); on the other, it takes cues from Kevin Ohi's account of Henry James's queer style, in which he argues that the atemporal style of James's writing produces a beguiling effect of asynchrony and subverts the heteronormative and futurist framework of the novel form. The same beguiling effect is on display in Hollinghurst's use of musicality in *The Line of Beauty*, which opens up an intermedial and intermediary sphere to negotiate queer relationality and anti-relationality. Constructing a narrative conscience which is "out of sync" with its environment, this "out-of-sync"-ness reveals a queer space of aesthetic self-affirmation for Nick—a space, however, ultimately irreconcilable with the socio-political conservatism of the novel's Thatcherite setting. To trace these temporal and medial entanglements—including their ekphrastic, ironic, and nostalgic affordances—this chapter uses queer style as a lens to read a specifically musical episode from the second section of *The Line of Beauty* and discusses in what ways the aesthetic (a)synchrony on display reflects upon lived queer experience more generally.

Styles of Time, Times of Style

Style has seen a surge of critical interest in recent years, reassessing its political potential but also its theoretical and practical elusiveness and its relation towards substance (Herrmann et al. 2019; Hartley 2016). This newly discovered ubiquity and polyphony of style has proven especially productive for queer literary studies:

sexuality and its attendant forms of desire, love, relationality, and non-relationality (human and nonhuman both) can be considered . . . a series of still unfolding styles, consisting of counterintuitive reading, temporal disjuncture, the performative, narrative interruption and suspension, non-closure, negativity, ambivalence, affective intensity, color, texture, syntax, and tone that make up the queer literary domain.

(Seitler 2019, 37)

This exploration of style subsequently broadens the theoretical discussion of queerness beyond "identitarian terms" (Seitler 2019, 43). While these terms have marked a foundation of queer activism, they have also been the object of debate since the rise of queer theory in the early nineties and its rejection

of the identitarian premises of gay and lesbian studies. Consequently, Seitler suggests, we may consider queer literary style not only in identitarian but also in aesthetic terms. Brian Glavey has similarly emphasised the connection between issues of identity and aesthetic form in his concept of queer ekphrasis, arguing that “ekphrasis offers the possibility to transfigure stigma into aesthetic value, privileging form . . . because it allows for the revaluation of the experience of being treated as an image or a copy” (2015, 7). If an attunement to aesthetic form, especially to literary representations of visual art, reveals the ways in which forms lend themselves to the lived experience of queer subjects, then the ephemeral form of music arguably offers even more insight into the temporal disjuncture of queer identity and desire. Kevin Ohi has identified such a fusion of form and queerness and thus of style and substance in Henry James, arguing that queerness becomes manifest less in James’s contents or his much-speculated biography, but rather in his idiosyncratic style. Drawing from the Deleuzian notion of style as “‘the foreign language within language” (qtd. in Ohi 24), Ohi suggests that James enacts “a queer practice of representation that offers a way to frame the emergence of sexuality . . . not as a topic or content for a representation but as a ‘treatment’ or style” (2011, 15). This style is inherently defined by “belatedness and asynchronicity” as “erotic categories” which manifest in various narrative and stylistic devices like the blurring of literal and figurative registers, meta-level commentary, tropes such as syllepsis and zeugma, or free-indirect discourse (Ohi 2011, 31–32).

