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From Ghitterns to Harps: How Tolkien's Music Became Generic

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Cover Page Footnote

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In *Letter* #187, Tolkien remarked that "musicians want tunes, and musical notation." However, when reading *The Hobbit*, musicians and readers familiar with history of music also want something else—an erratum:

> Kili and Fili rushed for their bags and brought back little fiddles; Dori, Nori, and Ori brought out flutes from somewhere inside their coats; Bombur produced a drum from the hall; Bifur and Bofur went out too, and came back with clarinets that they had left among the walking-sticks Dwalin and Balin said: "Excuse me, I left mine in the porch!" "Just bring mine in with you," said Thorin. They came back with viols as big as themselves, and with Thorin's harp wrapped in a green cloth. (15)

Clarinets?! The clarinet is a baroque instrument, invented in the late 17th century—not the period we tend to associate with the Third Age of Middle-earth. The instruments in Bifur's and Bofur's hands are as incongruous as Torin in a powdered wig or Dwalin with a musket.

The anachronistic nature of Dwarves' clarinets has been noted by many.[1] *The Hobbit*, of course, contains other anachronisms such as a mantle clock and tea and biscuits[2] but they always belong to Hobbits and contrast their late Victorian environment with the fantasy world of Dwarves and Elves. Clarinets (and viols, another late medieval and baroque instrument) relate to neither.

It is fun to speculate what prompted Tolkien to select these particular instruments for the Dwarves. He may have had a certain music in mind that would call for the sound of specific strings and woodwinds. He may have decided that more ancient instruments such as, for example, "cornemuse and shalemyes" from Chaucer's *House of Fame* (line 1218)—a poem that Tolkien studied[3]—would only confuse his readers (even though a shalemye would fit the time period better than its descendant, the clarinet[4]). He may have simply picked "an instrument which could go unnoticed among the walking sticks" (Steimel 101). Or, always careful about his choice of words and their sound, he may have thought that clarinets fit his sentence better than equally familiar and stick-like oboes or recorders.

And yet, the combination of clarinets, flutes, fiddles, viols, a drum, and a harp invokes a particular setting: the names of the instruments are familiar, yet not all of them are typical for a contemporary or Victorian orchestra. Fiddles and viols instead of standard violins and cellos are old-fashioned but not overly so; the word "clarinet" sounds slightly exotic in English; a harp—in a *green* cloth—recalls ancient bards. Together, they help the reader to be slowly "swept away into dark lands under strange moons" along with Bilbo (*Hobbit* 15). Very effectively, Tolkien uses more or less familiar instruments to indicate what kind of music they would soon play. On the other hand, once the playing starts, it is the vocal part that matters, not the instruments. The music moves into the background quickly. The song takes over.

Music, of course, plays a very important part in Tolkien's tales; it lies at the core of the creation. Verlyn Flieger famously compared the unfinished legendarium itself to *Interrupted Music* and

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[1] See e.g. Bratman ("Liquid Tolkien") and Steimel.

[2] See further discussion in Rateliff (18).

[3] Cited in "Chaucer as a philologist: *The Reeve's Tale*" (135).

[4] David Bratman relates and dismisses the proposal that Tolkien actually meant crumhorns, other early woodwinds that look more like walking sticks with a crook handle: "if Tolkien had meant crumhorn, he could have written it" ("Liquid Tolkien" 165). Also, he could not have expected his readers to guess crumhorns by associating clarinets and walking sticks.

Bradford Lee Eden described the history of Middle-earth as a musical parable ("Music" 445). On a more basic level, songs abound in Tolkien's stories and some of them—the lays—are songs themselves.

But what of the actual music? Here I will focus not on its allegorical meanings but on Tolkien's evolving descriptions of music or rather, on their growing absence. Relegating instrumental music to the background was his approach not only in *The Hobbit* but in most other tales: to suggest its nature broadly, with as thrifty language as possible. The rest was deliberately left to the readers' imagination. The technique is absent in the earliest legendarium and takes some time to develop. Its key characteristics are

- the song is primary;
- the instruments are basic;
- the playing is described in the most generic ("thrifty") terms;
- the music remains in the background.

Strange Guitars

The clarinet is not the only unusual instrument in the legendarium. An early poem likely written in June 1916 (Scull and Hammond I-81) mentions "sound of faint guitars" and "gleaming music of their strange guitars" (*BLT*1 91-2). The setting is Habbanan/Eruman, a Valinorian analog of Purgatory (later rejected in the legendarium theology). Guitars?! In Valinor?!

