

From your reading of 'Captain Corelli's Mandolin' how appropriate is the musical reference in the title?

Louis de Bernieres' 'Captain Corelli's Mandolin' explores a multitude of different themes such as conflict, love, history and morals. Music is a universal form of entertainment, expression and catharsis, and de Bernieres incorporates it and its qualities into his novel in an extremely subtle yet hugely complex way. Music has always, in the history of literature, been a device that allows authors to explore themes of love and passion, as William Shakespeare wrote, "If music be the food of love, play on".

It has also proved to be a prominent use of expression in all forms of conflict and war, when Chile was governed by a military dictatorship (1973-1990) Patricia Vertugo, a journalist, spoke to a group of Chilean physicists and said "What is happening can be measured in music. The only way we have of communicating is through music. We can't talk about politics; they don't allow us to hold meetings. But if I hear someone listening to music, I know who that someone is and that's enough for me to know that that person is with me." It becomes a voice for the people that cannot be hushed.

With Captain Corelli's Mandolin the reader is instantaneously made aware of the subject of music through the title, and as soon as passion and love begin to become prominent in the novel, music does the same. Music is used to both explore and represent many ideas within it. In this essay I intend to look at these ideas and how they contribute to the novel itself. After reading the novel it is obvious that without the central theme of music the relationships that develop throughout would not have been given the chance to do so. The theme of music, which in itself is a complex device, is used to explore the polyphony and the unpredictable nature of love and how it entwines with the complexities of falling in love in such a complicated and unpredictable war torn time. This is relevant in the novel as the love that Corelli and Pellagia find within one another feeds them with the motivation to continue through such terrible times, as they effectively begin to live, and fight, for their newly found love.

It is essentially music that allows the couple's love to be a possibility as it is Corelli's music that opens both Pellagia and the Doctor's eyes and minds, enabling them to see him as a musician and a human being, rather than an embodiment of all that they hate and fear. "Signorina, in times like this, in a war, all of us have to make the most of what little innocent pleasure there is." Here Corelli reminds Pellagia of the importance of strength and optimism in order to preserve one's spirit. When he plays for them he essentially gives them a gift, the gift of escapism; he takes the pair on a journey, relieving them of their worries and responsibilities as civilians of war, and so the night he plays for them becomes a doorway, opening up a world of possibilities, disappointments, tragedies and victories.

For Corelli his music is a tool which gives him boundless opportunities; it breaks barriers between him and many others, it is a key device which enables him to be seen for what he loves and truly is, a musician who happens to be a soldier, rather than a soldier who happens to be a musician. He uses his passion as an instrument in itself, subtly helping to bring the soldiers under his command together, lifting their morale and essentially making them support one another, forming 'La Scala', and briefly relieving them of their ranks, so in some respect their burdens, and replacing them with musical titles "He had two baritones, three tenors, a bass, and a counter-tenor". We are able to see that Corelli has not devoted every of his thoughts solely to

war related subjects, furthering our insight into him as a soldier and musician. It is during a 'rehearsal' for 'La Scala' that they are approached by Gunter Weber, a German soldier, who sees them from a distance singing and laughing. To him the group are so dramatically juxtaposed that he cannot help but approach them. As a soldier he is accustomed to regimental routines and general order. Music is directly related to an individual's emotions, so what he hears is spontaneous, impulsive and, consequently, appealing to him. As Corelli says to Pelagia, "The human heart likes a little disorder in its geometry...it is these things that make you both attractive and beautiful...symmetry is for God, not for us." We can see that the spontaneity which he sees in Pelagia and which he incorporates into his music is something which attracts and moves him greatly. The Italian soldiers have obviously been influenced by Corelli's behaviour as they are aware of the German's position through uniform but do not think to be threatened or to be prejudice, because he is seen as a fellow human being, in the same position as them and probably hating it just as much as they are. If Corelli was a 'traditional' soldier his men would be expected to have very different views on or at least act differently, towards members of different country's armies, especially in times of war. As time goes on Gunter begins to see how music gives the Italian army the vital ability to persevere, and how they see music as being as much of a victim of war as any human involved, as it is essentially denigrated in terms of traditional priorities and it, like them, has become constricted. Eventually he sees to what extent their music is part of them when they are stood in front of his army's firing squad, and they one by one begin to sing directly at the face of death. "Corelli felt strangely euphoric, as though drunk on fatigue and the infallible excitement of certainty. Why not smile in the face of death? 'Let's sing, boys,' he repeated. 'Carlo, sing.'" He chooses for the music which has bound the group together in life to do the same in death and the poignancy of this defiant act is one that sticks with the reader. It emphasises how music can be a window to the soul as well as a part of it, and La Scala's final rendition together shows their strength as individuals, as soldiers and as musicians.