Ohi’s reading of James’s queer style as belated and asynchronous adds an important formal dimension to the discourse on temporality which became a focal point of queer theory and queer studies in the early 2000s (see Dinshaw et al. 2007). As “denizens of times out of joint” (Freeman 2010, 18), queer individuals are particularly prone to experiencing tensions between synchrony and asynchrony, of being etymologically “with time” and “without time” (Freeman 2016, 129). This tension singles out asynchrony as a “queer phenomenon—something felt on, with, or as a body, something experienced as a mode of erotic difference or even as a means to express or enact ways of being and connecting that have not yet arrived or never will” (Freeman 2007, 159). That these ways of being and connecting have not yet arrived is important as it points towards an open potentiality of change that may or may not be actualised eventually. If synchrony is “a matter of rhythm” (Freeman 2016, 129), then its counterpart, asynchrony, doesn’t necessarily entail a complete lack thereof but rather suggests a different kind of rhythm altogether that does not abide with the conventional measurements of “keeping time.” This emphasis on rhythm obviously speaks to the musical dimension in the discourse on (a)synchrony. Indeed, as I will show in the following, Nick’s aesthetic attachment to music in *The Line of Beauty* grants him a queer relationality that both connects and disconnects him from his outside world.

In light of these remarks on being with and without time, it is tempting to dismiss Hollinghurst as an asynchronous writer whose nostalgic aesthetics

and affinity for the past remain points of contention among readers, critics, and scholars alike (Mathuray 2017, 4). Yet such dismissals undervalue his subtle but acute commentary on queer experience and sociality throughout 20th- and 21st-century Britain which skews much closer to the socio-political concerns of queer theory than critics accusing Hollinghurst of retrogressive nostalgia would concede (Mitchell 2016). Dinshaw rightly points out that the seemingly nostalgic “longing for another kind of time” (2012, 36) can still coincide with a critical awareness of temporal multiplicity both in the presentist *now* and the nostalgic *then*. Hollinghurst’s stylistic debt to Henry James is a case in point. *The Line of Beauty* “offers not merely a stylistic homage to, but also a political remobilisation of, Jamesian aesthetic,” to deliver “commentary on the personal cost of sexual liberty and the visibly changing perceptions of gay identity in public life” (James 2011, 494, 499). Queerness becomes an element of neither just form nor content—or style and substance—but of both; from the perspective of late 19th-century aestheticism, no art form facilitates this fusion more perfectly than music, as indicated by the opening epigraph from the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In his introduction to James’ *The Ivory Tower*, Hollinghurst himself notes “the inseparable coexistence of form and content” (2004, xvi) in the Master’s works. In *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst masters his personal fusion of style and substance, producing “sentences [that] are always aware of their own beauty, but [that] are not devoted exclusively to its achievement” (Macfarlane 2011, 175).

Hollinghurst’s seemingly nostalgic return to James’s style—and, as we shall see, Hollinghurst’s narrative use of music—is thus best understood in terms of what Ashley Shelden calls “amorous time,” a temporality closely entangled with but not equivalent to nostalgia. According to Shelden, amorous time assumes that “from the position of the present, one desires a better future based on an ideality that is supposed to have existed in the past” (2017, 94). However, the future once portended never came to be, leaving its promise unfulfilled and thereby necessitating the present return to the past. This emphasis on unfulfillment and disappointment of past promises in the present distinguishes amorous time from “unexamined nostalgia”: “simple nostalgia constructs a fantasy to eliminate negativity; amorous time constructs a fantasy that foregrounds and thrives on the negative” (Shelden 2017, 96). It is the open acknowledgment of pain and negativity in the present that makes the temporal return to a past that still bore potential for future positivity not just nostalgic, but amorous. This paradoxical simultaneity of optimism and pessimism, of promises and their subsequent disappointments, becomes manifest in Hollinghurst’s stylistic appropriation of James.² *The Line of Beauty*, I argue, does not just hark back to the “vagueness, shading into pointed difference” (Hollinghurst 2004, xiv) that constitutes the queerness of James’ writing; it does so precisely in the poignant awareness that despite the political progression since James’s lifetime, issues of queerness often can still only be addressed in equivocal and evasive terms.