At first glance, this is not "little musical knowledge" (*Letter* #260) but sheer ignorance. However, Tolkien appears here to play a clever game. "Guitar" is not necessarily an anachronism but may be a substitute for a cithara. One of the most famous medieval works of English history, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittaniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), tells of Saxon leader Baldulph trying to enter a besieged city. He disguises himself as a bard/minstrel and moves through the Britons' encampment. In the original, "Deinde intra castra deambulans, modulis quos in lyra componebat, sese cytharistam exhibebat" (101). In modern translation, "He strode up and down in the camp, pretending to be a harpist by playing melodies on his instrument" (213). Note that the Latin original distinguishes between two instruments, *lyra* and *cythara*: Baldulph originally composed music on the latter but played the former. One is Anglo-Saxon, the other, Brittonic, the distinction that could be known to Tolkien.[5] The translation quaoted above simply uses a generic "harp." However, an earlier translation by Sebastian Evans (1904) renders this sentence differently: "walking to and fro within the camp, made show as had he been a minstrel singing unto the tunes that he thrummed the while upon his ghittern" (226). Here the translator emphasizes the *cythara* rather than the more familiar *lyra* and thus chooses a more unusual word. But a ghittern or, in a more common spelling, a gittern[6] is different from a harp or a cithara; just as the name suggests, this mandolin-like instrument is a precursor of the modern guitar.

[5] The difference is discussed in detail in e.g. F.W.Galpin's seminal *Old English Instruments of Music*, first published in 1911 (11-12). Another take on the difference between *lyra* and *cythara*, without a reference to *Historia*, can be found in the 1910 *Enc. Brit.* article on the crowd (i.e. Welsh crwth). Whether or not Tolkien consulted either source is immaterial: the difference was sufficiently well-known at the time for a student of classics, Anglo-Saxon, and Welsh to come upon it. He could certainly discover it himself by a careful reading of Geoffrey.

[6] Evans preferred the unusual spelling, as in e.g. his "Nickar the Soulless."

Tolkien most certainly read Geoffrey in his undergraduate days[7] and could very well be familiar with the Evans translation. (Even a student of classics might have wanted to consult a translation from time to time.) It contained the text that he would have studied in the original, was published by a popular press, and was, therefore, widely available. Most importantly, the passage discussed above dealt with the subject dear to his heart: Baldulph and his brother Colgrin assumed the leadership of the Saxons after the death of Octa, son of Hengest and thus, in the early legendarium, grandson of Eriol (*BLT*1 24). Could Tolkien's guitar be related to the gittern/ghittern of *Historia*? His early tales were placed in the same time period, so this is what Men in Habbanan would play. Tolkien could continue where Evans had stopped and substitute a more standard guitar for a gittern/ghittern/*cythara* in his English/Anglo-Saxon mythology, while referencing the original instrument. (The words are similar enough—in fact, related—unlike, say, crumhorns and clarinets.) Of course, the idea of replacing a more period-appropriate cithara with the guitar could have been Tolkien's own but connecting these differently-looking instruments directly seems a stretch. Evans' ghittern would provide a mental bridge and allow Tolkien to avoid using cithara, an instrument more fitting for Valinor but harder to use in a poem.

A guitar, therefore, is not an anachronism. A modern reader may still be shocked that Tolkien combined traditions of different periods but this was not significant: after all, Evans was equally unconcerned by the introduction of a medieval Iberian instrument into an earlier British setting. (This might also explain Tolkien's clarinets: his sense of historicity may not have been precisely the modern one.) On the contrary, guitars connect to a different period, that of *Historia*'s Baldulph.

They do not appear anywhere else in the legendarium as musical references grow more abstract. Rather than obliquely referring to classical texts, Tolkien quickly restricted his vocabulary to more traditional instruments. There would be no guitars or ghitterns in Arda, nor would there be citharas.

The Book of Lost Tales (*BLT*1 and *BLT*2) mention other uncommon instruments. For example, the original Music of the Ainur was played, in part, on lutes and organs that are otherwise rare in the legendarium: "Then the harpists, and the lutanists, the flautists and pipers, the organs, and the countless choirs…" (*BLT*1 53) Later, in the *Ainulindalë*, the text subtly transforms into "the voices of the Ainur, like unto harps and lutes, and pipes and trumpets, and viols and organs, and like unto countless choirs singing with words" (*Lost Road* 156, *Silm* 3). The instruments are listed only for comparison now. We cannot comprehend what the Music was; we can only gain a faint impression.