Many other characters in the novel are provided with valuable insights of people through music; it could be seen as a universal language, or one of its own, giving people of various nationalities the opportunity to communicate significant emotions which would be otherwise left undeclared. Corelli could easily have said to Pelagia and her father that he was in just as much of a predicament as them, but his words would have meant nothing to them, initially they had no desire to his voice and it would not have caught their attention, but the sound of his mandolin did, and as his instrument was an extension of him he was capable of communicating to them and in such a time as the one in which the novel is set communication is vital for survival.

Corelli had the ability to capture his emotions in his music, and reveal them to individuals as and when he wished. He was therefore, in a sense, able to capture moments in time, making him more similar to Iannis than either of them realise, the doctor logging the history of the island and Corelli logging the events as they happen, making him also a form of historian. He puts this into practise when he composes Pelagia's March. This is another example of music being a gift, as well as providing escapism its ability to provoke hidden memories, and induce the sensations felt and the images seen when those moments were first experienced, as we see when Pelagia listens to Corelli's nostalgic piece, this time Corelli takes her to the past, rather than a fictional safe place, or effectively the future.

Throughout the novel Corelli uses this ability himself, he holds on to the memory of Pelagia for the years during which they are parted through the music he

wrote for and about her. Before arriving on Cephallonia his only love is Antonia, his mandolin. When he falls in love with Pellagia there automatically becomes a connection between the two for him. Listening to or playing a certain piece is, to Corelli, as close to being with or embracing her as he can be, without his music this kind of absent union would be impossible. He compares them physically “her wrists remind me of the slender necks of mandolins, and her hand broadens from the wrist like the head that holds the pegs...”, as well as combines them, resulting in ‘Pellagia’s March’, “It was inspired by, and dedicated to, a woman named in the score only as “Pelagia”, and he eventually leaves the pair behind, in Cephallonia.

When the child finds Antonia a whole world of memories is opened for Pellagia. Its unscathed condition is representative of the preservation which the instrument originally symbolised and inspired. The string it is missing still lies in Correli after Iannis used it to save his life, an act which in itself is hugely emblematic as it shows the reader that music has literally saved Correli’s life, and is a deep and permanent part of him. The discovery also induces hope for the re-building of the country after the earthquake as it provokes the feelings of optimism that it once gave so many. “He heard a melody begin to rise up in his heart, something joyful that captured the eternal spirit of Greece”. He is instantaneously reminded of the connection he formed with the country, and although not a native he holds an important place for the times he spent there. Music, once again, builds bridges, for both Correli and Pellagia.

In the last chapter of the novel the two are once again united. Considering the huge gap of time between their parting episodes and their eventual reunion moment, the bond that still exists between them is still very much alive and strong. Such a quick reinstatement of their feelings would not have been a possibility if it weren’t for the music which had become a form of metaphorical glue between them all those years ago, when war threw them together and music bound them.

Music plays such a large part throughout the novel that any reference to it is relevant. It effectively forms a foundation for the range of emotions that the book fundamentally builds on. The reference in the title to the mandolin itself can at first seem a little off the point, considering that Correli himself does not enter the novel until chapter (twentysomething), but it is essentially that mandolin that in a thick fog of death and hate, takes two people, and makes something beautiful.