Such hopes for moral progressiveness not just of individual characters but of society more generally lay at the heart of James's "operative irony," which seeks to imagine the promise of what *might* be rather than simply stating what currently *is* (James 1962, 222, emphases in the original). If operative irony presents a "utopian ideal of self-realization within the constricting framework of social values" (Ziegler 1983, 228), then the past hope of those social values someday becoming less constricting has remained unfilled, at least in the Thatcherite setting of *The Line of Beauty*.³ In the conservative household of the Feddens, Nick's homosexuality is silently tolerated as long as it is not openly discussed and made otherwise explicit, turning him into a queer embodiment of his own notion of style that he seeks to explore in his PhD: "style that hides things and reveals things at the same time" (Hollinghurst 2015, 54; see also Hannah 2007, 89). Nick has to hide significant parts of himself in order to preserve (and thereby reveal) his state as a literal "guest" in the Feddens' luxurious Notting Hill townhouse.⁴ In that regard it makes sense why Nick has developed such a strong attachment to classical music, as discussed subsequently: in his aestheticist love for musical, instrumental beauty, Nick gets to enact, albeit subliminally, the queerness that otherwise is being silenced by the Feddens and society at large.

Although homosexuality is much more thematically explicit in Hollinghurst than in James, the stylistic continuity between the two suggests an ongoing tension in finding means to express the topic discursively. These conflicting strains of defining and (dis)avowing queerness are reflected in the wider reception of Hollinghurst's writing, too. While Chris Smith, chairman of the 2004 Booker Prize, deliberately downplayed the topic of homosexuality in *The Line of Beauty*, stating that "the fact that it was a gay novel did not figure at all in the discussions," Hollinghurst's win also sparked headlines like "Booker Won By Gay Sex" and "Gay Book Wins" (Moss 2004; Mathuray 2017, 2). Ironically, then, by trying to make Hollinghurst's win *not* about the "gayness" of his novel, Smith achieved the opposite, drawing attention to the topic by disowning it. This friction between embracing and rejecting queerness is likewise evident in Nick's trajectory in *The Line of Beauty*, a trajectory defined in temporal terms by his struggle to find a sense of aesthetic synchrony in an environment of social asynchrony. Hollinghurst represents this struggle by narratively and stylistically conveying the sensuousness of classical music in one of the most aesthetically charged moments in the novel, employing asynchrony similarly to James as an erotic category. Paradoxically, though, as we will see, this narrative moment, which makes Nick's eroticised asynchrony so palpable, is informed on first glance by the opposite of asynchrony: synchrony.

Flowing Sounds, Flowing Words

Ranging from poetry to portraiture and architecture, literary and non-literary art forms alike mark integral elements of Hollinghurst's *mise en scènes* and

narrative structures. Pieces like the Roman mosaic in Charles Nantwich's cellar in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Cecil Valance's poem "Two Acres" and the house that inspired it in *The Stranger's Child*, or the nude painting of David Sparsholt in *The Sparsholt Affair* run through their respective texts as common threads and offer a sense of intergenerational continuity. Music constitutes a more evanescent yet no less impactful dimension of this intermedial disposition and arguably stands at the centre of the aesthetic concerns in *The Line of Beauty*, despite the novel's related interests in visual arts like architecture, painting, and photography. As Andrew Eastham observes, "the primary medium of Nick's artistic experience throughout the novel is music" (2006, 520). In that sense, Nick expands upon Hollinghurst's first-person narrator in his debut novel *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), William Beckwith, who shares Nick's affinity for classical music and frequently attends the Royal Opera House with his grandfather, a patron of the theatre. Even though Nick graduated from Oxford in English literature, music sparks at least a similar if not even greater passion in him than his academic field of studies. The very first chapter ends with Nick attempting an impromptu sight-reading of a Mozart piece on the Feddens' piano, establishing music as "integral to a rich emotional life" (Shiller 2017, 111) for the protagonist early on:

To Nick himself the faltering notes were like raindrops on a sandy path, and he was filled with a sense of what his evening could have been. The simple Andante became a vivid dialogue in his mind between optimism and recurrent pain; in fact it heightened both feelings to an unnecessary degree.