Lutes come up in the legendarium once more: appearing before Tuor, Ulmo "made deep melodies of a magic greater than any other among musicians hath ever compassed on harp or lute, on lyre or pipe, or instruments of the bow" (*BLT2* 155). Here, as in the *Ainulindalë*, we are asked to consider the truly divine music, something out of the deep past. Naturally, the instruments used to provide the right impression are old-fashioned—a lute or a lyre or the lofty "instruments of the

[7] There is no direct evidence that Tolkien studied Geoffrey at Oxford but he could hardly avoid such an important text. He definitely knew more than just the general outline of *Historia* by heart; for example, he used a minor point from Geoffrey in a lecture on dragons (Scull and Hammond II-221).
Notably, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, co-edited with E.V.Gordon, lists the Evans translation as a standard English version of *Historia.*

bow." Yet once again, the music of the Valar is defined by negation: it is close to the ancient music of the listed instruments but is emphatically greater.

Just a little later, organs and lutes disappear from Tolkien's writing, as he simplifies his musical language further. The "instruments of the bow" are never used again, replaced with "viols," which is a shorter word, slightly unusual but not lofty or intimidating. These are enough to provide the right comparison and set the desired mood.

Lyres will disappear too, yielding to more generic harps. Salmar still plays upon "harps and lyres"[8] (*BLT*1 75) but this is the last time the latter instrument is mentioned. Later, everyone uses only harps, even though the instruments themselves may be different. When Felagund entered Bëor's camp, he picked up "a rude harp […] and played music upon it such as the ears of Men had not heard" (*Silm* 135). The rude harp may be "of wood and the sinews of bears" (*BLT*2 149), whereas an Elven instrument would be of "silver" (*Lays* 334) or "gold" (*LotR* 235). The difference may be greater than between Geoffrey's *lyra* and *cythara* but Tolkien is content to use the same word for both—just as the modern translators of *Historia*. The song and its music matter more than the technical details, which become vague and generic.

Little Musical Knowledge

Tolkien is sometimes said to have cared little for music personally, though this can be easily disproved.[9] One cause of this misapprehension is his own personal statements about having "little musical knowledge" (*Letter* #260) and "no aptitude for it" (*Letter* #142). However, in the context of the letters the "aptitude" means the ability to play music, rather than appreciate it; the "knowledge" is compared to his own—vast—linguistic skills.[10] In a 1955 lecture, he remarked "I am quite incompetent to deal with [music]" but, as the text makes it clear, meant dealing with it as a musicologist ("English and Welsh" 166). Tolkien was neither a gifted musician nor a scholar of music but this does not mean that he did not love it. His appreciation of songs, clear even in the earliest legendarium attempts, testifies to that. So do his own words; "I love music, but have no aptitude for it" is only an admittance of own shortcomings, not a dismissal.

A more difficult question is the depth of Tolkien's knowledge of music, in particular early Western music that could serve as the inspiration and source for the music of Middle-earth. English "early music revival," intended to rediscover and promote primarily Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque compositions, began in the late 19th century. One of its active supporters was William Morris, a known influence on Tolkien. A key figure was Richard Terry, a choir director with connections to Oxford and a fellow Catholic (he was the Master of Music at the Westminster Cathedral). The movement was not confined to a few enthusiasts; in the early 1920s hundreds of choirs all over England participated in early music festivals (Haskell 28-38). Of course, Tolkien had little interest in the Tudor period, whose music Terry championed.

[8] The distinction is reminiscent of the difference between the *lyra* and *cythara* but it is more likely to have been influenced by a Biblical phrase, rendered in the Vulgate as "psalterium et cithara" (Psalms 56, 150).

[9] See Bratman ("Liquid Tolkien" 140-1).

[10] The linguistic skills could help with the music too. For example, in his essay on "Smith of Wootton Major" Tokien differentiates between Fiddlers and Crowthers (i.e. players on the fiddle and the crwth); even though, as Verlyn Flieger remarks in her notes, he translated Middle English *crouders* in *Sir Orfeo* as *fiddlers*—another deliberate simplification of musical language (*Smith* 93,145).