(Hollinghurst 2015, 18)

This musical dialogue of optimism and pain encapsulates the oscillation between hope and disappointment of Shelden's amorous time and infuses later instances of intradiegetic music in the novel, too, as seen in the following.

The musical reverberations throughout the first of the novel's three sections, aptly titled "The Love-Chord," continue. Nick's affinity for music allows him to engage in repartees with Gerald over the aesthetic value of Richard Strauss, solidifying his status as the appreciated aesthete of the house while also sparking in Nick the self-conscious concern that "he would care too much," whereas for Gerald "it was only music" (Hollinghurst 2015, 96). Music also provides Nick with means to make sense of and aestheticise his relationship with Leo in the titular love chord that he imagines during his lover's absence:

When he thought of Leo after not thinking of him for a minute or two he heard a big orchestral sound in his head. . . . It was high and low at once, an abysmal pizzicato, a pounce of the darkest brass, and above

it a hair-raising sheen of string. It seemed to knock him down and fling him all in one unregistered gesture.

(Hollinghurst 2015, 138)

At the end of “The Love-Chord,” Leo himself plays Mozart on the Feddens’ piano when the two men are alone in the house, surprising Nick with his technical expertise and creating a moment of unforeseen intimacy between them. Indeed, “the music seemed to know . . . the irresistible curve of hope, and its hollow inversion” (2015 174). Hollinghurst transposes the dynamic flux of Nick’s desire first onto the rise and fall of the music and second onto the elegant flow of his syntax, which descends from a major key of hope into its minor inversion just a few words later. Years later, Nick remembers this moment after Leo’s death from AIDS. The memory of Leo’s impromptu performance brings back “the beautiful rawness of those days again, the life of instinct opening in front of him, . . . everything tingling with newness and risk” (2015, 415). Even later in the novel, a recording of Rachmaninov’s *Symphonic Dances* takes Nick’s mind back to his university days at Oxford as “regretful longing . . . unfolded for him like that endless tune on the alto sax” (Hollinghurst 2015, 454; see also Macfarlane 2011, 175). In all of these instances, music and its haunting echo give aesthetic shape to Sheldon’s amorous time and the retrospective return to a moment when hopes for the future had not been disappointed yet. If ekphrastic writing can make queer longing aesthetically manifest, then *The Line of Beauty* creates a correspondingly queer musical poetics to match it. These poetics not only encapsulate in words the non-verbal evanescence of music; in doing so, they also articulate that the reciprocal fulfilment of (queer) desire can be as ephemeral and intense as a fleeting piano note.

Significantly, these musical poetics derive almost exclusively from classical music. Noting formal discrepancies between literary representations of classical and non-classical music like jazz, Emily Petermann has observed “the relative emphasis on individuality in tone and performance style in jazz music in contrast to the desire for homogeneity in classical instrumentation” (2014, 14–15). Representations of classical music thus often focus on formal elements rather than on individual variations and interpretations, conceptualising music as “embodied in the written score and less in any individual performance, which attempts to a much greater extent to reproduce a single idealized ‘original’” (Petermann 2014, 14–15). Yet Petermann also points out that this dichotomy between the universal formalism of classical music and the performative individuality of jazz is eventually subverted in post-modern texts. *The Line of Beauty* strategises this musical tension between a formal ideal and the individual realisation of that ideal as an aesthetic foil of Nick’s queerness, and it does so nowhere more resoundingly than during the concert in the second section of the novel.

Nina Glaserova, an up-and-coming pianist from Czechoslovakia, has been invited to give a concert at the Feddens’ house. As both musical connoisseur

and focaliser of the novel, Nick attempts to scrutinise the technical quality of her interpretations of Chopin, Schubert, and Beethoven while also appearing deeply impacted by the affective immediacy of the performance:

[W]atching her own hands busying up and down the keyboard as if they were astonishing automata that she had wound up and set in motion, in perfect synchrony, to produce this silvery flow of sound. She made it seem a bit like an exercise, but you could tell, if you listened, that the piece was life itself, in its momentum and its evanescence. The modulations in it were like instants of dizziness.

(Hollinghurst 2015, 238)

Unlike most of the other characters who only attend the concert for the social prestige that it symbolises, Nick *does* listen to the music and is completely swept away by the dizziness of its perfect synchrony. Indeed, listening to the performance becomes a physically rapturous experience for the protagonist, an experience conveyed by Hollinghurst in almost orgasmic terms that accentuate Nick's trembling and shattering sensations.

[F]or Nick to listen to music, to great music, which was all necessity, and here in the house, where the floor trembled to the sudden resolve of the Allegro, and the piano shook on its locked brass wheels—well, it was a startling experience. He felt shaken and reassured all at once—the music expressed life and explained it and left you having to ask again.

(Hollinghurst 2015, 239)

Yet the more Nick finds himself immersed in the music, the more he also disconnects himself from the social environment in which he is physically embedded. For the openly gay Nick, the music opens up a metaphysical platform from which to contemplate his social relations, especially the relation to his lover Wani, the son of a Lebanese entrepreneur, who's also in the audience and who, unlike Nick, is still “in the closet.”

He felt he floated into another place, beautiful, speculative, even dangerous, a place created and held open by the music, but separate from it. It had the mood of a troubling dream, where nothing could be known for certain or offer a solid foothold to memory after one had awoken. What really was his understanding with Wani? The pursuit of love seemed to need the cultivation of indifference. The deep connection between them was so secret that at times, it was hard to believe it existed.

(Hollinghurst 2015, 240)

For Nick, the experience of perfect musical synchrony lays bare and makes manifest his social asynchronies, not only through his working-class

background and his passion for the fine arts, but particularly through his homosexuality. For a brief moment, he achieves social detachment through “total synaesthetic immersion” (Eastham 2006, 522) into the music. The “numbness of absence, the wistful solitude, the stifled climaxes of longing” (Hollinghurst 2015, 240) expressed by the pianist in a Beethoven sonata become reflections of the absences, solitude, and longing in Nick’s personal life, capturing his feeling of social asynchrony in the musical synchrony of the live performance.

In addition to conveying the flow of Nick’s desire by verbally imitating the musical flow of the intradiegetic performance, Hollinghurst also visualises that flow by having Nick notice Wani’s profile in “the glossy double curve of the piano lid” (2015, 240). Nick temporarily ascends into “an abstract universe, but he does so through the image of his lover reflected in a piano lid—the shallow reflection is both a limitless gateway and a momentary narcissistic glimmer” (Eastham 2006, 522). This visual reference not only marks a variation of the novel’s recurrent mirror imagery, which produces a paradoxical simultaneity of flatness and depth (Macfarlane 2011, 171). It also epitomises the “metaphorics of light” that structure Shelden’s amorous time (2017, 98): in the piano’s gleaming reflection of his lover, Nick sees their past encounters, present relationship, and possible future all fused into one anticipatory flicker, which also “came luminously through” (Hollinghurst 2015, 240) in the music. The piano, its shimmer and musical sound, become resonances of the utopian potentiality of queerness and its “anticipatory illumination” (Muñoz 2019, 15). This potentiality, I argue, departs from the more negative accounts of Nick’s aestheticism and its “failures,” within which other critics like Eastham have previously framed Nick’s love of music. Notably, theories of musical emotion in the 19th century were equally informed by tensions between surfaces and depths (Spitzer 2020, 309). Hollinghurst thus draws from his entire intermedial arsenal to showcase how, as a queer aesthete living in 1980s London, Nick finds emotional depth in aesthetic surfaces and a moment of introspective pause in the fleeting temporality of music.