Nonetheless, the movement could hardly escape his notice. Moreover, Tolkien was aware of some key figures of the early music revival such as the composer and musicologist Peter Warlock (mentioned in *Letter* #83).[11] He must have known, professionally and personally, Grace Eleanor Hadow, a Chaucer scholar at Oxford, who also collaborated with her brother, the noted musicologist and early music specialist William Henry Hadow (*Oxford DNB*).[12] He knew and mentioned the work of another prominent figure in the field, Thurston Dart ("English and Welsh" 165). Tolkien could not be unaware of the artistic and scholarly movement around him that he, if willing, could mine for details about early medieval musical performance. He could, for example, consult the widely available F. W. Galpin's book (see footnote 5)—the original edition or, later, the 1965 revision by Thurston Dart—or other accessible sources and further anchor the music and song of Middle-earth in the old English traditions. He had many opportunities to learn about shalemyes or crumhorns and fill his stories with more detailed descriptions of music.

Yet, even if he did, it does not show in his writing. The choice not to engage was deliberate.

Sweet Song and Fair Music

In *The Road to Middle-Earth*, Tom Shippey convincingly argues that after composing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien turned to 'thrift,' i.e. "a drive towards consistency, towards reducing data, events, characters to some smaller set of principles or categories," while in his earlier writing he was moving in the opposite direction and so created "the supreme lavishness of Middle-earth" (234). If so, the only anomaly, stark in its exceptionality, is his approach to music. As I explained above, Tolkien reduces his instrumentarium after *The Book of Lost Tales*. Descriptions of music itself come next and are rarely lavish after the earliest writings collected in *The Book of Lost Tales* and *The Lays*. For example, the first chapter of *The Hobbit* describes Dwarves' singing as "deep-throated […] in deep places of their ancient homes" (16). One can almost hear the reverb sounds of their low voices. We also, of course, have the list of instruments but as for the music itself, we are only told that it began "sudden and sweet." The mood is set and we know how the words sounded—but no idea of the accompaniment.

This choice of deliberately sparse descriptions of music stands in sharp contrast not just with Tolkien's earlier tales but also with the works by the writers most close to him, his fellow Inklings. Here is, for example, Roger Lancelyn Green in *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table*: "music so sad and sweet that no man there had ever heard the like, nor might many restrain the tears from running down their cheeks" (133) C. S. Lewis is comparably lavish in *The Silver Chair*: "the wild music, intensely sweet and yet just the least bit eerie too, and full of good magic" (227). Unlike Tolkien, Lewis also introduces non-standard instruments such as a mandolin (183) or "the

[11] Warlock was the pseudonym of Philip Heseltine (1894-1930), who was a classics student at Oxford in 1913-14. Intriguingly, *Letter* #83 has "poets and musicians etc. from Peter Warlock to Aldous Huxley." Huxley entered Oxford in the same year as Warlock. Both studied at Eton and knew each other, though not closely (Smith 232-3). Could Tolkien meet them both socially and thus keep linked together in memory decades later? Both were actively involved in the Oxford music scene of the time.
Interestingly the letter's recipient, Christopher Tolkien, was presumed to know about Warlock despite his relatively limited fame. Could the Tolkien family know the contemporary classical music scene better than usually assumed?

[12] A sign of Tolkien's regard for Grace Hadow is giving her biography, with dedication, to his student, Simone d'Ardenne (Cilli A536).

musical instrument called a serpent,[13] [whose] tube curled right round the [players]'s neck" (51). The reader can visualize the performance and almost feel the effects of its sound—a luxury denied to the readers of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Bradford Lee Eden, noting "the decay and decline of the power of music" (in a broader sense) from Tolkien's earliest writings on—especially when comparing *The Book of Lost Tales* and *The Silmarillion*—proposes connecting it to the decline of Elves ("Music" 445). This is an intriguing suggestion, although it should be remarked that the descriptions of music already become drier in the early chronicles of the First Age collected in *Shaping*.[14] ("The decay and decline" and the more technical concept of "thrift" may be related, which opens a potentially fruitful approach for interpreting the full legendarium's narrative. However, here I only concentrate on considering Tolkien's immediate language and will not discuss its broader implications.)