Hollinghurst’s invocation of the affective impact that the music has on Nick echoes James’s description of experience in “The Art of Fiction” as a state from which an author should be writing and which differs from mimetic representation:

Experience is the atmosphere of the mind, not the events that the atmosphere might lead the mind to register. . . . Neither the mind itself nor an object in the world, experience transgresses the dichotomy between inside and out that would ground an analogy linking cognition and representation as simple mimetic processes.

(Ohi 2011, 6)

James's idea of "experience," especially the atmosphere of the mind, captures Nick's intradiegetic experience during the concert and Hollinghurst's rendering of it. The various sensuous impressions that jolt Nick during the performance, from the audible of Nina's piano-playing to the visual of Wani's profile, fuse to have a profoundly dislocating effect on him, creating "an "atmosphere" that [his] mind can neither identify with nor objectify" (Ohi 2011, 10). Although the events that Nick's mind registers do not quite vanish, they neither constitute his experience altogether, as he enters "a place held open by the music, but separate from it" (Hollinghurst 2015, 241). Just like the image of Wani (Hollinghurst 2015, 241), music almost hypnotises Nick, transporting him into an ephemeral realm outside of time and space from where his actual social relations appear to him in a poignant new light and accentuate his ever-present struggle between belonging and not belonging. The fact that the novel is written in an elaborate free indirect style—another Jamesian hallmark (Ohi 2011, 60; Macfarlane 2011, 171–74; James 2011, 499)—with Nick as our only focaliser further makes the atmosphere of his mind and that internal struggle of belonging accessible to readers.

Considering that synchrony, as Freeman notes, "is key to establishing a sense of engroupment, to implanting the affects and movements that make a person feel connected to something larger than him- or herself" (2016, 133), Nick's aesthetic synchrony with music not only exposes his social asynchrony, his very lack of engroupment and connectedness as a homosexual aesthete living in the household of a Tory MP during the reign of Margaret Thatcher. Stylistically, Hollinghurst's quasi-Jamesian use of free indirect discourse also creates a complex sense of engroupment between Nick and the reader. Given our retrospective distance from the novel's time line, we as readers enjoy a critical awareness of the events in the plot that Nick, being in the moment, is crucially lacking. Nevertheless, Hollinghurst opens a gateway that lets us get as close as possible to Nick's aesthetic immersion without accidentally mistaking his immersion for our own. If synchrony and asynchrony are matters of rhythm, then the musical poetics in *The Line of Beauty* create a multi-layered symphony that encompasses all of Nick's rhythmic patterns, both the ones he is attuned to—his aestheticism—and the ones he is not—his socio-political environment.

Generative Beauty

In the academy, Nick's excessive aestheticism and his tension between aesthetic attachment and political detachment have traditionally been read as the character's greatest failure and the key to his fallout with the Feddens (see Eastham 2011, 8–9; Yebra 2022, 144–54). While Nick's aestheticism arguably does blind him to the reality of his environment the further he proceeds (Su 2014, 1102), these rather unfavourable estimations of his aestheticism also betray some futurist inclinations that the novel does not fully

corroborate. As Elahe Haschemi Yekani rightly points out, “Hollinghurst does not convey a coming-out story in which a protagonist claims a gay identity that rests on a conception of futurity” (2012, 221). Nick’s aestheticism does not strive to build a cultural legacy for himself that will outlast his generation. If anything, Hollinghurst makes it bitingly clear that it does the opposite. Nick’s doctoral thesis on style never goes anywhere, just like his ill-conceived film adaptation of James’s *The Spoils of Poynton*, and the first issue of *Ogee*, his joint art magazine with Wani, also ends up being its last due to Wani’s rapidly worsening health in the third section. Rather than catering to the future, Nick’s aestheticism repudiates the future in favour of indulging in the present moment, which pushes him close to what Carolyn Dinshaw calls amateurism.

Regardless of his considerable aesthetic expertise, Nick’s relationship to the arts, aside from his editorial involvement with *Ogee*, is largely unprofessional and does not abide with any normative, capitalist timelines, allowing him to excessively attach himself to the arts in a decidedly unproductive way that professionals cannot. This amateurish aloofness, significantly enabled by Wani’s financial support, adds to Nick’s queer detachment from the world. “Amateurism,” Dinshaw writes, “is itself a bit queer, defined by attachment in a detached world,” and rendering amateurs like Nick “‘belated’ or ‘underdeveloped’ in relation not only to the profession but also to the reproductive family” (2012, 31). David Halperin similarly suggests that “[g]ay male culture’s distinctive brand of erotic aestheticism . . . and its insistence on perfection in its erotico-aesthetic objects, tend to produce an absolute privileging of the beautiful” (2012, 231). Nick indeed privileges beauty and its presentist experience above everything else, even his own sense of self-preservation towards the future. He strives for aesthetic perfection not despite being an amateur, but *because* of it—because he takes “[his] own sweet time” (Dinshaw 2012, 15), rather than adhering to the relentlessly forward moving temporalities around him. Losing himself momentarily in the beauty of classical music during the concert is arguably symptomatic of that. Even when the normative temporalities of modern life catch up with Nick at the end, with the possibility of an HIV infection looming over his head, he refuses to abandon his queer stance and marvels at “the love of a world that was shockingly unconditional” and “the fact of a street corner at all that seemed, in the light of the moment, so beautiful” (Hollinghurst 2015, 501). While these lines may hint at Nick’s continuous state of denial and ignorance (Macfarlane 2011, 184), they strike a more hopeful note to me. The most telling part of that passage is not the fact that it ends with the adjective “beautiful” but what comes before. Nick’s aestheticism, particularly his affinity for music, never aimed for the future but for the light of the present moment, especially now that the finitude of life becomes painfully obvious to him. Just like the *now* is inherently “a transition, always divided between no longer and not yet” (Dinshaw 2012, 2), so too does *The Line of Beauty* construe

a queer temporality that is both amorously affiliated with the past and radically embedded in the present and uses aestheticism to gesture towards the *not yet* of the future.

Arguably, few art forms lend themselves better to this temporal complexity than the fleeting immediacy of music. Unlike, for example, painting—the art form that dominates Hollinghurst’s most recent novel, *The Sparsholt Affair* (2017)—the performance of music does not produce a separate material object which can be owned, touched, and perceived on end after the production process. Musical performances may be recorded and made available for repeat access, which can also hold significant affective potential, as seen by Nick’s yearning reaction to the recording of Rachmaninov’s *Symphonic Dances* towards the end of the novel. Yet the intense immaterial rapture that immerses Nick during the concert only results from the live(d) experience of “being in the moment.” In such live performances, appearance and disappearance of aesthetic form coalesce, the sound of notes travelling throughout the room and eventually vanishing as soon as they have emerged. This evanescence makes the affective experience that music gives to marginalised amateurs like Nick all the more precious.

Paradoxically, then, it is in this presentist dimension that music and its affordances for aesthetic attachment propel *The Line of Beauty* past “a *sinthomosexual-style* rejection of sociality and futurity” (Mitchell 2016, 187, emphases in the original). The end of the novel may underline Nick’s asynchronous lack of engroupment and sociality after being shunned by the Feddens. Yet this lack of engroupment also reinforces Nick’s status as someone who has found his sense of self in the world and “the possibility of newness just around (as the cliché has it) the corner” (Roberts 2017, 119) by unconditionally devoting himself towards expressions of beauty, for better or worse. Aesthetic form becomes an anchor of self-attachment for Nick at a time when meaningful social attachments remain far and few between for him, and Hollinghurst’s stylistic and narrative invoking of music translate that longing for attachment to the page. If “beauty, having a ‘forward’ and ‘backward momentum’ at once, invokes generative power” (Kim 2016, 184), then beauty, most of all the beauty of music, certainly invokes a self-generative power for Nick: the power to aesthetically affirm his queer identity against the oppressive backdrop of heteronormativity, even if that affirmation entails literally and figuratively falling out of time. Thus, despite being a catalyst of his downfall, Nick’s aestheticism, as exemplified by the concert episode, also gives him a faint glimpse of that “new beautiful world in the post-AIDS era” (Kim 2016, 184) in which the novel was written, a queer future not marked by repressive reproduction. In that sense, Nick’s aestheticism and its potentially fatal consequences may be the novel’s grandest manifestation of Shelden’s amorous time. Past the end of the narrative, Nick’s test might still turn out positive and pave his way towards a likely death from HIV. Nonetheless, by leaving this final question unanswered, the future that was once foretold in Hollinghurst’s retrospective novel remains doubtful yet open