The Hobbit, written after the tales and annals in *Shaping*, still has occasional tantalizing descriptions of music: "The dark hall was filled with a melody that had long been silent" (293). However, *The Lord of the Rings* grows even more economical with its descriptions of playing. "Noises of trumpets and horns, and pipes and flutes, and other musical instruments" (29) of the hobbits is simply a generic visual; "sweet music" (230) of elvish minstrels cannot be more vague; and even "music that turned into running water, and then suddenly into a voice" (233), though poetic, says nothing about the music's nature or its effect on the listener. The sound of military trumpets, horns, or drums aside, the only time somebody's playing is described, it is the cat on the five-string fiddle[15] in Frodo's "ridiculous song" in Bree (158) but then its text essentially dates to 1923 (Scull and Hammond I-122). When Frodo listens to Bilbo's song in Rivendell, we are treated to a long and lavish description of its effect—compared to an enchantment—but nothing is told of its music, except that it had "beauty of the melodies" (233). At the parting from Lorien, Galadriel sings in a "sad and sweet" (372) voice but, though she plays a harp, the only description of its music is "fair" (377). And this is written about the accompaniment to "Namárië," perhaps the most poignant song in the legendarium! As always for Tolkien, the song is primary, but even the descriptions of singing in *The Lord of the Rings* are mostly frugal. (It is the songs themselves, whose texts we are invariably provided, that matter most.) Bilbo, leaving Bag-End sings "softly" (35), as do several other characters later; Tom Bombadil has a "deep glad voice" (119); marching orcs of Isengard sing with "harsh voices" (566). Only somewhat more expansively, ents' beating on their flanks is described as "a marching music […] like solemn drums," while they sing "high and strong" (484). This is as colorful as musical language gets in *The Lord of the Rings.*

Thus the 'thrift' in musical descriptions is already fully realized in *The Lord of the Rings* with the change apparent by the time of *The Hobbit*'s composition. Compare this to *The Books of Lost Tales* (Part 1): "music full of all beauty and longing" (20), "music thinner and more pure" (46), "at every note a new one sparkles forth and glistens" (94), "weave catching threads of sound whispered by waters in caverns or by wave-tops brushed by gentle winds" (126). In *The Lay of Leithian* written almost a decade later, we still read that "his pipe he took/ and sadly trembling the

[13] Unintentionally or not, Lewis is mistaken: the brass instrument called "serpent" does not curl around the neck.

[14] As does the style of First Age tales in general. David Bratman calls it "Annalistic" as opposed to the "Antique" style of *The Book of Lost Tales* ("Literary Value" 73-4).

[15] A five-stringed fiddle is not necessarily Tolkien's invention; such instruments existed in the Middle Ages. One evidence is a statue in Beverley Minster in East Yorkshire (Galpin 88), not far from where Tolkien convalesced in 1917-18.

music shook;/ and all things stayed while that piping went/wailing in the hollows" (200). Similarly, Tolkien's published non-legendarium poetry of the time is also full of detailed musical symbolism (Eden, "Strains" 95). Several secondary characters in *The Book of Lost Tales* such as Timpinen/Tinfang Warble and Salmar are musicians. So is Dairon in *The Lay of Leithian* (though sometimes called a minstrel, he plays a flute or pipes and thus cannot accompany his singing). Later the legendarium will only emphasize minstrels and singers.

From the point of view of the composition of the legendarium—as opposed to the internal chronology of the Ages—after the mid-1920s Tolkien forgoes complex and lavish narratives of music and its performance in favor of 'thrift.' His descriptions of instruments, as opposed to their playing, also become basic; the instrumentarium shrinks. Such reductions could only be his conscious choice. He could—and did—write about music in a more expansive fashion with greater aesthetic or historical references; he had access to sources and experts that could provide the appropriate musical framework, just as his professional training supplied the necessary philological and linguistic tools; he simply decided not to do so. The choice was primarily stylistic. "The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama" (*Letter* #131). By reducing attention paid to music itself, Tolkien begins to emphasize the songs, the music of words.

Leaving Scope for Other Minds

Tolkien's all too rare and economical descriptions of actual music and its performance may be taken as a lack of interest in music, at least by the more eager readers: "Musicians want tunes, and musical notation" (*Letter* #187). Some may even criticize him for blunders such as dwarves with clarinets. But as I discussed above, the paucity of Tolkien's musical language, as well as preference for more contemporary instruments, was a deliberate choice. He intentionally simplified his musical references, dropping the complicated lyres as well as cleverly non-anachronistic guitars and bringing in the more familiar clarinets. His descriptions of music become bare by the time of *The Hobbit*, essentially forcing it into the background. Not being a musician, Tolkien ultimately preferred to say less than he could and leave the rest to his readers' imagination, "minds and hands."

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