rather than definitively foreclosed. The distant echoes of the love chord linger on in Nick's memory and the readers', tonally reminiscent of the lost past but also amorously gesturing towards the imminent *not yet*.

Conclusion: Beautiful (Un)Belonging

In the second section of the novel, entitled “‘To whom do you beautifully belong?’,” Nick tells his colleagues at *Ogee* about a threesome he'd had recently and intersperses his report with several Henry James quotes about how his characters call each other beautiful, especially in moments of overt moral wickedness.

“There's a marvellous bit in his play *The High Bid*, when a man says to the butler in a country house, ‘I mean, to whom do you beautifully belong?’”

(Hollinghurst 2015, 208–9, emphases in the original)

In the novel, Nick leaves the question unanswered, regarding both James's play and himself. How, then, may we as readers answer it in his stead? At the end, Nick definitely no longer belongs to the Feddens, if he ever did at all to begin with. He also does not appear to belong to his parents, his relationship with whom is presented as distant and emotionally strained over the years, especially after Nick's involvement in Gerald's scandals (Hollinghurst 2015, 472). His former lover passed away from AIDS, and his current one is just about to. Unsurprisingly, then, Nick never is seen to feel beholden to a larger gay community. On a more abstract note, as a consciousness defined by aestheticism and amorous temporality, Nick never fully belongs to any one singular moment in time. By the novel's open ending, however, Nick, as clichéd as it may sound, at least manages to belong to himself. Hollinghurst employs moments of intradiegetic music to create a stylistically beguiling atmosphere of simultaneous synchrony and asynchrony which embodies this very struggle of queer belonging—not despite of but *because of* the ephemeral nature of music and Nick's queer attachment to it. The love that still barely dared—or was not allowed to—speak its name in Thatcherite Britain finds a twofold equivalent both in the non-verbality of classical music and in the verbality of Hollinghurst's style. Thus, even though its protagonist belongs to no body, no place, and no time, *The Line of Beauty* magnifies Nick's love chord into a symphony of amorous time and turns the temporal predicament of not belonging into an (im)possible queer virtue, and, as this chapter has shown, it does so *beautifully*.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Flannery (2005), Rivkin (2005), and Eastham (2006).
- 2 According to Robert Macfarlane, this paradoxically anticipatory notion of nostalgia infuses Hollinghurst's entire oeuvre: “The characteristic tense of all of

- Hollinghurst's novels is the future perfect, the will-have-been. His main characters . . . love to cast their minds forwards to a point from which they will remember the ongoing present. They enjoy, too, the impossibility of return from that imagined future, the frisson of exclusion from a past that was once lived. As such, they remind us of the exquisite and implicitly erotic nature of nostalgia as frustrated desire" (2011, 174).
- 3 Eastham (2006) therefore reads Hollinghurst's novel as a transformation of James's operative irony into inoperative irony.
 - 4 The poignantly ironic resonance of Nick's last name "Guest" as a social denominator has been widely recognized; see, for example, Eastham (2006, 523), Hannah (2007, 85–86), Haschemi Yekani (2012, 222), Macfarlane (2011, 170), Shiller (2017, 112), and Yeager (2013, 312).

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